

**The Flesh of History:
Intersubjectivity, Experience and Utopia
in Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin**

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the connection between intersubjectivity, experience and utopia in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Walter Benjamin. The project utilizes a constellative approach, reading Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin through and against one another, in a manner in which each draws out latent ideas or problems in the other's work. In these respects, the project begins by drawing on a political reading of Merleau-Ponty's late ontology of the flesh in the context of his earlier phenomenology of the body and his political engagements. The ontology of the flesh transcends the various dualisms that have marred Western thought, in viewing being as in and of the world, and in asserting the very relational character of the body-as-flesh. Here, Merleau-Ponty provides a rich, multifaceted understanding of intersubjectivity. Yet, the ontological contours of Merleau-Ponty's work often operate at a level of abstraction that ignores or fails to theorize the contours of embodied experience under the particular historical conditions of capitalist modernity. In theorizing the primacy to the historical, Benjamin's work provides such a phenomenology. In this vein, Benjamin's work suggests that under modern conditions the sensuous capacities of the body take on an anaesthetic character, which ultimately elides the very relations of alterity that are central to intersubjectivity and political possibilities. At the same time, in deconstructing the "object" of history, Benjamin sees potentially utopian possibilities in the ontological and ethical conditions and structures of history. While this offers only a minor gesture in the direction of providing a positive political or ethical optic, these insights provide a means for re-reading Merleau-Ponty's account of the body as a site of the utopian/dystopian. In this context, the project turns to theorizing embodied capacities as providing the conditions of possibility for both relations of solidarity/emancipation and domination. Consequently, it explores the manner in which the corporeal capacities of embodied subjects can be transformed, as well as the problem of the particular forms of institution and intersubjectification that are rooted in this transformability.

*To my parents, Peter and Melody, for love and support
that has always gone beyond the mere confines of parental obligation.*

Acknowledgements

One of this dissertation's central ideas is that subjectivity is always intersubjectivity: that human existence is only meaningful through our relations with others, which are fraught with tension and revelation. To the extent that I've been able to escape the contemporary tendency towards interiority and the closure of meaning, this dissertation – and my life more generally – was enlightened by the support and friendship of a number of people. This is the first chance I have to "officially" thank them, though hopefully my thanks have already been felt in various non-official ways.

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Introduction

“What we are calling flesh, this interiorly worked-over mass, has no name in any philosophy...We must not think the flesh starting from substances, from body and spirit – for then it would be the union of contradictories – but we must think it, as we said, as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being.”¹

-Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*.

“[I]mage is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical – that is, not archaic – images. The image that is read – which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded.”²

-Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

The “flesh” and the “‘concept’ of history”: these terms evade as much as they explain. But perhaps there is something in their very nature and intention – in the specific philosophical lineage of critical thought – that makes this evasion necessary, that makes it a substantial portion of the meaning of both the flesh and the concept of history. The primary intention of this dissertation will be to explore the manner in which Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin attempt – through innovative dialectical approaches – to relate the fundamental questions of the body and history, intersubjectivity and ethics, experience and ontology, in opening them up to a free flowing development, and severing them from the constraints of deterministic and closed categorizations. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin both seek to challenge prevailing philosophical conceptions, and turn to new terminologies and modes of thinking about traditional problems. Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh aims to overcome the dualistic character of the Cartesian cogito (and its mirrors) by theorizing the ontological subject as an embodied cogito that relates to the world and others, not as something opposed or external to them, but as something composed of, and intertwined with, a common element. Benjamin’s “concept” of history aims to overcome the historical in-itself that has informed positivist and historicist

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1968), 147.

² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 1999), 462

conceptions of history, and instead theorizes historical knowledge and events as dialectical categories devoid of the self-same quality of being “always already” there. In criticizing traditionally static, identitarian and dualistic approaches, the flesh and the concept of history seek to avoid the rigid imposition of a linear and closed utilization of ontological and historical categories.

My ultimate goal in exploring the meaning of the flesh and the concept of history lies in attempting to develop the political import of Merleau-Ponty's and Benjamin's work, which in turn emerges through the fundamental connection between the body, intersubjectivity, experience and utopia. But in this vein, neither Merleau-Ponty nor Benjamin will offer a traditional theory of politics. Rather, what they can offer is a radical theory of subjectivity (as intersubjectivity) rooted in the corporeal contours of the body as a mode of being-in-the-world, one that is subject to the world and a subject in the world. In these latter respects, I aim to think this mode of subjectivity through a utopian framework, conceptualizing both the dystopian modes of corporeal being that prevail under capitalist modernity, as well as the utopian potentials that lie at the very core of embodied being and hold out the possibility of shattering reified forms of being. This reading can combat a number of misconceptualizations that have permeated the literature on Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin, and offer a unique account of embodied subjectivity.

I. The Problem of Politics in Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin

While there is a voluminous secondary literature on Merleau-Ponty's and Benjamin's work generally, politics has had a peculiar or neglected place in this literature. Despite an enduring philosophical legacy and a more recent resurgence of interest in his work, political theory has largely been a neglected realm for Merleau-Ponty scholars.³ To the extent that there

³ Diana Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics After Humanism*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littleman Publishers 2007), 8-17.

is a political literature,⁴ it tends to be dated, largely inflected by Cold War politics, and framed around questions about Merleau-Ponty's relationship to, and alleged "retreat" from, Marxism.⁵ In this account, precipitated by specific developments in the Soviet Union and by the failure of the proletariat to produce the "true, homogenous and final society"⁶ it was alleged to be the embodiment of, Merleau-Ponty's increasingly critical stance towards Marxism and Marx's own philosophy drove him away from radical/revolutionary political commitments towards a politics of reform⁷ or a sterile liberalism.⁸ This is often buttressed by Merleau-Ponty's call for a "new liberalism" in *Adventures of the Dialectic*. In lieu of this Marxist politics, Merleau-Ponty is said to have turned to a parliamentary politics, which could found a stable set of traditions and institutions capable of enacting moderate reforms,⁹ or which could allow for free speech and different ideas (but not action) in uniting a multiplicity of subjects. In effect, parliament would become the great guarantor of truth, and Merleau-Ponty sets it as the limits to politics.¹⁰

⁴ I should emphasize here that this largely applies to the English language literature on Merleau-Ponty. He has played a formative role in the thought of a number of French language scholars – centrally, Claude Lefort, Cornelius Castoriadis and Miguel Abensour – yet, these theorists are less concerned with Merleau-Ponty's particular contribution to political theory, than they are with using some of his philosophical motifs in developing their own approaches. Furthermore, while I will turn to the feminist appraisal of Merleau-Ponty in Chapter 6, I do not include this important branch of research because it is still more philosophically oriented, being concerned with Merleau-Ponty's account of perception/subjectivity, and largely unconcerned with his political writings.

⁵ The key general works on Merleau-Ponty's politics are Barry Cooper, *Merleau-Ponty and Marxism: From Terror to Reform*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1979); Sonia Kruks, *The Political Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, (New Jersey: Humanities Press 1981); Kerry Whiteside, *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundations of an Existential Politics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1988). While not solely oriented towards Merleau-Ponty, a similar concern with his relationship to Marxism animates both Mark Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1975) and Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept From Lukács to Habermas*, (Berkeley: University of California Press 1984). Two more recent works follow the same tendency of seeing a reformist, or parliamentary, approach in Merleau-Ponty's work: Taylor Carman, *Merleau-Ponty*, (New York: Routledge 2008), pg. 152-155; Martin Plot, 'Our element: Flesh and democracy in Merleau-Ponty,' *Continental Philosophy Review*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 2012.

⁶ Cooper, *Merleau-Ponty and Marxism*, 132.

⁷ As is contended throughout Cooper, *Merleau-Ponty and Marxism*.

⁸ As is contended throughout Kruks, *The Political Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*.

⁹ Again, this is contended throughout Cooper, *Merleau-Ponty and Marxism*.

¹⁰ Most of this emerges in Kruks, *The Political Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, Ch. 7. In a similar vein, James Schmidt argues that, in ultimately rejecting his own conception of the proletariat and the "end of history," Merleau-Ponty resigns us to working "within the limits of existing structures" effectively repudiating any conception of transcendence or break. See, James Schmidt, 'Lordship and Bondage in Merleau-Ponty and Sartre,' *Political Theory*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1979, 221.

While of much interest to literary or aesthetic critics and cultural historians,¹¹ Benjamin's work has failed to attract much attention in the field of political theory.¹² This may be the result of the heterodox methodology that animates his work: engaging with both Marxism and messianic Judaism, his work is often deemed to be insufficiently in line with the orthodoxies of either of these tendencies, if not entirely contradictory because of an attempt at fidelity to both.¹³ On those rare occasions when this problem is left aside and Benjamin's political theory is deemed worthy of investigation, two major criticisms have been levelled. First, he is criticized for clinging to a political romanticism, animated by the desire to return to a past prior to the corruptions of modernity. This is the position held by both Jurgen Habermas and Richard Wolin, who view Benjamin's politics as inherently conservative, and thus unable to present an adequate theory of political action/praxis.¹⁴ Second, Benjamin is criticized for lacking a substantive theory of subjectivity. This line of critique takes a number of forms, and he is variously criticized for: ignoring people altogether and shifting his attention towards cultural artefacts¹⁵; failing to posit a subjective capacity for the messianic force he theorizes, or for failing to name

¹¹ Vanessa R. Schwartz, 'Benjamin for Historians,' *American Historical Association*, Vol. 106, No. 5, December 2001; Irving Wohlfarth, 'Smashing the Kaleidoscope: Walter Benjamin's Critique of Cultural History,' *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1996); Michael Lowy, 'Against the Grain: The Dialectical Conception of Culture in Walter Benjamin's Theses of 1940,' *Benjamin and the Demands of History*.

¹² James Martel, 'Taking Benjamin Seriously as a Political Thinker,' *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2011, 297; Raluca Eddon, 'Arendt, Scholem, Benjamin: Between Revolution and Messianism,' *European Journal of Political Theory*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2006, 263. Exceptions to this trend include the work of Eddon and Martel (and the issue of *Philosophy & Rhetoric* on Benjamin that he edited), as well as Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press 1991), Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*, (Berkeley: University of California Press 1993), David McNally, *Bodies of Meaning: Studies on Language, Labour and Liberation*, (Albany: SUNY Press 2001), Asher Horowitz, *Ethics at a Standstill: History and Subjectivity in Levinas and the Frankfurt School*, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 2008) and Michael Lowy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*, (New York: Verso Books 2005).

¹³ Lowy, *Fire Alarm*, 20.

¹⁴ Jurgen Habermas, 'Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism – The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin,' *New German Critique*, No. 17, Spring 1979; Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, (Berkeley: University of California Press 1994). See also, Richard Wolin, *The Frankfurt School Revisited, and Other Essays on Politics and Society*, (New York: Routledge 2006).

¹⁵ Angela McRobbie, 'The *Passagenwerk* and the Place of Walter Benjamin in Cultural Studies: Benjamin, Cultural Studies, Marxist Theories of Art,' *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 6, Issue 2, 1990.

such a potential force¹⁶; or, theorizing the extinction of cognitive or historical subjectivity under the forces of modernity.¹⁷ The various incarnations of this second critique might also be seen as symptomatic of a larger critique of the Frankfurt School: while providing a critique of domination, it often fails to develop a “positive ethical optic”¹⁸ or a theory of political emancipation.¹⁹

These critiques or neglects suffer from a number of problems and distortions. In the first place, the political accounts of Merleau-Ponty's works are far too encumbered by the very Cold War binary of the liberal-capitalist West versus the communist/Marxist East that Merleau-Ponty sought to transcend via his call for a non-communist left.²⁰ Moreover, the emphasis on his acceptance of parliamentary politics is based on a selective reading of *Adventures of the Dialectic*. There, Merleau-Ponty suggests that – in opposition to the stifling of opposition in the Soviet state – parliamentary *and* democratic actions should be accepted *despite* shortcomings, because “Parliament is the only known institution that guarantees a minimum of opposition and of truth.”²¹ That it supplies a “minimum” of truth is hardly a ringing endorsement: Merleau-Ponty accepts parliamentary politics not as a good in itself, but as more open to opposition when juxtaposed to communist politics. But even this proclamation is preceded by qualifications. The non-communist left is intended to continue to raise the social problems that parliamentary politics *and* the dictatorship of the proletariat are unable to confront. In this vein, Merleau-Ponty

¹⁶ Darko Suvin, ‘The Arrested Moment in Benjamin’s “Theses”: Epistemology vs. Politics, Image vs. Story,’ *Neohelicon*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2001, 102.

¹⁷ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute*, (New York: Macmillan Free Press 1977), Ch. 10.

¹⁸ Horowitz, *Ethics at a Standstill*, xi.

¹⁹ Miguel Abensour, ‘Philosophie politique critique et émancipation?’ *Politique et Sociétés*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2003.

²⁰ Commentators have tended to seize on a problematic appropriation of the Merleau-Ponty's "new liberalism" rather than on his call for a non-communist left that is neither pro-Soviet nor pro-capitalist. Moreover, the literal appropriation of his use of "new liberalism" shows a lack of understanding of the Weberian genealogy of the term, as I suggest in Chapter 1.

²¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1973), 226.

notes the falsity of the philosophical and political opposition between “‘free enterprise’ and Marxism.”²² A non-communist left aims to unmask the ideology of both systems, unravelling something beyond the mere pessimism that they present in response to one another (i.e. that the failures of the other justify their existence/allegiance). Yet, rejection of the Soviet regime is not a de facto endorsement of the West: “it is, at the same time and without paradox, the condition of a modern critique of capitalism because it alone poses Marx’s problems again in modern terms.”²³ The continued existence of a working class serves as an indictment of the capitalist West, exposing the falsity of liberal proclamations, with their reduction of “the history of a society to speculative conflicts of opinion, political struggle to exchanges of views on clearly posed problems, and the coexistence of men to relationships of fellow citizens in the political empyrean.”²⁴

Five years later, in the ‘Introduction’ to *Signs*, Merleau-Ponty drew into question even a modified parliamentarianism. In the face of increasing instances of class struggle throughout the world, he claimed that “the new economic climates and the development of industrial society in Europe, which render the old way of parliamentary and political life decrepit, make the struggle for the control and management of the new economic apparatus the order of the day.”²⁵ Of course, returning to the Leninist concept of the party or its many variations would simply be a return to the rationalism that had failed. During the course of his lukewarm and qualified statements about parliamentary politics, Merleau-Ponty had already suggested that the return to the party was “not ‘a solution,’ and we know full well.”²⁶ But this points not to a political solution, but a political problem: the attendant forms of politics, given the *mutual* failures of East

²² Ibid., 227.

²³ Ibid., 225.

²⁴ Ibid., 225.

²⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Introduction,’ *Signs*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1964), 12.

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 227.

and West. As Diana Coole astutely observes, Merleau-Ponty “laments a failure of imagination in inventing new ways for negotiating collective life. He no longer believed in revolutionary politics as an alternative or panacea to liberal capitalist inertia. But he did recognize that the critical capacities of institutionalized oppositions remain vulnerable, while even the most open parliamentary debate is unlikely to assuage broader negativities that emerge within everyday experience.”²⁷ Merleau-Ponty's lament has rarely lead political commentators to explore whether his philosophy may provide a means to imagining new modes of politics, and more philosophically inclined commentators have tended to stay within the realm of ontology and phenomenology.

The critical accounts of Benjamin's work, or the entire neglect of his potential politics, are embedded within the context of his "problematic" relationship to Marxism and/or messianism. Indeed, Marxists generally view Benjamin's appropriation of Marxist concepts as too un-orthodox (and messianic) to be properly Marxist and, moreover, as being politically ambiguous or a-political at the same time. In this vein, even a sympathetic critic and friend (Theodor Adorno) saw fit to decry his regression into "magic and positivism." On the other hand, those applauding Benjamin's theological focus decry that his Marxism intrudes and inhibits the applicability of the former – though this also seems to come at the cost of their assuming a theological approach in Benjamin's work that is harmed by the political focus that comes from his Marxism.²⁸ A third tendency sees in his approach an entirely contradictory whole because of the uneasy relationship between Marxism and messianism,²⁹ and suggests that this undermines the analytical/logical and political import of his work. Of course, the problem with these schools

²⁷ Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics*, 57.

²⁸ On these trends, see Martel, 'Taking Benjamin Seriously as a Political Thinker,' 297-298.

²⁹ On the three schools of reading Benjamin (the Marxist, theological and contradiction schools), see Lowy, *Fire Alarm*, 20.

lies in their own orthodoxy, and their attempt to impose it upon Benjamin's work, while ignoring his own movement and method. Indeed, Benjamin aims to mediate the Marxist and theological poles of his thought – and their strengths and weaknesses – through one another. While Marxism supplied tools for critical social analysis that theological thinking lacked, Marxism's regressions into vulgar materialism and the ideology of progress sapped it of its own political import. The elements of Jewish messianism in his work sought to overcome these problems in providing a non-linear, non-teleological mode of political action, rooted in the ethics of remembrance. At the same time, Marxism could act to profane the messianic elements of his thought, which often veered towards a-politicism.

Moreover, if we allow that Benjamin's rather un-orthodox Marxist and messianic elements can contribute to thinking politics (or, at the very least, are neither orthodox nor contradictory), then we can turn to criticizing the claims that he lacks a theory of subjectivity or regresses into a romanticist understanding of political action. What Benjamin ultimately provides is a critical account of the experience of modernity. While this often emerges through a seeming positivism, his intention is to provide something approaching a phenomenological description with utopian intentions. As he described the methodology of one of his essays: “[A]ll theory will be kept far from my presentation...I want to present the city of Moscow at the present moment in such a way that ‘everything factual is already theory’...thereby refraining from all deductive abstraction, all prognosis, and even, within limits, all judgements.”³⁰ In this vein, Benjamin's focus on seemingly peculiar, mundane and inane phenomena (shopping, gambling, crowds, prostitution, rag picking, etc) actually aims – through the constellative method of montage – to provide a political phenomenology that might alienate our traditional understandings of such phenomena, in re-opening the desire for freedom and new forms of

³⁰ Quoted in Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 28.

subjectivity. Far from a romantic return to the past, his very idea of a "concept" of history aims to reject the simplistically linear accounts of temporality – either progressive or regressive – in advancing an epicyclodic account that allows for the peculiar starts and stops that characterize historical perception and experience. More to the point, his account of historical perception rejects any simplistic notion of an unsullied past, for the past can only be known as an "image" that the present grasps in the particular now of its recognizability.

II. Constellating Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin

All of this points to the need to re-think Merleau-Ponty's and Benjamin's potential contributions to political theory. And while there are internal reasons for rejecting the political critiques or neglects of Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin respectively, this dissertation also aims to read their work as a constellation, in order to develop a political approach that can rescue each from the dustbins of political theory. Constellations are not obvious, inherent or given: they are the organization and juxtaposition of a series of phenomena that, in themselves, have no necessary connection. But, brought together through the organizing idea of the constellation, they become more than the singularity of their parts, and illuminate a truth that all of the moments participate in, contributing a unique aspect of their singularity to this unity. This dissertation utilizes a constellative methodology on two levels. The first reads the respective works of Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin via a constellation and not an intellectual biography. While an intellectual biography might seek to understand the development or breaks within their thinking, or the intellectual connection that exists between the two theorists, a constellative approach charts a new path. In thinking about each theorist individually, it aims to consider how their various works shine a light on one another, in bringing something new to light that may escape conceptual analysis if we seek to impose a developmental trajectory upon the texts under investigation, focusing on the coherence of each theorist's thought with their attendant breaks

and transformations. Consequently, I seek to read their respective texts backwards and forwards, in order to grasp the meaning of these works outside of the tradition/institution created by the “name” of the author.

In reading Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin in this way, I seek to highlight what is unique and politically challenging about their work. The unique and radical import of Merleau-Ponty’s thought has been noted³¹ but rarely elaborated on politically: it lies in a radical anti-essentialism and indeterminacy that asserts the fluidity, relationality and creativity of being/existence and the body. In this vein, I seek to develop the political contours of his late ontology by reading it in unison with the concerns elaborated in his central political texts. In doing so, I will excavate from his work a theory of embodiment, intersubjectivity and ethical capacities that attempts to transcend the traditional subject-object binary that has marred western thought, and which retained residues in the types of Marxism that Merleau-Ponty rejected. Benjamin’s work stands out from the theorists of the Frankfurt School in potentially providing a theory of emancipation or political subjectivity, via what I will suggest is a critical phenomenology of modernity, rooted in a radical historicity (as phenomenological *epoché*). In particular, I focus on his later “Parisian cycle” of writings (‘The Storyteller,’ ‘Motifs on Baudelaire,’ the *Arcades Project* and ‘On the Concept of History’) in the light of his earlier habilitation thesis (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*), in order to understand the critical approach to the experience of history, modernity and capitalism that he employs. In this context, Benjamin seeks to expose – via a Freudian, Marxist and messianic methodology – the violence against subjectivity that contemporary societies unleash. Here, his central concern is to develop a critical theory of

³¹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, (London: Verso 1985), 146.

capitalist experience that is predicated upon an understanding of the corporeal dimensions of subjectivity, and their utopian potentials.

At a second level, the dissertation approaches the relationship between the two theorists as a constellation. Hence, it explores how Merleau-Ponty's ontological and ethical commitments can challenge, dislodge or better bring to light the implicit ethics/subjectivity of Benjamin's critical theory; and, in turn, it explores how Benjamin's critical theory can challenge, dislodge or better bring to light the critical political import of Merleau-Ponty's ontological and ethical commitments. In maintaining the particularity/singularity and sanctity of each theorist, this approach refuses to reduce one to the other, so as to retain the challenge each presents, in order to enrich and develop the other's political thinking. In this vein, the project uses Benjamin's critical theory to draw out the radical (if latent) import of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh, and uses Merleau-Ponty's ontology and vision of intersubjectivity to draw out the (latent) ethical and political subjectivity contained in Benjamin's accounts of capitalist experience and history. Hence, while I suggest the critical or neglectful approaches to each theorist's politics can not be sustained, a stronger political theory can be extracted by reading them together as a constellation.

As feminist critics rightly point out, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology/ontology is often too little attuned to the power dynamics that exert a critical and limiting effect upon the construction of subjectivity and its attendant forms of embodiment.³² In these respects, he fails to provide a specifically historical understanding of bodily capacities, instead focusing on an abstract ontology. Yet, his phenomenological commitments require that we return to the

³² See in particular Judith Butler, 'Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*,' *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, ed. Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1981), Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1994) and Shannon Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism and Feminism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2001).

concrete lifeworld in order to draw out the genesis of particular forms of experience. Consequently, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology (with its accounts of embodiment and intersubjectivity) requires a critical theory of society to bring it to full political fruition – something that Merleau-Ponty himself fails to carry through. Here, we need to account for the effects that contemporary power and social relations can have on the functioning of bodily capacities. Benjamin's work provides an ideal means to explore this not merely because of his critical approach to modernity but because he is much concerned with issues relating to embodiment, experience and history in the context of capitalism. Indeed, Benjamin's work helps to expand the Marxist concept of exploitation beyond its abstract, economic configuration (the extraction of surplus value) by illustrating the corporeal dimensions of exploitation under the conditions of capitalist modernity as a total mode of being. This is something that affects not merely the experience of the labour process, but the human organism as a whole. Consequently, we find in his work a critique – via phenomenological description – of the exploitation of bodily functioning, and its mutilating effects on subjectivity. This can be utilized to provide a more politically efficacious account of the body via Merleau-Ponty's work. Indeed, while secondary literature on Merleau-Ponty tends to focus on the "electric" and ecstatic character of experience in his work, this generally fails to consider the nature of the body under the specificity of capitalism. If we read Merleau-Ponty in the light of Benjamin's critical theory, we can re-assess and re-read the former's work, in providing an account of the body's socialization via the capitalist world and its power relations, while also acknowledging the primordial characteristics of bodily experience that explain the potential for forms of domination and emancipation.

At the same time, in developing Benjamin's thought, I am not merely dismissing Merleau-Ponty's work as constituted entirely by a lack; rather, I aim to read Benjamin through

Merleau-Ponty's work to compensate for the lack of an overt, positive ethical optic in Benjamin's thought – to provide a means to thinking emancipation beyond the realm of pure social critique. This emerges centrally by reading Benjamin through Merleau-Ponty's understanding of intersubjectivity, exploring the new contours it can bring to the former's work. Benjamin's critique of capitalist experience is not a priori a critique hedged in the context of intersubjectivity, yet this concept can bring to light elements of Benjamin's work that remain repressed or latent. In this direction, what he focuses on in his critique of the experience of modernity is the suppression of the capacity for embodied collective experiences ("collective innervations") at a diachronic and synchronic level. In seeking to draw these out through phenomenological description, he aims to harness the utopian potentials contained in negative experiences, such as that of the crowd. Moreover, intersubjectivity can be used to draw out the utopian politics contained in his work on history. Indeed, far from a romantic return, Benjamin posits a mode of intersubjectivity (as ethical demand and the potential for an ethical experience) at the level of history, one that is capable of mobilizing new subjectivities against their repression by the ideology of progress. Here, an ontological indeterminacy informs the possibility of a utopian politics in such images as the classless society, which emerges throughout history in new forms. At the same time, this image of the classless society posits the ethical demand that can open a new realm of intersubjectivity as the return to the origins of a movement of emancipation that was trampled by the ideology of progress and the "necessity" of historical development.

By reading Benjamin against and through Merleau-Ponty, we can return to thinking Merleau-Ponty's account of the body at a more acute political level, accounting for the layers that Benjamin adds to complicate it. Read through Benjamin's interventions, Merleau-Ponty's

account of the body must be grasped in its full indeterminacy, as allowing for multiple relations to the outside – including domination and freedom. In effect, the ontological surplus and the critical ethical components of Benjamin's thinking should be attached to the account of the body as an indeterminate entity. This implies re-thinking the flesh in its connection to a body-politics, as well as re-thinking Merleau-Ponty's politics both in the context of this new politicized body, with the deeper image of intersubjectivity that it facilitates. In re-thinking his earlier political writings in the context both of his later self-critique and his later ontology of the flesh, we can reassess and re-interpret his account of proletarian subjectivity as the embodiment of intersubjectivity.

III. Outline of the Work

The path of this work follows the constellative reading it provides of Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin, alternating between the poles of their thought, while also dealing with issues internal to Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin scholarship. Chapter 1 provides a political reading of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh, reading it through his political engagements with Machiavelli and Marx. In attempting to transcend dualistic thinking, Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh posits the world of being as a realm of non-identical identity, in which self and others intertwine in malleable and non-objectifying constellations that inform the indeterminacy of differentiated, but not irreconcilable, modes of being-in-the-world. This develops via the insights and shortfalls of Marx and Machiavelli: on the one hand, Merleau-Ponty adopts something tantamount to Machiavelli's politics of division, but against the potentially objectifying and ahistorical social relations that permeate Machiavelli's *The Prince*; on the other hand, Merleau-Ponty maintains a devotion to the emancipatory and egalitarian impetus of Marx, but rejects the theory of the proletariat as the absolute/universal subject. Ultimately, I suggest that the political contours of the ontology of the flesh emerge in its conception of intersubjectivity and alterity, both of which

are informed by Merleau-Ponty's deployment of the concepts of *écart*, chiasm/intertwining and reversibility.

Chapter 2 begins constellating Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin by exploring the latter's emphasis on the primacy of the historical. Indeed, while the body plays an important role for Benjamin, this body can only be thought in the context of its particular incarnations within the historical – that is, as the historical body. In this chapter, I focus on unravelling his account of the historical, including its debt to the work of Marxist thinkers Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch. Through his engagement with Marxism, Benjamin adopts an understanding of the commodity structure of capitalism, as well as capitalism's radical historicity – its existence as a historical monad. While the theory of the monad was developed in his early, pre-Marxist work, it comes together with his Marxist approach in providing a new means of understanding and perceiving history, one that attacks the ideological character of progress and linearity. In elaborating on this, the chapter provides an overview of Benjamin's historical approach, connecting it to what we might call a radically historical, phenomenological *epoché* that seeks to grasp capitalist experience as it appears in modernity. In doing so, I suggest that this historical approach can provide a critical political impetus that can extricate Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh (and his phenomenology of the body) from its seemingly abstract incarnations.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide the groundwork for Chapter 3. While Chapter 2 posits the historical character of being and experience, Chapter 3 provides an exploration of embodied experience under capitalism. Yet, in order to do this, I borrow from the theory of intersubjectivity developed in Chapter 1. On the one hand, if Benjamin does lack a substantive theory of subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty's account of intersubjectivity can add to Benjamin's critical social analysis; on the other, if Merleau-Ponty lacks a critical social analysis in positing the body

and intersubjectivity in abstract terms, Benjamin's work provides a concrete account of the specificity of capitalist experience and its affects on the human sensorium. Borrowing from psychoanalytic understandings of consciousness and memory, Benjamin argues that the shock experience that prevails under capitalism has conditioned the human sensorium in a manner that anaesthetizes experiential content and consequently blocks the very experiences that could draw us together with others – namely, our conscious recognition of our, and others', modes of being-in-the-world. In this context, the chapter elaborates on a biopolitical account of the body and capitalism, which emerges substantially in Benjamin's critical engagement with Baudelaire's phenomenology of the streets, including the subjectivity of the urban crowd. While the chapter focuses on the anaesthetizing affect that capitalism has on the body, it also explores Benjamin's gestures towards theorizing emancipatory subjectivity via this account of negative social experiences.

If Chapter 3 sounds a pessimistic political tone, Chapter 4 elaborates on the utopian and ethical elements of Benjamin's thought at the level of history. This confronts head on the claims that he succumbs to a political romanticism, suggesting a more complicated and complex account of historical inquiry and images, in reading Benjamin's concept of history through (or as) utopia. Thus, drawing on Miguel Abensour's accounts of the ontological and ethical sites of utopia (and its persistence), the chapter suggests that Benjamin's work oscillates between the two, in theorizing an ontological opening that makes possible a new ethical and utopian possibility that manifests itself in history. In this vein, the chapter aims to understand the break with the identical "object" of history as opening up (via excavation) its surplus meaning, and freeing the repressed energies of the historical. Here, images and dreams (particularly of the classless society) shatter the linear conception of history in opening new possibilities. But,

moreover, this also enacts an ethical obligation (the possibility of an ethical experience): the past generations call for the present to redeem them through the re-activation of the surplus energies that have been effaced. The weak messianism he counsels introduces a political interplay between Marxism and theology, which acts to reconceptualise the relationship between subjects, history and temporality in deploying a political theory of utopia.

Chapter 5 returns to Merleau-Ponty's work in trying to draw out more explicitly the political and ethical threads that Benjamin begins to unravel. Indeed, reading Merleau-Ponty's account of the body through the biopolitical and ethical/utopian accounts of experience given by Benjamin in Chapters 3 and 4, this chapter develops an account of the ethical capacities of the bodily "I can" in Merleau-Ponty's work on the body as "nature." Here, I deploy a concept of the bio-phenomenological invariant (the body as an experiential and transformative entity constituted by a peculiar mixture of invariance and transformation) that seeks to theorize the mode of transformation of the body as a sensorial organism. Here, I suggest – drawing on the work of Paolo Virno – that the conditions of possibility of such a transformation lie in the moments at which humans experience the conditions of possibility of experience itself. In order to think through this, I explore Merleau-Ponty's account of the body as a corporeal schema that retains an immanent relation to an *umwelt* – the notion that the body is in and of the world, a world that both structures and is structured by the body. Building on this account of the bodily sensorium, I argue that the conditions of possibility of experience lie in the encounter with the other, and that it is at these moments – including the re-articulation of desire as an ambivalent root of relations of domination and affect/solidarity – that we can transform the bodily "I can" in accordance with the production of a new *umwelt*, as a new mode of socio-historical being.

All of this lays the foundation for Chapter 6, which aims to enunciate a political theory of intersubjectivity. This starts by addressing the concept of anonymity in Merleau-Ponty's work. While this concept has often drawn the ire of critics, a number of scholars have argued that anonymity posits the Janus-faced quality of subjectivity: that we are always-already born into subject positions that we become habituated to, and that usurp or inform our "personal" being; and, yet, anonymity always retains a surplus and temporality that allows for subject positions to be shattered in the deployment of new subjectivities. In building on this, I draw from Virno's understanding of individuation as the production of the "individual" and "society," which are not preconstituted but are created out of the common elements of being. Consequently, I suggest that with Merleau-Ponty individuation signifies intersubjectification as the mode of production of a particular way of being-together, which builds on ideas developed in the previous chapter. Given this, we need to consider the idea that the institution of the social contains particular possibilities of being-together that defy the repressive reduction of various beings to an identity. Rather, intersubjectivity depends upon an institution as a "hinge" that mediates between different beings in the world, supplying simultaneously the capacity for being-together, as well as for new modes of individuation. Finally, the chapter ends by reading Merleau-Ponty's account of proletarian institution as a mode of intersubjectivity. While Merleau-Ponty ultimately laments the regression of proletarian institution into proletarian identity, the 1917 Russian Revolution still provides a model for understanding the contours and intentions of political intersubjectivity.

Chapter 1

Politics À L'Écart: Merleau-Ponty and the Flesh of the Social

“Our state of non-philosophy -- Never has the crisis been so radical --”¹
-Maurice Merleau-Ponty, working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*.

Written in the context of his late ontology, this statement reads like an epigram for Merleau-Ponty's philosophical method. Rooted in the traditions of phenomenology and existentialism, his work was constantly engaged in a radical interrogation of the inherited truths of western philosophy. This initially took the form of an attempt to elaborate a philosophy of perception outside the strictures of its philosophical presupposition and against its entrenchment in Descartes' philosophical dualism and its aftermaths. His later philosophical forays continued in this same vein, deepening the critical import of his earlier work, borrowing from Heidegger's critique of philosophy for its failure to interrogate another category that had seemingly been taken for granted by philosophy's unwillingness to adequately think its own concepts: the category of being. In engaging these complex fields, Merleau-Ponty's work rose to prominence in post-war France, and led one intellectual admirer and critic to label him “a truly great philosopher, the last in France before that giant of a philosopher Derrida.”²

In this context, it is no surprise that there has been an enduring interest in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and even something of a recent renaissance. Yet, politics has been a much thornier issue for Merleau-Ponty scholarship, and has often been absent from discussions of his work.³ There are, perhaps, reasons for this: only a handful of Merleau-Ponty's texts are

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Working Notes,’ *The Visible and the Invisible*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1968), 165.

² Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts Forever*, (New York: The New Press 1998), 178.

³ Diana Coole and Renaud Barbaras note a revival of interest in Merleau-Ponty's work in recent decades. As Coole points out, this revival has largely ignored Merleau-Ponty's politics, or failed to read him politically. Barbaras notes that this revival has been multidisciplinary, though fails to mention politics in this context. See Diana Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics After Humanism*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littleman Publishers 2007), 8-17 and

specifically works in political philosophy, and the book length texts are often considered his less rigorous, more polemical works.⁴ Yet, by bracketing these works out, Merleau-Ponty's thought is subjected to an implicit "break" thesis, which treats his political writings as an "interregnum" that interrupted his philosophical writings or treats his return to philosophical concerns in his later works as a "retreat" from politics.⁵ This results in two tendencies: on the one hand, the many inquiries into his philosophy largely neglect his political writings and concerns;⁶ on the other, the few inquiries into his political thought are often framed around questions about his relationship to, and ultimate "retreat" from, Marxism.⁷ While the philosophical approach

Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2004), xx.

⁴ Even those sympathetic to Merleau-Ponty's work generally are critical of them. Diana Coole – 'Philosophy as Political Engagement: Revisiting Merleau-Ponty and Reopening the Communist Question,' *Contemporary Political Theory*, 2, 2003, 332 – states that *Humanism and Terror* and *Adventures of the Dialectic* "are not among his best [books]," though still engages with them. M.C. Dillon – *The Ontology of Becoming and the Ethics of Particularity*, (Athens: Ohio University Press 2012), 154 – views them as too encumbered by Hegelian and Marxist engagements with history, and is less willing to engage with them as evidenced by their complete absence from his magnum opus, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (2nd Edition), (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1997). Indicative of this problem is the fact that Merleau-Ponty's English language editor suggested that they were unlikely to ever be translated into English. Dick Howard, *The Marxian Legacy*, (London: The Macmillan Press 1977), 191.

⁵ This tendency is pointed out by Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, (Berkeley: University of California Press 1994), 299-300 and Diana Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics*, 1-17. It appears to be rooted in Jean-Paul Sartre's recounting of his relationship with Merleau-Ponty. In response to a letter from Sartre accusing him of this and other political treasons, Merleau-Ponty categorically rejects this characterization of his work. He notes, amongst other things, that: the ambiguity of the truth of events (based on the idea that truth is rooted in the temporality of meaning) made it unwise to weigh in on every political event as it happened, hence his desire to refrain from writing on emerging political events; philosophy is rooted/anchored within the world and politics; that even the philosophical works he wrote during his "retreat" (specifically *The Prose of the World*) were directed towards/engaged with political questions; Sartre ignored his specific political engagements during his alleged retreat. See both 'Philosophy and Political Engagement: Letters from the Quarrel Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty' and Sartre 'Merleau-Ponty Vivant,' both in *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Jon Stewart, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1998).

⁶ By way of example, it is notable that the preeminent English language book on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy – M.C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* – contains no references to Merleau-Ponty's relationship to Marxism, or to his political writings. A more recent monograph – Lawrence Hass' *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2008) – aims to connect Merleau-Ponty's philosophical work to contemporary post-structuralist thought, but neglects Merleau-Ponty's own political writings. Moreover, as Diana Coole points out, only two of the thirteen essays in *Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005) deal with Merleau-Ponty's politics.

⁷ This approach is front and center in Barry Cooper, *Merleau-Ponty and Marxism: From Terror to Reform*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1979); Sonia Kruks, *The Political Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, (New Jersey: Humanities Press 1981); Mark Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser*,

appears content to ignore Merleau-Ponty's politics, the political approach is content to reduce his philosophical writings to his political writings, thus contending that he retreated into a political liberalism or reformism⁸ that was mirrored by an ontology of "harmony"⁹ in his late works. This political reading operates via the simplistic binary of Marxism/liberalism, and seemingly implies that any divergence from Marxism is a de facto acquiescence to liberalism and move away from radical politics. That Merleau-Ponty broke with Marxist orthodoxy by no means suggests that he simplistically moved into the opposing camp (either politically or philosophically). Merleau-Ponty continued to view Marxism as an important source of inspiration¹⁰ for both philosophical and political concerns – not as *the* philosophy of history, but as a source with myriad tools for critical social analysis. That said, under the pressure of a number of perceived errors in the roots of Marxian thought, Merleau-Ponty sought other sources for politico-philosophical inspiration, including the work of Machiavelli.¹¹

This chapter breaks with these simplistic binaries, and provides a political reading of Merleau-Ponty's late ontology. That is, it will look at the philosophical problems that he addresses through the lenses of his political interventions.¹² This is not intended to denigrate Merleau-Ponty's political writings themselves. Rather, it suggests that his late writings were

(Princeton: Princeton University Press 1975), 151; Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept From Lukács to Habermas*, (Berkeley: University of California Press 1984), ch.12.

⁸ See in particular Barry Cooper, *Merleau-Ponty and Marxism*, and Sonia Kruks, *The Political Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*. In a more recent essay – 'Our element: Flesh and democracy in Merleau-Ponty,' *Continental Philosophy Review*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 2012 – Martin Plot follows this trend in reducing Merleau-Ponty's work to a variant of parliamentary democracy.

⁹ As Kruks contends.

¹⁰ Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics* and 'Philosophy as Political Engagement'; Bernard Flynn, 'The Development of the Political Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty: Humanism and the Rejection of Terror,' *Continental Philosophy Review*, 40, 2007, 135. Coole sees a more direct and continuing link to Marx than Flynn. See also Michael E. Gardiner, ' "A Very Understandable Horror of Dialectics": Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty,' *Weak Messianism: Essays in Everyday Utopianism*, (Oxford: Peter Lang Publishers 2013), 95.

¹¹ Flynn, "The Development of the Political Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty," 135.

¹² Diana Coole, in *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics After Anti-Humanism*, provides a thoroughly informative political reading of Merleau-Ponty. My reading of Merleau-Ponty – through the division of the social – is imbued with different intentions and lenses.

informed by the political interventions that he made but never fully worked out before his death while writing his major oeuvre, *The Visible and the Invisible*. In this vein, I aim to read his ontology of the flesh as an attempt to work through these political problems on a philosophical plane; read in this manner, it offers a new ontology of the social. The chapter begins by looking at Merleau-Ponty's readings of Machiavelli and Marx, and the ways in which they illuminate – yet ultimately fail at solving – the complex problem of human co-existence. After exploring the insights and failures of Machiavelli and Marx, I turn to Merleau-Ponty's ontology. In the context of his critiques of Machiavelli and Marx, Merleau-Ponty's work attempts to develop a conception of being that transcends the traditional subject-object dualism. Through his ontology of the "flesh," he puts forth a theory of being in which the self, the world and others are composed of the same "stuff" and, hence, not opposed and irreconcilable entities. But this is not to say that he creates an ontology of identity that reduces others to the "same." Rather, through his concepts of *écart*, chiasm/intertwining and reversibility, he incorporates difference (and essentially a non-identical identity) into his ontology. Ultimately, he presents a conceptualization of the being of self and others (i.e. the social) as inherently divided and non-identical with themselves, though finds this non-identity to be constitutive of the vertiginous nature of being. Thus, Merleau-Ponty de-centers the self and the social in a way that has far reaching consequences for any understanding of politics. After setting out the contours of his ontology of the flesh, I return to a more in-depth interrogation of Machiavelli and Marx and the political dilemmas their work raises. In doing so, I hope to show that Merleau-Ponty's ontology posits the social as a realm of non-identical identity, in which self and others intertwine in malleable and non-objectifying constellations that inform the indeterminacy of differentiated, but not irreconcilable, modes of being-in-the-world.

I. Existential Motifs in Machiavelli and Marx

Merleau-Ponty's political thought is informed by the existential contention that the world is governed by "paradox, division, anxiety, and decision."¹³ These conditions contradict the idea that "universal reason" can exist and that the world is pre-destined for a certain order or harmony. Consequently, Merleau-Ponty proclaims the necessity of breaking with the rationalist tradition and its assertions of a closed or complete solution to the problem of human co-existence. But the existential contention that the world is governed by division and contingency does not reduce it to a meaningless flux. By the assertion "that unity and reason do not *exist*"¹⁴ existentialism intends to open the human world to the potential for "human" (or non-objectifying) relations between self and others. Indeed, the dislocated world of human existence was not something to be simply swept aside for the sake of an ideal/rationalist politics. Rather, they were the very characteristics out of which the political project of human community needed to be constructed. It is because of their attunement to the complicated nature of existence that Merleau-Ponty saw something particularly valuable in the political thought of Machiavelli and Marx.

Machiavelli's work starts from a recognition of the conflictual nature of social life, attesting this to the contingency that rules and destabilizes it. In and of itself, this recognition is not unique. But, unlike previous thinkers, Merleau-Ponty argues that Machiavelli does not attempt to overcome conflict/division. His originality lies in the fact that "having laid down the source of struggle, he goes beyond it without ever forgetting it. He finds something other than antagonism in struggle itself."¹⁵ In Machiavelli's description of the irrationality, violence and death of collective life, Merleau-Ponty sees an immersion of self in others: the fear/aggression

¹³ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1947), 187.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Note on Machiavelli," in *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 211.

that I subject the other to is the same fear/aggression which I live in, am subject to and am inspired by. Hence, “The evil that I do I do to myself, and in struggling against others I struggle equally against myself.”¹⁶ We find here a circuit between self and others, in which our immersion in, and engagement with, a world of struggle subjects us all to a “common situation.”¹⁷ The coercive power of a prince must emerge to stabilize the community and prevent conflicts from becoming “insoluble,” but this is not a stunting of them. The prince aims to contain, though not end, struggle/division and his authority has its limits and its goals. For Machiavelli, this division marks the starting point of “a human community emerging from” a collective life that is characterized by difference; recognition of this allows “us to estimate the task we are faced with if we want to bring some truth to [politics].”¹⁸ Indeed, to iron over the struggle endemic to social life would be to subject the human community to a truly oppressive politics that seeks to annihilate difference. In a dislocated world, the “prince” attains “mastery of his relationships with others...[and] 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.”¹⁹ Herein lies Machiavelli’s radical humanism: he assesses politics on the basis of the relationship it creates between humans, rather than the principles which are used in governing.²⁰ Merleau-Ponty takes this as the leitmotif of any (immanent) critique: we must not assess the values that a regime purports to uphold but the concrete relations existing between people in light of these values.²¹

¹⁶ Ibid., 212.

¹⁷ Ibid., 212-215.

¹⁸ Ibid., 214.

¹⁹ Ibid., 217.

²⁰ Ibid., 217-223.

²¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, xiii-xv.

Yet, Merleau-Ponty finds Machiavelli's solution to the problem of human existence somewhat lacking. In the first place, his operationalization of division appears to fall into the sort of dualistic ontology that Merleau-Ponty criticized in Jean-Paul Sartre's work. For Sartre, the objectifying gaze of the self – the idea that my subjectivity derives from objectifying others – negates the potential for ethical relationships. This view is predicated on a dualistic ontology under which I am only able to see the other's body – which is merely an object to me – and not their mind/"subjectivity." Consequently, others are either objectified by me, or subjects that objectify me; one can, on Sartre's account, not be both subject and object, and, ultimately, "The Other, on principle, is my alienation."²² Or, to cite Sartre's other famous phrase, "Hell is – other people!": the ontological objectification translates into the day-to-day objectification of others – their use as objects, and objects to struggle over the control of – in a permanent purgatory.²³ Machiavelli's conception of the exercise of political power in *The Prince* renders a world in which some are subjects and others are only objects or objectified. Merleau-Ponty argues that this is rooted in an immutable conception of human nature that presents two types of people: "those who live through history and those who make it."²⁴ The latter exhibit a "natural art of commanding" and are capable of exercising political virtue. But this presents an absolute opposition, for as Machiavelli describes the different "humours" of the body politic: "The people do not wish to be commanded or oppressed by the nobles, and the nobles desire to command and oppress the people."²⁵ We thus have a division between those who wish to rule, and are capable of doing so, and those who wish merely not to be oppressed. This conception of the exercise of

²² See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, New York: Washington Square Press 1966), Part Three. For explications of this divide between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, see Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 306-311; Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, 104-106; Jack Reynolds, *Merleau-Ponty and Derrida: Intertwining Embodiment and Alerity*, (Athens: Ohio University Press 2004), Ch. 5; Raymond Aron, *Marxism and the Existentialists*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers 1969), 9.

²³ Jean-Paul Sartre, 'No Exit,' *No Exit and Other Plays*, (New York: Vintage International 1989), 45.

²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, "Note on Machiavelli," 221.

²⁵ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), ch. 9.

political power, particularly when politics is reduced to a "place of power," renders a world in which some are subjects and others are only objects or objectified. Indeed, if one group or class of people is capable of filling the political void or the place of power, even only temporarily, they are capable of acting as subjects but incapable of recognizing those who according to Machiavelli want only to not be oppressed. As we will see, while Merleau-Ponty will acknowledge a cleavage in the social, it will not be based on a principle of those who want to rule and act as subjects, and those who wish only not to be oppressed/treated like objects. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty argues that Machiavelli leaves us no criteria for assessing the historic/political men, aside from "evoking a power which would not be unjust."²⁶ By re-defining the problem of political virtue and human community, he leaves a void that will be filled by arbitrary powers founded in opportunism.²⁷

Marxism offers a possible transcendence of Machiavelli's political void and social hierarchy in the person of the proletariat. Experiencing the conditions of capitalism as powerlessness and detachment from other individuals, the comprehension of alienation posited the very conditions out of which a collective subject could emerge. The increasing tendency of society towards proletarianization situated the proletariat as a universal subject: because the processes of objectification and alienation "transcend national, historical and ethnic peculiarities," the proletariat is capable of recognizing "itself in the others who face the same problems, the same enemy, and join in the same struggle against the same oppressive machinery."²⁸ Moreover, as a non-class or pure negativity, the proletariat suppresses its own existence – and the existence of classes in general – as the final stage of its own becoming. Thus, in the very modes of its (non)being-in-the-world, the proletariat possesses the possibility

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, "Note on Machiavelli," 221.

²⁷ Ibid., 221-222.

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, 113-117.

of “community and communication.” In Merleau-Ponty’s words, “it is the sole authentic intersubjectivity because it alone lives simultaneously the separation and union of individuals.”²⁹ For Marxism, this humanization of social relations represents the very meaning of history: the proletariat has been shaped by history, and represents a determinate solution to the continual struggles that have prevented the problem of human co-existence from being resolved. In these terms, the whole gives meaning to the contingent events that have marred history.³⁰ Far from being the closure of the political universe, Georg Lukács argues that the proletariat – as a pure negativity – creates itself as a self-critical power capable of “a life which makes attempts, corrects itself, and progresses as it goes.”³¹ In other words, the proletariat – despite, or because of, its existence as the identical subject-object of history – produces, in Lefort’s phrasing, a “determinate indeterminacy”³² via its continual and critical transformation of itself.

Yet, ultimately, Merleau-Ponty argues that – like Machiavelli’s – the Marxist solution to the problem of human co-existence is a failure. To begin with, Merleau-Ponty argues that the “pure proletariat is a limit-case,”³³ and one that is “without historical equivalents.”³⁴ This approach – represented by Lukács – treats the proletariat as *the* identical subject-object of history, a being that acts only by acting on, and realizing, itself; in these respects, it is conceived of as the first objective possibility of the entrance of an (absolute) subject into history. But, for Merleau-Ponty, this is little more than the desire that the proletariat be capable of carrying out such a form of praxis.³⁵ Consequently, the whole closure of history via the proletariat’s “becoming” is a pure myth, and the being of the proletariat is simultaneously projected backward

²⁹ Ibid., 110-117, 129-131, 146-156; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 33, 137.

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, 129-131.

³¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 137.

³² Claude Lefort, ‘Thinking Politics,’ *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, 372.

³³ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, 177.

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 204.

³⁵ Ibid., 54, 64. See also Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics*, 82; Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 373.

and forward in history irrespective of its actual manifestations/existence. In this form, Marxism (and specifically Lukács) capitulates to a rationalism in which, as Dick Howard describes it, “the idea of experience dominates over the experience itself.”³⁶ Imbued with a problematic idealism, the proletariat is treated as a carrier of a teleological historico-philosophical totality despite its inability to live up to this character in historical reality. Consequently, Lukács’ thought minimized the resistance that this idealist subject would meet in historical reality, for it had no “means of expressing the inertia of the infra-structures, the resistance of economic and even natural conditions, and the swallowing up of ‘personal relationships’ in ‘things.’” History, in Lukács’ approach, “lacked density and allowed its meanings to appear too soon.”³⁷

While Merleau-Ponty credits Lukács with attempting to preserve “a Marxism which incorporates subjectivity into history without making it an epiphenomenon,”³⁸ he criticizes Lukács’ understanding of this subjectivity as the incarnation of pure negativity in history. The proletariat can become the absolute historical subject who creates the means for a suppression of all classes only by producing its own *non-being* as the being of society; in the process, it inaugurates “a transparent society, internally undivided and classless.”³⁹ Against this, Merleau-Ponty argues that being always contains a partial positivity: for “nothingness” to exist, it must itself participate in being. In particular, historical subjects cannot exist as pure negativity, but must exist positively to affect history. This is true of the proletariat too: “The proletariat *is* the revolution, the Party *is* the proletariat, the leaders *are* the party. This is not an identity in difference but, like being, is being.”⁴⁰ Moreover, he queries of Lukács: “Can one continue to

³⁶ Howard, *The Marxian Legacy*, 216.

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 54, 64. See also, Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics*, 82; Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 373.

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 41.

³⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Materials for a Theory of History,’ *In Praise of Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963), 104.

⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 89.

think that negativity remains identical once it has acquired a historical vehicle?”⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty finds the transparency and self-contained character of such a being to be dubious, citing Max Weber’s emphasis on “the opaqueness of social reality as a ‘second nature’ [which] seems to postpone infinitely the limiting concept of transparent social relationships and therewith the categorical definition of history as the genesis of truth.”⁴² The social as second nature blurs the very “essence” of the proletariat as a pure non-being or being, positing it as merely the existence of a class in its historically specific intersubjective constellation. Consequently, if this “negative” and “critical” power becomes a positive, historical being then self-criticism becomes nominal: the identical subject-object of history negates the possibility of opposition or plurality by positing no other outside of it, and asserting its own identity as the conditions of society itself.⁴³

The full import of these problems comes to the fore in Jean-Paul Sartre’s “ultrabolshevism,” which emerges at the very point that Lukács’ idealist variant of Marxism trailed off: that the proletariat is a being without historical equivalents. While the proletariat “is not verifiable, debatable, or living,” Sartre uses it as “a category delegated to represent humanity.”⁴⁴ Hence, he changes it from a historical movement and incarnation of nothingness, to the philosophical representation of it – to a consciousness to be created. Possessing the “gaze of the least-favoured,” the idealized proletariat is the only being capable of realizing a true humanity by virtue of its own nothingness. But if the proletariat is a non-existent non-being, then it “must be invented. One must here create from nothing the milieu of a common enterprise

⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty, ‘Materials for a Theory of History,’ 106.

⁴² Ibid., 106.

⁴³ On these themes, see James Miller, *History and Human Existence: From Marx to Merleau-Ponty* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 220-221.

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 168-171.

or history, and one must even create the subjects of this enterprise: the Party.”⁴⁵ For Sartre, if the proletariat does not exist but its idealization represents humanity’s aims, then its power and authority “must pass to the Party which fights in its name.”⁴⁶ Moreover, if its existence is entirely predicated on the pure action of the Party, then the Party’s actions are unquestionable and attain the force of objective dictates. Ultimately, Sartre treats the Party and the proletariat as identical. Without the Party there is no proletariat, while the Party remains the a priori apparatus intended to create the proletariat because it does not exist. The decisions of the Party bring the proletariat into existence and, hence, are the decisions of the proletariat itself. This identity of Party and proletariat leads to the absolute exclusion of anything outside of this identity/ideality, and denies a pluralistic subject/ivity; indeed, the historically fragmented nature of the proletariat must be suppressed as a historical reality and as a part of its identity in the making. To open the possibility of “other decisions” is to break the Party’s identity and, consequently, the proletariat’s potential being. This demands the negation of all internal dissent: the opposition – like the other – must be expelled. Or, like the proletariat itself, it must simply obey, which is to say conform and identify. Hence, in Sartre’s hands, the “permanent revolution” “becomes the permanent anxiety of the Party” and its attempts through a falsified or mythical self-criticism to purify itself and make real the identity that cannot exist without it.⁴⁷

II. Ontological Turn, Political “Retreat”: The Flesh of the World

Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology has often been considered a philosophical retreat from political considerations. As I will suggest, we should read his “retreat” as a philosophical sublation of the errors he saw in Machiavelli’s and Marx’s own approaches to politics. Indeed, it should be acknowledged that his ontology of the flesh comes on the heels of his intense critical

⁴⁵ Ibid., 164.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 135-137.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 135-137.

engagement with Marxism, which he saw as the heir to the political dilemmas posed by Machiavelli. Those who advance a "break" or "continuity" theses regarding Merleau-Ponty's work tend to do so from one of the binary approaches to reading his work – the philosophical or the political. The philosophical approach is concerned with the trajectory between *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*, and what the philosophical significance is: whether there is a break between the two works, or whether the latter is merely a continuation or deepening of the concerns that animated the earlier work. But, as I suggested earlier, the effect of Merleau-Ponty's political writings on this question are entirely bracketed out, because this approach appears to find little significance in the political writings. The political approach starts from the a priori primacy of the political writings and reduces the political options to Marxism/liberalism, obfuscating the potentiality that Merleau-Ponty's approach might offer something beyond both Marxism and liberalism.⁴⁸ Against these approaches, we need to probe how the dilemma of preserving division/difference can be affected without imposing a dualistic ontology that would translate into hierarchical and monadic political relations.

In his early writings, Merleau-Ponty was centrally concerned with developing a theory of the embodied mind against Cartesian bifurcation. His central argument was that, rather than being an object divorced from and peripheral to experience and knowledge, the body is “on the side of the subject” for “it is our *point of view on the world*.”⁴⁹ In these terms, he saw the body as the medium of our existence in the world, and the pivot upon which our relationship to objects of cognition and experience revolves. Our ability to know objects is predicated on our embodied

⁴⁸ The appropriation of motifs from Merleau-Ponty's work by radical democratic theorists such as Claude Lefort and Miguel Abensour suggests such a political alternative.

⁴⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 235-239; 'Unpublished Text,' *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 3-5. Original emphasis.

approach to them, and our body and soul thus meld in an intentional act that transcends their Cartesian separation. Much of this emerges in what M.C. Dillon terms Merleau-Ponty's middle period (1945-1958), which centered around *Phenomenology of Perception* and the problems it attempted to elaborate and resolve.⁵⁰ Claude Lefort likens Merleau-Ponty's work on the body in this period to the position of the proletariat in Marxism: the body represented the identical subject-object of history, a being whose intentionality and praxis in the world was capable of interpreting, transforming and consolidating the meaning of the world and itself.⁵¹ But Merleau-Ponty's late period (1959-1961) saw something of a "shift" in his work that drew into question this focus on the body. This comes to the fore in the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*, where he makes a self-critical remark that appears to call into question some of his own earlier insights: "The problems posed in [*Phenomenology of Perception*] are insoluble because I start there from the 'consciousness'-'object' distinction."⁵² Operating at the level of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty's early work sought to transcend the binaries that informed Cartesian and post-Cartesian thinking through an interrogation of subjectivity. Here, he suggests that this focus continued to contain a dualistic residue, not because it failed to transcend a one-sided notion of subjectivity but because it focused on the subject as such. This subject, while in-the-world, was still opposed to "thing-ness." In criticizing this, Merleau-Ponty argues that the philosophy of consciousness approach had taken him to the endpoint of its logos: for it, the

⁵⁰ Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 86.

⁵¹ Claude Lefort, 'Flesh and Otherness,' in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, (ed.) Galen Johnson and Michael Smith, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1990), 12; Lefort, 'Thinking Politics,' 368-369.

⁵² Merleau-Ponty, 'Working Notes,' *Visible and the Invisible*, 200. Dillon argues throughout *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* that this comment does not signal a break with his earlier writings on the body; rather, we should view it as a development and deepening – if not an immanent self-critique – of ideas present, in embryo, in these earlier writings. Coole suggests the political analogue of this, arguing that there is a consistency to Merleau-Ponty's politics and philosophy that is not characterized by a break but "a deepening of his critical and interrogative project." Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics After Anti-Humanism*, 14. While I agree with Dillon and Coole in seeing this as a development of earlier ideas and themes rather than a complete break, the centrality of Merleau-Ponty's changing political position suggests a larger transition than either Dillon or Coole appear prepared to concede.

intentionality of consciousness creates a situation in which “there is no exchange, no interaction between consciousness and the object.”⁵³ To re-work philosophy, this insight needed to be brought to “ontological explication.”⁵⁴

With *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty’s focus shifted from the epistemological and cognitive dilemma of exploring the embodied character of mind and its relationship to the objects of perception to a more general consideration of ontology. Rejecting the binary epistemological alternatives of subject or object, he sought to draw into question the very essence of the “being-object” and “being-subject” that had traditionally informed philosophy.⁵⁵ In doing so, he turned to an exploration of “experiences that have not yet been ‘worked over,’ that offer us all at once, pell-mell, both ‘subject’ and ‘object,’ both existence and essence, and hence give philosophy resources to redefine them.”⁵⁶ In these respects, he aimed to get to the core of brute or savage being – that is, being “behind or beneath the cleavages of our acquired culture” and “before” the thinking subject of Cartesian inspiration. This endeavour required a rejection of philosophy’s heretofore accepted concepts and the adoption of a new terminology.

The terminology of “subject” and “object” limited philosophy’s ability to express being as something that is not simply one or the other. To overcome this, Merleau-Ponty introduced his concept of the “flesh.” In his words, “The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance.”⁵⁷ To describe it as any of these terms would be to put it into an opposition with some other category of being. To break up such closed categorizations, Merleau-Ponty proposes that we think of the flesh as an “‘element,’ in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire,

⁵³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Institution in Personal and Public History,' in *In Praise of Philosophy*, 107.

⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty, 'Working Notes,' 165-167, 183.

⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 22-23.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

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.”⁵⁸ In these respects, the flesh is intended as a non-identical ontological category. It is unnameable as a “substance,” because naming it would subject it to the principle of identity and limit its being, potential becoming and relationality. The flesh is neither a specific substance, nor a compound of substances, but is present in all things that have existence. As flesh, the relationship between beings embodies simultaneously identity (they are made of the same “stuff”) and non-identity (there is no superposition of one over the other, for these beings retain an *écart* – a distance, separation or dehiscence). This disorients the traditional epistemological leitmotifs of a human subject or seer (e.g. a cogito) coming to have knowledge of an external and differentiated object or seen (e.g. a piece of wax).⁵⁹ Rather, both of these entities are “flesh,” and “the world is made of the same stuff as the body.”⁶⁰ We will get a better understanding of this relationship if we begin interrogating it through the traditional language of “object” and “subject”.

Beginning with the “object” as flesh, Merleau-Ponty rejects any notion of the object-in-itself. Rather, he aims to grasp how an object appears to a subject that is a being-in-the-world, negating the very in-itself of the object. The object is always there *for-us*. In his work on Gestalt psychology, Merleau-Ponty rejected any atomistic conceptions of objects, emphasizing perspective and totality in perception: the object always appears to us as “a figure on a background” and “is always in the middle of something else, it always forms part of a ‘field.’”⁶¹ In these terms, the object’s appearance – color, size, perspective, etc – is structured through its

⁵⁸ Ibid., 139.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 139-141.

⁶⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind,' *The Primacy of Perception*, 163.

⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 4. See also, Merleau-Ponty, 'Working Notes,' *Visible and Invisible*, 206.

relations with other objects contained in that field of vision. This understanding was epitomized in the works of Impressionist painters who – in rejecting the Classical distinction between colour and outline – emphasized the extension and melding of colours/objects into each other. This blurred the atomized being of objects and conveyed the relational character of perception.⁶² In the language of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty describes this relationality as a “dimension of variation” and an overlapping. In the context of the colour red, he notes that “this red is what it is only by connecting up from its place with other reds about it, with which it forms a constellation, or with other colours it dominates or that dominate it, that it attracts or that attract it, that it repels or that repel it.”⁶³ This is an overlapping of flesh upon flesh that encompasses both identity and difference: while made of the same “stuff,” these colours or these fleshs maintain a certain *écart* in their layering or folding over onto each other. Indeed, they never become homogenous. Rather, each flesh is determined *through* its relations within a specific constellation. In these terms, the flesh is a living but malleable relation in which each visible is pregnant with the being of other visibles, and the categories of inside and outside (like subject and object) are sublated.⁶⁴

If we turn to the “subject” as flesh, Merleau-Ponty views it as not opposed to, outside of, or substance-ly different than the object: my flesh – like that of the flesh of the world – is perceptible/visible. It is also visible/sensible to itself, as it is visible/sensible to others.⁶⁵ In these terms, the flesh is distinct from the traditional notion of consciousness, “which only thinks its object by assimilating it, by constituting it, by transforming it into thought.”⁶⁶ By the nature of its being composed of the same stuff as the world, the flesh has no necessity to transform,

⁶² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, (trans.) Oliver Davis, (New York: Routledge 2004), 37-43.

⁶³ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 132.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 132-133.

⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind,' 162.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 162-163.

translate or reflect the “external” world: the flesh has an *inherence in-the-world*, being simultaneously *in* and *of* the world. But the body-as-flesh has the distinct quality of being capable of drawing the things of the world into communication and sensibility with itself. The body is capable of moving itself, and through the look “it holds things in a circle around itself.” Moreover, this look “radiates,” “envelops” and “palpates” the visible world – that is, the body extends beyond itself, reaching into the world which it is already a part of. This extension is a result of the corporeal character of the flesh and it “clothes” the world in its flesh. Essentially, as a visible flesh itself, the body “uses its own being as a means to participate in theirs [i.e. the objects], because each of the two beings is an archetype for the other, because the body belongs to the order of the things as the world is universal flesh.”⁶⁷ Again, this is a non-identical identity in which identity and difference co-mingle, relating to each other as similar in their being but never reducing the other to the self/same. In these terms, the flesh is an opening in (or up to) the world: the flesh extends beyond the confines of its own being, and enters into a communion with the seen, in much the same way as the objects in the field of vision did with one another in a constellation. Moreover, while our flesh radiates via the look, it never fully reaches the seen – for it never “becomes” it, nor can it totally grasp the seen which always contains parts that evade the look. This distance is what establishes the “other” as truly other – as more than the projection or continuation of the self.⁶⁸ What separates them is not a simple empty space, but rather a space itself filled with flesh as the palpation of the flesh.⁶⁹ As John O’Neill terms it, this

⁶⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 137.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 134-138; Merleau-Ponty, ‘Eye and Mind,’ 162-163.

⁶⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 134-138; Merleau-Ponty, ‘Eye and Mind,’ 162-163.

is an “*aesthetic distance* which I am sure of crossing with a glance, but which I can never totally embrace.”⁷⁰

Yet, in dividing the flesh for explanatory purposes into the traditional categories of subject and object we risk obscuring much of Merleau-Ponty’s point: neither is merely “subject” or “object.” As flesh applied to flesh, the subject-object relation gives way to a situation in which “the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen.”⁷¹ The relationship is not one between opposed beings/substances; rather, it is a relationship *within* being. In these respects, it is a de-centering of subjectivity. By describing the relationship of “seer” to “seen” as an intertwining or chiasm, Merleau-Ponty conveys that the “truth” of their being lies in neither one nor the other, but in their communion. Neither is a pure in- or for-itself; rather, they are beings with-and-through each other, and the object is “a being of which my vision is a part, a visibility older than my operations or acts,”⁷² and vice versa. This defies the traditional “for-Oneself”/“for-the-Other” distinction: “there is Being as containing all that,” or a “co-functioning” relationship of reversibility.⁷³ The perceptible/visible world is itself formed across the relational intertwining in which seer is seen, and seen also sees. The look of my flesh, and the look or the façade of the flesh facing me, palpate each other and allow for this mediated visibility to take place. In essence, things look at me looking at them, in a relationship of mutual – though jarring – recognition.

At the level of a savage or pre-reflective ontology, there is no a priori opposition between these beings. Indeed, as a relationship of flesh to flesh, neither body nor world dominates or fully envelops the other: they do not coincide or fuse. Rather, they each participate in – and, in

⁷⁰ John O’Neil, *Perception, Expression and History: The Social Phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1970), 42.

⁷¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 139.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 123.

⁷³ Merleau-Ponty, ‘Working Notes,’ *Visible and Invisible*, 214-215.

effect, extend and subtend – the being of the other. This participatory aspect is hedged in the terms of intertwining, and Merleau-Ponty says that it is “as though [my look] were in a relation of pre-established harmony with [the visible things].”⁷⁴ This de-centring and sublation of the subject/object dichotomy occurs because the very notion of the flesh is not oppositional, as expressed in being as an *opening* in the world. This distinguishes the flesh from the “closed” cogito, which perceives the world from a position of interiority, as ideas within the mind. As an opening, the flesh is capable of corporeal relations with the “outside,” relations characterized by the openness – the mutual palpation and penetration – of the flesh: in Merleau-Ponty’s words, “there is a reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other.”⁷⁵ In a different language and with different results, Merleau-Ponty here reiterates his previous contention that “the relationship between human beings and things is no longer one of distance and mastery such as that which obtained between the sovereign mind and the piece of wax in Descartes’s famous example.”⁷⁶ The de-centered relationship of intertwined flesh dislocates and dissociates the traditional categories of subject/object, human/world, inside/outside, with each taking on attributes of its binary “other.”

What should equally be emphasized is that the flesh is also not identical with itself. The assertion of the non-identity of things – that the object always transcends our attempts to know/understand/perceive it – is not entirely new with *The Visible and the Invisible*, but in the context of the reversibility of the flesh and the de-centring of subjectivity it takes on a new meaning. As we saw previously, Merleau-Ponty’s existentialism asserted the incompleteness of the world, and its perennial condition of contingency, ambiguity and conflict. This existential condition is mirrored in Merleau-Ponty’s early writings on perception: “Where human beings are

⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 133.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁷⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *World of Perception*, 51.

concerned...the unfinished quality to knowledge, which is born of the complexity of its objects, is redoubled by a principle of incompleteness.”⁷⁷ Because we experience, know and live the world from within as “beings who are embodied and limited,” we are capable only of seeing from particular vantage points.⁷⁸ In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty finds that the relationship of reversibility dislocates identity to an even greater degree, for it also dislocates the identity of the body-subject as flesh. In the relationship of reversibility, my own being/identity is fragmented and partial because it is mediated through my relationship to the object in a constellation. But Merleau-Ponty also contends that the body-as-flesh is non-identical with itself. The full import of this idea emerges through the example of touch. The body is a sensible amongst sensibles. This characteristic constitutes what Merleau-Ponty calls the body’s “double belongingness,” or its concomitant existence at the level of object (a “thing amongst things”) and subject (a thing that “detaches itself upon [things], and, accordingly, detaches itself from them”). Moreover, touch contains a paradox of immanence and transcendence: my hand “is felt from within,” as a synaesthetic aspect of my corporeal being, and as something that is present as a sensible part of myself; but, simultaneously, like all my senses and the very nature of flesh-as-being, my hand is also “accessible from without” as my sentient being that palpates the world outside, and touches it while also being touched by it.⁷⁹ In essence, then, the body-as-flesh is always in the process of transcending itself, as an opening palpating the world, but always simultaneously felt as an immanent sensible.

As in perception, we find with touch that the relationship of reversibility blurs the identities of sentient and sensible. But Merleau-Ponty emphasizes “that it is a reversibility

⁷⁷ Ibid., 77-83. This runs entirely counter to Cooper’s dubious assertion that the core of intersubjectivity lies in the idea that appearances assure that we see what others see, and politically “this means an insistence upon the reality of the mundane and factual.” Cooper, *Merleau-Ponty and Marxism*, 170.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 54.

⁷⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 133-138.

always imminent and never realized in fact.” This emerges in the case of my left hand “touching my right hand touching the things.”⁸⁰ In this situation, my right hand is simultaneously touching and touched (the touching-touched). But the ability to touch my right hand’s touching of the things always evades my left hand: either my right hand becomes touched in which case “its hold on the world is interrupted”; or, my right hand “retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch *it* – my right hand touching, I palpate with my left hand only its outer covering.”⁸¹ My hands never usurp one another: my left hand never touches the things touched by the right hand, nor does the left hand co-opt the touch of the right hand. But my left hand does transform the touching into the touched, in a relationship that can be reversed when the right hand lets go of the world and touches my left hand in turn. The point is that they “never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization.”⁸² Perceiving or touching necessitates an *écart* which also separates my body – as a sentient-sensible – from itself, cutting it in two. In the case of one hand touching the other hand, rather than coinciding there is an overlapping, and the hands alternate between touching and touched. Hence, while these two hands both belong to the same body, their relationship illustrates that – as an opening – my body-as-flesh is not identical with itself: the unity of my body with itself is broken.

We may deem this is an alienation, but it is an alienation that is an affirmative principle of the flesh. The flesh is always de-centred by virtue of its openness and its inherence in the world. In this vein, Merleau-Ponty does not see this imminent-but-unrealized character to be a failure, but the perennial condition of being. Indeed, because the body-as-flesh is not a pure interiority but is a being-in-the-world *open* to other beings-in-the-world, it is continually in the

⁸⁰ Ibid., 147.

⁸¹ Ibid., 148.

⁸² Ibid., 147.

process of its own short-circuited becoming.⁸³ Consequently, the flesh is a hyperdialectics of being, envisaging “without restriction the plurality of the relationships and what has been called ambiguity.”⁸⁴ The flesh, then, is a vertiginous conception of the subject, always contained in myriad constellations. As Merleau-Ponty states, “The perceiving subject is not this absolute thinker; rather, it functions according to a natal pact between our body and the world, between ourselves and our body. Given a perpetually new natural and historical situation to control, the perceiving subject undergoes a continued birth; at each instant it is something new. Every incarnate subject is like an open notebook in which we do not yet know what will be written.”⁸⁵ *Écart* plays into an openness that gives us access to the world and its/our indeterminate and vertiginous being.

But this decentered and vertiginous existence is also contained in the relationship between beings/fleshes. As with things, in the relation of self to others we no longer know who sees and who is seen, who is subject and who is object; again, it as though “they were in a relation of pre-established harmony.” Their being composed of the same “stuff” is the means to their intertwined communion: I can see and be seen by, touch and be touched by, speak to and hear, the other as flesh of my flesh, and vice versa, because we are sensible and open to one another. These are relations and experiences that are not possible in the “mute” and “solipsist” world of opposed and closed substances mired in their own particular being. The flesh as non-identical “claim[s] no monopoly of being and institutes no death struggle of consciousnesses.”⁸⁶ Indeed, there is no a priori opposition which would necessitate my subsumption or conquering of others as objects for my own self-realization. The non-identity of the object-for-me opens it up

⁸³ Ibid., 133-134, 147-148.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 93-95.

⁸⁵ Merleau-Ponty, 'Unpublished Text,' 6.

⁸⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Philosopher and His Shadow,' *Signs*, (trans.) Richard C. McCleary, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1964), 170.

to other perspectives, and I have no need of a monopoly on the objects of the world. The world is a non-identical depth open to multiple perspectives, and “the field open for other Narcissus, for an ‘intercorporeity.’”⁸⁷ This absence of the death struggle is contained in the idea that the flesh’s opening “is more dispossession than possession.”⁸⁸ This once again emphasizes the relationship of non-identical identity that I have been referring to: my flesh positively subtends, but never possesses or consumes, the being of others. As a whole, we belong to the same visible world: “as overlapping and fission, identity and difference, it brings to birth a ray of natural light that illuminates all flesh and not only my own.”⁸⁹ But even when Merleau-Ponty states that “we function as one unique body” he is not operating in terms of a pure identity, for the body is never identical with itself and this reversible relationship of self-to-self equally operates at the intercorporeal level. The other creates “within me an other than myself, a divergence (*écart*) by relation to...what I see, and thus designate it to me myself.”⁹⁰ Far from being an autonomous entity, the flesh-as-being is split within itself, simultaneously impartial and formless in its very essence and pregnant with and formed by the others with which it co-exists.

III. Machiavelli and the Problem of Social Division

Merleau-Ponty lauds Machiavelli's acknowledgement of the centrality of division to the social realm and, on an abstract level, the ontology of the flesh runs parallel to this division of the social and the affirmative character that the maintenance of this division brings to politics. But, in terms of Machiavelli’s operationalization of this division – specifically as found in Claude Lefort’s reading⁹¹ – he appears to fall into the Sartrean trap. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli

⁸⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 141.

⁸⁸ Merleau-Ponty, 'The Philosopher and His Shadow,' *Signs*, 170.

⁸⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 140-145, 214-215. See also, Merleau-Ponty, 'The Philosopher and His Shadow,' 170.

⁹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, 'Working Notes,' *Visible and Invisible*, 224.

⁹¹ In large part, in what follows below, I am utilizing Lefort’s famous reading of Machiavelli. A student of Merleau-Ponty, Lefort’s reading seems to build off of ‘A Note on Machiavelli.’ I turn more explicitly to Lefort's work in the following section.

posits a “natural” division in the social between the rich/grandee and the people/poor.⁹² As he states, “The people do not wish to be commanded or oppressed by the nobles, and the nobles desire to command and oppress the people.”⁹³ Lefort describes this relationship as natural because it is essentially pre-political, for it exists prior to – and outside of – politics.⁹⁴ These classes or humours are immediately opposed to one another and, as Lefort summarizes, “in [the grandee] the people encounter their *natural* adversary, the Other who constitutes them as the immediate object of its desires.”⁹⁵ Moreover, Lefort states, “one class only exists by the lack that constitutes it opposite the other.”⁹⁶ In this context, the “humours” of the social body are presented as an absolute, and seemingly irreconcilable, opposition. Derived from the opposed natural desires/dispositions of the respective classes, with their separate “lacks” constituting a wholeness, each class is the negation of the other. This opposition cannot be transcended, for it is the permanent and perennial division of social life. Hence, the “solution” to their conflict lies in the prince. The prince – or, more generally, the “empty” place of power that he occupies – rises above the social division, giving the “image” of a higher unity that masks but never supersedes the division.

⁹² It should be noted that Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Machiavelli has a different inflection than Lefort’s reading, but the consequences are the same. For Lefort, the rich attempt to assert their subjectivity through domination of the poor as their objects; and the poor merely aim to avoid being objectified, and have no true subjectivity of their own (being merely “objects” for their other, and having no inclination towards subjectivity themselves). In Merleau-Ponty’s reading, the enduring men with the natural art of commanding (princes and men of virtue) assert their subjectivity over the “historic men” who merely live through history and are afflicted with “blindness.” The major difference in the two readings is that Lefort speaks of the conflict between non-political actors, which will ultimately be mediated by the political sphere/prince, while Merleau-Ponty speaks of the opposition between a political class (at least in terms of its potential to function as rulers according to virtue) and a non-political class. What interests me here is simply the nature of the relationship between these two beings, for both inflections contain the same ontological errors.

⁹³ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 9.

⁹⁴ Bernard Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2005), 16.

⁹⁵ Claude Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, (trans.) Michael B. Smith, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2012), 141.

⁹⁶ Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, 140.

As I suggested earlier, the nature of subjectivity in Machiavelli presents something akin to the Sartrean dualism that Merleau-Ponty criticized. The ontology of the flesh provides us with the means to deepen this critique, and take it in different directions. In the first place, it challenges Machiavelli for the relatively a-temporal or essentialist character of his ontology, and its failure to acknowledge the “plurality of relationships” that the hyperdialectic of being posits. By asserting that the division of rich/poor or ruler/ruled is a “universal” and natural relationship – part of the “immutable” character of humans, and reproduced in the cyclical character of history⁹⁷ – Machiavelli appears to collapse the ontic experience of this division into a permanent and primordial feature of social ontology. In other words, he takes a specific incarnation of being as a universal and ultimately transhistorical and/or transcendental fact. Or, in a more complex sense, the Lefortian reading of Machiavelli provides us with something like an eternal recurrence of this relationship in which “the same” continually recurs in history. Throughout his work, Merleau-Ponty posits the historically transient nature of being and particularly of intersubjective relations. In this vein, he argues, “History is other people; it is the interrelationships we establish with them, outside of which the realm of the ideal appears as an alibi.”⁹⁸ In the context of his existential rejection of an ultimate solution to the division, anxiety and decision that characterize human existence, Merleau-Ponty sees the potential for human community and mutual recognition through the creation of new forms of being-in-the-world. But, in rejecting reference to the ideal, Merleau-Ponty demands that we look at “the real relationships between people in our societies.”⁹⁹ In these respects, he finds that “for the most part, these are master-slave relationships.”¹⁰⁰ But the existence of these relations is no reason for

⁹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, ‘Machiavelli,’ 221.

⁹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, ‘The Primacy of Perception,’ 25.

⁹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *World of Perception*, 67.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 68.

their acceptance, and he calls for us to think outside of the trap of adopted customs and to “prepare the ground for those rare and precious moments at which human beings come to recognize, to find, one another.”¹⁰¹

The reference to recognition here bears the marks of Merleau-Ponty’s engagement with Hegel. For Merleau-Ponty, the “existential” Hegel of *Phenomenology of Spirit* affirms the contingency and perennial becoming that is central to the human condition – that is, rather than affirming an “end of history,” Hegel’s existentialism posits the continual unrest at the core of human subjectivity: “As long as this last stage of history remains unattained – and should it ever be reached, man, deprived of movement, would be like an animal – man, as opposed to the pebble which is what it is, is defined as a place of unrest (Unruhe), a constant effort to get back to himself, and consequently by his refusal to limit himself to one or another of his determinations.”¹⁰² This permanent state of self-discovery – the vertiginous, because non-identical, state of being – ties into the flesh’s dehiscence with itself.¹⁰³ The flesh is characterized by its continually deferred realization, “the coincidence [that] eclipses at the moment of realization” but which transforms my existence, and the existence of those around me, nonetheless.¹⁰⁴

At the same time, Hegel affirms the divisive nature of social existence (the multiplicity of being) and my necessity of living “not for myself alone but with other people.” But rather than affirming the relationship of mastery – a specifically deformed determination of human co-existence – Hegel affirms “the idea of a reason immanent in unreason,” of a drive towards a never-to-be-fully-realized-“universality” that would affirm the *multiplicity*, not the duality, of

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 68.

¹⁰² Merleau-Ponty, ‘Hegel’s Existentialism,’ *Sense and Nonsense*, 66.

¹⁰³ Miller errs in seeing this struggle for recognition as ending. Miller, *History and Human Existence*, 206.

¹⁰⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 133-134, 141, 147-148.

being.¹⁰⁵ In this vein, Hegel's dialectic of recognition suggests that we are not reduced to a binary choice between "the *pour soi* and the *pour autrui*, between our version of thought and the version of others."¹⁰⁶ The choice of one or the other always involves the denial of both positions, for in the dialectic of recognition we each seek the affirmation of others who we equally recognize: through the denial of their being, or their "version of thought," I deny exactly what I have chosen to seek from them. In the dialectic of recognition, "I submit myself to the judgement of another who is *himself worthy of what I have attempted*, that is, in the last analysis, to the judgement of a peer whom I myself have chosen."¹⁰⁷ In understanding this, Merleau-Ponty's brief reference elsewhere to Montaigne's friendship with La Boétie is instructive.¹⁰⁸ Despite his desire "to live according to himself," Montaigne's "friendship with La Boétie was exactly the kind of tie which *enslaves us to another*."¹⁰⁹ Here, we find an originary belonging rooted in our openness to the world.¹¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty suggests that Montaigne was "born of this friendship...for him, in sum, existing meant existing beneath his friend's gaze."¹¹¹ In such a relation, we are tied or have a responsibility to, and desire for, the other – and the image that they have of us – and we must try to decipher and make meaning of it (even if by breaking it) by

¹⁰⁵ Merleau-Ponty, 'Hegel's Existentialism,' 70.

¹⁰⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1973), 85-86.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 85-86.

¹⁰⁸ This reading will offer us something akin to Emmanuel Levinas' ethical demand. And it does so *against* Levinas' critique of Merleau-Ponty's use of the hand shake as constitutive of a radical separation between self and other that obscures the ethical relation/responsibility that we take on in the face of the other. Levinas' focus on the handshake – largely drawn from a discussion of the 'The Philosopher and his Shadow' – obscures the focus on vision and sensibility that is often at the forefront of *The Visible and the Invisible*. Moreover, in *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty asserts the innocence that is contained in the face of the other (138), again suggesting the centrality of vision to his perspective. For Levinas' critique of Merleau-Ponty, see Emmanuel Levinas, 'Intersubjectivity,' *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, 59. Simon Critchley appropriates Levinas' reading of Merleau-Ponty without much critical interrogation. See Simon Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought*, (London: Verso 1999), 64-65.

¹⁰⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Reading Montaigne,' *Signs*, 207.

¹¹⁰ I borrow the term "originary belonging" from Elaine Stavro's comments on a portion of this chapter presented at the Canadian Political Science Association Annual Meeting 2011 at Laurier University. I develop the concept further throughout the dissertation.

¹¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, 'Reading Montaigne,' 207.

trying to understand ourselves as they understand us. If the other has an image of my reality, then I must attempt to understand this image while simultaneously trying to understand the other who holds it. This disjoins my own being and the being of the other, de-centering both to the point whereby we exist not through our own allegedly authentic and autonomous being, but through the process of trying to understand the other and the other's understanding of us¹¹²: "in loving them [Montaigne] was himself and regained himself in them as he regained them in himself."¹¹³ In "choosing" this other from whom I seek recognition – and to whom I am "enslaved" not because they are my "master," but because I seek their recognition as they seek mine – rather than giving up rights and privileges, I take on a self-affirming obligation "to understand situations other than my own and to create a path between my life and the lives of others, that is, to express myself."¹¹⁴

We should read Merleau-Ponty's return to ontology in the context of this indeterminate and perennial dialectic, keeping in mind that – in recognizing the historicity of the flesh – he seeks to avoid reducing being to a specific socio-historical incarnation, and seeks to find in his new ontology the possibility for human community while acknowledging its de-centered/divided nature. Hence, with the specific project of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh attempts to give an account of savage or wild being; such an ontology would be capable of moving "below" or "outside" of contemporary social structures and conventions. This also implies moving "below" the purely phenomenological experience of the ontically situated thinking subject – below the thinking subject who has even an immediate

¹¹² In an insightful essay on the relationship between Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, and drawing on the former's political writings, Roberto Bernasconi notes the decolonizing feature at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's thought: given that colonization as a philosophical act is rooted in the imposition of the self/same on the other, decolonization calls for, or demands, stepping outside of oneself, and seeing through the eyes of the other. See Bernasconi, 'One-Way Traffic: The Ontology of Decolonization and its Ethics,' *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, 70-71.

¹¹³ Merleau-Ponty, 'Reading Montaigne,' 207.

¹¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, 86-87.

consciousness and is hence prone to objectifying social relations in a first collision – to the ontological being that informs that ontic experience. In light of this, his work suggests that Machiavelli fails to get to an unsullied analysis of being, still operating at the level of a post-reflective philosophy tainted by pre-conceived social and cultural categories. The flesh is rooted in a phenomenological ontology that aims to grasp the *essence* of being, bracketing out what we “already know” or think we know about it in order to allow being to appear to us as it *is*, as being-qua-being. While maintaining the division between self and *others* (between the I and non-I) rather than the post-ontological division between oppressor and oppressed, Merleau-Ponty finds the essence of being contained in its openness to the world and others, in the flesh’s interactive presence in which others are always the subtending and extension – without superposition or consumption – of the self.¹¹⁵ This openness in conjunction with its temporal foundations means that the circuit of the flesh is a fluid constellation, and militates against any notions of being and intra-being relations as absolute and fixed: the non-identity of the self with itself, and with others/things, opens it up to different relations and ways of being/becoming across time and space. In these respects, our being is informed by our interrelations with others (and the things of the world): it is constructed, like the being of the color red discussed above, out of the complex but contingent interaction of various beings whose identity – in the colloquial sense – is determined through their interrelations.

For Machiavelli this sort of fluid interaction is ontologically absent and consequently a political non-starter. He posits two a-temporal and essentialist beings/humours that constitute a self/other difference as opposition, but fails to truly posit it as a de-centering. His division of the social is purely one of opposition, whereby the being of the upper class is contained in its attempt to constitute the other as an object, and the being of the lower class is contained in its desire to

¹¹⁵ This reading draws on Jay’s account of the Merleau-Ponty/Sartre relationship in *Downcast Eyes*, 311.

merely not be objectified. But in these respects, there is the assertion of subjectivity *by* the two humours *against* one another (even if the poor/non-virtuous' subjectivity is predicated on not being objects), but seemingly no intersubjectivity *between them* (each class/humour's subjectivity being predicated on the impossibility of a direct relation with the other – on the impossibility of their mutual action). In the context of political economy, this way of thinking drove Marx to assert, in exasperation, that “private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it...when we use it.”¹¹⁶ It is this problem that Merleau-Ponty's work aims to resolve at the philosophical level: in positing the non-possessivity of being through the depth and non-identity of the world itself, Merleau-Ponty's ontology aims to transcend the opposition found in Sartre, which manifests itself in Machiavelli in the form of the conflict of having (the patrician ideal) and being (the plebeian ideal). In opening the world to multiple beings, Merleau-Ponty aims to open up these beings to one another for genuine relations of intersubjectivity and alterity – to the actions of a self which comes into being through a relationship of mutual encroachment and transgression, immanence and transcendence, affirmation and action with others.

With Machiavelli, “interaction” is only manifested through – and limited to – a play of forces, and assertion of self *versus* other, in the “place of power” or the political. But this is competition, not interaction or intersubjectivity. The being of each is violently and irreconcilably opposed to the being of the other by definition;¹¹⁷ the only “solution” is a masking of this struggle, or its mediation *through the prince or place of power* not through the

¹¹⁶ Karl Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,’ *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, (New York: Penguin Books 1992), 351.

¹¹⁷ In his work on recognition, Axel Honneth renders a similar reading of Machiavelli, suggesting that he reduces humans to a permanent state of hostility which justifies any actions on the part of the prince. However, as Merleau-Ponty and Lefort's readings suggest, Honneth errs in arguing that Machiavelli's prince aims to end the struggle. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, (Cambridge: MIT Press 1995), 8.

intercorporeity of these beings. Here we have a case of mutual exclusion, whereby the Sartrean notion of subjectivity is embodied in “the political” as an open realm that facilitates the arbitrary alternation of subjects objectifying (and excluding) the other. The being or subjectivity of each is hence not reconcilable with/through the being of the other, and the very depth of being that Merleau-Ponty posited is flattened out. At his most democratic, in *The Discourses*, Machiavelli argues that a mixed constitution – which gives the core social factions a share in the constitution – is ideal. But this is still structured around the opposed social wills of those who want to oppress and those who want merely not to be oppressed. Here, the opposition of irreconcilable wills is merely institutionalized as a system of checks or mediations on the power and disposition of the other.¹¹⁸ For Merleau-Ponty we are pregnant with others, not as two opposite/opposed entities constituting a whole nor as in need of a mediating sphere, but as non-identicals open to and decentered by our relationship with these others (which, however, never “complete” our being). But the problem for Lefort (and his appropriation of Machiavelli) may lie in the pregnancy of self with others inherent to reversibility.

IV. Lefort and the Problem of Alterity

Lefort’s essay ‘Flesh and Otherness’ presents a critical analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh, which – in the context of what I have been discussing – may appear as a defence of Machiavelli’s position or Lefort’s reading of it, and helps us to further understand the political implications of the flesh. Centrally, Lefort argues that there is a tension “between an interpretation [of the flesh] principally founded upon the experience of reversibility and an interpretation that makes us admit the irreducibility of Otherness.” On Lefort’s reading, reversibility – and the pregnancy of self with other that it entails – is predicated on a relationship of sameness: the metaphor of birth is for him a notion of self-begetting, and reversibility is

¹¹⁸ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, (London: Penguin Classics 1983), 104-118, 223-225.

always a relationship of identity between identicals – if not a relationship that is entirely internal to the seer (i.e. the seer sees in the other only his own gaze). Lefort notes that Merleau-Ponty does mention a relationship of intercorporeity, but in the context of the discussion of the “synergic body,” and the example of my right hand touching my left hand. For Lefort, this is a relationship of the body to itself. Ultimately, his contention is that the relationship of reversibility is not able to account for (or, rather, does not truly theorize) otherness, emphasizing homogeneity and overlapping. Moreover, Lefort uses the example of “infantile experience” to argue that the relationship between child and adult – far from being reversible and lateral – is an asymmetrical one in which “the look of the other opens the world to [the child].” For instance, the hand of the adult points the look of the child in the direction of the object. As he explains, “nature is always seen as having already been seen by another. The reversibility between the thing and the seer masks the eye that already had seen before what we are seeing now, and that saw us.” Hence, the claim of reversibility – between the seer and the object – actually negates the “third term,” the other which has already seen the object and the seer. Thus, the child is born into a world that has already been named: “the other gives names, and in a certain sense, introduces the child into the sphere of law whenever he says ‘this is red, and not yellow,’ or ‘this is a house, and not a boat.’” More to the point, the naming of the child is an “original and irreducible transcendence,” and “we cannot escape from being named and bearing the mark of some heritage, the mark of debt and law.” Lefort claims that this naming is not reducible to a relationship of reversibility: it is a genuine sign of “otherness in myself,” “imprinted on me and at the same time bound to remain outside me, above me.” Summing up his critique of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, Lefort claims that the relationship of reversibility – between sentient and sensible, and the body and the outside – is a “dual relation” of sameness. Thus, Lefort states in

no uncertain terms, “What in general is not taken into account is the other, the third one, the representative of otherness.”¹¹⁹

Lefort brings the digression into infantile experience full circle by suggesting a fault with Merleau-Ponty's politics. In reference to Merleau-Ponty's scant adoption of the language of the flesh in his later political writings, Lefort argues that “he did not succeed in leaving the frame of sociological analysis. What he considered essential was the web of purely social relations, so he did not get rid of relativism by comparing the different types of social structures.” Centrally, he suggests that Merleau-Ponty failed to acknowledge the “cleavage” between “political forms of society,” centrally modern democracy and totalitarianism. It is on the basis of the “third term” that these can be differentiated. For in totalitarianism – which treats the social as a closed and identical being, and the state as the fulfillment of the being of that closed whole through its distribution of, and dominance via, the power distributed in the social – “there is no place...for reference to the third one, the representative of justice or truth, no sense of otherness.” Democracy, on the other hand, is a political form that “accepts that it does not possess the meaning of its own genesis and its own ends”: by leaving the place of power empty, democracy holds out the possibility of changing its self-generation/representation of the social and never conceives of it as a finished and total self-institution.¹²⁰

The response to Lefort's central claim – that reversibility denies alterity because it is a self-relation – should be apparent from what I said about the flesh previously: the flesh as a relation is one of non-identical identity. The relationship of self to others *requires* identity, for these beings must be of the same flesh in order to have a relationship or means of communion/communication (particularly one that avoids the subject-object dichotomy and the

¹¹⁹ Claude Lefort, ‘Flesh and Otherness,’ 3-13.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 12-13.

implicit relations of domination/superposition contained in it). But the relationship is still characterized by the *écart*/dehiscence that makes them non-identical beings – that makes others not merely the continuation of the self but its extension/subtension. Hence, in ignoring the centrality of *écart*, Lefort errs in seeing a tension between reversibility and otherness: *écart* and reversibility are complimentary concepts, and exactly the ontological characteristics of the flesh that allow it to express alterity.¹²¹ More to the point, while *écart* is central in establishing others as truly other than myself, reversibility posits the very *social relationship* between self and others, the means to our intercorporeity – namely our double belongingness to the realm of subject and object, inside and outside, self and other. In these respects, reversibility posits our intercorporeity as a pre-reflective fact of being and posits the necessity of coming to grips – at the ontological and political level – with the very alterity of others. Admittedly, Lefort manages to gloss over this by transforming the relationship of reversibility to one between the subject and the world/objects/things or itself. Of course, this neglects the core of Merleau-Ponty’s ontological innovation, namely that “subject”/“consciousness” and “object”/“world” are Cartesian categories that he intends to overcome. In these respects, the de-centered flesh-as-“subject” contains elements of subject and object, being and world, particularly through its complex relations with others, in an attempt to understand others as more than merely objects-for-us or the objectifying colonization of our self.

The colonization or objectification of the other’s subjectivity seems to be exactly what is at play in Lefort’s use of the child-adult relationship. As David Michael Levin argues, that the child is born into social relations illustrates the “inherently interactional” character of being-as-flesh that Merleau-Ponty aims to capture: “it enables me to see myself as *always already* social –

¹²¹ In these respects, I concur with Dillon’s defense of reversibility via *écart* in ‘Écart: Reply to Lefort’s Flesh and Otherness,’ in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, 14-26

as having *already been* social, social from the very beginning.”¹²² I am, from the time of my birth, already in a relationship of intertwining with others. And, in this context, we experience not an originary division, but an originary belonging: we are born part of an intersubjective space that shapes us prior to our own individuality, but this intersubjective space also allows us to become an “I” or “we” *within* the sphere of belonging, facilitating a belonging within division (the possibility of the unity of our impossible perspectives). Yet, the asymmetrical character of the child-adult relationship specifically is not the prototype of being but *a particular form* of social interaction/relations and, when completely asymmetrical, a particularly deformed one which stunts and disrupts the potentiality of mutual recognition and communication. Certainly in his reference to the naming of the child, Lefort is aiming to illustrate the disjunction between the child and representations of it. But what should also be noted is that the idea that the child has been named, that the other was there before, that the other “introduces the child into the sphere of law” and that the child consequently bears “the mark of some heritage, the mark of the debt of law,” simply rigidifies the sedimented cultural world that we are born into without legitimating (or interrogating) it. If we were to take the child-adult relationship as a prototype of social relations or political being, we would inevitably wind up with a patriarchal regime along the lines of Hobbes’ Leviathan, with the absolute sovereign constituting the other that has already named and defined justice. Certainly, this is not Lefort’s intention. But in treading down this path, Lefort’s point ignores that implicit in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology is a critique of monadic and inherently objectifying, social relations. His entire ontology is an attempt to break free of the Cartesian notions of subjectivity that have informed these social relations. Merleau-Ponty argues that a society should be judged not by its “principles” but “on the basis of the relations it

¹²² David Michael Levin, ‘Justice in the Flesh,’ in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, 36-40.

seeks to establish (through the creativity of man).” What is important for Lefort is not social relations but the realm of the political.

Indeed, for Lefort, what is key in Machiavelli is not the virtue of the prince, but the “place” that he occupies: the political sphere or the place of power. In these respects, he draws a distinction between “politics” as a sphere of competitive social division and “the political” in the sense of a political regime. According to Lefort, the difference between political forms of society emerges in the manner in which societies institute, or objectify, themselves in the realm of the political:

Giving [political institutions or regimes] a form implies giving them meaning (*mise en sens*) and staging them (*mise en scene*). They are given meaning in that the social space unfolds as a space of intelligibility articulated in accordance with a specific mode of distinguishing between the real and the imaginary, the true and the false, the just and the unjust, the permissible and the forbidden, the normal and the pathological. They are staged in that this space contains within it a quasi-representation of itself as aristocratic, monarchic, despotic, democratic or totalitarian.¹²³

As James Ingram explains, “For Lefort, ‘the political’ constitutes society’s unity by projecting it onto a point of ‘power,’ which he understands as a symbolic location.” Through self-institution in this symbolic location, “collective relations and actors’ understandings of them, give (objective) form and (subjective) meaning (*mise-en-sens*) to society.”¹²⁴ In this context, what is important in Machiavelli’s work for Lefort is not the prince but the image of the prince as the stabilizing force of society that neither overcomes the division that characterizes politics nor posits the political as a closed realm that has an ultimate solution to the problems of politics. In relating this to modern regimes, Lefort argues that the fundamental difference between totalitarianism and democracy lies in the manner in which each undertakes the process of self-institution, specifically in terms of the relations between society/politics and the political. In

¹²³ Claude Lefort, ‘The Question of Democracy,’ *Democracy and Political Theory*, (Cambridge: Polity Press 1985), 11-12.

¹²⁴ James D. Ingram, ‘The Politics of Claude Lefort’s Political: Between Liberalism and Radical Democracy,’ *Thesis Eleven*, No. 87, November 2006, 36.

Lefort's words, totalitarianism seeks "to weld power and society back together again, to efface all signs of social division, to banish the indetermination that haunts the democratic experience." Through the mechanisms of violence and repression, totalitarianism seeks to ultimately abolish the conflictual sphere of politics, and its oppositional elements, and represent society via the political as a whole that is identical with itself. On the other hand, democracy leaves the political space "empty" or "open" as a "symbolic void." As Ingram explains: "Because the political is a realm of representation, it always includes an element of the imaginary: there is always a gap between a society's representation of its unity and its real divisions."¹²⁵ Because democracy does not permanently fill the void of the political – as totalitarianism does – but only represents an image of itself through it, the sphere remains open to the continual contestation of its ability to represent society's wholeness.¹²⁶ It is in the context of this framework that Lefort's political critique of Merleau-Ponty becomes intelligible: Merleau-Ponty's focus on social relations neglected the analysis of the political sphere and the place of power – which constitutes "the third one," "the representative of justice or truth" and the "sense of otherness" – and is incapable of differentiating democracy and totalitarianism.¹²⁷

Lefort shows simultaneously an acute understanding and a fundamental misunderstanding of the ontology of the flesh. Merleau-Ponty conceived of the flesh as a being that was non-identical with itself, constantly in the process of its own short-circuited/deferred realization. This is what is at play in Lefort's presentation of society's relationship to the political: society is always in the short-circuited process of attempting to realize/represent itself in the political. But Lefort's fundamental misunderstanding of the centrality of *écart* to the flesh

¹²⁵ Ibid., 36.

¹²⁶ See Lefort, 'Flesh and Otherness,' 12-13; Claude Lefort, 'Dialogue with Pierre Clastres,' *Writing: The Political Test*, (Durham: Duke University Press 2000), 207-233; Lefort, 'The Question of Democracy,' 16-18; Ingram, 'The Politics of Claude Lefort's Political,' 35-39; Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort*.

¹²⁷ Lefort, 'Flesh and Otherness,' 13.

as constitutive of otherness blocks him from seeing the ethico-political claim contained in the principle of reversibility. What is more, Lefort's one-sided appropriation of the flesh – his neglect of the otherness contained in it – leads him into offering a non-substantive principle of alterity in his own theorization of politics: what he posits is a theory of the non-identity of the self with itself, not a relationship between self and others. In these respects, the alleged fault of Merleau-Ponty's work – that the principle of reversibility is self-referential and ignores alterity – appears as the immanent negation of Lefort's own claim to conceptualizing otherness/alterity.

In Lefort's thought the third term, or the representative of otherness, appears to be the political, because the social division of the two, or of "self" and "other," is not constitutive of a relationship of alterity. The being of the contending classes is largely monadic/autonomous, and their principle of subjectivity lies in their ability to one-sidedly – even if, "indeterminately" or "emptily" – assert their own identity and represent the social through an image of unity (the symbolic negation of social otherness) in the realm of the political. This is an institutionalization of class conflict that makes no pretence to taking class alterity and oppression seriously, merely presenting the institutionalization as "constitutive of the very unity of society."¹²⁸ Even if we look at Lefort's work as a transposition of Machiavelli's social humours to the realm of a symbolic/imaginary contained within society generally rather than in the actual existence of class relations, we still wind up with merely a self-relation: the grandee/oppressive humour symbolizes the – misguided – attempts to represent the social as identical, while the plebeian/anti-authoritarian humour asserts the social's non-identity with itself. If the relationship of otherness (and of alienated and vertiginous being) is to be found, it is only through the relationship between society/politics and the political. "Society" institutes itself as a non-identical being, a being always short-circuited in its own becoming (its own becoming in

¹²⁸ Lefort, 'Question of Democracy,' 18.

accordance with its image of unity) in the realm of the political. But this is ultimately the very relationship of reversibility that Lefort criticizes for its lack of alterity in his misreading of Merleau-Ponty: this relationship of reversibility is one between society and itself (or, rather, its imaginary/symbolic self-institution). Again, as with Machiavelli, we have a subjectivity but no intersubjectivity and consequently no alterity/otherness: the self is always its own other (or the “other” is the non-identity of the self).¹²⁹

This point can be reiterated by looking at Lefort’s critical analysis of Pierre Clastres’ work. There, he argues that despite the “indivision” of the social in Clastres’ work on “primitive” societies, the other comes into play in the form of the “invisible” beings contained in the laws inscribed on the body of tribal members. Lefort contends that this represents a chiasm/intertwining between self and other, between “the world down here and the other world, between the visible and the invisible.” In this situation, Lefort argues that these peoples are essentially subjected to the power of an other that is “absolutely distant from their own living space,” one that seeks to banish division and distinction by writing on and inhabiting the body itself. Far from seeing this other as a real being or real world that effaces difference/division, democracy transforms this into society’s symbolic imaginary, its self-institution.¹³⁰ But in either situation Lefort sees in this other realm the “other” and the relationship of alterity: society with itself, as either the totalitarian incarnation of the One, or as its symbolic and malleable self-institution. In either case but particularly the latter, we are not de-centered by a *genuine other* (i.e. an other who actually confronts us as a different being-in-the-world) and our relationship to it, but only by the lack of society’s own absolute identity.

¹²⁹ This lack of intersubjectivity in Lefort’s work is also suggested in Hugues Poltier, *Passion du politique: La pensée de Claude Lefort*, (Paris: Labor et Fides 1998), 143-144.

¹³⁰ Lefort, ‘Dialogue With Pierre Clastres,’ 225-227.

Merleau-Ponty's ontological project is intended to convey our dehiscence with ourself *and our opening to, and de-centering by, others*. For Merleau-Ponty any notion of the "third" refers to the fact that intersubjectivity is not limited to the relation between the self and *the* other, but to the relationships between selves and others as constellations.¹³¹ Hence, the relationship of alterity must be based on a conception of other beings that are, and that I experience as, truly other than myself. Our very existence is predicated on our inherence in a historical situation in which we are confronted by others as other beings-in-the-world and as other modes of being-in-the-world.¹³² By transferring our focus to the level of our symbolic self-representation, Lefort ignores the very layering of flesh upon flesh that reversibility implies both with ourselves and with others. Indeed, our existence is informed by the interactive character of the flesh as a being that is open and intertwined with others. This ontology rejects the superposition, consumption or constitution of others, positing in its stead the constellative being of self and others. This constellative intersubjectivity rejects treatment of others as merely the negation of the self, as a "disjunction" in which self and others constitute irreconcilable modes of being and, consequently, "form a system of reciprocal exclusions." It also rejects any form of synthesis (imaginary or otherwise) of our modes of being-in-the-world. Both of these positions are entrenched in a philosophy of (constitutive) consciousness that elides Merleau-Ponty's attempt to step outside of the binary poles of traditional ontology.

The ontology of the flesh suggests that I "[exist] between others and myself, between me and myself, like a hinge, the consequence and the guarantee of our belonging to a common world."¹³³ By acknowledging our embedding in an originary belonging – our common belonging to the world of being – we recognize that others "[engage] with the things in my world

¹³¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*, 81-82.

¹³² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xiv.

¹³³ Merleau-Ponty, 'Institution in Personal and Public History,' 108.

in a style that is at first mysterious to me but which at least seems to me a coherent style because it responds to certain possibilities which fringed the things of the world.”¹³⁴ This implies an openness to – and consequently an interpellation or de-centering by – other modes of being-in-the-world, and demands the attempt to form a “unity across impossibles such as that of *my* world and the world of the other.”¹³⁵ These other modes of being-in-the-world are, hence, not the negation or counterpoint of my own. Rather, they surprise, disorient and disjoint my own being. This is a further layering of the vertiginous being of the flesh for this relationship of reversibility “presupposes a transformation of myself and of the other as well.”¹³⁶ In being “enslaved” to others, these other modes of being affect mine and are a part of my own existence, ultimately changing me in a way that transcends any monadic or introverted presentation of being. Montaigne’s enslavement to the gaze of La Boétie represents a transformation that subtends – but also extends, as a project of understanding himself and others – and transforms his being from what it would have been if he were considered an autonomous or monadic subject. As openness, I am always continually – and substantively – changed/transformed by my relationship to the “outside,” to the world and others, and we re-make these relations in an attempt to attain a recognition that can never be completed, because we can never fully coincide with ourselves or others. Far from extracting from the historical embodiment of modes of human oppression a set social “humours” that are then ad hoc de-historicized and hoisted onto the social body (which would supply ready-made subjects), this implies a historicity of the constellation of being and the continual transformation of existent relations, modes of being and conditions of possibility (i.e. it presents indeterminate beings in the continual process of an indeterminate

¹³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 142.

¹³⁵ Merleau-Ponty, ‘Working Notes,’ *Visible and Invisible*, 214.

¹³⁶ See both Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, 142-143 and ‘Working Notes,’ *Visible and Invisible*, 214. This point is also made by Diana Coole in *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics*, 246-247.

emergence/becoming). Merleau-Ponty states: “The foundation of truth is not outside time; it is in the opening of each moment of knowledge to those who will resume it and change its sense.”¹³⁷ Being and existence are likewise located within the historicity of truth, and changed by those who participate in them. That Merleau-Ponty focuses on social relations and sees the dialectic of recognition as a moving principle by no means implies the movement towards the eradication of difference via the totalitarian focus on the One of identity. *Écart* maintains the integrity of others as truly other than myself, but reversibility locates truth in the struggle to know, to recognize (to be known by, to be recognized by) others as others and, consequently, to recognize and know myself as other as well.¹³⁸ Ultimately, then, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology suggests that politics cannot merely be founded on the recognition of the “divided” character of the social or the non-identity of the divided social with itself, but must be founded on the interactive character and the constellation of being in which my world and the world of others collides. For Merleau-Ponty, otherness is expressed in the direct relation – the interworld – between the different beings that comprise the social, and what must be assessed is the relationship that exists between them.

V. Marxism and the Problem of Identity

Through a circuitous route, if we turn to Merleau-Ponty’s ontological critique of Marxism it will further address the contention that Merleau-Ponty’s focus on social relations contains a relativism that blocks him from differentiating between political forms of society and, seemingly, fails to provide an adequate means of criticizing totalitarianism. In contradistinction to Machiavelli’s static and essentialist treatment of social relations or his attempt to

¹³⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, 144.

¹³⁸ In addressing the relationship between the human and animal worlds, Kelly Oliver notes that Merleau-Ponty sees a “strange kinship” or lateral relation, in which difference and identity are sublated allowing for “an intimate relation based on shared embodiments without denying differences between life-styles or styles of being.” I am suggesting a parallel relation between human subjects. Kelly Oliver, ‘Stopping the Anthropological Machine: Agamben with Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty,’ *PhaenEx*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Fall/Winter 2007, 18.

institutionalize unequal ones, Marxism grasps the historicity of being, and posits the political project of overcoming objectifying social relations. This was the core insight contained in *Capital*: it showed that the alleged “permanent” features of human/social nature “are really the attributes (and the masks) of a certain ‘social structure,’ capitalism, which is evolving towards its own destruction.”¹³⁹ For Marx, being is always historical, and history is constituted by subjects’ attempts to realize themselves through the process of externalization via labour; this process of externalization also comes to shape their relationship to others and nature. But two important contentions emerge from this: first, different modes of externalization embody forms of being-in-the-world and forms of giving meaning to the world; second, this self-realizing act often takes place at the expense of excluding or coming into conflict with others over the use of the world of objects, ultimately turning others into objects as well.¹⁴⁰ By taking “the merely momentary for the eternal,” political economy and scientism naturalized historically specific modes of domination.¹⁴¹ While Merleau-Ponty applauds Machiavelli’s recognition of the affirmative character of struggle and the division that it arises from, his ontology refuses to accept Machiavelli’s naturalization of the specific struggle/division between the rich and poor, or those who wish to dominate and those who wish only not to be dominated. While division/difference/dehiscence will be a permanent feature of social existence, Merleau-Ponty draws on Marxism in rejecting the dualistic representation of it, in which “some men exercise their absolute right as subjects in which case the others submit to their will and are not recognized as subjects.”¹⁴² Hence, rather than viewing these divisions as an “end” to be accepted and affirmed, Marxism posits the emergence of a subject, the proletariat, that is capable of

¹³⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Marxism and Philosophy,’ *Sense and Nonsense* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 126.

¹⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, 101-102.

¹⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty, ‘Marxism and Philosophy,’ 126.

¹⁴² Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, 110-111.

transcending these boundaries and inaugurating non-reifying intersubjective relations. Thus, Marx's work attempts to institutionalize human community through the being of a subject whose own powerlessness in the structure of human relations can herald a regime "capable of suppressing exploitation and oppression."¹⁴³

Yet, we should keep in mind Lefort's comparison of Merleau-Ponty's conceptualization of the body-as-subject in his phenomenological works to the Marxian conception of the proletariat: the ontology of the flesh sought to de-center the body/proletariat. In terms of the proletariat/body, we find Marxism (and Merleau-Ponty's early appropriation of it) still indebted to a philosophy of consciousness approach, in which the proletariat – as an embodied being that experiences the intense reifying characteristics of capitalist society – is capable of apprehending and consecrating history's objective meaning. But it does so – in the work of Lukács – by virtue of its ability to become *the* identical subject-object of history that acts only by acting on and realizing itself, ultimately consecrating the totality of historical meaning/being. These problems further haunt Sartre's ultrabolshevism and its theory of the party. Sartre removes history from the equation, and makes recourse to the immediacy of facts (or the fact of immediacy), and the pure action that it necessitates. Thus, he "wants to see all meanings immediately and simultaneously," leaving aside the strictures of the potential ebb and flow, peak and decline, of revolutionary consciousness. Of course, these emerge through the pure and ex nihilo action of the party, which creates the proletariat because of its lack of substantial existence.

With his development of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty finds the transparency and self-contained character of such a being to be dubious, citing Weber's emphasis on "the opaqueness of social reality as a 'second nature' [which] seems to postpone infinitely the limiting concept of transparent social relationships and therewith the categorical definition of history as the genesis

¹⁴³ Merleau-Ponty, 'Note on Machiavelli,' 222.

of truth.”¹⁴⁴ Weber’s sentiment, and his place in *Adventures*, plays an important role in unfolding Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Marxism. As Johann P. Arnason suggests, Marxism and liberalism both confronted the problem of their limitations in the face of experiences they were at odds to explain. Because Weber was conscious of this and sought to transcend it by reinserting contingency into historical understanding, his “new liberalism” “could be used as a guideline for a prima facie parallel – but ultimately more radical – reflection on the limitations of Marxist views of history.”¹⁴⁵ Refusing to condemn history to the purity of understanding/knowledge (with its multiple options from a position of spectatorship) or action (with its absoluteness and immanence in history), Weber opened up history and historical meaning to a dialectic between the two. More importantly, this dialectic knew its own limits and ultimately retained the margin of doubt necessary to avoid slipping into an identity thinking that would reduce itself to realist or deterministic positions. By rescuing contingency and choice, Weber’s work taught us that “history does not have a direction, but has a meaning.”¹⁴⁶ Our embedding in history infects the dialectic of meaning with a certain relativism that undermines rationalism’s attempt to reduce experience to logic, and ultimately close history by putting the dialectic in things. Indeed, Weber’s “doubt” about the closure of knowledge or realization of society appears to inform Merleau-Ponty’s hyperdialectic in its rejection of pure negation and/or pure realization as idealizations that ignore that “the only surpassings we know are concrete, partial, encumbered with survivals, saddled with deficits.”¹⁴⁷ The hyperdialectic must be ruthlessly applied to itself, and the error of dialectics lay not in dialectics itself but in “the pretension of terminating it in an

¹⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, ‘Materials for a Theory of History,’ 106.

¹⁴⁵ The similarities Arnason notes in liberal and Marxist approaches appears to be the regression into rationalism. Moreover, Arnason suggests that Merleau-Ponty explores Weber to show how previous Weberian Marxisms subjected it to the very totalization that it sought to avoid. See Johann P. Arnason, ‘Merleau-Ponty and Max Weber: An Unfinished Dialogue,’ *Thesis Eleven*, No. 36, 1993, 90

¹⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 28.

¹⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*, 95.

end of history.”¹⁴⁸ Thus, the hyperdialectic militated against what Merleau-Ponty saw as Marxism’s “future positivism.” In the end, the negation of the negation constitutes a regression into the very rationalist politics and exhaustion of being that the proletariat was said to defy when it became the positive side of reality.

Ultimately, the realization of Marxism would efface the very truth that it sought to expose¹⁴⁹: history as the mediation of subject and object, and itself as the grasp of a particular moment of this hyperdialectical unfolding of the open character of history. Weber’s opposition to “revolution” draws this into context: “[Weber] is against revolution because he does not consider it to be revolution – that is to say, the creation of a historical whole.”¹⁵⁰ This doubt introduces a weak relativism that merely asserts the contingency of events and their meaning, and the preliminary character of truth – the instability of knowledge and action because of our existence within history. Merleau-Ponty must have had Weber’s problematization of the homogenous and transparent character of social relations in mind¹⁵¹ when he suggested the need to relativize the Marxist notion of “pre-history” or the “true Society” and claimed that, “History is not from this moment on so constructed as to one day point, on all its dials at once, to the high noon of identity.”¹⁵² In essence, the social itself always leaves a remainder and the pretense of annihilating the dialectic in the person of the proletariat as being the true, homogenous society was what needed to be re-thought. The essence here is not that Weber solves the problem, but that he brings new contours to the Marxist idea of “a meaning which is imminent in history” and

¹⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 206.

¹⁴⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Hegel,’ *Telos*, No. 29, September 1976, 95, 105.

¹⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 25. Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms of revolution seem to agree with Weber: that revolutions are “true as movements but false as regimes” does not reduce politics to a conformism. Rather, it embraces the movement of change (such as class struggle), but rejects revolution as totalization.

¹⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty, ‘Materials for a Theory of History,’ 106.

¹⁵² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Everywhere and Nowhere,’ *Signs*, 131.

that “this question should now be reopened.”¹⁵³ With this conclusion, Merleau-Ponty draws into question Lukács’ essentialist vision of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history¹⁵⁴ and the very principle of “realizing” the social.

The ontology of the flesh starts from an entirely different position than the opposition (posited by Sartre, yet relevant to Lukács’ work) between positivity and negativity, or being and nothingness. The Sartrean world is one that is “opaque and rigidified,” marred by the “open and uncompleted meanings” that characterize the absolute subjectivism of nothingness; he overcomes this via the completed meanings that emerge through the pure action and absolute freedom of the Party-as-Cartesian-subject. The flesh, in dispensing with the language of being/nothingness and complete/incomplete, presents a world filled with density/depth and movement.¹⁵⁵ As Merleau-Ponty states: “Our point of departure shall not be *being is*, *nothingness is not* nor even *there is only being* – which are formulas of a totalizing thought, a high-altitude thought – but: there is being, there is a world, there is *something*...there is cohesion, there is meaning.”¹⁵⁶ This implies that – like the other binary divisions – the flesh attempts to transcend these oppositions. With respect to positivity and negativity, we find the flesh as something that is partial and incomplete, something that exists positively but is always continually remaking itself and its relations to/in the world. To say that the flesh exists positively is to say that it has an inherence in a world and a historical situation that already exists and subtends its absolute freedom. But the flesh is still an openness to a field of meanings and directions that are never pre-ordained or complete/identical, and allows for a freedom and movement within this field, within the world as depth. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty argues that

¹⁵³ Merleau-Ponty, ‘Materials for a Theory of History,’ 106.

¹⁵⁴ See also Miller, *History and Human Existence*, 220-221.

¹⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 143-144.

¹⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 88.

existence is in a constant state of self-affirming vertigo, which cannot be closed in some absolute subject or in the absolute closure of historical meaning. Essentially, being *is*, but being *is never* completed in an "end of history" or a realization of society. In de-centering the being of the "subject" and "object," there can be no identity between the two: by stripping the subject and the object of their "determinacy," the ontology of the flesh rejects the possibility of their identity. Consciousness cannot constitute the "object" as its own: the flesh's inherence in the world sublates the opposition between subject/object and being/world, producing in each characteristics of the other and eliminating the absolute freedom of the Cartesian subject.

Directly related to this is Merleau-Ponty's contention that we must "relativize the Marxist idea of a pre-history which is going to give way to history – of an imminence of the complete, true Society in which man is reconciled with man and nature."¹⁵⁷ The proletariat was alleged to be that subject which brought about this reconciled history and society, because its own non-being represented the transcendence of class divisions and the realization of society's "true" being, or because the Party could step outside of historical reality and comprehend/create the proletariat's objective being and guide it in this direction. The de-centered character of the flesh rejects the very idea that "there are beings who are living definitions, whose existence is fully included in their essence."¹⁵⁸ Neither a subject nor society are capable of sustaining or producing this identity: the relationship of reversibility implies not only that they always retain a dehiscence from each other and never become identical, but that this relationship exists between each and itself. Moreover, there cannot be a subject that is pure presence to itself because our being is fundamentally subtended and informed through our relationship with the other; a subject purported to have a completed essence is ultimately the elision of the other who is outside this

¹⁵⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Everywhere and Nowhere,' *Signs*, 131.

¹⁵⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 168.

essence. This elision ultimately destroys social relations themselves, positing in their stead the relationship of the self with itself – the illusory self-critical being of an identical subject. Sartre ostensibly posits several subjects (proletariat, militant, Party); but, for him, these subjects – like the proletariat and bourgeoisie – are ultimately For-Itself's whose perspectives conflict and are incapable of meshing. By reducing them to an identity – to the identity of the Party – he ultimately negates the complex sphere of the interworld, the intersubjectivity and *écart* that not only produces multiple beings, but that separates the self from itself, in denying any "pure" identity. As the absolute assertion of the "I" and the objectification of all that is non-I, there is consequently no intersubjectivity; the concomitant destruction of social relations would be the summary failure/denial of the drive for recognition. Hence, Merleau-Ponty argues, "There is no longer any ordered passage from one perspective to another, no completion of others in me and me in others...the Other can thus be present to the I only as its pure negation."¹⁵⁹ In eliding the other, Sartre's ultrabolshevism ultimately reduces or consumes all that is non-I to the I, which is to say it ultimately destroys the dehiscence and difference that characterizes the constellative being of the social.

For Merleau-Ponty, outside of the purely thinking subject, we are always already social and intertwined with others. Through the rejection of the notion of a pure subject or pure object, the ontology of the flesh discloses to us the different perspectives and meanings that inhabit a world of depth, a world characterized by the openness of being-as-flesh rather than the closed and possessive battle of two For-Itself's. If the flesh is "more dispossession than possession," then different perspectives, meanings and identities need no longer be conceived of as irreconcilable and necessitating coincidence; rather, the flesh facilitates "the meshing of two

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 204-205.

experiences which, without even coinciding, belong to a single world.”¹⁶⁰ Hence, the political dilemma of others is not about the negation of the self, but about constructing a human community capable of recognizing and affirming multiple subjects, multiple perspectives and multiple modes of being-in-the-world. Yet it should be emphasized that Merleau-Ponty conceives of others as always more than a latent potential of my own being: being already instituted – already instituted in social relations, which is to say being always already social – the other comes to form a central aspect of my own essential being. *Adventures* asserts, in embryo, the hyperdialectic of being: “There is dialectic only in that type of being in which a junction of subjects occurs, being which is not only a spectacle that each subject presents to itself for its own benefit but which is rather their common residence, the place of their exchange and of their reciprocal interpretation.”¹⁶¹ In other words, my very identity is formed not in the interiority of my own being, but in that junction or meeting place (the interworld, the place of recognition) of other subjects that my being-as-flesh opens onto, palpates, in which I am a hinge to my own and their being, and vice versa; consequently, I am enslaved to others not despite “myself,” but because it is through them that I am shaped, recognized and affirmed. Hence, meaning – which is continually open, as a constellation always in the process of formation, yet never realized – is created through our participation in the world, *with and through others*.¹⁶² In these respects, while his political and ontological thought has undergone changes, Merleau-Ponty continues to demand that we judge societies on the basis of the relations they attempt to create between subjects, between the self and others all of whom are capable of being-in-the-world in their own way. Social relations – and particularly the integrity of others and genuine alterity – continue to

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 200.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 204.

¹⁶² Ibid., 199-205.

provide the means for judging political regimes, even if he refuses to idealize a singular political form.

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“The essence of revolution is to be found in that instant in which the fallen class no longer rules and the rising class does not yet rule.”¹⁶³

-Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*.

We have here the seeming confirmation of Lefort’s adoption of Merleau-Ponty in his description of the political. Merleau-Ponty asserts that the revolutionary essence is contained in that delayed gap – the point of deferred realization – before one ruling class replaces another. This affirms both the indeterminacy of the social, and the repressiveness contained in the attempt to fill the gap of the political with a singular identity. And, certainly, this assertion of the non-identity of being, and its concomitant opening of meaning, is something to be affirmed in his work. Yet, it is also, at the same time, not enough. Recognition that the social is divided, and that no part of society can fill the void and reduce the rest of society to its own being, is insufficient. The ontology of the flesh posits simultaneously a rich alterity in which social relations are characterized by the recognition of the reversibility of self and others, of our intertwined communion that sees our modes of being-in-the-world not merely as the opposition of wills or character traits but as co-possible responses to the world. While Merleau-Ponty’s work posits a critique of Marxism, and particularly the proletarian politics that it conveys, this is not intended to give up on the focus on class struggle because it contains potentially totalitarian implications that are solved by a reconsideration of the political. As he states, “There is a class struggle and there must be one, since there are, and as long as there will be, classes.”¹⁶⁴ Contained in this is simultaneously the affirmation of a politics rooted in non-domination, and the confirmation of the mutability of being or the transition beyond class-subjects, even if class

¹⁶³ Ibid., 209.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 225.

subjectivity retains a saliency. That the proletariat is without historical equivalents merely calls for the renovation of our understanding of class and subjectivity. Moreover, this criticism, and the demand for a non-communist left that is critical of both Soviet-style Marxism and liberal capitalism, is “the condition of a modern critique of capitalism because it alone poses Marx’s problems again in modern terms.”¹⁶⁵

Hence, while Merleau-Ponty’s premature death prevented him from potentially elaborating on the political import of the ontology of the flesh, I hope to have shown that his ontology is loaded with implications that come to the fore if we read it in unison with his political engagements. Indeed, while Machiavelli and Marx may have paved the road for Merleau-Ponty’s “retreat” into philosophy, they also provide a means for drawing his ontology back into the political web. While affirming the division and difference that characterize their work, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology diverges in key respects. While he rightly acknowledges the centrality of division to the social, Machiavelli appears to present an immutable conception of social relations, rooted in a hierarchical structure that owes something to the sorts of dualisms from which Merleau-Ponty sought to extricate philosophy. Marxism aims to eliminate these sorts of hierarchical human relations, but falls into its own dualism, and ultimately slides into a theory of the absolute subject that elides relationships of alterity and intersubjectivity. These illustrate something of a divergent impulse in Merleau-Ponty’s work: on the one hand, towards the affirmation of struggle, division, and openness in politics; on the other, towards a commitment to an emancipatory and egalitarian politics of alterity. In these respects, Merleau-Ponty’s ontological renovation provides us with a new means to criticizing the objectifying characteristics of capitalism, with a radically new form of politics intended. Yet, Merleau-Ponty’s own work fails to provide us with this critique. He has laid the groundwork, and it is

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 225.

through turning to a constellative reading of his work with that of Walter Benjamin, who is ideally suited to providing us with a radicalized critique of capitalism, that I aim to flesh – all puns intended – out a new politics. Indeed, utilizing the theory of intersubjectivity that is so central to Merleau-Ponty's work, I aim to re-read Benjamin's through its lenses – while simultaneously utilizing Benjamin's insights to bring some historical depth to the theory of intersubjectivity.

Chapter 2

The Primacy of the Historical: Benjamin's Monadology

“Leaving aside Benjamin’s peculiarly uncritical consent to technology, I want to question the conception of the body taken for granted here...According to this conception, the body is a chaos of drives: turbulent, frenzied, and without any internal principle of organization. It is conceived in the image of Dionysus, a god of excess, knowing no measure: a body of self-abandonment, intoxication, and wildness.”¹

-David Michael Levin, ‘Justice in the Flesh.’

“What sort of perceptibility should the presentation of history possess? Neither the cheap and easy visibility of bourgeois history books, nor the insufficient visibility of Marxist histories.”²

-Walter Benjamin, ‘Materials for the Expose of 1935.’

A point of entry into a discussion of any possible relationship between Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin is perhaps not readily apparent. While dealing with a number of common themes, the phenomenological and ontological focus of Merleau-Ponty’s work would, on first appearances, appear to be at odds with the critical theory of Benjamin in particular, and his Institute for Social Research colleagues in general³: while Merleau-Ponty sought to expose and elaborate the concepts and categories that informed being, Benjamin’s work often sought to bring being down to earth against the abstract and naturalizing tendencies of figures such as Heidegger.⁴ If an entry point is not readily apparent, then we might proceed through an interrogation of Levin’s attempted connection – the body. According to this account, the ostensible error is not merely that Benjamin takes this theory of the body for granted but that this conception of the body is mistaken and, in these respects, it is incapable of providing an adequate

¹ David Michael Levin, ‘Justice in the Flesh,’ *Ontology and Alterity In Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Galen Johnson and Michael B. Smith, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1990), 36.

² Walter Benjamin, ‘Materials for the Expose of 1935,’ *The Arcades Project*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 1999), 911.

³ For direct critiques by the Institute members of phenomenology (and its connections to ontology), see in particular, Herbert Marcuse, ‘Sartre’s Existentialism,’ *The Essential Marcuse: Selected Writings of Philosopher and Social Critic Herbert Marcuse*, (Boston: Beacon Press 2007) and Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, (New York: Continuum 2000). For secondary elaborations of the relationship – often conflictual – between critical theory and phenomenology, see Pier Aldo Rovatti, ‘Critical Theory and Phenomenology,’ *Telos*, 15, 1973 and Fred Dallmayr, ‘Phenomenology and Critical Theory: Adorno,’ *Cultural Hermeneutics*, 3, 1976.

⁴ As Benjamin states: “What distinguishes images from the ‘essences’ of phenomenology is their historical index. (Heidegger seeks in vain to rescue history for phenomenology abstractly through ‘historicity.’)” See *Arcades Project*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 1999), 462.

theory of action (“ethical” or more purely “revolutionary”) because it is devoid of reason, devoid of order. Moreover, Levin contends, because this conception of the body is monadological and self-contained, “it is a body incapable...of ethical relationships.”⁵ These very characteristics allegedly put Benjamin’s theory of the body into conflict with Merleau-Ponty’s, which is the very measure of reason, order and an ethics that can follow from them.⁶

Against Levin’s account, I argue that a more productive relationship can be drawn between the two. But to gather some fruit from the relationship, the existing connection must be broken so that we can write anew the possibility of a *constellative* relation between Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin: a constellative relation, not a monocausal or monocular relation that reduces – in contradistinction to a Merleau-Pontian ethics – the other to the outside, without even trying to understand this other in its fullness, let alone how it may chiasmatically interpenetrate with, or disrupt the closure of, the self. A constellative relation in which self and other, inside and outside, moment and moment, dislodge each other and bring out a truth content that can only exist through the mutual dislocation of their priorly existing positions.

In beginning on this path, this chapter explores Benjamin’s account of the historical. While this appears to be a divergence from the focus on the body, for Benjamin it is impossible to extricate the body from its historical anchoring. Indeed, the abstract account of the body simply is not sufficient: it needs to be wedded to a temporal dimension which concretizes and disrupts any simple a priori notion of a structure of being, as well as positivist conceptions of the character of history. In these respects, Benjamin veers towards an ontological primacy of

⁵ Levin, ‘Justice in the Flesh,’ 36.

⁶ While I have drawn this from ‘Justice in the Flesh,’ Levin makes a similar argument in ‘The Embodiment of the Categorical Imperative: Kafka, Foucault, Benjamin, Adorno and Levinas,’ *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2001, 7-8. But, it should be noted, the later article limits the criticism to the passage from Benjamin’s essay on surrealism, and sees more possibilities for an ethics of the body (even if unfulfilled) in his other writings.

historicality⁷ that demands that the body be contextualized and considered in its concrete relations – relations between self-others-things that ultimately limit and/or expand the possibilities of the body’s experiential capabilities and possibilities (or relations that are limited and expanded by the body’s capabilities and possibilities). While the next chapter will turn to understanding the specificity of the body and perception/experience under capitalism, this chapter sets the ground work for this exploration through unravelling Benjamin’s account of the historical. In this vein, it focuses on reading his early, constellative methodology through his later Marxist inflected critique of reification and progress, in establishing the present as a particular field of experience that retains a non-linear relation to the past. In this context, Benjamin develops his account of now-time, and the now of recognizability, that becomes central to a phenomenological impulse that can provide a critical account of the flesh under capitalist modernity.

I. From the Metaphysical to the Historical Body

In one of his earliest – and one of only a few sustained – excursions into the question of the body, ‘Outline of the Psychophysical Problem,’ Benjamin explicitly addresses the Cartesian mind-body dualism that has inhabited a central place in Western philosophy.⁸ The ‘Outline’ begins with a simple enough claim: “[mind and body] are identical, and distinct simply as ways of seeing, not as objects.”⁹ While Benjamin admits a separate existence between body and mind, this only emerges in terms of a formal and abstract separation: they are separate only as different modes of vision. But he is quick to eliminate even this formal dualistic separation, arguing that “the form of the historical is that of mind and body combined,” for this embodied mind

⁷ Given Benjamin’s opposition to “historicity” – as embodied in the positivist and teleological permeations he rejects – I will use the word “historicality” to avoid confusion.

⁸ David McNally, *Bodies of Meaning: Studies on Language, Labor and Liberation*, (Albany: State University of New York 2001), 170.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, ‘Outline of the Psychophysical Problem,’ *Selected Writings. Volume. 1*, 393.

constitutes the “now” of the form of the historical. Thus, the embodied mind is not an abstract construction, but the ontological being that is “proper to reality in all its forms.”¹⁰

In these first, and very fragmentary, thoughts on the psychophysical problem, Benjamin attempts to establish the embodied mind as the central nexus in our temporally-situated (the “now”) worldly existence and experience; that is, he seeks to establish the embodied mind as our mode of presence in the historical and material world. Benjamin sees both “limbs and organs” as part of the form of this mode of being,¹¹ and puts forth a holistic and synaesthetic conception of the body. Moreover, this body is for Benjamin not merely an individualistic body. As he states, “The body, the function of the historical present in man, expands into the body of mankind.”¹² Again, this collective body is the functional entity of historical existence. But co-existent with this development of the embodied mind is Benjamin’s regression into a dualistic conception separating the historical/material and the spiritual/theological.¹³ For, while claiming that the embodied mind is the modicum of worldly existence, Benjamin also claims that, unlike our corporeal substance, this embodied mind is not the “substratum of [the body’s] particular being.” Benjamin here suggests the difference between the incarnated and historical being of the body, which is an ephemeral entity that dwells in the immediacy of the “now,” and the eternal, transcendent and metaphysical character of corporeal substance. Highlighting the consequences of the two definitions, Benjamin states: “Man’s body and his corporeal substance place him in universal contexts. But a different context for each: with his body, man belongs to mankind; with his corporeal substance, to God.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid., 393.

¹¹ Ibid., 394.

¹² Ibid., 395.

¹³ McNally, *Bodies of Meaning*, 170; Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, (Berkeley: University of California Press 1994), 213.

¹⁴ Benjamin, ‘Outline,’ 395.

The 'Outline' aims to address the issue of the ontological status of the body within the context of the traditional Cartesian dualism; however, Benjamin's subsequent works fail to conform to the questions that Merleau-Ponty and Western philosophy have sought to answer, and we must stretch his works – possibly beyond the point of breaking – if we wish for them to do so. And yet, the fault here is not with Benjamin's work, but with this particular manner of approaching the body. The increasing influence of Marxism on Benjamin shifts his focus from a metaphysical or ontological account of the body to an historical account of bodily experience. Indeed, he begins to focus on the historically constituted nature of being, rather than on being as such. It should be remarked that it is not so much the injection of Marxism into Benjamin's thought that is of importance here, for Benjamin's Marxism – like his Messianism – is idiosyncratic. Rather, it is the historical methodology that is introduced into Benjamin's thinking through his entanglement with Marxism. These new elements play a central role in Benjamin's works, introducing ideas not apparent in the 'Outline' but constituting an important feature of his subsequent works. Indeed, the 'Outline' retains a certain abstract quality, dealing generally with the notions of mind and body, spirit and corporeal substance, in somewhat a- or un-historical terms. Certainly, Benjamin asserts that the embodied mind exists in, or constitutes, a historical now. But even with this introduction of the "historical," Benjamin is not distinguishing between historical moments or historically situated modes of being, but between the being of a historical now (ephemeral and earthly) and that of a metaphysical and trans-historical being (eternal and transcendent). Hence, we are ultimately dealing with the juxtaposition of two opposed forms of "materiality," not between the historically constituted and variable being of the body/materiality at the level of "history" itself.

With ‘Naples,’ we find the beginning of a shift towards the historical that is central to understanding Benjamin’s work. As Susan Buck-Morss argues, Benjamin shows that, despite the implanting of modern social relations in the midst of a crumbling precapitalist order, in Naples “the structuring boundaries of modern capitalism – between public and private, labour and leisure, personal and communal – have not yet been established.”¹⁵ While Benjamin will not use the explicit language of the commodity or commodification, it does comprise an underlying theme in this work. Written as a travel piece, Benjamin notes that the fetish that draws the foreigner to Naples is “Pompeii”: “‘Pompeii’ makes the plaster imitation of the temple ruins, the lava necklace, and the louse-ridden person of the guide irresistible.”¹⁶ With the emergence of capitalist social relations, the ability to sell these sorts of fetishes/commodities penetrates Naples, and commodifies Neapolitan life itself. Indeed, commodification begins to penetrate the whole of life without respect for the boundaries of private and public, or modern and pre-modern, and everything is transformed into an object for exchange. Hence, in addition to the regular markets and auctions, Benjamin discerns the emergence of a bizarre economy on the streets of Naples in which everything is a commodity: Christ and the Madonna both play the role of a remunerated prostitute, as a street artist pimps their chalked images on the sidewalk for coins; “the art of eating macaroni with hands” is displayed for money; even chivalry has its price, as a “fat lady drops her fan” and, unable to pick it up herself, receives assistance from a “gentleman” at the price of ten lire.¹⁷ What Benjamin finds in Naples is a society on the cusp of two different historical/social orders (capitalist/modern and precapitalist/premodern), which consequently co-

¹⁵ Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, (Cambridge: MIT Press 1989), 26.

¹⁶ Benjamin, ‘Naples,’ 415.

¹⁷ Ibid., 415-419.

mingles into a transient state of being that melds aspects of both – and upsets, or transforms, the functioning of being.

If this represents the development of a methodological shift – the introduction of a temporal dimension in which historicity informs the structure of being – the more particular contours of this development’s effect on Benjamin’s conception of the body emerges in ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.’ While I will deal with ‘Motifs’ in more depth in the next chapter, what is relevant at this point is Benjamin’s engagement with Henri Bergson. Benjamin discusses the reception of lyric poetry, suggesting that it has become less popular because it is less in tune with the experience of readers. He argues that philosophy has attempted to understand the change in experience through a “series of attempts to grasp ‘true’ experience,” and for this it has “invoked poetry, or preferably nature – most recently, the age of myths.” For Benjamin, Bergson’s *Matter and Memory* stands out amongst this literature. Regarding “the structure of memory as decisive for the philosophical structure of experience,” Bergson’s work is firmly linked to empirical and biological research. But it is here that Benjamin discerns a problem, for Bergson is not only unconcerned with the historical determination of memory – he rejects it. As a result, Bergson misses the historical anchoring of his own ideas in the “alienating, blinding experience of the age of large-scale industrialism.”¹⁸ Through this, and his concomitant suppression of death in his notion of *durée* and the “bad infinity” this suppression produces, Bergson’s notion of experience has been “estranged from history.”¹⁹ As Benjamin states, in shutting out the historical nature of experience, “the eye perceives a complementary experience –

¹⁸ Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,’ *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 2006), 314.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 336.

in the form of its spontaneous afterimages, as it were. Bergson's philosophy represents an attempt to specify this afterimage and fix it as a permanent record."²⁰

This critique of Bergson emerges out of Benjamin's engagement with Marxism and its forms of historicity. Marx had repeatedly criticized various opponents for their inability to understand the historically determined nature of various categories of human existence. In particular, he argued that the classical economists sought to generalize/de-historicize the specific features of capitalism – private property, wage labour, exchange value, etc – turning them into the eternal categories of human existence.²¹ Against Bergson, Benjamin expresses the same sentiment with respect to biological or neurological factors such as memory.²² For Benjamin, experience and the being through which experience comes to be – the body, including its neurological functions/capacities – are historically determined/situated: "the body" is not a transcendent/al entity, but a being that is subject to a first and second nature. Indeed, while first nature may represent a pre-temporal notion of embodied being, Benjamin notes that it is ultimately subsumed by the social and historical character of a second nature whose problems "must be very close to resolution before those of the first – love and death – can be distinguished even in outline."²³ Ultimately, under Bergson's estrangement from history, the ontic being of capitalist society is reified to the point that it comes to appear as pre-ontological: it produces the now as an ever present absolute, devoid of breaks or changes, death or suffering.²⁴

²⁰ Ibid., 314.

²¹ Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,' *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, (New York: Penguin Books 1992), 322.

²² Of course, it should be noted that Marx criticized Proudhon, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, (Amherst: Prometheus Books 1995), for failing to understand that "the whole of history is nothing but a continual transformation of human nature."

²³ Benjamin adopts this distinction from Georg Lukács. See, Benjamin, 'A Different Utopian Will,' *Selected Writings. Volume. 3*, 134.

²⁴ I have drawn on Martin Jay's account of Horkheimer's criticism of Bergson in these respects. Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1956*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company 1973), 51.

II. History as Monad and Constellation

If the historical plays a central role in Benjamin's account of the body and experience, then we need to probe the contours of the "historical" as he understands it. The centrality of history/the historical actually animates Benjamin's early work, and is by no means simply the result of his engagement with Marxism. While I will turn to his key Marxist referents and their contribution to his historical methodology in the next section, it bears first turning to the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' to his first major work, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (or *Trauerspiel*). In the 'Prologue,' Benjamin develops his concepts of constellation, monadology and origin, all of which are central to understanding his work on history. In developing the concept of constellation, Benjamin provides a new epistemology that informs his understanding of historical truth and recognizability. With this new epistemology, he presents not merely a means of conceptualizing or understanding history, but a way of seeing it – and the manner in which history presents its own visibility.

The 'Prologue' begins by raising what Benjamin sees as perhaps the most important issue for philosophical reflection: the representation of truth. This issue is at the forefront of a theory of non-identity, which must necessarily know its limits: the idea that "the object of knowledge is not identical with the truth"²⁵ demands an answer to how truth can be *represented*. This requires a consequent break with the traditional ways of thinking about truth, concept and object. The very phrasing Benjamin uses here points to a two-fold problem. The first, explicitly stated, is the very idea that the object and conceptions or representations of it are not identical. At its very core, this demands that we go beyond the confines of the objectivist/positivist assertion of truth's self-apparent, and already-existing, non-representational form: beyond the reified existence of things. But the second problem lies in Benjamin's distinction between truth and knowledge. He

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, (London: Verso 1999), 30.

criticizes both the propensity of mathematical/scientific thinking to disregard representation, and systematic thinking's abstract imposition of principles of truth and organization upon the phenomena.²⁶ In both cases the being (or becoming) of the object is restricted, and the organization of these objects is constructed a priori. As Richard Wolin has pointed out, Benjamin seeks to redeem phenomena²⁷ – to free them from the restricted meanings and truth that they take on when reduced to an identity or confined to a closed organization and juxtaposition. In freeing or redeeming phenomena, Benjamin affects a radical reorganization of the traditional methods of philosophical thinking, displacing moment and totality, form and content, in an attempt at developing an open method of thinking and seeing. No longer can we understand these moments only from the perspective of totality (or system), and no longer can we understand the content only through its form.

Rather than starting from the high-altitude view of an all-being or all-seeing philosophical observer, Benjamin aims to dispense with the possessivity of what he deems knowledge: “Knowledge is possession. Its very object is determined by the fact that it must be taken possession of – even if in a transcendental sense – in the consciousness. The quality of possessing remains. For the thing possessed, representation is secondary; it does not have prior existence as something representing itself.”²⁸ The last sentence speaks to the general problems of dualistic epistemologies in both their idealist and positivist variants. In the idealist perspective, the object of knowledge is totally constituted by consciousness (transcendental or otherwise) and hence devoid of self-representation; in the positivist perspective, the object transcends representation by being self-apparent and automatically corresponding (in the collapsed sense) to its concept. Thus, in knowledge, Benjamin sees all of the perils of identity

²⁶ Ibid., 27-28.

²⁷ Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 90-106.

²⁸ Benjamin, *Origin*, 29.

thinking, and the very question of representation is negated by the acquisitive possession that knowledge asserts: the object is not represented, interpreted or recognized, for in being possessed it is known beyond the confines of representation. Moreover, possession implies a closedness of being, and an elimination or collapsing of the gap between existence and essence, thought and thing, seeing and seen. Freeing phenomena from these impositions implies allowing their self-representations to emerge in all their immanence; that is, it implies allowing the objects to speak for themselves and shatter those ideas that we seek to impose upon them. In freeing phenomena/objects from their reified form, truth appears “as the burning up of the husk as it enters the realm of ideas, that is to say a destruction of the work in which its external form achieves its most brilliant degree of illumination.”²⁹ In essence, phenomena themselves take on a centrality to the process of thinking and truth.

In criticizing knowledge, Benjamin is not rejecting any relationship or organizing principles between the objects of representation, or between objects and “subjects.” In fact, one of the failures of “knowledge” lies in their separation: “Knowledge is concerned with individual phenomenon, but not directly with their unity.”³⁰ Of course, we cannot simply turn to filtering these objects through a system – let alone an encyclopaedic system that organizes them according to closed definitions – which would be the antithesis of Benjamin’s renovation. Rather, truth emerges through the idea, which is itself the mediated relationship between phenomena (represented in concepts): “As the salvation of phenomena by means of ideas takes place, so too does the representation of ideas through the medium of empirical reality. For ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete

²⁹ Ibid., 31.

³⁰ Ibid., 30.

elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements.”³¹ We find here a dialectical relation between form (ideas) and content (the empirical data that ideas represent and illuminate), which both shape one another. But, simultaneously, we find a series of mediations and representations.³²

Phenomena as empirical reality are mediated by consciousness and its perceptions which illuminate the “reality” of the objects of the world. In acknowledging this as mere representation, and a representation that is itself historically/temporally mediated, Benjamin leaves open the possibility of the transformation of the concepts, which is to say he opens up phenomena to the transiency of their meaning/being. In recognizing this transiency, the reified unity and self-sameness of phenomena cannot be represented as an intrinsic part of their nature. In turn, these concepts (these representations of phenomena) mediate the idea as an organizing principle: “Through their mediating role concepts enable phenomena to participate in the existence of ideas. It is this same mediating role which fits them for the other equally basic task of philosophy, the representation of ideas.”³³ Benjamin is ultimately arguing that the idea gives the concepts their unity and actuality: it draws them together into a unity that can be accorded with truth (truth as a relation of the unity of concepts). It does this through breaking the apparent self-same unity of phenomena, dividing them so as to be capable of participating in a higher order of truth – one that transcends, but does not eliminate, their individuality. Hence, it is a unity that does not reduce the concepts or phenomena to an overarching “identity”: the unity attains its meaning only through the co-mediation of the parts as separate entities that come together in their singularity to produce a truth in which the moments are mediated through one

³¹ Ibid., 34.

³² In my reading of these relationships/mediations, I have drawn loosely on Fredric Jameson’s reading of Benjamin. See, Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic*, (London: Verso 2000), 53-55.

³³ Benjamin, *Origin*, 34.

another and through the idea, as a pseudo-totality containing a “synthesis between extremes.”³⁴ This is a unity whose truth lies in the non-identity upon which it is founded, which is to say that the truth of the moments lies in their configuration and mediation through one another – each moment/concept being what it is only through the others, and vice versa. In giving an analogy for this rather obtuse formulation, Benjamin states: “Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars.”³⁵ Constellations are not obvious, inherent or given: they are the organization and juxtaposition of a series of phenomenon that in themselves have no necessary connection. But, brought together through the organizing idea of the constellation, they become more than the singularity of their parts, and illuminate a truth (and form) that all of the moments participate in, contributing a unique aspect of their singularity to this unity.

In locating truth within the concept of constellation, Benjamin is not re-asserting truth as a closed system or as a fixed constellation. The moments within a constellation are distinct and fragmentary; their unity is essentially a unity of the discontinuous, and a unity of extremes which reflect and refract each other in coming together. As Benjamin puts it, “in a conceptual treatment they acquire the status of complementary forces, and history is seen as no more than the colored border to their crystalline simultaneity.”³⁶ The point here is that the idea draws together the parts into a coherent whole, but this whole only coheres in the moment of their coming together. And, in this vein, constellations are eminently historical formations, and “every idea is an original one.”³⁷ Far from reducing the world to a relativity, this merely maintains the transiency of truth as it is contained in the relation of monadic moments. Hence, truth-as-constellation transcends itself via the shifting character of their concepts. In connecting

³⁴ Ibid., 41.

³⁵ Ibid., 34.

³⁶ Ibid., 38.

³⁷ Ibid., 43.

this to the notion that truth lies in a nucleus of time, constellations are thus never static: they are floating/changing. But this is not to say that the phenomena themselves change. Rather, the concepts (the representations of phenomena) change via the continual and critical assertion of the non-identity of the phenomena. In this sense, truth lies in the moment and in the configuration of the parts of the constellation. Each change in the parts fundamentally changes the overall meaning and truth content derived from the disparate and distinct phenomena, their concepts and their interconnection. Thus, in tune with the assertion of non-identity, the changing character of the concepts can rupture the truth content of the overall organization of phenomena. And, in reflecting the relationality of the monads, the shifting nature of one monad changes the singular character of the others, for “every single monad contains, in an indistinct way, all the others.”³⁸ In these respects, Benjamin suggests that the totality is nothing more than an expression of its parts in a constellative sense – the totality only exists through the monadological relation of parts, which reflect and refract each other, without losing their uniqueness/particularity. In these terms, the idea may be an organizing principle that draws together moments, but it is not something that is imposed on the parts: it emanates from them.

The monadological element is not limited to the constellation as a merely temporal and unique moment of truth, but operates simultaneously at the level of history: the same relation exists at the singular moment and across moments, and while the monad is historical, history likewise contains a monadological structure. Benjamin refers to his mode of interpretation as “philosophical history” or a “science of origin,” an endeavour concerned with the concept of origin (*ursprung*). As he states, “Origin, although an entirely historical category, has, nonetheless, nothing to do with genesis.”³⁹ In this sense, origin is not a tracing out of the direct

³⁸ Ibid., 47.

³⁹ Ibid., 45.

development of the existent being of things, and is not tied to the pure facticity of the world. Rather, origin aims “to describe that which emerges in the stream of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis.”⁴⁰ Truth emerges in bursts, as a revelation and fulfillment of the idea through the phenomena. Thus, origin refers to neither a linear development nor a tracing of the ever present. Rather, origin focuses on understanding and conceptualizing the existence of things (rather than presupposing them) and in doing so focuses on recognizing them in the process of emergence – including the manner in which these historical monads come to refract and reflect each other in new constellations. This allows for the trajectory of constellations to be not merely linear/developmental, but lateral and backwards⁴¹ – or, more generally, dialogical in so far as the dialogical can account for the historical (as a relationship between moments) in a manner that the purely logical cannot. This dialogical element refers simultaneously to the relationship between the parts (as disparate and extremes) and to the changing character of those relationships. In this sense, the critical interrogation of origin represents “the form which, in the remotest extremes and the apparent excesses of the process of development, reveals the configuration of the idea – the sum total of all possible meaning juxtapositions of such opposites.”⁴²

Origin/history, then, is a principle of interrogation of the very relationship of the development (as emergence and disappearance) of parts within a constellation. Origin must of necessity show its own authenticity through its emergence in the process of being’s becoming, and this must be a genuine representation or image of the world. This implies both the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 45.

⁴¹ In this discussion, I have drawn loosely on Samuel Weber’s excellent discussion of origin. Samuel Weber, ‘Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth and Allegory in Benjamin’s *Origin of the German Mourning Play*,’ *MLN*, 106, 1991, 468-474.

⁴² Benjamin, *Origin*, 47.

understanding of the transformation of the constellation and its parts in the process of appearance and decay, and plays out the role of de-naturing and redeeming phenomena. As a critical investigation, the pursuit of origin is tied to the idea and its relationship to the historical, a relationship which is oriented towards redemption and fulfillment. There is a sense, then, in which the study of origins remains a truth in potential; but the point is not that this truth is thus false, but that its latent being must be extracted through the dialectical process intrinsic to constellative thinking. In essence, origin can appear only in the process of discovery and is thus a matter of recognition that aims to illuminate the very historicity of the phenomena. And, in these respects, the life of the phenomena emerges in its own monadological relationship, fundamentally rupturing the static being of their various incarnations. Indeed, the historical totality emerges, but it emerges as a pseudo-totality that is itself ruptured by the transformation of the parts in their continual process of transience. History, in these respects, is characterized by the principle of incompleteness, but in a sense which still aims for an objectivity of truth tied to time.⁴³

While this presents a rather prolix formulation, in a fragment entitled ‘*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy’ Benjamin puts these ideas into a more historiographical form. He states: “Historical time is infinite in every direction and unfulfilled at every moment. This means we cannot conceive of a single empirical event that bears a necessary relation to the time of its occurrence.”⁴⁴ In these respects, he likens time to a form that encapsulates the content of empirical events. But, as he suggests in the ‘Prologue,’ form is a husk that is burned up through

⁴³ I borrow the term pseudo-totality from Jameson, to indicate the very monadological features of this totality: its possible transformation via the openness of the objects, which are themselves organized by perceptive capacities and thus capable of being arranged otherwise. In essence, there is a non-binding and open organization of this “totality” which presumes its own possible transformation via the dialectical or monadological connection between the parts and the whole. See Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 50.

⁴⁴ Walter Benjamin, ‘*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy,’ *Selected Writings. Volume. 1*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 1996), 55.

the redemption of empirical events. Benjamin links the anchoring of events in time to a notion of a mechanical, empty time – a form of time centrally linked to mechanical notions of change. Genuine historical time militates against this, opening itself up to the infinity of the non-identical, with its plurality of directions and its ability to transform itself by transcending the mere contours of the temporally momentary.⁴⁵ This posits historical time as an ambiguous (or open) realm. As Benjamin states, “a process that is perfect in historical terms is quite indeterminate empirically; it is in fact an idea.”⁴⁶ As we saw previously, the idea is something that emerges out of the complex interconnection between phenomena, their conceptualization and their interconnection – which is intentionally indeterminate and caught up with the principle of redemption.

III. Lukács and Korsch: Referents for a Theory of Historicity

While the 'Prologue' is centrally concerned with issues relating to history and historical knowledge, Benjamin's encounter with Marxism comes to direct his monadological and constellative approach towards a more directly political reading of history. Indeed, Benjamin's account of modernity as monad takes on the form of a critique of capitalism and its modes of being and historicity with his encounter with the work of Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch.⁴⁷ Published in the same year (1923), Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* and Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* both sought to return to Marxism its revolutionary core, in the face of

⁴⁵ While this may be a violent reading, in reading *Origin* through 'Trauerspiel and Tragedy' and Leibniz's 'Monadology,' I offer a different reading than Buck-Morss, who contends that *Origin* is concerned with “the representation of eternal ideas.” See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, (Cambridge: MIT Press 1991), 21

⁴⁶ Benjamin, 'Trauerspiel and Tragedy,' 55.

⁴⁷ Lukács' influence on Benjamin has been much noted and explored. Korsch's has been isolated to scant references, usually via the medium of a derivative influence through his Marxist “pupil,” Bertolt Brecht. The specific adoption of Korsch's notion of historical specificity in particular is understated. The following sources note Korsch's influence in isolated and unexplored phrases: Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, (London: Pluto Press 2000); Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, 'Introduction,' *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, (New York: Continuum 2002); Michael Lowy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*, (London: Verso Books 2005).

the theoretical and practical stagnation of the Marxism of the 2nd International. For both, this required resuscitating the philosophical element contained in Marxism, against the adoption of the positivistic scientism of 2nd International Marxists. Indeed, the conflation of essence and appearance, and the vulgar reduction of consciousness to little more than a reflection of existing reality, had sapped Marxism of its revolutionary, activist blood, a matter that Lukács and Korsch saw as the heart of Marx's approach. Far from adopting in total either of their accounts, Benjamin finds in Lukács and Korsch the means to attempt to understand and unravel the enigmas of capitalism as historical formation, for the purposes of transcending it. And, in these respects, Benjamin took from each a key methodological element: from Lukács, the notion of reification and the commodity structure of capitalism; from Korsch, a radical historicity embodied in the idea of historical specificity.

Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* represents one of the most important and celebrated elaborations of Marxism and, as has been often noted, Benjamin was quite taken by Lukács' work when introduced to it by Asja Lacis. In terms of the development of Benjamin's thought, the main reference point is the essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' and its understanding of reification and the commodity structure of capitalism. In attempting to re-read Marx in order to understand the nature of capitalist society, Lukács states: "there is no solution that could not be found in the solution to the riddle of commodity-structure...That is to say, the problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem of economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects."⁴⁸ Lukács is quick to differentiate the commodity-structure of capitalism from previous modes of commodity exchange, noting that the specifically capitalist

⁴⁸ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, (Cambridge: MIT Press 1971), 83.

form (and all of its effects) only emerge when all of society's needs are met by commodity exchange: that is, "only when [the commodity] becomes the universal category of society as a whole."⁴⁹ Under these conditions – the complete commodification of the potential necessities for the reproduction of life, including labour – reification comes to rear its ugly, socially disfiguring head. As Lukács explains, under the process of reification "a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity,' an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people."⁵⁰ The central crux here is that the specific social relations that constitute capitalist exchange come to take on an independent character, despite being merely the embodiment of human productive powers and the product of human collective agencies. Reification indicates that in the process of exchange, this reality is veiled by the appearance of a mere relation between commodities. Moreover, this process comes to permeate all aspects of capitalist society, particularly bourgeois modes of thinking which came to separate the subjective realm from the objective and "natural" realm of the economy. This process of reification has a two-fold effect: objectively, the market puts into force the actual exchange of these commodities, and this power cannot be escaped under the total organization of society according to a commodity-structure; subjectively, the labour of individuals is incorporated into the commodity nexus and estranged from its possessors. Consequently, the commodity-structure produces an alienating effect, abstracting labour from people and utilizing it against them, turning the production process itself into a rationalized activity that denies any notion of fulfillment for workers. Moreover, under the guise of "a relation between things," this whole process takes on

⁴⁹ Ibid., 86.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 83.

the appearance of an uncontrollable and natural force, ultimately obfuscating the particular socio-historical forces that produce it.

As we saw, the notion of commodification was present in ‘Naples.’ But there, Benjamin described a society on the cusp of taking on the total character of the commodity structure of capitalism: it was a society in transition, and the reifying aspects that emerge with totalization appeared to be absent, or at least unclear/in development. Yet, this Lukácsian motif begins to make its full appearance in ‘One-Way Street’ where, rather than illustrating the historical transition between these phases, Benjamin begins to discern the fully reified form in which the subject of capitalism encounters and expresses reality.⁵¹ Central in these respects is the passage ‘Imperial Panorama.’ In surveying life in Weimar Germany, Benjamin notes the dissipation of “close relationships” under the rule of money, which becomes “the center of vital interest” and the “very barrier before which almost all relationships halt.”⁵² In the *Manifesto*, Marx had noted the ways in which the commodity-structure of capitalism reduced all relations to issues of calculation mediated through the cash nexus.⁵³ Benjamin sees this cash nexus as having permeated society to such a degree that conversations with others exhibit little more than the concern with prices. Such concern for narrow private interests emerged through the paradoxical adoption of mass values; in the face of society’s alienation from itself, the use of intellect and agency gave way to the forces of “imbecility” and the decline of vital defence instincts of which even animals are capable. Indeed, the effects of reification constitute a vicious circle in which we watch ourselves as actors on a stage, but without the chance of escape. This is a matter simultaneously of the actions of people and their perceptions of their actions. Poverty,

⁵¹ Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illuminations: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of the Surrealist Revolution*, (Berkeley: University of California Press 1993), 184.

⁵² Walter Benjamin, ‘One-Way Street,’ *Selected Writings. Volume 1*, 451-452.

⁵³ Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, (London: Penguin Books 1967), 82

homelessness and the generally wretched conditions of human existence (under stable and unstable conditions) permeate this society, yet its own perception is that they are the result of natural forces, “invisible hands.” Benjamin sees the possibility of such conditions leading to the revolutionary uprising of the afflicted, but finds it continually repressed by the perception – and ideological representation – that these effects arise from “dark powers that hold [their] life in thrall.” Yet, his overarching claim is that this perception does not negate the reality that people are subjected to the horrific powers of “collective forces” rather than fate or the natural economy.⁵⁴

In a sense, ‘One-Way Street’ represents the partial culmination of a shift that had begun with ‘Naples’: the understanding of the commodity structure of capitalism as central to experience. This methodological element is central to ‘Motifs,’ and points to the very essence of Benjamin’s critique of Bergson: the failure to consider the ways in which memory and experience are mediated through the concrete historical process, particularly the specific forms reification takes under modern capitalism. But Lukács’ approach also presented a number of methodological problems, particularly in respects to his approach to history (and situating capitalism within it). In seeking to explain the intellectual roots of Adorno’s and Benjamin’s common intellectual project (a negative dialectics), Buck-Morss argues that Adorno adopted the negative/critical side of Lukács’ philosophical resuscitation of Marx (the theory of reification), while rejecting the positive/revolutionary side. In these latter respects, where Lukács went wrong was in seeing the proletariat as the subject-object of this process of reification, and hence the repository of truth: Adorno rejected the idea that truth could be singularly embodied in this class, and that “total” knowledge could be attained of capitalism as an objective social formation by the proletarian subjects it produced. Part of the problem with Lukács’ account will be

⁵⁴ Benjamin, ‘One-Way Street,’ 450-455.

familiar from my discussion of the debate between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre in the previous chapter: the metaphysical standpoint Lukács adopted was at odds with the empirical reality of proletarian consciousness, and so he fell back on a conception of “imputed consciousness” which required the party-as-mediator to bring the “truth” to the class – or required the party to manipulate truth to fit its purposes.⁵⁵ David McNally notes that Benjamin also never fully adopted Lukács’ conception of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history.⁵⁶ In the wake of these criticisms, we are left to ponder the specific nature and departing of Benjamin’s own approach from Lukács’ adoption of a Hegelian conception of history. It is at this point that we might turn to Korsch’s influence for a better understanding of the radical historicity that Benjamin appropriates in order to avoid the problems of history marring Lukács’ work, for it is Korsch’s work that informs aspects of Benjamin’s historicity, particularly in ‘Convolute N: Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress’ of the *Arcades Project*.

While Lukács and Korsch have numerous points of convergence – and Korsch had proclaimed his philosophical solidarity with Lukács in *Marxism and Philosophy* – an obscure criticism of Leninism in Korsch’s 1930 postface, ‘Problems of Marxism and Philosophy,’ offers us a point of divergence that takes on a central importance. *Marxism and Philosophy* had treated Marxism itself as a historical mode of consciousness, subject to changes – retrograde and progressive – in accordance with its complex interconnection with history. But, in the postface, it was the refusal of this principle and the assertion of the absolute objectivity not only of Marxism but of truth itself, that the “Leninists” were affecting. In this vein, Korsch maintained, Leninists merely inverted the dialectic that Marx inherited from Hegel, and unilaterally applied it to all categories of society (“Object, Nature and History”). By virtue of this, Korsch argued,

⁵⁵ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute*, (New York: Macmillian Free Press 1977), 28-30.

⁵⁶ McNally, *Bodies of Meaning*, 172.

“they have abandoned the question of the *relationship between the totality of historical being and all historically prevalent forms of consciousness*.”⁵⁷ Indeed, the vulgarization of the materialist perspective regressed into a metaphysics that took being as “absolute and given” and knowledge as little more than the coming to consciousness of the imputed objective being. Hence, this approach severed “the dialectical relation of *being* and *consciousness* and, as a necessary consequence, the dialectical relation of *theory* and *practice*.”⁵⁸ This metaphysics represented consciousness as a potentially pure consciousness – even if it was imputed and the party was necessary to bring it to light – capable of abstractly and completely comprehending being/reality outside of the specificity of historical forms of consciousness. In these respects, the ontological status of being was neglected in favour of “the narrower epistemological or ‘gnoseological’ question of the *relationship between the subject of knowledge and the object of knowledge*. Nor is this all. They present knowledge as a fundamentally harmonious *evolutionary progress* and an *infinite progression towards absolute truth*.”⁵⁹ Far from conforming to Adorno’s critique of succumbing to identity thinking,⁶⁰ Korsch drew into question the absolutes that identity thinking required. Moreover, he drew into question any blind faith in the progression towards an absolutely reconciled form of knowledge that would consecrate the total historical process: the internal/immanent relationship between being and consciousness – that is, their mutual relation *within* history – negated the possibility of their absolute identity.

While Korsch never names Lukács directly in this criticism, aspects of this tendency can be seen in *History and Class Consciousness*. Indeed, for all his complexity, Lukács ultimately

⁵⁷ Karl Korsch, “The Problem of “Marxism and Philosophy,”” *Marxism and Philosophy*, (London: New Left Books 1970), 117.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁶⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*. While the specific reference to Korsch has been expunged from the English edition, it remains in the original German edition.

falls into a conception of Marxism as the finally discovered, supra-historical truth that can consecrate all of history (as embodied in the proletariat's adoption of Marxism as imputed class consciousness via the party); or, in other words, a relatively fixed materialist position beholden to an identity thinking that fails to take seriously the historically prevalent forms of consciousness. In these respects, Lukács reproduces the teleological character of the Hegelian philosophy of history: history and the past could only "truly" be known from the perspective of a completed historical totality. Consequently, in pre-capitalist societies "class consciousness is unable to achieve complete clarity and to influence the course of history consciously."⁶¹ For the most part, this is "because class interests in pre-capitalist society never achieve full (economic) articulation."⁶² Through mystification (via political and religious obscuring) the realization that the roots of social conflict are determined through these class positions are denied the objective possibility of being brought to consciousness. With the emergence of capitalism, the situation takes on a new character: "With capitalism...class consciousness arrived at the point where *it could become conscious*. From then on social conflict was reflected in an ideological struggle for consciousness and for the veiling or the exposure of the class character of society."⁶³ Through the knowledge of its position as a commodity in the capitalist process of production, the proletariat is able to attain knowledge of the historical genesis underlying capitalism and the production of the objective world through human actions/agency. And the consequences of this are clear for Lukács: "When the worker knows himself as a commodity his knowledge is practical. That is to say, this knowledge brings about an objective structural change in the object

⁶¹ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 55.

⁶² Ibid., 55.

⁶³ Ibid., 59.

of knowledge.”⁶⁴ Through knowledge of this process of objectification, the proletariat realizes itself as a historical subject, thus bringing to an end the “pre-history” of humanity.

If we read this in the context of Korsch’s critique of Leninism, we find that Lukács fails to properly and dialectically mediate the relationship between moment and totality in the historical process by artificially treating his own perspective as the closure of the historical totality. Lukács is rightly concerned with the problem of relativism in the philosophy of history, and seeks to avoid conceiving of every historical moment as value neutral. But reducing history to the progressive realization of the contradictory tendencies contained in the present epoch (i.e. judging all history from the position of capitalism and its transcendence) does not provide an adequate way out. The categories drawn out through the dialectical deconstruction of capitalism are valid for capitalism. Moreover, we can discuss the historical descent and becoming of its categories, culminating in their present configuration (i.e. the genealogy of capitalism as a totality). But this cannot reduce the past to a teleological and linear progression to the present, replete with a post ex facto assertion of every past moment’s inevitable impotence. The objective possibilities of each totality must be considered from the vantage point of their own immanent tendencies, predicated on their own epistemological categories and the practical possibilities emanating from them – even if the totality of these possibilities were not fully realized. In these respects, truth itself must be historicized, and the teleological truth imputed to the proletariat as identical subject-object must be drawn into question.

We can begin excavating the influence of Korsch’s ideas on Benjamin through their common interlocutor, Bertolt Brecht. In this vein, Benjamin records a salient comment by Brecht: "Yesterday, after playing chess, Brecht said: 'You know, when Korsch comes, we really ought to work out a new game with him. A game in which the moves do not always stay the

⁶⁴ Ibid., 169.

same; where the function of a piece changes after it has stood on the same square for a while: it should either become stronger or weaker. As it is the game doesn't develop, it stays the same for too long."⁶⁵ While this is said with a certain good-natured mockery, the core of what Brecht gets at is Korsch's notion of historical specificity: there is no transcendent truth, for historical change dialectically transforms truth's very form and content. Indeed, Brecht's comment suggests that Korsch conceives of a shift in the nature of the subject ("the function of a piece changes") and its forms of subjectivity ("the moves do not always stay the same") – all in accordance with the passing of time. In this context, we get a notion of historical presentism,⁶⁶ and this is the core idea contained in the passages from Korsch's *Karl Marx* that Benjamin transcribed into 'Convolute N.' In noting the restricted character of Marx's materialism, Benjamin cites Korsch to the effect that, "the general propositions of materialist social theory concerning the relations between *economy* and *politics* or *economy* and *ideology*, or concerning such general concepts as *class* and *class struggle*...have a different meaning for each specific epoch and strictly speaking, are valid, in the particular form Marx gave them within the present bourgeois society, only for this society."⁶⁷ The divergence from Lukács' historical understanding should be apparent. For him, Marxism did not represent a complete fissure in the epistemological universe, but the truth that had escaped previous epochs about being. In essence, Marxism itself did not change: only its function did, as it went from being critique to Truth. Contrary to this, Korsch suggested that "time" was not the measure of superior knowledge, and could not reduce the past to a series of follies. Furthermore, Benjamin cites Korsch to the effect that, "Marx replaces the overweening

⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'Conversations with Brecht,' *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Debate within German Marxism*, (London: Verso Books 2002), 88.

⁶⁶ Buck-Morss suggests that such a presentism permeates Adorno's work, but that Benjamin waffles between it and a more developmental approach. Regardless, she acknowledges that the 'Theses' were informed by this presentism and it is them and the *Arcades Project* that I am centrally concerned with. See, Buck-Morss, *Origins*, 168.

⁶⁷ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 483.

postulate of Hegel that the truth must be concrete with the rational principle of specification...The real interest lies...in the specific traits through which each particular historical society is *distinguished* from the common features of society in general and in which, therefore, its *development* is comprised.”⁶⁸ We find here the assertion that the present configuration – its ways of being, acting and thinking – is wholly unique and peculiar to a given society, not that a new mode of “thinking” brings the truth to the world of being and action. Of course, as the claim about development asserts, these must be situated in the context of the general processes of historical change. But this does not undermine the essential particularity of the present moment itself, but only the need to understand the present's "origins" – the modifications, changes and breaks, that have contributed to its own formation and the ways in which it distinguishes itself from the past. This also establishes the present as a moment capable of qualitative transcendence – transcendence as rupture.

While Marx's thought was subsequently taken over by his “epigones” as a “general” set of rules, capable of being transposed and applied to “society in general,”⁶⁹ this ultimately undercut the revolutionary intention of such historical specification by positing little more than an evolutionary schema tied to inevitability and the dismissal of “primitive” attempts at social upheaval – the old story about waiting for the conditions for revolution to be ripe. However, as we will see in Chapter 4, Benjamin's weak messianism sought to break with such conceptions, and veered in the direction of Korsch's non-dogmatic approach to Marxism – not all of which would have been familiar to Benjamin, but the contours of which are still present in *Karl Marx*. Korsch's whole intention was to open “a wholly undogmatic guide to research and action”⁷⁰ that

⁶⁸ Ibid., 485.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 485.

⁷⁰ Karl Korsch, *Karl Marx*, (New York: Russell & Russell 1963), 229. This is one of the core themes in several of the essays collected in, Karl Korsch, *Revolutionary Theory*, (Austin: University of Texas Press 1977).

situated Marxism *within* the working class movement, as one of its moments along with other theoretical tendencies. Benjamin's interest in the work of Fourier, Blanqui and other "utopian" socialists would appear to be part of this same project. The resurrection of these moments, and of the past as a living entity, represented an intersubjective or constellative realm. In essence, then, the theoretical monopoly of valid thought itself was being severed by this principle of specification, as was the alleged monopoly Marxism had on socialist thought.

All of this suggests a very different historical procedure than the one undertaken by Lukács. Transcending Lukács' error requires the acknowledgement that past and present are dialectically or constellatively – and not causally or linearly – interconnected: neither moment has an absolute identity, and each moment casts the other in a new light that is only true at the moment of their interconnection. In Lukács' hands, historical materialism necessitates a re-writing of history not as a dialectically new reality, but as the secret, finally discovered, of all history. Ultimately, this fails to consider that the notion of historical totality undialectically presupposes a fixed end (or "beginning") of history, and reduces all historical moments to a mere link in the causal chain to the present (and its transcendence). For Benjamin, the past cannot be seen as the teleological culmination of the present, in which truth finally emerges to illuminate all previous epochs. Rather, the present (as monad) contains its own epistemological and ontological foundations that shape the very perceptibility of the past: rather than illuminating a homogenous time, the past is filled by the "now" of historical perceptibility. In this vein, Benjamin cites Karl Kraus to the effect that, "Origin is the goal."⁷¹ Historical inquiry was not the exposing of an absolute truth – known a priori through an evolutionary schema, or through the "truth" of the present – but the means to extracting the ur-history of the present. In reversing

⁷¹ Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History,' *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 2003), 395.

the claims of evolutionary biology, Korsch cited Marx to the effect that “the anatomy of man is a key to the anatomy of the ape.”⁷² In Benjamin’s hands, then, we find a radical historicity that rejects Lukács’ notion of the suprahistorical truth contained in Marxism and dismissive of all previous revolutionary projects as inevitable failures. Benjamin wanted to retain these “failed” moments, so their very essence could be explained by the current fragmentation of social life. What Benjamin adopts from Korsch, vis-à-vis these tendencies in Lukács, is a radical notion of historicity divorced from teleological and linearly progressivist conceptions. This culminates in a presentism which views the current historical moment as a monad, refusing both the Bergsonian approach that would present being as contained in a homogenous-empty time devoid of birth, suffering and death or the Lukácsian approach that would see the present as the inevitable culmination or result of an epistemologically limited past. In essence, we must understand the current historical moment – with its commodity structure – in its own specificity.

IV. The Crises of Progress and Historical Perception

The combination of Benjamin's constellative methodology and his appropriation of Marxism from Lukács and Korsch informs his critique of progress as a historical concept in his later works. As in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue,' Benjamin's approach begins from a rejection of a positivist understanding of history, but this critique comes to be imbued by the reifying character of capitalism's commodity structure and the assertion of historical specificity (via a radical presentism). Centrally, Benjamin rejects linear temporal structures and the focus on the past as an object-in-itself, both of which aligned with Leopold von Ranke’s maxim that the goal of history is to “tell how it really happened.”⁷³ All of this presupposes the positivist conflation of existence and essence (if not a complete dismissal of the question of essence), which in turn effects an illusory dissociation of history from concepts of meaning. The roots of this fact-based

⁷² Korsch, *Karl Marx*, 52.

⁷³ Theodor Adorno, *History and Freedom*, (Cambridge: Polity Press 2006), 10.

history lie in the traditional, Cartesian epistemological separation of subject and object, which acts to separate the “neutral” historian from his/her object of inquiry and facilitates their knowing it as an object-in-itself.⁷⁴ It is only through such a separation that the past could be recognized “the way it really was” – that is, as an independent entity unencumbered by the problematic intrusions of the organizing perceptions of the historian or his/her epoch.⁷⁵ Consequently, the object is treated as a self-identical thing, completely and totally transparent to any and all perceiving subjects. In the process, the past is represented as an “eternal image” divorced from time itself⁷⁶ and, by virtue of this, the urgency to know or come to terms with it is annihilated by its ever-present character.⁷⁷ It is in this stance that history is presented as a mere matter of recounting the facticity of the world. Yet, Benjamin discerns in this a duplicitous smuggling in of a progressivist historical trajectory focused largely on causality and continuity. As Benjamin summarizes its method: “Its procedure is additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogenous, empty time.”⁷⁸ Hence, far from being devoid of a principle of historical meaning, this historicism is centrally concerned with developing a causal nexus amongst these moments. The very procedure of picking out events suggests that these moments represent something meaningful about the historical process itself. This has the effect of representing “the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary.”⁷⁹ In essence, history is represented as a succession of moments, all linearly connected via a progressive and continuous line in which each historical epoch is the resolution, development and continuation of the previous one. History is then

⁷⁴ See Lowy, *Fire Alarm*, 42-44.

⁷⁵ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 463; Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History,’ 391.

⁷⁶ Walter Benjamin, ‘Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,’ *Selected Writings. Volume 3*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 2002), 261-262.

⁷⁷ Ronald Beiner, ‘Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy of History,’ *Political Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 3, August 1984, 427.

⁷⁸ Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History,’ 396.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 397.

understood through the attempt to pick moments out of the continuous flow of events, and to understand these past moments as looking forward towards the future.⁸⁰

Benjamin is concerned to assess the meaning or function that this conception of history has, particularly in its relation to the present moment. Here, Korsch's inversion of the evolutionary schema – the assertion that “the anatomy of man is a key to the anatomy of the ape”⁸¹ – becomes key. An evolutionary schema is central to the historicism Benjamin critiques. He discusses this in terms of the question of empathy: “Empathy with the past serves not least to make the past seem present. It is no coincidence that this tendency accords very well with a positivist conception of history.”⁸² In this context, empathy is a passive sentiment that aims to draw the past into the present, seeing in it the teleological fore-history of the present – even if across a homogenous, empty time that sees only quantitative development (i.e. “progress”). The present is thus represented as the proper culmination of the failures of the past, their culmination in the evolutionary progress of a realized present. Far from truly being “alive” in the present, the past is merely that era whose existence necessitated the being of the present, and the past is relegated to a nodal point in the development of the present. Yet, if this appears to be the transposition of the “scientific” character of positivism into an historical understanding of causality, Benjamin is quick to draw out the ideological function that it plays. As he states: “With whom does historicism actually sympathize? The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of prior conquerors.”⁸³ Ultimately, history’s continuity is held together by the succession of victors/rulers who have trampled over the oppressed throughout the course of historical “progress.” This serves the purpose of not only justifying them, but of

⁸⁰ Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History,”’ *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, 405.

⁸¹ Korsch, *Karl Marx*, 52.

⁸² Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena’ 401.

⁸³ Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History,’ 392.

covering up the failed revolutionary moments that lie repressed and suppressed in the historical past: existing outside of the continuity of victory and the succession of victors, these moments come to represent little more than irrational blips on the historical radar. As Adorno suggests, by virtue of their impotence/vanquishment, they are rendered “irrelevant, eccentric, derisory” moments (or beings) that “did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement.”⁸⁴

Within this, Benjamin finds the ultimate betrayal of the concept of progress. He defines progress as “the first revolutionary measure taken.”⁸⁵ This definition remains somewhat obtuse. Yet, the obtuseness is by design, for Benjamin wishes to treat progress as a concept no longer glued to identity thinking: it is in identity thinking – and the ideological purposes that it serves – that progress comes to negate itself. In its critical capacity, progress denoted a revolutionary break or rupture with existing concepts, and an attempt to actualize social goals. Or, in Adorno’s translation of Benjamin’s intent: “progress would be the very establishment of humanity in the first place, whose prospect opens up in the face of its extinction.”⁸⁶ In this context, Benjamin sees true progress as an active transformative moment, but one of rupture and actualization not linearity and inevitability. Under this conceptualization, it is necessary to critically interrogate given historical moments to determine their meaning and significance, and whether they represent a development of humanity’s claims/demands. Progress loses its critical edge when it comes to measure not the potential development or actualization of social goals, but “the span

⁸⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, (New York: Verso 2005), 151.

⁸⁵ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 474.

⁸⁶ Theodor Adorno, ‘Progress,’ *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, (New York: Columbia University Press 1998), 145. In these respects, I concur with Asher Horowitz’s contention via Adorno that Benjamin’s critique of progress did not intend to dispense with it. See Asher Horowitz, *Ethics at a Standstill: History and Subjectivity in Levinas and the Frankfurt School*, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 2008), 376. On the other hand, I reject Rolf Tiedemann’s contention that Benjamin favours an ahistorical or transcendental break, which is in no way connected to the social ideals or hope produced in the past. See Rolf Tiedemann, quoted in Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, *Theodor W. Adorno: An Introduction*, (Durham: Duke University Press 2009), 32. I will address this argument implicitly throughout much of Chapter 4. At this point, it bears mentioning that in an early fragment, Benjamin states: “My definition of politics: the fulfillment of an unimproved humanity.” This sentiment would seem to be in line with suggesting that Benjamin’s intention was to redeem the concept of progress (and humanity).

between a legendary inception and a legendary end of history.”⁸⁷ Progress in this sense indicates simply what the historical process “as a whole” always is: linear conceptions of development and growth as a progressive trajectory that is guaranteed by the march of time.⁸⁸ It is thus an inevitable and automatic occurrence. Here, there is no critical element to the concept, and progress becomes “an uncritical hypostatization rather than a critical interrogation.”⁸⁹

In the particular context of modernity, the problem with “progress” lay in its complicity with emerging bourgeois conceptions of history and its end: the complete separation between the past and the present. In this vein, Benjamin argues that discontinuity “is the regulative idea of the tradition of the ruling classes (and, therefore, primarily of the bourgeoisie).”⁹⁰ What he means here is that the bourgeoisie presents itself as the realization and harmonization of a pre-existing humanity, which has finally thrown off the shackles of the previous oppressors or developed fully the conditions of possibility for the utilization of the capacities of that pre-existing humanity. Benjamin’s sentiment draws on Marx’s contention that, as a revolutionary class, the bourgeoisie presents itself as the representative of a universal humanity, but that with its victory it imposes its own exploitative mode of being upon the other classes within capitalist society.⁹¹ The class dynamics of Enlightenment notions of progress only come to the fore with the consecration of bourgeois power, and manifest themselves in the increasing alienation and immiseration of the proletariat in the midst of the “progress” of the means to the

⁸⁷ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 478.

⁸⁸ This can take on an a-progressive character, but then it is more distinctly a flow of events through homogenous empty time, as a series of eternal returns in which nothing ever happens.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 478.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 364. This quote is slightly peculiar. Throughout most of his work, Benjamin suggests that continuity is the regulative idea of the traditions of the ruling class. This contention is more conducive to the assault on homogenous empty time, for it accords with the notion of eternal return contained within the philosophy of progress. As I discuss later on, in his own approach, Benjamin aims to sublimate the opposition between continuity and discontinuity.

⁹¹ Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, (London: Penguin Books 1967).

domination/exploitation of nature via the growth of technological capacities.⁹² Here, we find that progress is reduced to the quantitative growth of commodity production, and the concomitant development of the productive forces. Thus, progress becomes a “shallow rationalism,” for it is only utilized to measure an “infinite” quantitative growth within a qualitatively static mode of existence – or within a qualitatively static and closed conception of humanity itself (characterized by the “universality” of bourgeois conditions of existence).⁹³

Ultimately, progress comes to refer to a reified history which measures the birth and development of bourgeois society and its economic apparatus.⁹⁴ And, in terms of the bourgeois philosophy of history, it comes to describe little more than the post-humous chain of causal connections that the present epoch has created in order to glorify itself; this self-aggrandizing history’s “enshrinement as heritage” covered up the very possibility of unfulfilled revolutionary moments in the past (their reduction to irrationalism). Indeed, for Benjamin the claim to “history” and “progress” serves as the “spoils” of the victors, and it is beholden on them to present their own epoch as the culmination of history, and their own coming to power as the fulfillment of a historical necessity. The past is thus relegated to being an irrational occurrence incapable of keeping up with the march of history – the past is something dispensed with because of historical necessity. Despite the discontinuity bourgeois history purports to represent, the apologia/enshrinement of history creates a continuity of succession – it establishes the rosary beads that denote the development of the present’s perfection, or its perfectibility within itself.⁹⁵ In narrating history as an epic undertaking, this configuration attempts to turn the past into an

⁹² Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism*, 178.

⁹³ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 119.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 478.

⁹⁵ Walter Benjamin, ‘Central Park,’ *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, 162.

eternal/timeless truth, by showing things “as they really were.”⁹⁶ But, in doing so, it merely grabs hold of the present’s own historical imposition. For, as Benjamin contends, the “purity” of the gaze – the gaze that excludes “anything that has taken place in the meantime,” particularly those events that fall outside of the enshrined narrative – is impossible, and the present constantly informs the understanding of the past.

And yet, this "perception" of the past represents a reified form of perception that occludes the non-identity of the past as "object" and phenomena. Indeed, what Benjamin discerns in this positivist conception of history is a crisis of historical perception.⁹⁷ The principle of empathy with the past sought “to make the past seem present.”⁹⁸ In drawing out the implications, Benjamin states: “In the field of history, the projection of the past into the present is analogous to the substitution of homogenous configurations for changes in the physical world...The former is the quintessence of the ‘scientific’ character of history, as defined by positivism.”⁹⁹ We find here the collapsing of existence and essence, and the representation of changes in quantity via homogenous entities. Hence, when this is transformed into a mode of historical perception/knowledge, the past is identical with the present as regards its ultimately static, qualitative essence: growth and progress only refers to the quantitative growth of a pre-existing entity,¹⁰⁰ and anything that falls outside of this – those moments or beings which defy the linear historical narrative – are rendered peripheral/irrational and ultimately moot. Hence, the process of making the past present refers to a process of the present recognizing only itself or its own

⁹⁶ Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History,’ 391.

⁹⁷ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 392.

⁹⁸ Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena,’ 401.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 401.

¹⁰⁰ Perhaps the most pertinent ideological history in these respects would be a Smithian economic history. For Adam Smith, the natural propensity amongst humans to “truck, barter and exchange” has existed since time immemorial and has merely required the growth and expansion of trade relations across time. On the other hand, if we turn to Hegel in his more simplistic formulations on the philosophy of history, we find a humanity that has been fettered from its own self-realization over time, only to be liberated with the emergence of protestant Christianity and the Prussian state.

image in the past, excluding all that might transcend it: the present sees in the past only its own fore-history. In evolutionary terms, this fore-history would only be the present's infancy/childhood, conceived of as a necessary stage which we have since left behind. Consequently, the development to the present takes on a pre-ordained and teleological character, imbued with a monological mode of subjectivity: the present develops only in dialogue with itself, and in accordance with a linear dynamic.

And yet, at the same time, the present completely forgets the past and turns its focus towards development for the future.¹⁰¹ The present is conceived of as having broken with the past: there is a separation between past and present, which represents the present as the perfect fulfillment of humanity and the past as an obsolete entity that merely played out the role of evolving to the present. This was why Benjamin argued that discontinuity was the regulative idea of the victors: they must represent their own coming into being as the fulfillment or end of history. Of course, at the same time, this requires the representation of history as a continuity and a continuity that could not be broken: again, it measures “the span between a legendary inception and a legendary end of history.” This end point is the culmination of historical development, whereby humanity has come to realize itself. Yet, this is entirely self-referential and requires the exclusion of unfulfilled moments of the past. To assert the perfection of the present is to deny the very potential being of these past moments: they were nothing more than irrational moments incapable of realization, because they lacked the purity of the present's existence. Indeed, “humanity” is victorious only as the emergence of its representatives and as the betrayal of those parts of humanity who fail to conform to its representation. This betrayal plays out against two entities: those who fail to conform to humanity's current representation, or those that failed to conform to – or keep in step with – the historical narrative that feeds and

¹⁰¹ Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena,’ 394.

legitimizes this current representation. Hence, the present's progress threatens not merely those who exist within the current epoch, but those who have died or been killed to fulfill humanity's perfection in the present – it threatens them via a historical amnesia which serves to buttress the ideological purposes of history.¹⁰² Indeed, with the gaze turned squarely towards the future as a realm of quantitative growth, the past – particularly those parts that are already excluded – is ignored and forgotten.

Benjamin is arguing that universal history is only universal to the extent that one part of humanity is represented in the historical narrative, and everything that transcends or negates this is excluded and forgotten. It is in this context that the famous “angel of history” thesis comes to have a meaning. History as the history of progress is the continual catastrophe of the denial of humanity's realization. The ideology of progress drives us forward, and no matter how destructive or dehumanizing the events that transpire along the way are, these are thought to be the “cost” of progress itself. Hence, in the context of the rise of fascism, Benjamin notes the peculiarity that people can be amazed that these events are “‘still’ possible.”¹⁰³ The narrative of progress represents such circumstances as external and contingent to history's overall march. Yet, Benjamin sees in fascism the continuation of the singular catastrophe that has to the present marred human existence. Moreover, the continual unwillingness to comprehend or come to terms with such experiences – the repetition of them throughout history – perpetuates the continual commission of such atrocities. The angel, as that being potentially capable of consecrating and amending history through the recognition and awakening of the dead, appears in the metaphor as no match for the gale force winds of progress and is continually pressed forward along with the flow of bodies that accrue at its feet for the “sake” of progress. As we

¹⁰² Ibid., 391.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 392.

will see with the experience of the crowd, alterity is elided and subjectivity is summarily denied. But the figure of the angel contains several clues to unravelling the possibility of the emergence of subjectivity. Indeed, against the flow of progress towards the future, Benjamin sees the angel as facing backwards, towards the past. Moreover, the redemptive capacities of history lie in the angel's own existence in the now through the recognisability that this opens the past up to. Within this and within his more general claims about history, Benjamin is demanding a new mode of historical perception that can open the past to the present as a realm of alterity and dislodgement, outside of a philosophy of possession or imposition.

V. The Historical Presentism of Now-Time as Monad

The critique of progress pushes Benjamin towards a historical presentism that sees the present as a wholly unique experiential moment – divorced from linear or homogenous connections to the past and present – structured by specific ways of thinking and being. In the context of the terminology of constellations, we can now conceptualize the present as a monad, representing a specific/particular essence. But, as monad, this includes a relationality with other historical moments. Empty, homogenous time represents the world as either a linear progression of static and self-identical moments via the teleological realization of humanity across time or as self-same and devoid of qualitative change or qualitatively different moments. Benjamin's concept of history signifies the idea that history is itself comprised of monads and, more importantly, that the present – its needs and modes of thinking – shapes the beginning of understanding the coming into being of the other monads (i.e. the past) and vice versa: the present's interrogation of the past brings it to life. Within Benjamin's later lexicon, the present as relational monad is referred to as "now-time." Now-time represents a wholly unique moment

that lacks a continuity with the past,¹⁰⁴ for it is only as a separate unit that a relationship can be established between the past and present, which is to say that for a relationship of alterity to exist the past as other must be conceptualized as truly other than the present. The presentist element of now-time rejects any notion of the purity of the gaze: the past can only be seen from the perspective of the present as a unique now, and in its unique engagement with the past. In this sense, Benjamin likens the historian to “a prophet facing backward.” The essence of this metaphor lies in the idea that the prophet’s gaze is structured by the present while rummaging through the past – though the transiency of the present often renders this intentionality impotent.¹⁰⁵ But, intentionality aside, the point is that by virtue of this, Benjamin distances the present from the idea that there is an eternal or permanent image of the past. And, more to the point, the intention of the historian is not to dispense with the past, but to make the past present as its image flits by during his/her rummaging.

Benjamin’s conceptual moves thus far are intended to re-think and reconfigure the relationship of past and present as a dialectical and constellative one, and this requires that he also reconceptualise the very nature of the historical “object.” In tune with the non-identical epistemology at the center of his thought, Benjamin reconfigures the terminology of the object to divorce it from possession and identity. Thinking history through its monadological structure allows us to conceive of the relationship of past and present as containing multiple threads (which are not linear) and as defying the self-apparentness of the object which lies in wait to be known. Indeed, containing a non-identical essence, the monad represents an entity whose being is constantly in flux and structured by its relations to other beings. This facilitates the “Copernican turn in historical perception” whereby history no longer concentrates its forces on a

¹⁰⁴ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 470. While Benjamin states this directly, we know of course that there is a continuity of oppression. But it is still an oppression within a different monadic essence.

¹⁰⁵ Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena,’ 405.

given object to know it as it really was (and already is). Rather, Benjamin now conceives of history as a “not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been”¹⁰⁶: a knowledge that is itself in the process of being, becoming and disappearance through the very transformation of the relationship between the monads within temporality. This process of transformation is fundamentally structured by the character of the monad as “object.” Indeed, Benjamin likens his historical method “to the process of splitting the atom,” which aims to liberate “the enormous energies of history that are bound up in the ‘once upon a time’ of classical historiography.”¹⁰⁷ It is the very monadological structure of the historical object that allows it to break with this “once upon a time.” As a monad, the historical object can be “blasted out of the continuum of historical succession,” and its emancipatory value recuperated and redeemed at a higher level of actuality through a new historical constellation.¹⁰⁸ Benjamin argues that this must occur through the object itself, and not merely its conceptual form; in fact, the redemption of the object often emerges through its throwing off of the conceptual form (linearity) that limits and inhibits it. Benjamin repeatedly refers to this redemption as a *political* rather than historiographical endeavour. To understand this through the epistemology of the *Trauerspiel*, we might liken this difference to the one between truth and knowledge. Knowledge, as possessive, aims to encapsulate the object/phenomenon. But it does so without much of a practical purpose, and does so through a closed and singular approach. Truth would seem to know its own limits, and aim to represent the phenomena – and to represent them in their monadological relation, and in their process of birth and decay. It is exactly this function that the political reading of history entails – and it does so as the redemption of the objects and subjects of history.

¹⁰⁶ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 388-389.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 463.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 474-475.

Given the transient and non-identical character of the historical object, historical perception requires the arrest of progress/time, in order to allow for the present to establish a specific and unique relationship to the past. Hence, rather than being subject to the flow of events, time would stand still and structure the very historical perspective that is absent in the ideology of progress. After all, if the image of the past flits by, then time must stand still in order to grasp this tempestuous image. Only through the arrest of time can the continuum of history be blasted open. Indeed, given the pace of progress, and its ideological functioning, the past is subject to the desecration of an historical amnesia. But through the arrest of time, the past can be brought into a perceptive relation with the present¹⁰⁹ in a manner that transcends this amnesia. Here, Benjamin sees the past attaining a higher plane of being, or acquiring “a higher grade of actuality than it had in the moment of its existing.”¹¹⁰ As a failed moment by the struggling/oppressed class, this moment did not achieve its actuality. Within the context of a political reading of history, the past emerges as “a moment of humanity”¹¹¹ – and, it emerges as “a history that is originary for every present.”¹¹² The past emerges only in the now of its recognizability, as a non-linear connection in which moments much distanced from the present may come into connection with it outside of the medium of the direct, structured, developmental connections that exist across empty, homogenous time. But, in and of itself, this emergence does not entail the full redemption of the past: it only achieves a higher actuality by virtue of opening up the potential of redemption as recognition. Indeed, the very notion that history as an object of knowledge is determined by the interest the present takes in it opens it up to the possibility of an actualizing connection/relationship, by breaking with the flow of events and time that would

¹⁰⁹ Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History,’ 396.

¹¹⁰ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 392.

¹¹¹ Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena,’ 403.

¹¹² Benjamin, ‘Eduard Fuchs,’ 261-262.

ultimately pass it by. By drawing a concrete connection between the moments, even without an actualizing redemption, the past-as-object has already attained a higher existence.

What Benjamin has conceptualized here is a notion of the recognizability of history. But this is not a pre-existent or omnipresent recognition and it seeks to dispense with what Benjamin conceives of as the abstract historicity of Heidegger's approach. Now-time encloses the present within a particular ontological and epistemological field, and it does so to theorize its relationship to the past. In conceiving the past as something that flits by, Benjamin is conceptualising "the moment of its recognizability."¹¹³ Again, this rejects any notion of the past as an eternal image, and instead aims to convey the uniqueness of the experience, a uniqueness tied to temporality as that in which the specific relationship of knower and known comes to be (or decays). And it is the nature of this temporality which necessitates time taking a stand – or the idea that the present is not merely a transition, and holds out the possibility of the arrest of time as a moment of recognition.¹¹⁴ Within this process, the intentionality of the present as subject is denied. While the historian rummages through the past, it is the past itself that flits by and presents itself as recognizable to the now. And it does so in the moment of its recognizability, a moment that is itself not eternal but must be seized at the point of its arising: "each 'now' is the now of a particular recognizability."¹¹⁵ This alludes to the importance of vision/perception in history: the recognizability of history can be elided by the powers of progress that represent the present as a continual transition and efface its relationship with the past. In such cases, the image of the past disappears and is irretrievably lost. The very presentism that Benjamin conceptualizes sees those moments as only perceptible in that specific form at the moment of their emergence. The failure to grasp the image at these moments allows

¹¹³ Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History,' 391.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 396.

¹¹⁵ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 462-463.

them to recede into the past, and their meaning to decay. Thus, we find a failure of recognition and redemption, one that threatens the knowledge and emancipation of the present and past.

In aiming to recuperate the past, Benjamin argues that one of the key characteristics of historical materialism lies in its “constructive” or “creative” element. In order to affect a change not merely of historical vision but of the course of history, historical materialism aims to rupture the triumphant narrative the present has created, to draw it into crisis and to rescue the dead from the catastrophe of being forgotten. Indeed, Benjamin suggests that it is the work of the historical materialist to engage and hold fast to the past as it emerges. In rejecting the identitarian basis of historicist thought, he argues that this moment lacks a static or causal epistemological foundation. Rather, historical moments come together in a constellative relationship. In conceiving of this relation *within* the flow of time itself, Benjamin sees it as a moment of truth in which simultaneously knowledge of a past historical moment is brought into a new light and the nodal points come together to illuminate one another, but only at that moment of their connection. It is to express this very idea that Benjamin utilizes the terminology of “image”: he suggests that the “image” of the past is characterized by its historical index – that is, by the particular character and moment of its recognizability/legibility. Moreover, he argues that the now “is determined by the images that are synchronic with it.”¹¹⁶ This suggests the very dialogical and monadological character of the relation between historical moments. Indeed, this is not a monological imposition of the present on the past: “it is not that what is past casts light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill.”¹¹⁷ Indeed, the synchronic coming together of moments implies their

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 462-463.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 462-463.

intersubjective transformation. Benjamin is thus quick to note that the connection between moments, rather than being temporal/continuous, is dialectical and figurative. Benjamin refers to this moment of the dialectical image/constellation as a caesura:¹¹⁸ that is a pause, gap or break in time in which the historical object comes into its direct contact with the present. And this moment blasts the present out of its reified continuity and self-proclaimed actualization of humanity, recuperating the past by inciting a crisis of history (and historical knowledge).¹¹⁹

What is established in this caesura is a not-yet-conscious knowledge of the past, which brings to light a not-yet-conscious knowledge of the present – a truth is brought to light that is only recognizable as the intersubjective relation between these moments. In essence, each moment becomes pregnant with the others. Benjamin likens the dialectical image to literary texts. As he quotes Monglond: “the past has left images in literary texts, images comparable to those registered by a light-sensitive plate. The future alone possesses developers active enough to scan such surfaces perfectly.”¹²⁰ This succinctly summarizes the gist of Benjamin’s treatment of the non-identity of history itself. The present generation (or future generations, from the perspective of those whom the past has left such light-sensitive images) must “read what was never written”¹²¹ in drawing out the meaning and truth contained in these images. This suggests the very monadic character of the historical object itself, and the historical materialist only confronts the object “where it confronts him as a monad.”¹²² The monadic character is what allows the object to be jarred loose from the historical continuum and read in a different light. And, in jarring it loose, the historical materialist “blasts a specific life out of the era, a specific

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 475.

¹¹⁹ Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena,’ 403.

¹²⁰ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 482.

¹²¹ Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena,’ 405-406.

¹²² Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History,’ 396.

work out of the lifework.”¹²³ Doing so allows the historical to make whole what has been fragmented and repressed; moreover, in showing the fragmented character of history, its exclusionary quality, history and the object can be made "whole" again. Indeed, wrenching the object from the continuum of historical succession is a process of sublating the object: “the lifework is both preserved and sublated *in* the work, the era *in* the lifework, and the entire course of history *in* the era.”¹²⁴ In wrenching these moments from the historicism that would see them as a series of transcendences, the moments become parts of a single catastrophe that implicates the present in their continued oppression/repression. Moreover, through this the crisis of the present is exposed. It is only in the context of the caesura that the intersubjectivity of past and present may emerge, for in pausing or breaking with the flow of events (like pulling the brake on the locomotive of history) the moment of recognizability comes into being rather than fading away. More to the point, the caesura brings the past to light as a moment of shock: “where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad.”¹²⁵ In essence, the image of the past that flits up exposes the tensions contained in the present’s image of itself and its relationship to the past, and exposes the multiplicity of the monad’s historical capabilities – which is to say the multiple histories that emerge with the passing of time.

In redeeming the past, Benjamin’s constellative epistemology reconfigures the juxtaposition of historical moments by completely freeing them from the strictures of temporality-as-succession. But this does not mean that each constellation – as an originary formation, informed by the revolutionary conception of progress as caesura or break – is disconnected from history. Rather, each constellation brings into being a non-linear relation of

¹²³ Ibid., 396.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 396.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 396.

historical monads, a relation that is related to meaning and essence rather than causality: that is, a relation that illuminates the meaning or truth of objects, but in their connection to temporality. In blasting the object of history out of its enshrinement within the continuity of victors, historical materialism sees “the work of the past as still uncompleted. It perceives no epoch in which that work could, even in part, drop conveniently, thing-like, into mankind’s lap.”¹²⁶ The non-identity of the past is contained in the idea that historical objects contain secret meanings not apparent to those who first discovered them. Redeeming the past entails utilizing it for new purposes outside of its enshrinement as self-aggrandizement of the present. This alludes to the break with contemplativeness: the object is a practical and open being, rather than a whole object that can fall into the lap of the historian for the possessive purposes of asserting its identity and absolute truth. The originary character of every constellation includes the originary historical relation that it inaugurates. Indeed, in wrenching it from its context, Benjamin argues that the very bowels of the object – its inner connections – enter into a new relation, due to its monadological structure.¹²⁷ Thus, in breaking the object from the continuity of succession, the present affects a break in the connective tissues of historical phenomenon. In essence, the now of recognizability opens up the object, breaking its self-sameness and its fixity, showing that either the object itself or fragments of its very being are excluded from the triumphal narrative. Here, we find the science of origin coming into play: the object, which now emerges in its non-identity, becomes a dialectical object. Indeed, the becoming and disappearance of the object shows its subjection to continual change; but it is still beholden upon the history of origins to trace out this process of becoming and the manner in which it transforms the object. This involves two procedures. First, it must unravel the very disappearance and coming into being of the object itself. Essentially, the

¹²⁶ Benjamin, ‘Eduard Fuchs,’ 268.

¹²⁷ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 475.

emergence brings to light the recognizability of the origins themselves, for as Benjamin notes: “threads can become lost, only to be picked up again by the present course of history in a disjointed and inconspicuous way.”¹²⁸ Thus, the present – by virtue of drawing into being a new meaning or essence of the object – effects a change in the very origins of the historical moment itself. But, second, this also changes the connection of the moments to the present, affecting changes in the very origin of the present. This is what Benjamin intends to convey when he argues that historical objects “integrate their fore-history as well as their after-history; and it is by virtue of their after-history that their fore-history is recognizable as involved in a continuous process of change.”¹²⁹

In drawing out his presentist perspective, and locating the origins of the process of change, Benjamin states: “It is the present that polarizes the event into fore and after-history.”¹³⁰ It is the present that affects, or draws out, the monadological structure of the past and its relation to the present. But it is the historical materialist’s goal to draw the past into the present, interpenetrating the two moments. In these respects, in accordance with their monadic character, each moment comes to refract and express the other. The present imbibes and absorbs its fore-history, a fore-history that only emerges as a function of the now-of-recognizability of the moment of connection, which is to say the dialectical image. In recognizing the past, the dialectical image emerges as something charged with the polarizing character of its fore-history and after-history. The fore-history emerges – always anew – in accordance with the character of the present, as it interpenetrates via its emergence in the now of recognizability.¹³¹ But this fundamentally ruptures the existent character of its after-history, for the transiency and

¹²⁸ Benjamin, ‘Eduard Fuchs,’ 269.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 261-262.

¹³⁰ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 471.

¹³¹ Ibid., 470.

uniqueness of the present must force a new relation. This becomes particularly pertinent in rupturing the direction of “progress” that had characterized the historical role of the present prior to this rupture. The now of recognizability creates a unique connection between the present and the past, and affects a break in the historical continuum with the direction of “progress” in the present: it entails a transformation of the after-history of the present monad as well, for the dialectical image affects a transformation in the interconnections and the meanings contained in them. By interspersing the past with the present, the present is portrayed as that which has failed to actualize the past for it only reigns via its own repression and repulsion of the past. Here, the dialectical image – the image of the past perceived from the position of the crisis of the present – is an image filled with tensions which ruptures the fundamentally compartmentalized or empty/homogenous character of historical moments in bringing forth an entirely new constellation.¹³² The after-history of the present comes to be – and comes to be read – through this confrontation. But, in these terms, the dialectical image exhibits a synthetic character¹³³: the collision of monads affects a transformation of the nodal points contained in the constellations, as well as their relational connections (that is, their fore-history and after-history). In redeeming the past, the present ruptures its self-same and embedded character, opening it up to its non-identity and alterity (its other being). But, by virtue of opening up the meaning of the past, the past imposes on the present the alterity of history and the ethical demand (the redemption of the past) that opens up the very tripartite alterity of the present: its relation to the past (as an ethical demand that needs to be answered), its relation to itself (its non-identity, and its own redemption from the fixity of the ideology of progress) and, predicated upon these first two, its alterity to a synthetic and fundamentally new mode of being in general (to the utopia of a future).

¹³² Ibid., 474-475.

¹³³ Ibid., 474; Benjamin, ‘Central Park,’ 179.

VI. Constellating Merleau-Ponty: Re-Phenomenologizing the Flesh

We have taken a fairly long digression here, and much of it will need to be unravelled in the next two chapters. What I hope to have established is a rather simple, but central, claim by Benjamin, through the mediation of Lukács and Korsch: under modern conditions the totality of life comes to be permeated by the commodity structure of capitalism, with its reifying effects; but these very categories are only real, discernable and applicable from the specific approach or vantage point of capitalism itself – from its specific forms of being and knowledge. This is the central point through which we need to understand Benjamin’s approach to the body: it establishes the present as a monad, containing a particular configuration of a particular field of experience. The question we must answer is: what becomes of the living functioning of the flesh within its existent field of experience, within the conditions of the specific historical functioning of capitalism and its commodity structure? And, following that, how does Benjamin attempt to reconceive “history” itself via his monadological approach as containing the possibilities of a future utopia? Benjamin’s writings on Baudelaire present a concentrated attempt to link bodily experience to the specific experience of capitalism, and it is to them that I will turn in the next chapter to answer the first question. And I will turn to the *Arcades Project* and ‘Theses on the Concept of History’ in the fourth chapter to answer the second question. However, we must first briefly return to Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty’s work is not devoid of an acknowledgement of the historical character of being and intersubjective relations. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he asserted the historical nature of being, and sought to enclose this being in a phenomenal field devoid of the abstractions of a-historical and purely intuitive/introspective thinking: “The first philosophical act would appear to be to return to the world of actual experience which is prior to the objective world...restore to things their concrete physiognomy, to organisms their individual ways of

dealing with the world, and to subjectivity its inherence in history.”¹³⁴ As I noted in the previous chapter, Merleau-Ponty was concerned with “the real relationships between people in our societies.”¹³⁵ Reading this sentiment in concert with the passage from *Phenomenology* suggests the need to understand the concrete relations between self-others-things as they exist in our historically charged field of experience, and as modes of habit or being-in-the-world.¹³⁶ To this same end, Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Marx shows an attunement to the historically constituted character of being. As he states: “Marx’s entire effort in *Das Kapital* is directed precisely to showing that [the laws of classical economics], often presented as the permanent features of a ‘social nature,’ are really the attributes (and the masks) of a certain ‘social structure,’ capitalism[.]”¹³⁷ As with Benjamin’s critique of Bergson,¹³⁸ we find a concern over the treatment of an ontic reality as a permanent feature of existence. Far from being merely a concern aimed at classical economics, Merleau-Ponty extends this to “physical nature.” As he argues, even “modern physics only conceives its laws within the framework of a certain historical state of the universe,” a state which is not permanent.¹³⁹ Nature, as a dialectical and not an idealist or dualist entity, is inseparable from human perception and action – though also co-existent and co-constitutive of/with it.

Yet, if these passages present us with a framework for discerning the historically specific character of the present moment through the simultaneous assertion of subjectivity’s inherence in

¹³⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (New York: Routledge 2005), 66.

¹³⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, (London: Routledge 2004), 68.

¹³⁶ Nick Crossley also notes the historical constitution of being-in-the-world and habit formation for Merleau-Ponty, as well as Merleau-Ponty’s failure to discuss the specific modalities of body-power that inform these features of existence. See Crossley, ‘Body-Subject/Body-Power: Agency, Inscription and Control in Foucault and Merleau-Ponty,’ *Body & Society*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1996.

¹³⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Marxism and Philosophy,’ *Sense and Nonsense*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1964), 126

¹³⁸ The same concern was at the heart of my reading of Merleau-Ponty against Machiavelli and Lefort on the originary division of the social.

¹³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, ‘Marxism and Philosophy,’ 126

history and the discovery of a fundamental phenomenological trinity (self-others-things), Merleau-Ponty offers virtually no elaboration on what effect this historicity may have on the *specific* functioning of the flesh under particular historical moments. With all of his emphasis on the phenomenological principle of the lived body, we rarely find in Merleau-Ponty's work an elaboration or exploration of the way the body/flesh lives under capitalism. In attempting to delineate an ontology of pre-objective or savage/brute being, his work often takes on an abstract and a- or un-historical character. Certainly, this is not to say that Merleau-Ponty ignores the existence of capitalism, history or historicity. In what we may deem his overtly political texts – namely *Sense and Nonsense*, *Humanism and Terror* and *Adventures of the Dialectic* – Merleau-Ponty is much attuned to capitalism and history. Yet, he dodges the question of the specifically historical character of the flesh/body/experience itself.

The omission of a political/critical reading of the historicity of the flesh is reproduced to the point of exaggerated hyperbole in the secondary literature.¹⁴⁰ Lawrence Hass's *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy* is representative of the political neglect that often permeates the philosophical and ethical readings of Merleau-Ponty.¹⁴¹ Hass – perhaps admittedly – accentuates the disjunction between ontology and politics/history. His treatment of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the dynamic between self-others-things draws out its richness, noting the interweaving of these nodes of existence and asserting their character as a contingent though “living” reality; but the avowed historicity is presented as an abstract and symbiotic relationship

¹⁴⁰ Howard sees this as symptomatic of both the French and American readings of Merleau-Ponty, which eliminate his concrete historicity (and its relation to politics) thereby reducing him to Heidegger. Dick Howard, *The Marxian Legacy*, (London: The Macmillan Press 1977).

¹⁴¹ Hass is certainly not alone in these respects: Dillon in *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1997) and Mallin in *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, (New Haven: Yale University Press 1979) lack any particular attention to politics or Merleau-Ponty's political writings, instead focusing entirely on his philosophy; a number of the essays in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1990) either neglect Merleau-Ponty's politics altogether, or view his politics as divorced or distanced from his philosophy and focus on the latter; and, as Diana Coole points out, only two of the thirteen essays in *Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005) deal with Merleau-Ponty's politics.

devoid of historical/political/social determination or situation. That said, Hass readily argues against the sort of social constitution of the body he sees in Foucault's work. As he states, "Foucault's explicit insistence that society is '*totally* constitutive' of one's body, imposing *all* form and definition, renders the body essentially passive and formless, a contentless material substrate, a 'blank slate.'"¹⁴² Against this, Hass asserts – via Merleau-Ponty – the active nature of the body: "It surges up toward the world through 'its stable organs and pre-established circuits.' It is an organic being, with a basic structure that makes certain actions possible and other actions utterly impossible...Incorporation transpires not by external imposition of form, but by repetition and application in relation to social practices and forms."¹⁴³ Obviously, Hass is not merely implying that the body exists in a non-situated void, and he calls for an "inter-dynamic" account of the body and its constitution. In these respects, he admits to a lesser (and less hyperbolic) version of Foucault's critique: that while he may have a political theory, Merleau-Ponty lacks a politics of the body. As Hass states, "there is little or no recognition by Merleau-Ponty that culture coerces our bodies in a political way. This is not to say that Merleau-Ponty doesn't have a political theory, for he does. What he doesn't have is a political theory *of the body*. That is, he is missing a 'body politics' – and this is a serious omission."¹⁴⁴

Leaving aside Hass' total neglect of Merleau-Ponty's political theory and political writings, if we focus on his defence of Merleau-Ponty against Foucault's "constructionist" critique, we find that he seems little interested in these political questions, as he slides into the sort of dualist reading of Merleau-Ponty that would separate his philosophy/ontology from politics. His defence centres on the assertion of a set of "organs and pre-established circuits" ("a brain and central nervous system that develop, function and dysfunction in identifiable patterns")

¹⁴² Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, 93.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 91-94.

that respond to and resist external phenomenon. Certainly, he argues, this system is adaptable and able to “incorporate new behaviours and cultural forms, such as dancing and bike riding.” These incorporations occur through “repetition and application in relation to social practices and norms.”¹⁴⁵ But this line of argument shows the politically neutered nature of the philosophical reading of Merleau-Ponty. While Hass admits to the adaptability of organs and circuits – albeit in a-political and mundane acts like bike riding and dancing – he fails to acknowledge that these organs and circuits may be deformed and short-circuited through repetition and application in response to historically specific social environments and experiences. This deformation and short-circuiting goes beyond the mere “dysfunction” that may result from the body’s inability to adapt to certain tasks, or to achieve certain goals that are impossible by virtue of the way in which the body functions. But this very question of the im/possibility of the body’s functioning as an organ, is no more a standard set of capabilities than it is a blank slate: it is a question of historically situated and constituted being, even to the extent that the body resists, adapts to or alters its present organization and functioning. Hass fails to acknowledge this, and fails to probe the ontological and phenomenological import of Merleau-Ponty’s political work.

As Diana Coole points out, feminist scholars have often critiqued Merleau-Ponty for this precise point, for he appears to fail to account for historically specific power relations (such as gender), instead providing an abstract (and de-subjectified) account of the body and its capacities. With respects to gender, Judith Butler argues that “Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the ‘subject’ is...problematic in virtue of its abstract and anonymous status, as if the subject described were a universal subject or structured existing subjects universally. Devoid of a

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 93.

gender, this subject is presumed to characterize all genders.”¹⁴⁶ In rebutting this and reading Merleau-Ponty through Husserl’s claims about phenomenology, Coole notes that “the phenomenologist must operate on different levels, sometimes focusing on the general structures of the lifeworld and sometimes describing the genesis of particular forms therein.”¹⁴⁷ The implicit ontology of *Phenomenology of Perception* and the explicit ontology of *The Visible and the Invisible*¹⁴⁸ subject being to an *epoché*/bracketing which aims to grasp existence independent of its contingent manifestations – hence, to avoid treating gender and capitalism (or the philosophies that express/signify them) as natural, they are taken out of the equation at the basic level of pre-reflective ontology (a level that breaks with the reigning dualism of subject/object that would treat these characteristics as static binaries of a naturalist or linguistic/discursive variety).¹⁴⁹ But in aiming to capture the “particular experiences” at the concrete-phenomenological level, this approach demands that we re-introduce them to deepen the ontological analysis. If the general contours of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology aim to describe the possibilities of agentic capacities,¹⁵⁰ the phenomenological description of concrete/lived being-in-the-world is merely a further layer of concretion for the ontological being described in abstraction. In describing the chiasmatic intertwining of the body and the sensible, the flesh and the field of force it inhabits, Coole notes the mimetic intermingling that occurs – though notes that it contains both freedom and inertia, resistance and reification.¹⁵¹ Yet, she does not offer a

¹⁴⁶ Judith Butler, quoted in Diana Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics After Anti-Humanism*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers 2007), 202.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 202-203.

¹⁴⁸ These are descriptions borrowed from Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*.

¹⁴⁹ See Coole, *Merleau-Ponty*, 202-203, as well as the rest of ch.7.

¹⁵⁰ This is a theme explored by Coole in *Merleau-Ponty*, and ‘Rethinking Agency: A Phenomenological Approach to Embodiment and Agentic Capacities,’ *Political Studies*, Vol. 53, 2005.

¹⁵¹ Coole, *Merleau-Ponty*, 164, 171.

phenomenological reading of the flesh under capitalism,¹⁵² and it is in hopes of developing one that I turn to Benjamin's work: I aim to use Benjamin as a complement or another layer/dimension of the flesh of Merleau-Ponty's work.

When embedded within the historicity elaborated above, Benjamin's work may be ideally suited for developing the phenomenological implications of the flesh because of the very way in which he aims to write philosophy. As we have already seen in our brief encounter with 'Motifs,' Benjamin is centrally concerned with understanding the ways in which history affects the psychophysical experience of situated being. Moreover, with the adoption of the idea of reification from Lukács and historical specification from Korsch, his approach is concerned to understand the specific configuration of the historical nature of the relationship between self-others-things in this nexus of experience. And, in these respects, Benjamin's "philosophy" provides us with an opposing entry point to Merleau-Ponty's: rather than starting with the questions of philosophy or being-qua-being, Benjamin writes philosophy/being through concrete history. This method had already permeated some of his earlier, experiential writings. As Benjamin said of his Moscow essay: "[A]ll theory will be kept far from my presentation...I want to present the city of Moscow at the present moment in such a way that 'everything factual is already theory'...thereby refraining from all deductive abstraction, all prognosis, and even, within limits, all judgements."¹⁵³ If we take this intention to still be present in his writings on Baudelaire and the Paris of the 19th century, we find that he intends to allude to theoretical contentions without spoon-feeding them to his readers. The intention here seems to be to

¹⁵² In a similar vein, M.C. Dillon notes the reversibility of subject and object when they are conceived of as flesh: "...the body is also an object, a worldly object, and its thingly character was seen by Merleau-Ponty as a condition for its subjectivity...The body contributes to the constitution of the world we live in, but the reverse is also true: the world contributes to the constitution of our body." Like Coole, Dillon fails to provide a means of conceptualizing the field of experience (or the "constituted"/object that reverses its constitution onto the "constituting"/subject) under the specificity of capitalism. M.C. Dillon, 'Preface: Merleau-Ponty and Postmodernity,' *Merleau-Ponty Vivant*, ed. M.C. Dillon, (Albany: State University of New York 1991), xv.

¹⁵³ Quoted in Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 28.

preserve the non-identical character – the depth of experiential content – so central to what Benjamin deems “storytelling,” which I will explore in the next chapter.

Ultimately, then, the error in attempting to find an abstract or “first philosophy” of the body in Benjamin’s work lies in its failure to grasp that his seminal works in fact aim to jettison this very way of writing philosophy. As Buck-Morss argues, Benjamin attempted to write philosophy *through* history¹⁵⁴ – that is, he sought to provide a “phenomenological hermeneutics of the profane world,” a phenomenology of everyday experience.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, Benjamin’s work sought to expose the very experiences of bourgeois life outside of their reified and naturalized forms and historical narratives. And he sought to do this via a peculiarly phenomenological methodology: “Method of this literary project: literary montage. I needn’t *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.”¹⁵⁶ This begins with the radically historical, phenomenological *epoché* that his historical method constitutes, divorcing the various historical moments from one another in order to avoid the teleological and naturalizing implications of progress and development. This facilitates the interrogation of these historical moments outside of any presupposed temporal direction. In exposing these phenomena through something akin to phenomenological description, he focused on fragments and the seemingly ordinary as experiential moments that betrayed the peculiarity and reality of bourgeois existence; and, in showing them in relation to one another, he sought to preserve their independent significance/meaning outside of any totalizing logic, while still connecting them to one another. This very “methodology,”

¹⁵⁴ This is an argument that Adorno seems to affirm as well. See, Theodor Adorno, ‘A Portrait of Walter Benjamin,’ *Prisms*, (Cambridge: MIT Press 1982), 232.

¹⁵⁵ Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, 3.

¹⁵⁶ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 460.

particularly as it permeates Benjamin's later, more "materialist" works, can perhaps be blamed for the contention that he is not properly a philosopher, or cannot be deemed to be engaging in "philosophy."¹⁵⁷ But, as Richard Wolin argues regarding Benjamin's early elaboration of the concept of constellations, Benjamin seeks to achieve new truths at the noumenal level through the juxtaposition of phenomenal material.¹⁵⁸ As we will see in the next chapter, the intention in focusing on seemingly disparate phenomena (storytelling, factory labour, gambling and the encounter with the crowd) is to draw out a philosophical truth from their investigation and interconnection (the decline of bodily experience). In these respects, the temporal and phenomenal dimension come to have an "ontological" primacy for Benjamin and it is impossible to talk about the structure of being or the a priori functioning of the body: the body is always historically situated – or there is always a historically specific functioning of the body. This is not to say that Benjamin was oblivious to theoretical insights, or that his own work was not informed by philosophical – and, more specifically, psychoanalytical – motifs. Indeed, the last draft of Benjamin's Baudelaire essay, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,' aimed to draw these into the open to correct what Theodor Adorno viewed as the positivistic character of the earliest draft ('The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire'). This theoretical insertion into the final version will help guide us through Benjamin's thought process in adding some concretion to the theory of the flesh.

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To understand Benjamin's approach to the body it is necessary to approach the body's functioning as a specifically historical entity: to consider it as a living flesh, whose shifting

¹⁵⁷ For accounts of this approach to Benjamin, and discussions of the philosophical neglect of his work, see Sandor Radnoti, 'Benjamin's Politics,' *Telos*, 37, Fall 1978, 63; and, Lowy, *Fire Alarm*, 1; Gary Smith, 'Thinking Through Benjamin: An Introductory Essay,' *Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics*, ed. Gary Smith, (Chicago: University of Chicago 1989).

¹⁵⁸ Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 92.

character constitutes and is constituted by the field of experience within which we find it. In drawing from Benjamin's adoption of aspects of Lukács' and Korsch's approaches to Marxism, we find him trying to locate the body in the very specific field of a capitalist system rooted in a commodity structure and the reifying effects it produces. It is with this in mind that I turn my attention to Benjamin's work on Baudelaire, to see what his historico-phenomenological approach can contribute to a critical understanding of the flesh – and to supply it with a political import. But the question that we need to ponder before turning to Benjamin's phenomenology of capitalist experience and its complementary relationship to Merleau-Ponty's ontological and phenomenological concerns, is whether Benjamin's work allows such a rapprochement. In particular, does Benjamin's concrete philosophical approach resist the abstract character of Merleau-Ponty's ontology? Or, is Merleau-Ponty's ontology another variant of the Heideggarian ahistorical historicity¹⁵⁹ that Benjamin intended to confront?

Critical theory has posed a number of criticisms of phenomenology (and its ontological counterparts) that would suggest an uneasy, if not entirely irreconcilable, divide between the two approaches. There are at least three general critiques rendered against phenomenology,¹⁶⁰ though they are not mutually exclusive. First, phenomenology takes ontic structures and treats them as ontological a prioris, in essence “naturalizing” the particular characteristics of existing lifeworlds. Second, in doing so, it succumbs to bourgeois individualism, presenting subjects as individual consciousnesses (focusing on the intentionality of individual experience). Third, and again related, it oscillates between idealism/subjectivism and realism/objectivism in a contradictory manner. Rolling out of its individualist fix, phenomenology asserts the transcendental and/or constitutive character of consciousness (the ontically ever same character

¹⁵⁹ See Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 123.

¹⁶⁰ I have drawn these primarily from Marcuse, ‘Sartre's Existentialism’ and Dallmayr, ‘Phenomenology and Critical Theory: Adorno.’

of the individual) at the same time as it aims to get back to “the things themselves,” which would defy the transcendental and constituting character of consciousness. And, in this sense, it seeks to assert that reality can be exhausted, or grasped as a whole – as an “in-itself.” In sum, it presents an identity of subject and object that excludes mediation.

When not directed at phenomenology generally, these criticisms by Adorno, Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse are directed variously at Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre.¹⁶¹ Benjamin’s incorporation of a “phenomenological” method sought to avoid succumbing to these criticisms. But are they applicable to Merleau-Ponty? It would appear that Merleau-Ponty’s approach manages to avoid them, even if his work requires the phenomenological and critical deepening that Benjamin can supply. To begin with, Merleau-Ponty’s work was always attuned to the same principles of Marxian social critique that drove much of the thought of Benjamin and the members of the Institute for Social Research, while Marx failed to make a positive impression on the phenomenologists¹⁶² they criticized. In these respects, Merleau-Ponty remained attuned to the problems of capitalist society, and sought to avoid ontologizing its ontic features. In this vein, as we saw with Coole, the phenomenological reduction was intended to avoid the very naturalizing features that other approaches saw as the core of experience and, in these respects, Merleau-Ponty sought to unmask the reality that the various forms of bourgeois thought sought to eternalize. Moreover, in describing being as open, Merleau-Ponty placed primacy on the becoming of being, its constant transformation in and through time via different types of “being,” human relations and human community. Thus, he asserted the hyperdialectic as a means to

¹⁶¹ For a general survey of the influences and divergences between these thinkers and Merleau-Ponty, see Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, (New York: Routledge 2000), 394-412.

¹⁶² This is, of course, keeping in mind that Sartre wrote *Being and Nothingness* prior to his conversion to, or interest in, Marx and Marxism.

accounting for the variability of being in and through time.¹⁶³ And, in these respects, Merleau-Ponty's early phenomenology and later ontology of the flesh assert the perennial intertwining/mediation of "subject" and "object" – the idea that the subject is in and of the world, and that the object is an inextricable part of its existence but not entirely determining. Rejecting the transparency of the self/consciousness, its detachment from the world, or its "creation" of it, this defies the constitutive and transcendental character of "consciousness." By understanding consciousness as embodied and in and of the world, as well as constantly in the process of transcending itself, Merleau-Ponty rejects any closure of knowledge, locating knowledge itself within the specificity of situations (which are the very condition of possibility of knowledge).¹⁶⁴ Here, truth lies in the process of uncovering and making it.

From the Benjaminian perspective we may in fact see Merleau-Ponty's ontology as presenting something approaching a non-identical first nature rooted in the primordial ontological space of originary belonging that can dislodge and disjoint the capitalist second nature that Benjamin aims to expose. To undermine the second nature of capitalism implies that there is something "other" than it, even if we cannot name exactly what it is. The indeterminate character of the flesh represents this other, both in undermining the supremacy of capitalist being's claims to a first nature and in defying "nature's" own claims to permanency or to the status of a mythical entrenchment.¹⁶⁵ Moreover, rooted in a phenomenological perspective, the flesh does not purport to be the unsullied being of some primordial community. Rather, it seeks to explain the very structure of being and experience in the first place, and does so by

¹⁶³ In this vein, as well, my discussion of Merleau-Ponty in relation to Machiavelli and Lefort sought to criticize their fixation on the ontic features of Roman society (rooted in the specific conflict between the patricians and the plebeians). Marcuse's critique of Sartre seems remarkably pertinent in regards to Machiavelli and Lefort.

¹⁶⁴ Much of this emerges in the 'Preface' to *Phenomenology of Perception*, where Merleau-Ponty situates his phenomenological approach, and its differences and similarities to Husserl in particular.

¹⁶⁵ See Theodor Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural History,' *Things Beyond Resemblance: on Theodor W. Adorno*, (New York: Columbia University Press 2006).

characterizing it as open to myriad possibilities including the negation of the original sociality that Merleau-Ponty posits. In these respects, as we will see, Benjamin aims to expose the mortification of being and experience under the reign of capitalist reification, in the service of bringing into being something else. But, that “something else” remains underexplored in Benjamin’s work. Indeed, while presenting a critical, phenomenological approach that seeks to understand the historically specific experiences of capitalist oppression, Benjamin lacks an ethical optic/potential contained in a body politics¹⁶⁶ (or politics of the flesh), and more specifically in an explicit theory of intersubjectivity. In this vein, reading Benjamin’s work through the lenses of intersubjectivity will bring new contours to it and help to break with the problematic conceptions of the Lukácsian identical subject-object, opening up being to its non-identical groundings. In essence, Merleau-Ponty’s fails to provide a historical optic capable of critically undermining capitalist being (though hints at it), while Benjamin lacks an ethical/political optic capable of transcending capitalist being (though hints at it). In reading Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin together, I seek to unite their ethico-political and critical optics. Hence, rather than seeing these two approaches as irreconcilable, we may see them as the embodiment of a dialectics at a standstill.

¹⁶⁶ Levin is perhaps partially correct in asserting that Benjamin fails to posit a positive optic, though I think he fails to understand that this simply is not Benjamin’s project, which is to understand the specifically flawed functioning of human existence under capitalism. See Levin, ‘The Embodiment of the Categorical Imperative,’ 9-10.

Chapter 3

Mortifying the Flesh: Benjamin's Phenomenology of Capitalist Experience

“As I study this age which is so close to us and so remote, I compare myself to a surgeon operating with local anaesthetic: I work in areas that are numb, dead – yet the patient is alive and can still talk.”¹

-Paul Morand, cited by Benjamin in the *Arcades Project*.

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx presents his classic argument for the proletariat's emergence as a subject. As an oppressed class, and the objectified and immanent product of capitalism, the social system itself provides the means/conditions – namely, the organization of large masses via factory labour and urbanization amidst their continual immiseration and exploitation – under which it may become revolutionary (i.e. produce it as a subject-in-itself). But it is only through the development of class consciousness that these possibilities can become a practical force, and the proletariat can become an active and conscious collective subject (i.e. a class-for-itself). This only comes about through the conscious recognition that the same conditions of life permeate the existence of “others” like them: the workers come to see others who are exploited and subject to the dictates of capitalism, just as they are. Yet, the key assumption contained in this is that the proletariat is capable of recognizing the common demands (intersubjective and ethical) of others in the first place: the idea that through the process of capitalism's concentration of the proletariat in a given locale under specific conditions, the proletariat is capable of the sensuous recognition of others at all. This assumption seems to be at the core of Merleau-Ponty's work as well, for in locating the sensuous circuit of phenomenological life in the nexus of self-others-things, we presume that these others – this outside – is readily apparent, and not subject to misrecognition or failed recognition through the

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 1999), 462.

short-circuiting of the flesh via its historical embodiments. In both cases, there is the seeming assumption that the corporeal and perceptive capacities of subjects are in no way corrupted.

In providing us with a phenomenological approach to the historically specific features of capitalist experience, Benjamin finds that this process of recognition is upset through the reifying effects of capitalism, which do not merely “veil” the reality of class oppression but mortify the flesh of living beings. Consequently, there emerges a stunting of the possibilities of collective subjectivity within the immanent conditions of capitalism. Like Morand, Benjamin plays out the role of a surgeon, working through and diagnosing those experiential areas that have been numbed or deformed under modern conditions. But as with all anaesthetization, this is not the assertion of the death of the patient: it is conducted with the intention of resuscitating them and curing their maladies. In order to cut open the patient – the modern subject – Benjamin enlists the help of Proust, Freud and Baudelaire, figures who maintain an uneven presence in his work. Proust, while not an ever-present figure, is something of a recurring character – even being the central figure in at least one of Benjamin’s writings. Freud occupies a subterranean place, often underpinning Benjamin’s analysis, but only occasionally emerging outwardly in a handful of essays. Baudelaire occupies a central place in Benjamin’s later writings: ‘Convolute J: Baudelaire’ is the largest section of the *Arcades Project*, and Baudelaire is the central figure in a number of completed texts Benjamin wrote surrounding it.

As Benjamin states: “What I propose is to show how Baudelaire lies embedded in the nineteenth century.”² He uses the image of Baudelaire to shock us from taking for granted our own experiences, and to alienate those experiences from our usual associations. But understanding Baudelaire requires the help of Proust and Freud, a trinity that emerges in its full breadth in ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.’ In producing an image of Baudelaire’s life,

² Ibid., 321.

Benjamin's work aims to situate it within the emergent capitalist context of 19th century Paris, illustrating the changing forms of literature, modes of socio-economic being and experience that were existent while Baudelaire was producing his key literary texts, *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Paris Spleen*. In these respects, Benjamin draws attention to Baudelaire's resistance, and capitulation, to these emerging tendencies. This is not an antiquarian focus on a figure for purely literary or poetic purposes. Rather, the image of Baudelaire – as read through some motifs in Proust and Freud – stands out as a representative of the decline of experience/sensibility, a representative of its anesthetization. This decline is evident in both new literary forms and their aesthetic reception, as well as in the modes of memory and experience that permeate capitalism. To elaborate on this, Benjamin develops a psychoanalytic approach to the body, its specific responses to the phenomenon of capitalism and the ways this contracts the experiential and perceptive capacities of the body. Rather than expressing the grandiose, electric character of worldly experience, Benjamin finds a world of deadened senses and mortified beings. In developing these themes, Benjamin's work adds a historical dimension that has far reaching political implications that affect our reading of the flesh. Centrally, we will find that the sensuous circuit of self-others-things is replaced by the reified relation of mortified beings to one another. Under these circumstances the experience of one's own body, and of others, is elided and the intersubjective relation is summarily denied.

I. Signs of Decline: Experience and Storytelling

Central to understanding Benjamin's work on the decline of experience is the story of the decline of storytelling itself. For Benjamin, storytelling is an inherently multifaceted, experiential and relational act. In the first place, the story itself aims to convey an experience. This experience – “passed on from mouth to mouth” – may speak of the traveller's experiences of a distant land, or it may tell “local tales and traditions.” Regardless of which one, the

“orientation toward practical matters” is key. Indeed, Benjamin contends that the story “contains, openly or covertly, something useful.”³ Thus, it is a form of “counsel” that “embeds the event in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening.”⁴ In these respects, the story itself bears the marks of the storyteller: it contains the non-identical depth that defies the “in itself” of absolute events. To relate the story as an “in itself” would simply be to recount an event with no practical orientation and no counsel, as merely the presentation of a set of facts surrounding some isolated occurrence. The story is, rather, characterized by the perennial to-be-continued of non-identity. Indeed, each storyteller crafts her/his product like an artisan, producing the story in a specific way. S/he may present the story as something that happened to themselves, something that they witnessed or merely as a parable. But the point is that the story is presented so that it can be assimilated by the audience as a useful experience for their own practical living. How the story carries on owes something to the way the story is continually transmitted by new storytellers to new audiences, and how this form of counsel is used by its audience. Hence, the experience of storytelling is re-doubled: it not only tells a story of experience, but is an experiential act itself. Both storyteller and listener engage in the act face to face as embodied beings, and the story is continually altered by their interaction.⁵ Thus, there is an inherently collective and intersubjective character to the experience of storytelling, and the experience assimilated from the story itself: there is a relation between storyteller and audience, and storyteller and story, both of which are mediated by and through each other, and there is – at the same time – the relationship of audience to storyteller and audience to story. We may say, in relating this to Merleau-Ponty’s conception of

³ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller,’ *Selected Writings. Volume 3*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 2002), 144-145.

⁴ Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,’ *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 2006), 316.

⁵ Benjamin, ‘Storyteller,’ 145, 149, 155-156; Benjamin, ‘Motifs,’ 315-316.

intersubjectivity, that in this collision of experience all of the subjects involved (storyteller, audience and story) are ultimately altered and disjointed from their own being in the process.⁶

Benjamin's concern is ultimately with the decline of storytelling's particular mode of literary/aesthetic expression, reception and experience. Indeed, he begins 'The Storyteller' with a lamentation: "Familiar though his name may be to us, the storyteller in his living efficacy is by no means a force today. He has already become something remote from us and is moving ever further away."⁷ Benjamin argues that storytelling is in a precipitous decline, if it is not already dead. The emergence of print production created the conditions of possibility for the novel, and ultimately changed the conditions of possibility for literary experience itself. As Benjamin states: "What distinguishes the novel from all other forms of prose literature – the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella – is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor enters into it." Indeed, the entire structure of storytelling was predicated upon the direct transmission of experience, in which the experience of the storyteller became the experience of the audience. Here, we assimilate the story in the company of others. Moreover, in this environment we forget ourselves – enraptured in the experience of others, or in the rhythm of the artisan work that often accompanied storytelling – so "the more deeply what [we listen] to is impressed upon [our] memory."⁸ In listening, we imbibed so as to transmit that experience. In the novel, neither author nor audience encounter one another. One does not read a novel in the company of others: they read alone. Likewise, the author of the novel "has secluded himself. The birthplace of the novel is the individual in his isolation, the individual who can no longer speak of his concerns in

⁶ Benjamin's description of storytelling and the process of intersubjective (literary) exchange – particularly its relationship to the artisan class and radicalism – seems to bear some parallels with the descriptions of a number of working class historians. See in particular, E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (New York: Penguin Books 1980), Eric Hobsbawm and Joan Scott, 'Political Shoemakers,' *Uncommon Men*, (New York: The New Press 1998) and Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1989).

⁷ Benjamin, 'Storyteller,' 143.

⁸ Ibid., 149.

exemplary fashion, who himself lacks counsel and can give none.”⁹ Consequently, “we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others.”¹⁰ Benjamin here presents a unique understanding of counsel and wisdom, for he contends that these are both things that novel characters such as Don Quixote lack. The novel is inherently tied to the principle of time; in these respects, it has a definitive end point. But this end generally suggests an answer, and in the novel this end proposes some sort of answer to the questions posed by the meaning of life. But it is also the meaning of a life isolated from us – its focus is “*one* hero, *one* odyssey or *one* battle.” Hence, the warmth that we derive from the novel – no matter how didactic – is largely a cathartic denouement. By contrast, the counsel of the story refers to diffuse heroes and occurrences; it is “less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is in the process of unfolding.”¹¹ Rather than providing us with *knowledge* of the events that transpired, the story provides us with the *wisdom* to carry on the unfolding of the story: “counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom.”¹² Thus, the decay of counsel for ourselves comes from the non-counsel based knowledge that is expressed in the novel; but the lack of counsel for others comes from the very manner in which we take in and process the novel. According to Benjamin, “in this solitude of his, the reader of a novel seizes upon his material more jealously than anyone else. He is ready to make it completely his own – to devour it, as it were.”¹³ This devouring for one’s own cathartic purposes represents a distinct departure from the assimilation of the story which depended upon relaxation and boredom. The story goes beyond the herme(neu)tically sealed form and content of the novel.

⁹ Ibid., 146.

¹⁰ Ibid., 145.

¹¹ Ibid., 145.

¹² Ibid., 145.

¹³ Ibid., 156.

Yet, the novel is itself brought into crisis by the emergence of a different form of communication: information. Information represents a more stark departure from storytelling, and something of its opposite or counterpoint. As Benjamin states, “the prime requirement is that [information] appear ‘understandable in itself.’”¹⁴ In essence, the move from the story to information is tantamount to the move from the non-identity of meanings and their intertwining with the “subject” that comes to know the meaning of these objects to the pure identity of the object in-itself. Information must *appear* as “understandable in itself,” and to do this it is “shot through with explanations.”¹⁵ But, by consequence of this, it is distanced from the realm of experience in general – from that of the receiver and that of the presenter. Storytelling evaded these explanations and left itself open to the assimilation and processing of occurrences for the purposes of wisdom in living. Information merely presents us with the facts of an event, and aims to present the material as completely exhausted: there are to appear no mysteries surrounding information. In these respects, it is also momentary and fleeting: its value “does not survive the moment in which it was new.”¹⁶ In explaining the essence of an event, information cannot outlive its own espousal. The non-identity of the story, its continued ambiguity, was centrally directed at presenting the audience with something that – no matter how “distant” geographically or temporally – may provide them with a counsel that could be woven into the fabric of real life; with the disappearance of this, all we imbibe is a fleeting knowledge that quickly gives way to the next event.

Modern newspapers represent the climactic victory of information over storytelling and the novel. The general intention of newspapers is to provide brief news items, re-counting

¹⁴ Ibid., 147.

¹⁵ Ibid., 147.

¹⁶ Ibid., 148.

events in an objective style that focuses on “newness, brevity, clarity.”¹⁷ Again, the intention here is to convey the pure in-itself of events, explaining all that can be known about the event. The manner of writing is not conducive to any sort of imagination or openness. These features assure that the event/information is not assimilated into the experience of the reader: it is an account of an event – and a series of scattered and disconnected events – that occurs in the world, and not in the experiential nexus of the reader. Moreover, that “newness” is necessary to avoid the obsolescence of the previous day’s newspaper assures that these events are, generally speaking, not intended to enter into tradition – there is a transiency to newspapers, a never ending necessity to provide something new. But the different character of newspapers-as-information also rings through in the way in which they are received. As Benjamin notes, initially single newspapers were not available for purchase and people were forced to subscribe or “go to a café, where often several people stood around reading one copy.”¹⁸ This changed with the introduction of lower subscription costs: newspapers became more accessible and could be read in isolation from other individuals. Ultimately, this destroys the intersubjective experience contained in the story, replacing it with the objective and isolated non-experience of newspapers. But we likewise find the decline of the conditions of possibility for the sharing of experience – the decline of the capacity to imbibe or express experience. As Benjamin argues, the intersubjective relation between listener and storyteller “is controlled by [the listener’s] interest in retaining what he is told.”¹⁹ This interest is also linked to the listener’s intention to potentially tell the story himself. Newspapers destroy this experiential nexus by mass producing their product so that there is no story that anyone needs to share with another: the transmission of information on a “mouth to mouth” basis is usurped. But simultaneously – and this connects to

¹⁷ Benjamin, ‘Motifs,’ 316.

¹⁸ Benjamin, ‘The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,’ *Selected Writings*. Vol. 4, 12-13.

¹⁹ Benjamin, ‘Storyteller,’ 153.

the nature of information itself – the ability to listen and remember declines. Information itself is of course never assimilated as the listener's or teller's own experience in the first place. The rapid fire nature of information's continual pursuit of the new, and the over-exhaustion of its content (that is, its tearing of the event away from the realm in which it could be assimilated), resists memory's full assimilation. Moreover, the mode of reception alters the manner in which memory aims to imbibe it in the first place. Benjamin contends that "the process of assimilation, which takes place in the depths, requires a state of relaxation which is becoming rarer and rarer."²⁰ This state of relaxation is linked to boredom, which is something that drives our need for experience. In artisan work, the story was told to pass time. With information, rather than passing time in an experience that we engage with, we are bombarded with an information overload – with the overload of information dissociated from the realm of experience, but intricately tied to the realm of facts to be devoured. The interactive character of experience is thus summarily denied, and our ability to engage with genuine experiences ultimately erodes.

Thus, in the decline of storytelling, Benjamin ultimately explains the decline of intersubjective relations and the decline of experience in its literary form. But Benjamin's concern is not merely with the change in terms of literary forms. Rather, he sees a fundamental rupture with the structure of experience in general. In describing the changes emerging in the late 19th and early 20th century, he states: "For never has experience been more thoroughly belied than strategic experience was belied by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on horse-drawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and, beneath those clouds, in a force field of

²⁰ Ibid., 149

destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body."²¹ We find here a description of a series of ruptures that have ultimately transformed the very character of human existence. In this context, Benjamin echoes Marx's description of capitalism as a system continually in the process of re-defining and re-inventing itself, tearing down all of the previously sedimented and ossified characteristics of life.²² That he includes "the tiny, fragile human body" amongst the *exceptions* to the changing nature of modernity seems peculiar in the context of what I said about Benjamin's potential contribution to a theory of the historicity of the body in the previous chapter. At the same time, this echoes his contention that the body – as an embodied mind – is the now of the historical, the functional entity of human experiential existence. Moreover, it is important to note that he locates the body within "a force field of destructive torrents and explosions." As I argued in chapter 2, this notion of a force field was fundamentally informed by Benjamin's appropriation of Lukács and Korsch, in developing a theory of the historical specificity of capitalism's commodity structure. This force field represents the historicity within and from which all experience must be understood. But, that he saddles the body with the modifiers "tiny, fragile" suggests that it maintains a vulnerability to phenomenon – a vulnerability embedded in its historicity. Indeed, the destructive field of capitalist modernity that the body inhabits subjects it to repeated assaults on the senses. This is not merely a matter of constraining the body's movements and freedom,²³ but an actual assault on its very functioning. Indeed, while the body may not appear "changed" this does not imply that the

²¹ Ibid., 144.

²² Perhaps Marx's most famous passage on this front comes in *The Communist Manifesto*, (London: Penguin Books 1967), 83: "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."

²³ Coole suggests this is the intention of "field" for Merleau-Ponty. Again, while I take the essence of what I am attempting to do in this chapter to be rolling out of her defense of Merleau-Ponty vis-à-vis Butler, Coole doesn't go "phenomenologically" deep enough in her own account of Merleau-Ponty's ontology. See, Diana Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics After Anti-Humanism*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littleman Publishers 2007), 333-336.

manner in which it functions is constant: Benjamin sees the body as containing defence mechanisms that attempt to counter-act its vulnerability, and that become conditions conditioned through continual subjection to this field.

Benjamin already suggested that the presence of the body as an expressive mode of praxis was in decline. This emerges in the final aphorism of 'The Storyteller,' where he cites Paul Valéry's reference to "a certain accord of the soul, eye and hand" in artistic observation. Benjamin notes the centrality of this synaesthetic nexus to storytelling. While speech and hearing are paramount, the eye and hand are no less important: the gestures/gesticulations of the storyteller, and vision of the listeners, are also central to the entire exchange. As he states, "Interacting with one another, [soul, eye and hand] determine a practice. We are no longer familiar with this practice."²⁴ In understanding this claim, the connection between the storyteller and the artisan points to a much larger phenomenon. Like an artisan, the storyteller is able to fashion something out of his abilities – namely, experience. He is able "to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solidly, useful and unique way."²⁵ With the changing nature of communication, this ability becomes more distant and less capable of expression and reception. Under capitalism, Benjamin argues that this is the same change that the artisan undergoes in the nature of their practice and experience: "the role of the hand in production has become more modest."²⁶ Indeed, like information constantly flowing before a reader's eyes without leaving an imprint, providing counsel or involving an experience that may revolve around the practice/use-value that comes from storytelling, the artisan-cum-factory worker is subjected to a fleeting interaction with the articles of labour on the assembly line. The article of labour itself passes before the worker without leaving an imprint: it only passes by to

²⁴ Benjamin, 'Storyteller,' 161.

²⁵ Ibid., 161.

²⁶ Ibid., 161.

make way for the next article to come down the line. This denies any potentiality of “completion,” and each moment is a repetition of the same futile operation; consequently, any connection between the articles or stages of production is effectively severed. Under these circumstances, a genuine interaction with the object – the experience or practice that may be derived from the act of labour – is constantly denied, and we have the summary severing of the conscious element from the activity of the body and its complex, experiential nexus. Ultimately, practice, as something that allows for the creative and indeterminate interaction of self, others and things is absent. Indeed, practice – like wisdom – implies an agency or an action which can be perfected, changed and continued.²⁷

II. On Some Motifs in Proust and Freud

The idea that the conditions of capitalist modernity lead to the general decline of experience as expressed in the case of storytelling and factory work is intended as a dialectical contention. For Benjamin, it is not that “nothingness” prevails under capitalism; rather, there is a sensory bombardment. The entire experience of capitalism is a series of shocks, contained in everyday occurrences – factory work, the encounter with the (urban) crowd, mechanization, gambling, shopping, etc. Indeed, while Benjamin suggests that warfare was perhaps the first shock that illustrated the decline of experience, shock became an entirely commonplace phenomenon. In explaining the dialectical co-mingling of an overload of shock with a corollary decline of experience, his essay ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ develops a psychoanalytic theory of the senses and their defensive response to the shocks of modern experience. In doing so, he begins with a discussion of Proust’s *À la Recherche du temps perdu*. Benjamin regards Proust’s book “as an attempt to produce experience...in a synthetic way under today’s social

²⁷ Benjamin, ‘Motifs,’ 328-329.

conditions, for there is less and less hope that it will come into being in a natural way.”²⁸ The specificity of the shock factors are not central to Benjamin’s arguments with respect to Proust. But it is important to highlight that Proust and Baudelaire aim to express the specific experiences of capitalist modernity. This breaks with the abstraction – and suppression of death – that characterized Bergson’s musings on memory.

In beginning with Proust, Benjamin dissects the issue of memory as embodied in the famous story of the madeleine. Upon eating the cake, Proust remembered his childhood experiences in the town of Combray, which until that time had been largely vague. In explaining this experience, Proust refers to the vague and “indistinct” memories of “conscious attention” as a *mémoire volontaire* (voluntary memory). As Benjamin states, “Its signal characteristic is that the information it gives about the past retains no trace of that past.”²⁹ Proust notes that until eating the madeleine his memories could *register* Combray, but since voluntary memory “preserves nothing of the past, I should never have had any wish to ponder over this residue of Combray.”³⁰ In these respects, voluntary memory resembles information and the experience of the factory: it does not effect or recall an experience that is assimilated, but is rather an emptiness that comes with the inability to fulfill the potential for, or recall in its fullness, genuine experience. Voluntary memory keeps these experiences at a distance. Moreover, because of the distant and monadic way in which they are registered, these memories fail to enter into “tradition” – they do not leave an imprint or connect the events that make up a life, in much the same way as the division of labour suppresses the experience of – or relation to – the completed product. Thus, Proust states: “In vain we try to conjure [our own past] up again; the efforts of

²⁸ Ibid., 315.

²⁹ Ibid., 315.

³⁰ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 402.

the intellect are futile.”³¹ According to Benjamin, the past for Proust is thus contained somewhere other than in the conscious/voluntary memory, in a “material object” like the madeleine. Yet, this material object is unbeknownst to us, and we may never come upon it or may simply miss it – it is “free-floating.” This suggests that our ability to recollect the past, far from being a matter of “choice,” is a matter of “chance.” When or if we do encounter it, this object jolts us from our voluntary memory – with its fleeting attentiveness to the now – and triggers a *mémoire involontaire* (involuntary memory) in which our past can become actualized.

In distilling the insights from Proust’s conceptions of memory and connecting them to the nature of experience, Benjamin states: “Experience is indeed a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life. It is the product less of facts firmly anchored in memory [*Erinnerung*] than of accumulated and frequently unconscious data that flow together in memory [*Gedachtnis*].”³² Memory as *erinnerung* corresponds roughly to the conceptions of voluntary memory and the isolated experience (*erlebnis*) it leads to, while memory as *gedachtnis* corresponds to something like involuntary memory and the long experience (*erfahrung*) it draws together. Voluntary memory and its isolated experience produce subjects as fundamentally isolated/monadic, and something of forgetful creatures always caught up in the quasi-forgetting of the now – the mere registering of a disconnected past or in the repetition of the same. “True” experience requires a break with this: it requires the emergence of involuntary memory and the long experience it supplies. This long experience “is inseparable from the representation of continuity, a sequence.”³³ Hence, it allows us to re(-)collect memories – the traces of the past – that had been “screened” from the “inventory” of the individual. Or, rather, it allows the isolated memories to be assimilated in their fullness. This would entail simultaneously our assimilation

³¹ Benjamin, ‘Motifs,’ 315.

³² Ibid., 314.

³³ Benjamin, *Arcades*, 802.

of them as experiences and our retention of them as the inventory of our lives. Moreover, it would supply the individual subject with the means to connecting his life to the overall tradition of collective being.³⁴ Indeed, rather than being isolated from experience and others, genuine experience for Benjamin occurs in the conjunction of the personal and collective experience that can emerge when involuntary memory becomes actual.³⁵

To grasp the full import of these Proustian thoughts on memory, and to understand the meaning/nature of the distinction between these forms of memory, Benjamin suggests that we read them through Freud, specifically *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud's essay is a self-confessed work in speculative psychoanalysis³⁶ that seeks to unravel the relationship between consciousness and the unconscious which, for Benjamin's purposes, has a direct relationship to questions of memory and experience. Despite the speculative character of Freud's inquiry, Benjamin has no interest in verifying the scientific veracity of Freud's claims; rather, he wishes merely to explore their fruitfulness in understanding experiences that were often divorced from Freud's own intentions.³⁷ In these latter respects, the case of individual psychological impacts are of less interest to Benjamin, though certainly connected to his more general musings on the character of experience. But the general context for Benjamin's appropriation of Freud is a creative one: he is interested in seeing what insights Freud's theory might provide towards a

³⁴ Benjamin, 'Motifs,' 315-316; Walter Benjamin, 'On the Image of Proust,' *Selected Writings. Volume 2, Part 1*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 1999), 237-240, 244-247.

³⁵ Benjamin notes that "voluntary and involuntary recollection cease to be mutually exclusive" ('Motifs,' 316). But the conditions of possibility for this to be the case lie in the emergence of involuntary memory in the first place.

³⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, (London: W.W. Norton 1961), 18.

³⁷ As J.M. Bernstein notes, Benjamin's intention is "to provide a language that can shape and hence explicate the transformations of subjectivity that occur as a consequence of the withering of experiences." J.M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001), 118.

theory of subjectivity, and in adopting them as an ethical and aesthetic optic, not as a concrete and verifiable science.³⁸

In drawing out the implications of Freud's work, Benjamin sees a correlation between the ideas he developed through Proust, and Freud's conception of memory (which is akin to involuntary memory) and consciousness. As Benjamin states, "In Freud's view, consciousness as such receives no memory traces whatever, but has another important function: protection against stimuli."³⁹ In Freud's words, "protection against stimuli is almost more important than the reception of stimuli."⁴⁰ Essentially, the human organism itself possesses an internal energy or power which it must protect against the assault of the external world, which threatens this internal energy/existence with death.⁴¹ In order to protect the being of the living organism, consciousness attempts to "screen" – to cancel out – the potentially destructive shocks that come from the outside. But in screening these experiences, they are not internalized as part of memory or long experience: they are subjected to the realm of the quasi-forgetting of isolated experience and voluntary memory. As a protective layer insulating the self from trauma, Benjamin argues that "the greater the shock factor in particular impressions, the more vigilant consciousness has to be in screening stimuli."⁴² Hence, he suggests that within the context of the shock-infested world of capitalist modernity, consciousness is on the defensive to the utmost degree: "the tiny, fragile human body" expresses its vulnerability and malleability in its defensive response to these shocks. Whether it be in the factory, at the gambling table, on the war field or in the crowd, consciousness is constantly attempting to screen stimuli. This produces experience as

³⁸ In reading Benjamin this way, I have drawn on Berardi's characterization of Guattari's use of schizoanalysis. Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: from Alienation to Autonomy*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2009), 134-136.

³⁹ Benjamin, 'Motifs,' 317.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 317.

⁴¹ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 21.

⁴² Benjamin, 'Motifs,' 319.

mere isolated experience, and it does so “at the cost of the integrity of the incident.”⁴³ Consequently, in the experience of gambling and factory work, we find “futility, emptiness, an inability to complete something.” Benjamin’s suggestion here relates to the never-ending character of such futile acts. For him, long experience would be in the service of fulfilling the wish or goal that isolated experience continually denies. We seek experience for the possibility of achieving or completing something, rather than “continually starting all over again” as one does in pushing a button in a factory or pulling the lever of a slot machine. In Freudian terms, we might say that the repetitive nature of isolated experience (the inability to fully assimilate the traumatic experience) is ultimately a failure to acknowledge the traumatic experience which continually recurs in new forms: the failure to place it in the inventory of a life. The initial trauma may be acknowledged/registered by consciousness but, in screening it, consciousness does not allow the victim to connect the occurrence of symptoms (hysteria, neuroses, etc) to the original experience. Consequently, the victim repeatedly falls prey to the same traumatic recurrence in its current forms because consciousness has prevented them from coming to terms with it: while registering the initial event, consciousness prevents the victim from dealing with the event and merely registers its occurrence.⁴⁴ The victim remains, at best, unconsciously aware of the trauma that affected them, and their desire to come to terms with their malaise is denied. The consequence, Benjamin states, is that they “relive the catastrophe in which they were involved.”⁴⁵

What should be noted is that in these situations the process of blocking/screening is not entirely successful. As Benjamin argues, psychoanalysis aims to understand shocks “in terms of

⁴³ Ibid., 319.

⁴⁴ See both, Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; and Sigmund Freud, *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, (London: W.W. Norton 1909), 9-20.

⁴⁵ Benjamin, ‘Motifs,’ 317.

how they break through the shield that protects against stimuli.”⁴⁶ To explain this, he draws on the work of Freud’s student, Theodore Reik, who views this process in terms of repression. When consciousness is not up to the task of screening shocks, it “only lays them aside”⁴⁷ or parries them. This allows them to penetrate consciousness as involuntary memory. As Reik notes, true memory aims to “protect our impressions” and is “conservative”; on the other hand, voluntary memory “aims at their dissolution” and is “destructive.”⁴⁸ Hence, voluntary memory ultimately leaves the past behind, allowing the significance of the event to dissolve, and destroying its integrity. But, as involuntary memory, the events can still dwell in the recesses of the psyche, preserved by the possibility of coming to terms with them. As Freud suggests, this occurs when a part of the cortex has become “so frayed by stimulus” that it can no longer screen shocks. With the breakdown of the protective core, the event is able to enter into the unconscious as an isolated experience; but this isolated experience holds out the possibility of being transformed into a long-experience. Ultimately, the unconscious holds out the possibility of involuntary memory bursting/bleeding into conscious recollection. In particular, Benjamin takes notice of Freud’s mention of “the sort of dreams that may afflict accident survivors – those who develop deep neuroses which cause them to relive the catastrophe in which they were involved.”⁴⁹ As Freud notes, consciousness must “endeavour to master the stimulus retroactively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic experience.”⁵⁰ By reliving the event,⁵¹ the victim is capable of “training in coping with stimuli” and re-organizing the reception and receptivity of stimulus in general. In several respects, then,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 317.

⁴⁷ Benjamin, *Arcades*, 402.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 402.

⁴⁹ Benjamin, ‘Motifs,’ 317.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 318.

⁵¹ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 7.

the dream contains a repressed wish⁵² – the wish to cope with the traumatic event, and integrate it into the collective register – that aims to be converted into the conscious integration of long/genuine experience.⁵³

The utilization of these Proustian and Freudian themes should not be taken as limiting this discussion to the question of “consciousness” and “memory” – that is, to the realm of the mind. As with ‘The Storyteller,’ ‘Motifs’ deals with the whole bodily sensorium, and tells the story of the bodily sensorium’s decline under the conditions of capitalism. Susan Buck-Morss provides us with an insightful optic for understanding this, suggesting that Benjamin’s work describes how the synaesthetic experiential organism becomes an anaesthetic one. As she states: “The senses are effects of the nervous system, composed of hundreds of neurons extending from the body surfaces through the spinal chord to the brain.”⁵⁴ Here, she aims to connect the various organs/surfaces of the body in a synaesthetic system, against attempts to isolate the brain/consciousness as the locus of sensory experience. As she further contends, the very sensory/nervous system itself is not purely insular, but is embedded in the historical and cultural world. Hence, the co-mingling of the bodily organism and the world – which transcends the subject-object division – presents what we may properly call “experience.” In language and intent close to Merleau-Ponty’s, Buck-Morss describes this synaesthetic experiential/perceptual system as “open” in the dual sense of open to the world and open/non-identical within itself.⁵⁵ In transitioning into the question of the Freudian impulse of ‘Motifs,’ Buck-Morss notes the compatibility of this synaesthetic conception of the embodied mind with Freud’s conception of

⁵² Freud suggests both that those dreams which relive the past are the exceptions to wish-fulfillment dream, and that they represent the wish to recuperate those lost memories. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 26-27.

⁵³ In reading Benjamin on Freud, memory and experience, I have drawn loosely on the varied readings of McNally, *Bodies of Meaning*, Horowitz, *Dialectics at a Standstill*, Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*, (Berkeley: University of California Press 1993) and Susan Buck-Morss, ‘Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered,’ *October*, Vol. 62, Autumn 1992.

⁵⁴ Buck-Morss, ‘Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,’ 11.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 11-13.

the ego. As she states, Freud understands “the ego as ‘ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body,’ the place from which ‘both external and internal perceptions may spring’; the ego ‘may be thus regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body.’”⁵⁶ In this context, the implications should be clear: it is not merely consciousness’ parrying of psychological trauma that takes place but the synaesthetic sensorium’s parrying of all threatening psycho-physical phenomenon. At the level of the body, we find a response tantamount to the one directed against threatening psychic phenomenon: we react physically by means of a reflex-action devoid of conscious action and without psychically imbibing/retaining the experience or response. Moreover, the repetitive occurrence of this process in the midst of the excessive stimulation of shocks under capitalism ultimately mortifies the synaesthetic character of the embodied organism, turning it into an anaesthetic one “in order to protect both the body from the trauma of accident and the psyche from the trauma of perceptual shock.”⁵⁷ Thus, the anaesthetic system reverses the role of the synaesthetic system and, rather than the bodily sensorium opening onto and imbibing the world via its sensory capacities, it ultimately dulls or numbs the senses and closes itself off from the world and the possibility of genuine experience. In tune with the theory of commodification/reification, we find that the self becomes a mortified object that experiences the world not as a sensuous, intersubjective circuit of self-others-things, but as a mortified object parrying the blows of other objects.⁵⁸ Essentially, the body’s capacity for innervation⁵⁹ is short-circuited.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁸ John Russon, in an essay on Freud much influenced by Merleau-Ponty, likewise notes the embodied character of experience (including experience of the other) and the unconscious, rooting this unconscious in childhood experiences (and the pleasure principle) that can be effaced in later life by the dictates of the reality principle. In Benjamin’s work, the reality principle is specifically structured by capitalism. John Russon, ‘The Bodily Unconscious in Freud’s “Three Essays,”’ *Rereading Freud: Psychoanalysis Through Philosophy*, ed. John Mills, (Albany: SUNY Press 2004), 36, 38-39.

⁵⁹ Benjamin’s use of the term innervation in the Surrealism essay thus connects that work to his later ones.

In going beyond the theoretical critique of political economy that Marxists often render,⁶⁰ Paolo Virno and Joseph Fracchia consider the affects of the capitalist labour process on embodied beings in a manner that will lead us back to the embodied and anaesthetic elements in Benjamin's thought. To begin with, Virno's Marxist inflection on Foucault's concept of bio-politics illustrates the consequences of anaesthetization in the specific context of the very concept of "labour." For Virno, the key to understanding bio-politics – the political administration of biological life-processes and forces – lies in understanding the concept of labour power. In defining labour power, he cites Marx to the effect that labour power "is the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being."⁶¹ More appropriate for our purposes, the utilization of labour power in the labour process means mobilizing "the most universal requisites of the species: perception, language, memory, and feelings."⁶² Ultimately, then, we find that labour-power is defined as those human, sensuous capacities that are inherent in the psychophysical organism (or the flesh) of living subjects – all of which are commodified, or objectified, in the being of "labour power" under capitalism. Virno's point is that the commodity labour power is inseparable from the living person who possesses/sells it: "The living body of the workers is the substratum of that labour-power which, in itself, has no independent existence."⁶³ The bio-political element is contained in the fact that the human corporeal sensorium – life, the "bios" – is a potential subject that is ultimately objectified, administrated and controlled for use in

⁶⁰ As Fracchia notes, this type of critique encounters problems when Marx's concept of immiseration is reduced to a matter of wages (and the question of surplus value). The physical wounds the labour process inflicts helps to rescue the concept of immiseration via the corporeal character of production and exploitation. Joseph Fracchia, 'The Capitalist Labour-Process and the Body in Pain: The Corporeal Depths of Marx's Concept of Immiseration,' *Historical Materialism*, 16, 2008, 41, 52, 62-64.

⁶¹ Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2004), 81.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 77.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 82.

production as a process of the consumption of labour power. Indeed, what is ultimately bought is, in Marx's words, "labour as subjectivity."

In his analysis of the corporeal contours of Marx's concept of immiseration, Fracchia draws out the effects of the bio-political administration of labour as subjectivity. The key focus for Marx lies in the nature of "human corporeal organization" under the capitalist production process. To avoid naturalizing the system of production, Fracchia points out that it is "a made object" (the result of human agencies) but that it acts as a substitution for the body, in so far as it is an extension or prolongation of the human body's capacities for producing. But this system, in its capitalist form, is not a symbiotic extension of human corporeal being. Rather, corporeal being as merely labour-power (i.e. the expenditure of energy: a measure of time) becomes an object utilized by the system of production in its self-perpetuating drive to extract surplus value. As Fracchia explains, in his theory of immiseration Marx attempts to read "the corporeal hieroglyphics, barely visible to the observing intellect, inscribed on the wage-labouring body in pain."⁶⁴ This inscription of pain is rooted in the drive for the extraction of surplus value via pushing the limits of the "fluid" work day. Indeed, the work day is limited by physical factors (the corporeal needs of the body, such as food, drink and shelter) and moral factors (intellectual and social needs for cultural satisfactions). The point for Fracchia is that the production process continually seeks to extend the work day, pushing it beyond these limitations and thus beyond the limits of the body's capacities. As he cites Marx:

In its blind and measureless drive, its insatiable werewolf's appetite for surplus labour, capital oversteps not only the moral but even the merely physical limits of the working day. It usurps the time for growth, development and healthy maintenance of the body. It steals the time required for the consumption of fresh air and sunlight. It haggles over the meal-times, where possible incorporating them into the production process itself, so that food is added to the worker as to a mere means of production...It reduces the sound sleep needed for the restoration, renewal and refreshment of the vital forces to the exact amount of torpor essential to the revival of an absolutely exhausted organism. It is not the normal maintenance of labour-power which determines the limits of the working day here, but rather the greatest possible daily

⁶⁴ Fracchia, 'The Capitalist Labour-Process and the Body in Pain,' 41.

expenditure of labour-power, no matter how diseased, compulsory and painful it may be, which determines the limits of the workers' period of rest.⁶⁵

As a form of labour-power, as a mere commodity to be consumed in the process of production, the agentic capacity of the worker (her/his creativity, will and corporeal being) is negated, and they are subject to the disciplinary consumption of capital as the “head”/“brains” of the process of production. But, in addition to this de-subjectivization, capital subjects the worker to a constant infliction of pain within the disfiguring process of production. The vampire-like extraction of power does not merely take away time, but the life and health of the worker. Marx lists the myriad afflictions that confront the body, and Fracchia summarizes these succinctly: it is “a manifold and painful process which cripples the bodies and minds, stunts the personal growth, and foreshortens the futures of working people.”⁶⁶

Thus, capitalist bio-politics subjects the body (as the totality of human faculties) to a field that is beyond its control and which constitutes a specific set of forces that act upon it – it subjects the body to a form of “socialization.” And, as Virno points out, this is not merely a question of psychological phenomenon, but the administration or shaping of an entire mode of being-in-the-world.⁶⁷ The sentiments behind Virno’s and Fracchia’s arguments are front and center in Benjamin’s work, via the mediation of Marx. Rather than focusing on the outer physical effects (the scarring of the body) of the labour process, Benjamin focuses on the corporeal and ontological responses of the body as a sensorial organism, and the manner in which it blocks and dulls the drudgery of factory labour⁶⁸: the manner in which it resists the

⁶⁵ Ibid., 44.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 63.

⁶⁷ Virno, *Grammar*, 83-84.

⁶⁸ Because I am grounding this discussion via Merleau-Ponty’s work, I have used the word “ontological.” But I take this to also be “biological” in the sense in which Herbert Marcuse uses the phrase: “not in the sense of the scientific discipline, but in order to designate the process and the dimension in which inclinations, behaviour patterns, and aspirations become vital needs which, if not satisfied, would cause dysfunction in the organism.” Of course, I am

process of objectification and infliction of pain, in the service of protecting the organism.⁶⁹ In recalling that the experience and capacities of the flesh can be contracted or expanded, and that the flesh is a being of openness that radiates beyond the inward character of consciousness while also having a greater depth than its outer shell, we must also acknowledge that the body is subject to particular comportments and artificial appendages that play a role in that contraction or expansion and which simultaneously affect its inner and outer functioning.

In ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,’ Benjamin suggests that technology in general “has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training.”⁷⁰ While he suggests this in the context of the effect traffic signals have, he follows this with a discussion of Marx’s analysis of the factory labour process. As we saw previously, the segmentation of the labour-process ran parallel to the voluntary memory and isolated experience that would ultimately suppress a genuine interaction with, and experience of, the products of labour. But the anaesthetized response is also contained in the workers’ bodily actions, which become increasingly mechanized. The factory itself makes use of the worker rather than being a potential field for his/her experiential practice; consequently, it produces the worker as a machine, and expels practice from their actions and its purview. As Benjamin quotes Marx: “In working with machines, workers learn to coordinate ‘their own movements with the uniformly constant

here dealing with cases of disfunction, but I read the embodied mind (via Merleau-Ponty and Buck-Morss) in the same vein. See Hebert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, (Boston: Beacon Press 1969), 10.

⁶⁹ Virno – in *Grammar* – argues that the emotional response to these phenomenon is “neutral”: “it can manifest itself as a form of consent as often as it can as a form of conflict, as often with the characteristics of resignation as with those of critical unease. To put it another way: the emotional situation has a *neutral core* subject to diverse, and even contrary, elaborations” (84). While focusing on the immiserating bodily effects of labour, Fracchia also notes that this should not be taken to deny agency (at least of the worker, but seemingly also of their body), but does not probe this question himself (62). Below we find Benjamin elaborating a resistant response that illustrates detachment in the service of protecting the organism against shock. But, as we will see in the rest of this chapter and the next, Benjamin sees the potential for this resistant detachment to take on a more positive content.

⁷⁰ Benjamin, ‘Motifs,’ 328.

movements of an automaton.”⁷¹ The repetitive hand movements that characterize factory work coalesce with the principle of incompleteness that characterizes the worker’s interaction with the object. In effect, the worker is produced as an object, and in general the factory embodies the relationship between objectified beings. Thus, the worker’s response to his/her work environment is not that of a conscious actor, but of a machine operating in a manner which blocks off the entire experience from consciousness in something like an act of dissociation from the self – the better to fend off the catastrophic effects of the extension of the work day. Under these conditions, the senses are themselves robbed of their ultimate function and perceptibility, in being harnessed for bio-political purposes, is corrupted. Moreover, vis-à-vis the expansion of the drive to expand the work day and the body’s physical and moral limits, the body is capable of “adapting” via these defense mechanisms to its increasing immiseration. Thus, exploitation is not only an economic category, but also a cognitive⁷² and corporeal one. And, more generally, the experience of capitalism is not merely the deprivation of social empowerment, but the deprivation of the (social) body’s power for sensory capacity.

In an earlier fragment recounting a conversation about Mickey Mouse, Benjamin already discerned something of this sentiment. As he starts off the piece: “Property relations in Mickey Mouse cartoons: here we see for the first time that it is possible to have one’s own arm, even one’s own body, stolen.”⁷³ While we might attest this stealing of body parts to comedic hijinx, ‘Motifs’ draws out a larger meaning: under the conditions of capitalist production, labourers are robbed of their body parts as a function of their own corporeal being, which is consumed by the system of production. The agentic capacities of these labourers is mirrored by Mickey, who proves that “a creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to a human

⁷¹ Ibid., 328.

⁷² Buck-Morss, ‘Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,’ 16-18.

⁷³ Benjamin, ‘Mickey Mouse,’ *Selected Writings. Volume 2. Part. 2*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 2005), 545.

being.”⁷⁴ Rather than using the system of production for self-affirming purposes, the anaesthetic response combats the immiseration of the body by the disavowal or abdication of synaesthetic experience. In a sense, this response is tantamount to Mickey’s existence, for it is the means through which “mankind makes preparations to survive civilization.”⁷⁵ And it is in this context that we must assess Benjamin’s “peculiarly uncritical consent to technology.”⁷⁶ The defensive agency at the core of the corporeal response is a means to survival, but the revolutionary path Benjamin charts in ‘Surrealism’ seeks to transcend this need for mere survival through a collective innervation. Far from being an uncritical consent to technology, it is necessary – given the fact of technological exploitation and its anaesthetic effects – to confront the reality of technology and its relationship to the body. As Benjamin states, “Only when in technology body and image space so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*.”⁷⁷ The “only when” indicates that this is not something already existing, but something that can only emerge when body and image space are recuperated as functions of the corporeal being of human subjects, who can then utilize technology in a self-affirming way.⁷⁸

III. Baudelaire’s Phenomenology of the Streets

While the motifs from Proust and Freud provide Benjamin with an optic for understanding the effects of capitalism within the context of factory labour, Virno adds in connection with Benjamin’s conception of shock that these sorts of experiences are also

⁷⁴ Ibid., 545.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 545.

⁷⁶ David Michael Levin, ‘Justice in the Flesh,’ *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Galen Johnson and Michael B. Smith, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1990), 36.

⁷⁷ Benjamin, ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,’ *Selected Writings. Volume 2. Part 2*, 217-218.

⁷⁸ It is not my intention to delve into the particulars of the technological element of emancipation. I would suggest in passing that the later works do not have this same technological emphasis, and slide towards the roles of subjectivity and ethical experience in conceptualizing emancipation.

produced *outside* of the workplace in a manner that shapes “the relationship with the world, with others, and with oneself.”⁷⁹ And it is into this fold that the figure of Baudelaire steps, drawing out important aspects of the decline of experience, sensibility and relationality. In Benjamin’s reading, Baudelaire tells the story of how the contemporary mortification of the body and experience play out in the new urban field of experience: Baudelaire’s work supplies a phenomenology of the streets. In much the same manner as Merleau-Ponty would celebrate Cezanne’s impressionist painting for attempting to paint the world as we see it,⁸⁰ Baudelaire’s great phenomenological contribution was to write the world how we perceive and experience it in our living flesh. In these respects, he represents a storyteller who is subject to, expresses and attempts to transcend, the deformed conditions of capitalist experience. In literary terms, Benjamin argues that poetry retains the form of storytelling even against its print production: it is still a sensory mode of writing that drives the reader “to utter words aloud for the benefit of a listener.”⁸¹ In contextualizing the specifics of Baudelaire’s poetry, Benjamin draws a parallel with theories of “art for art’s sake,” suggesting that these approaches “issued directly” in the poetic structure of Baudelaire’s work in the form of a specific concern: “that sensibility is the true subject of poetry.”⁸² Baudelaire’s focus included both the “natural” changes that sensibility was undergoing in the guise of our Proustian and Freudian motifs, as well as the artificial, narcotic effects that modern subjects were exposed to.⁸³ Adding a wrinkle to this, Benjamin argues that sensibility is itself always caught up with suffering – and, we might add, the attempt to alleviate suffering and traumatic experience. Hence, he situates Baudelaire’s writings at the

⁷⁹ Virno, *Grammar*, 85. This contention continues the idea that capitalist exploitation is also cognitive or ontological, suggesting that it extends beyond the factory and permeates being in its socially mediated totality.

⁸⁰ See both, ‘Cezanne’s Doubt,’ *Sense and Nonsense*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1964) and ‘Eye and Mind,’ *The Primacy of Perception, and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1964).

⁸¹ Benjamin, ‘Storyteller,’ pg. 156.

⁸² Walter Benjamin, ‘Central Park,’ *Selected Writings, Volume 4*, 169.

⁸³ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 288.

crossing point of sensibility and suffering; in the context of a constellative reading with Freud and Proust, Benjamin thus sees Baudelaire as a keen storyteller of the deformity of sensibility, and its effects on experience.

Benjamin situates the figure of Baudelaire within the social order establishing itself in the mid-nineteenth century – within the specificity of emergent capitalism. While this gives Baudelaire a special access to the new experiential matrix being established, it also situates him within the specifically new conditions of aesthetic/artistic production being established at this time. In this context, Benjamin argues that his lyric poetry stepped into an historical epoch that was little prepared or capable of understanding it. In the first place, capitalism had transformed social relations, severing the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the poet, and subjecting the poet to the “objective” power of the market, thus transforming him/her into a commodity. Ultimately, lyric poetry was itself in decline, making way for the physiological and panoramic literature (examples of information supplanting storytelling) that flourished in the markets of the 2nd Empire in Paris. At the same time, the conditions facilitating lyric poetry’s positive reception were in decline. Baudelaire was cognizant of this change, as is made manifest in the opening verse of *Les Fleurs du mal*, ‘To the Reader.’⁸⁴ The entire verse is littered with references to the mortification of our corporeal, and spiritual, being: “Possess our spirits and fatigue our flesh,” “our captive souls,” “when we breath, death flows into our lungs,” “our spirit lacks the nerve.”⁸⁵ These already hint at something being amiss with the capacities and nature of human existence, as we find an uneasy unity between death/mortification and life. But this comes out more explicitly in the closing lines where, in naming the “most foul and false” creature, Baudelaire states: “He is Ennui! – with tear-filled eye he dreams, Of scaffolds, as he puffs his water-pipe.

⁸⁴ Benjamin, ‘Motifs,’ 313-314.

⁸⁵ Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008), 6-7.

Reader, you know this dainty monster too; -Hypocrite reader, – fellowman, – my twin!”⁸⁶ Here, Baudelaire implicates himself and his reader in succumbing to the conditions of apathy and longing for death (or existence as a walking death). If we read this through the backdrop drawn by Benjamin, we find him lamenting the condition of non-being – the utter passivity of the flesh that emerges with its anaesthetization – that prevailed under modern conditions. Baudelaire and his readers are both subject to this same pathological condition of inactivity. But, at the same time, the allusion to puffing a water-pipe suggests the sort of narcotic consumption that implies an agency or complicity in this anaesthetized being. Indeed, Baudelaire seems to suggest that rather than being a permanent condition, ennui – and the deadening of sensory capacities – can be overcome. In these respects, Baudelaire’s “heroic bearing” springs not only from his choice of artistic medium,⁸⁷ but also from the fact that his lyric poetry addressed head on the alienating existence that these changes were affecting.

Indeed, as Benjamin states: “In Baudelaire’s melancholy, all that is left of the infinite regress of reflection...is the ‘somber and lucid tete-a-tete’ of the subject with itself.”⁸⁸ Baudelaire’s poetic method was exactly the sort that sought to affect this reflection of the subject on its own self-estrangement, its departure from its living being as flesh. In these terms, Baudelaire possessed the same rebellious pathos as the *flâneur*, the professional conspirator, the bohème, the petty bourgeoisie and the proletariat – though he was himself none of these. Their rebellious character was rooted in their alienation from the emerging conditions of modern society: each of these figures had lost their place (economic, social, experiential) in society. It is this condition that Baudelaire, in appropriating “the gaze of the alienated man,” puts front and

⁸⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁸⁷ Benjamin, ‘Central Park,’ 178.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 163.

center in making Paris the subject of his poetry.⁸⁹ In doing so, he sought to fortify the self-estranged human being “with armor against the reified world.”⁹⁰ In the context of what has been said thus far, there would appear to be something contradictory in Benjamin’s claim: the anaesthetized human being has fortified themselves *from* experience because of the reifying character of capitalism. But Benjamin seems to be speaking in an allegorical mode here, and means something more along the lines of drawing experience back into the being of the self-estranged human: “armor against the reified world” would appear to be the sensual and sensible nature of the non-alienated being. Thus, when Benjamin states that “Baudelaire placed shock experience at the very center of his art,”⁹¹ he suggests that he sought to bring shock experience into the open, rather than letting it fall into the abyss of isolated experience. Baudelaire’s specific method of doing this involved taking to the streets, and attacking shock experiences head on:⁹² rather than screening shock experiences through consciousness, “Baudelaire made it his business to parry the shocks no matter what their source, with his spiritual and physical self.”⁹³ It is not inconsequential that Benjamin argues that Baudelaire parries the shocks with his spiritual and physical self, and not his consciousness. This may seem a minor turn of phrase, but that Benjamin puts the consciousness/memory and screening/parrying differences front and center in ‘Motifs’ should draw our attention to a larger intent: Baudelaire wanted to evoke the sort of fright that would draw out the significance of experience. Thus, he thrust his spiritual and physical self into the line of shock experiences, to explicitly evoke the jarring/frightening nature of them for his readers – and to avoid allowing them to recede into the quasi-forgetting of isolated experience/memory.

⁸⁹ Benjamin, ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,’ *Selected Writings. Volume 3*, 40.

⁹⁰ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 322.

⁹¹ Benjamin, ‘Motifs,’ 319.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 320.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 319.

In describing Baudelaire's aesthetic method, Benjamin states: "To interrupt the course of the world – that was Baudelaire's deepest intention."⁹⁴ This sentiment mirrors Benjamin's own suggestion that revolution, rather than being the locomotive of history, was "an attempt by passengers on this train...to activate the emergency brake."⁹⁵ For Baudelaire, interrupting the anaesthetized being that modern humans lived involved stopping and drawing out the movement that the world was already undertaking. In *Central Park*, Benjamin makes a connected methodological point: "The wrenching of things from their familiar contexts...is a procedure highly characteristic of Baudelaire. It is linked to the destruction of organic contexts in the allegorical intention."⁹⁶ Ultimately, in breaking experiences from the apparent normalcy that would come from isolated experience (the locomotive of experience, in which we can register – but not recollect – our stops), Baudelaire seeks to draw attention to them so they can be recognized (he attempts to pull the handbrake, so that we might assimilate the experience in its fullness). Thus, Baudelaire's "raison d'état" was "the emancipation from isolated experiences."⁹⁷ This emancipation lay in extracting events from the flow of ordinary experiences, in which they would be the subject of voluntary memory and its reflex responses. In this context, Proust states: "Time is peculiarly dissociated in Baudelaire; only very few days can appear, and they are significant ones...They are days of recollection [Eingedenken], not marked by any immediate experience [Erlebnis]. They are not connected with other days but stand out from time."⁹⁸ In extracting and drawing out what would normally be registered as isolated experience, Baudelaire seeks to transform the banal into the poetic. For him, it is the work of imagination – which is not defined as a realm of fantasy, but an act of the intellect that

⁹⁴ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 318.

⁹⁵ Benjamin, 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History,"' *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, pg.402.

⁹⁶ Benjamin, 'Central Park,' 173.

⁹⁷ Benjamin, 'Motifs,' 318.

⁹⁸ Cited in *Ibid.*, 333.

breaks through reified forms – to perceive “the intimate and secret relation of things, the correspondences and the analogies.”⁹⁹ Here, to perceive things is not simply to see them as they “really” are, but to “see through them”¹⁰⁰ and recognize the underlying peculiarity of the seemingly normal, or the poetic character of the seemingly banal. Through the act of imagination, Baudelaire aims to draw into the open the conflict between prehistory and modernity – each representing a different mode of being – to lament the breakdown of experience under modernity.¹⁰¹ In drawing these connections, *correspondances* recall the “data of prehistory,” as festivals recall “the encounter with an earlier life.”¹⁰² These modern events thus stand out, rather than being taken as the natural/organic order. Whether we take this as a literal nostalgia for a past epoch, or as an allegorical conjuring that unifies imagination and memory, Baudelaire’s intent is to show that – like modern subjects in general – he is a truly unhappy man, constantly staring back at the past¹⁰³ while lamenting the “breakdown which he, as a modern man, was witnessing.”¹⁰⁴

IV. Scenes From Within (and Outside of) the Crowd: The Crisis of Perception and the Tragedy of Failed Recognition

The central shock experience that Baudelaire’s work sought to isolate in this way was his contact with the urban crowd¹⁰⁵ – a distinctly modern phenomenon that will bring us back to the

⁹⁹ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 285.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 336.

¹⁰¹ As Buck-Morss notes, Benjamin ultimately finds Baudelaire’s emphasis on the discontinuity of experience problematic. See *Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, (Cambridge: MIT Press 1989), 178. I will turn to the question of dis/continuity in the next chapter, though my Brechtian reading of Benjamin’s historical method will not entirely reject discontinuity: it will emphasize a discontinuous/open continuity – or a continuity that is epicyclic rather than linear.

¹⁰² Benjamin, ‘Motifs,’ 334.

¹⁰³ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 341.

¹⁰⁴ Benjamin, ‘Motifs,’ 333.

¹⁰⁵ Given the central connection between ‘On the Concept of History,’ the Baudelaire essays and the *Arcades Project*, my reading rejects the claim made by Angela McRobbie that the *Arcades Project* is (merely) an attempt to “develop a theory of culture” or that Benjamin is centrally concerned with objects, in a world that is “strangely depopulated.” This chapter, and the following one, suggest the centrality of people as subjects – as potentially de-subjectivized via reification – to Benjamin’s entire approach. See, Angela McRobbie, ‘The *Passagenwerk* and the

realm of Benjamin's psychoanalytic reading of the body/experience. The crowd drew the attention of a great many writers during the 19th century. Victor Hugo saw the crowd as his clients/the public, and they entered his writings as "an object of contemplation."¹⁰⁶ Friedrich Engels saw the crowd as something of an unnatural intrusion – both aesthetically and morally – upon his provincial values. Benjamin suggests that Baudelaire expressed an altogether different relation, one indicative of a Parisian: rather than seeing himself as merely an observer standing outside of this rising mass, for Baudelaire "the masses were anything but external to him."¹⁰⁷ Baudelaire was a part of the crowd, and it represented a moment of fascination for him. Yet, this was a bittersweet moment, containing simultaneously fascination and heartache, allure and loss. This informs the melancholic character of 'A une passante.' As Benjamin argues, it is the crowd itself that brings love in the form of a passing woman. This passing woman can only be captured by the gaze – or in the experience – of the city dweller, who finds himself in a crowd of constantly passing figures. But this also contains the "the figure of shock, indeed of catastrophe."¹⁰⁸ According to Benjamin, the verse is an ode not to love at first sight but to love at last sight, an experience "which one might not infrequently characterize as being spared, rather than denied, fulfillment."¹⁰⁹ Indeed, this is a chiasm that is never fulfilled – the rush of the crowd pushes the woman continually by, and her gaze never catches Baudelaire's. While the woman becomes the object of his vision and his affections, he also submits to the potential that he will never see her again. Thus, we have a dialectical experience in which the crowd brings simultaneously the feeling of being close to an other (the encounter) and the subsequent shock of

Place of Walter Benjamin in Cultural Studies: Benjamin, Cultural Studies, Marxist Theories of Art,' *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 6, Issue 2, 1990, 14.

¹⁰⁶ Benjamin, 'Second Empire in Baudelaire,' 35.

¹⁰⁷ Benjamin, 'Motifs,' 322.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 324.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 324.

the lonely man whose encounter is ultimately missed (the averted gaze and the crowd that moves the woman past).¹¹⁰

Yet part of Baudelaire's *flâneur*-esque attraction to the crowd was simultaneously because of the horror of the social reality that these sorts of experiences betrayed.¹¹¹ Indeed, if his initial relation to the crowd was that of being a part of it, and sprung from fascination and a melancholy appeal, Benjamin argues that this soon faded away. As he states: "Of all the experiences which made his life what it was, Baudelaire singled out being jostled by the crowd as the decisive, unmistakable experience. The semblance of a crowd with a soul and movement all its own, the luster that had dazzled the *flâneur*, had faded for him."¹¹² Here, Benjamin finds something more sinister than the melancholic prose that issued from a fascination with the passing of strangers. Baudelaire came to exhibit a defensive reaction to the crowd. In these respects, his idea that the crowd itself was a collection of *flâneurs* gives way to a conception shot through with the Proustian and Freudian motifs that characterize the decline of experience: the crowd exhibits its "inhuman character" in its increasingly isolated experiences, devoid of functional action or practice. Indeed, the conception of the man of the crowd as a *flâneur* was never tenable, for the very manner of actions exhibited by the *flâneur* and the crowd clearly separated them. This became more and more obvious to Baudelaire. The crowd, rather than "looking around" or "demanding elbow room" as a *flâneur* does, exhibited a "manic behaviour" that was oblivious to attempts to stand out. Citing Valéry, Benjamin notes that the crowd "reverts to a state of savagery – that is, of isolation. The feeling of being dependent on others, which used to be kept alive by need, is gradually blunted in the smooth functioning of the social

¹¹⁰ Benjamin, 'Second Empire in Baudelaire,' 24-25.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 34.

¹¹² Benjamin, 'Motifs,' 343.

mechanism.”¹¹³ The savagery of the crowd is rooted simultaneously in its wildness (i.e. its reflexive, non-cognitive mode of action/being) and in its isolation (i.e. in the fundamentally inward character of the consciousness of its members, and their failure to experience/register one another). Ultimately, the crowd comes to mirror the mechanization that takes place in the factory and at the gambling table. Increasingly, its members take on – in mimetic fashion – the appearance of machines, with their actions being nothing more than reflexive. This culminates in Poe’s claim: “If jostled, [the pedestrian] bowed profusely to the jostlers.”¹¹⁴ Here, the member of the crowd undertakes no conscious action and fails to exhibit any conscious recognition of the other who jostles, betraying only the reflex action of the isolated automaton: deprived of their agency, they act in a manner that strips the exchange of any register or anything approaching long experience or a relation to the other. Indeed, the very encounter of the other is robbed of its chiasmatic character, and the individuals who collide in an accidental bump remain contained in their isolated being, abstracted from the world of alterity and interdependence.

In the context of Benjamin’s description of the defensive function that consciousness plays under the conditions of shock, this phenomenon points to a general crisis of perception. While, for my purposes, this plays out most importantly at the level of the streets, this contention is rooted in an aesthetic claim. While Benjamin had touted the democratizing elements contained in mechanical reproduction in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,’¹¹⁵ ‘Motifs’ focuses on the crisis of perception that the destruction of aura affected.¹¹⁶ He argues that traditional aesthetic objects possessed an aura that was tantamount to

¹¹³ Ibid., 328.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 329.

¹¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,’ *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, 251-270.

¹¹⁶ It is not my intention to delve into the debates around Benjamin’s aesthetic theory here. In passing, I would suggest that the essays present a difference in focus rather than an irreconcilability.

involuntary memory: the object contained associations that placed it within the inventory of tradition/life. This aura allows us to inscribe the object for the uses of long experience/practice.¹¹⁷ If this auratic character endows traditional art with the longevity necessary to produce genuine experience, Benjamin suggests that cameras and similar technological means of reproduction can “extend the range of the *memoire volontaire*” allowing us to retain events that would otherwise be lost – an important achievement for “a society in which long practice is in decline.”¹¹⁸ Yet, in freezing events, apparatuses like the camera destroyed a fundamental characteristic of aura: its infinite, non-identical and inexhaustible depth/distance. As Benjamin quotes Valery: “We recognize a work of art by the fact that no idea it inspires in us, no mode of behaviour it suggests we adopt, could ever exhaust it or dispose of it.”¹¹⁹ In this vein, Benjamin suggests, “the painting we look at reflects back at us that of which our eyes will never have their fill.”¹²⁰ He finds this aspect of aura symptomatic (and a transposition) of human relationships: genuine human relationships are characterized by an intertwining or chiasm, a relationship of reversibility, in which the person or object looked at simultaneously looks at the looker. This is informed both by the distance that exists between the two beings and the fragmentation that results from it, which in combination produce a non-identity or dehiscence between the two beings that informs their very essence. Like the gaze of the other symbolized in the relationship between Montaigne and La Boétie, the painting defies my attempts to overcome this distance but also informs my attempts to know myself and the object as “other.” In essence, I attempt to find myself in others and them in me, as I also attempt

¹¹⁷ While ‘The Work of Art’ focused on the sinister elements contained in aura – the dominating or hierarchical elements of the ritual function that aura elicited – ‘Motifs’ presents something of a sublated version of traditional aura. This will become important in the third chapter in differentiating “continuity” as a progress complicit in bourgeois historiography, and the dialectical/constellative continuity that Benjamin evokes.

¹¹⁸ Benjamin, ‘Motifs,’ 337.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 337.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 337.

to find the beautiful in a painting – two actions that can never be fulfilled, but also two experiences which (if genuine) we always retain. But, as an infinite/non-identical project, this always presupposes the gaze of the other – that is the expectation that our own gaze will be returned. With the introduction of the camera in particular, this relationship breaks down. In the first place, the camera captures what evades the eye:¹²¹ whether in positive or negative fashion, it aims to capture the in-itself of an object, rather than conveying the object as we see it. But, more to the point, technological means of re/production record “our likeness without returning our gaze.”¹²² As the anaesthetic/protective eye takes over the human sensorium, it mirrors the failure of the gaze to be returned, and we ultimately have the break down of the intersubjective and interdependent relationship, which constituted the struggle to come to terms with the being of others.

The failure of the gaze to be returned is exactly what plays out at the level of the streets under capitalism. Indeed, while Baudelaire the *flâneur* looks the passing woman directly in the eye, she fails to return his gaze and is swept up by the crowd. This is a more general phenomenon than what is conveyed in ‘A une passante.’ In referring to the “protective eye,” Benjamin argues that it is obvious that “the city dweller is overburdened with protective functions.”¹²³ Ultimately, shock experience is contained in the new forms of relationships found in the urban, capitalist environment. To elaborate on this, Benjamin draws on George Simmel, who states: “Before the development of buses, railroads and trams in the nineteenth century, people had never been in situations where they had to look at one another for long minutes or even hours without speaking to one another.”¹²⁴ For Simmel, this signalled both a new form of

¹²¹ Benjamin, ‘Work of Art,’ 254.

¹²² Benjamin, ‘Motifs,’ 338.

¹²³ Ibid., 341.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 341.

human interaction and, along with it, the primacy of visual activity in the urban environment. In the latter respects, he suggested that visual phenomenon presented a greater shock – or produced a greater unease – in urban subjects than aural phenomenon: in the form of vehicles and roads, and the ominous and consumptive character of the crowd itself, this new environment was fraught with shocks that caused their greatest unease through sight. Hence, with the production of these new situations of social interaction, we find that the protective function described by Freud sought to alleviate the unpleasant shock that came in the urban crowd – be it on public transportation, in the marketplace or elsewhere. In effect, it was not merely the jostling of the crowd that affected an anaesthetic, reflexive response but the very encounter with a mass of others. This defensive stance ultimately annihilated the very relations of alterity – the very dependence upon others, the very forming of the self in its relation to others – that both Valéry and Merleau-Ponty speak to. On public transit, people file by one another without a glance or acknowledgment. And, under the reifying characteristics that prevail under capitalism, people relate to each other in the market place not as beings but as objects. In Benjamin's words: "More and more relentlessly, the objective environment of human beings is coming to wear the expression of the commodity."¹²⁵ Ultimately, people themselves become commodities – judged and subject to a status valuation that is predicated upon the value of their labour/services in the market. Under these conditions, they also see in others only commodities, and we have a situation in which the commodity sees only its own reflection. The *flâneur*'s voyeuristic character is likewise subject to these commodifying effects. Purportedly, the *flâneur* went to the marketplace to marvel at the crowd and the melange of commodities, but the narcotic effect that the marketplace has on the crowd (including the *flâneur*) only heightens the allure of commodities: indeed, the allure draws bigger crowds and heightens the exchange value of the

¹²⁵ Benjamin, 'Central Park,' 173.

entire experience. In the process of the flowering of capitalist social relations, the *flâneur* becomes subject to the conditions of commodification:¹²⁶ the *flâneur* goes to the marketplace “ostensibly to look around, but in truth to find a buyer.”¹²⁷ Under these circumstances, each member of the crowd – even the *flâneur* who aims to go against the stream of the crowd – submits to their own alienation and to that of others as well.

Baudelaire was abundantly aware of this crisis of perception. But Benjamin contends that his defensive reaction leads to revulsion and complicity: in essence, he takes on the approach of Hugo and Engels, viewing the crowd as external to him – even while he aims to live the life of a *flâneur* from within its auspices. Benjamin argues that this changing relation culminates in a glance of contempt indicative of an “impotent rage” – a rage incited by the failure of the gaze to be returned. Consequently, the melancholy of ‘A une passante’ gives way to the resignation of ‘Fuseses’: “Lost in this base world, jostled by the crowd, I am like a weary man whose eye, looking backward into the depths of the years, sees only disillusion and bitterness, and looking ahead sees only a tempest which contains nothing new, neither instruction nor pain.”¹²⁸ Baudelaire is pained by the loss of “the ability to look”¹²⁹ but resigns himself to this loss. This does not, however, denigrate Baudelaire’s contribution to a critical reading of human existence: his work is important exactly because it expresses the conditions of experience in bourgeois society – even if it often succumbs/acquiesces to its illusions as well. But it is for this reason that Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire is a *critical* reading: Benjamin seeks to push Baudelaire’s work beyond its own confines.

¹²⁶ Benjamin, ‘Second Empire in Baudelaire,’ 31-33.

¹²⁷ Benjamin, ‘Paris,’ 40.

¹²⁸ Baudelaire quoted in Benjamin, ‘Motifs,’ 342-343.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 339.

In extracting some underlying political motifs from Baudelaire, Benjamin suggests that the experience of the crowd and the anaesthetizing of experience symbolized the eradication of the trace of the individual in the field of urban shocks. This was expressed in literary form in the detective novel: the victim and the suspect were invariably lost in the crowd, and nobody noticed either no matter how many blocks they may have been in the open city.¹³⁰ At the psychophysical level, this literary representation finds a match in the mechanization of the crowd's actions/existence. In a sense, the marketplace brought the crowd together for the fulfillment of each individual's private concern, but ultimately obliterated their individuality in the process. Benjamin saw in this phenomenon the premonitions of, or preconditions for, fascism.¹³¹ In the face of the levelling effects of the market, the crowd represented an amorphous entity, undifferentiated into classes or collectives.¹³² "A street, a conflagration, or a traffic accident assembles people who are not defined along class lines."¹³³ Seizing on this, fascism sought to organize these masses through its aestheticization of politics/war.¹³⁴ Under these conditions, the increasing proletarianization that was occurring in the cities with the growth of industrial production was twisted away from any radical potentials: the fundamental structure of society was left intact, while the market appeared as a happy accident that allowed for the reunification of "the race." Fascism thus sought to efface both individuality and the multiplicity of social being, subjecting them to the One of racial identity.¹³⁵ To do so, it made "the concentration of [its] citizens permanent and obligatory for all [its] purposes" and gave "free rein to both the herd

¹³⁰ Benjamin, 'Second Empire in Baudelaire,' 23.

¹³¹ Ibid., 36-37.

¹³² Benjamin, 'Motifs,' 320-321.

¹³³ Benjamin, 'Second Empire in Baudelaire,' 36.

¹³⁴ Lest we think this is isolated to fascism, Franco Berardi outlines the ways in which collective pathologies – exacerbated by the market – manifest themselves in a post-industrial context. See Berardi, *Soul at Work*, 102.

¹³⁵ In the specific context of the connection between totalitarianism and architecture, Miguel Abensour draws out similar themes through a number of theorists, including Benjamin. See Miguel Abensour, Miguel Abensour, *De la compacité. Architecture et régimes totalitaires*, (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 1997). On Benjamin in particular, see 50-61.

instinct and to reflexive action.”¹³⁶ But it is not merely the mechanization of the crowd or the disappearance of the trace of the individual that appears in fascism or in the general decline of perception: it is the general failure to recognize others (the tragedy of mis- or failed recognition and the consequent elision of alterity) as a fundamental condition of being and ethical existence, the effacement of the originary belonging that posits intersubjective being as the foundation of being itself.¹³⁷ Indeed, fascism’s attempts to turn the obliteration (and a self-obliteration at that) of humanity into an aesthetically pleasing “sublimation of desire”¹³⁸ would seem to require and/or be predicated upon the complete lack of recognition and alterity that anaesthecization symbolizes.

Virno’s work again supplies us with an optic for developing this idea, and one that connects up with Buck-Morss’ concept of anaesthetization¹³⁹ in the specific context of the problem of recognition. Building on the work of Vittorio Gallese, Virno argues that there is a biological foundation for sociability (and a pre-conscious realm of socialibility) that has been located in the mirror neurons of the inferior frontal lobe. These mirror neurons are connected to our bodily capacities/agencies, and are “discharged” when we complete actions related to goal oriented uses of our bodies. But, more importantly, they are also discharged while observing others carrying out a similar action. As Virno states, “This is the neuro-physiological basis that allows us to recognize immediately the emotive tonalities of members of the same species and to

¹³⁶ Benjamin, ‘Second Empire in Baudelaire,’ 37.

¹³⁷ We can formally separate these two terms – ontological and ethical – but, as I have tried to convey, in Merleau-Ponty’s work these features are interdependent.

¹³⁸ Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, (Berkeley: University of California Press 1994), 184.

¹³⁹ It should be noted that I will use Virno’s ideas somewhat freely: while he locates recognition in the brain’s mirror neurons as a biological predisposition, he suggests that misrecognition comes through language specifically. I make no claim (affirmative or negative) in the latter respects, but stick with the question of the embodied mind’s relationship to itself and to the world.

infer the aim of their actions.”¹⁴⁰ The major point here is that there is a pre-conscious sphere of interaction – and an original sociality – that predisposes us towards the recognition of others, and particularly to the recognition of their grief and suffering.¹⁴¹ Indeed, we ultimately feel what they feel by imitation at the *neural* level, in a mutual innervation and an act of co-feeling. As Virno states, “The interactions of a bodily organism with the world are radically *public*, always shared by the other members of the species.”¹⁴² This finding posits the intersubjective sphere as ontologically and biologically primary, and rejects the “metarepresentational” theories of cognitive psychology, in a manner that is congruent with Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh, and the way in which Buck-Morss reads Benjamin’s Freudian impulse: all posit a conception of an embodied mind, predisposed to the openness of experiential content – both the world and others. But the wrinkle added by Virno lies in the contention that despite this predisposition, we must acknowledge that “the human animal is capable of *not* recognizing another human animal as being one of his own kind.”¹⁴³ Virno locates this possibility in the interconnection of mirror neurons and linguistic negation. Indeed, in drawing on a sentiment from a poem by Primo Levi, he argues that the act of linguistic negation – the presentation of the other as “not human” – can play the role of “bracketing off” neural co-feelings. He presents this specifically through the optic of the holocaust (the insight from Levi): a Nazi officer is able to block off the mirror neurons through which he would recognize the cries of a suffering prisoner, through the

¹⁴⁰ Paolo Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2008), 177.

¹⁴¹ Russon provides a psychoanalytic reading of this original sociality: “the imitative behaviour of newborn infants has shown that the recognition by the child of another person as like itself (i.e., a subject, my ‘other’) is essentially immediate within experience.” Russon, ‘The Bodily Unconscious,’ 42. While Russon critiques Freud for failing to distinguish relations to objects from relations to subjects, he appears to maintain the position that assumes the self-other relation is not subject to elision via the reality principle – that the originary desire for the other can be abridged or stunted.

¹⁴² Virno, *Multitude*, 178.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 181.

sentiment that “the tears of this old Jewish man are not human.”¹⁴⁴ While this acknowledges the essential emotive sensation, it denies the other possession of it as a human – and it denies the subjectivity and the ethical demand that recognition aims to draw out in a chiasm.

The core of this argument is not necessarily the explanation of misrecognition as a linguistic phenomenon, but that misrecognition is a possible outcome in the struggle for recognition. Virno argues that this is the core of Hegel’s famous chapter on the master-slave dialectic in *Phenomenology of Mind*, and he draws inspiration from it – on the condition that we re-interpret it. Indeed, rather than showing the “happy” outcome that results from the drive for recognition, Virno argues that the chapter aims to illustrate the various ways in which recognition can go wrong: the initial moment of self-destructive conflict; the subsequent monological recognition accorded the master by the slave; the ensuing emancipation of the slave in a manner that reverses this relationship and denies the master the recognition s/he previously refused the slave; and finally, the “unhappy conscience” in which this failure is heightened to a permanently internalized way of being.¹⁴⁵ Thus, if Virno’s linguistic explanation of this phenomenon takes us in an ostensibly different direction than Benjamin’s psychoanalytic reading, the conclusion that they both draw about misrecognition (or the failure of recognition) is mutually supportive, as is the notion of a transition from an original (ontological or phenomenological) sociality to an elision of the relationship of alterity. Benjamin locates the failure of recognition in the crisis of perception that permeates modern (urban) capitalism, and in the defensive reaction that the embodied mind undertakes in the service of protecting its own psychophysical powers against repeated onslaughts.¹⁴⁶ In this vein, the missed gaze of the

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 183.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 184.

¹⁴⁶ My embodied, psychoanalytic reading of Benjamin might be read in the context of William Connolly’s argument about the body’s ability to regulate itself – what he refers to as the “tactics by the self upon itself” (which is

woman in the crowd is the result simultaneously of the power of the crowd as a force pushing her by, and of the defensive reaction of the human sensorium in response to the encounter with the crowd in the first place. Benjamin's thought may even allow us to look at this through the framework of linguistic negation if we conceive of language as part of the commodity-structure that permeates the totality of capitalist society. Lukács' influence on Benjamin could push us in this direction, for as Lukács states: "the problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects."¹⁴⁷ In connecting the various parts of the capitalist totality to its commodity structure, he notes that the commodity structure comes to permeate "all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them."¹⁴⁸ Under this conceptualization, the bodily form of anaesthetization finds a linguistic counterpart: the "not human" of the concentration camp becomes the "only an object/commodity/competitor" of the experience of others in the market place.¹⁴⁹ While this may sound like the very subjective representation of reification/commodification that Adorno thought he sensed in Benjamin's work,¹⁵⁰ Adorno himself noted the extent to which language could become "the reified and banal, the sign of commodities, falsifying thought from the start."¹⁵¹

Regardless of this linguistic approach to anaesthetization, the larger point is that the negation/elision of the humanity/existence of others is front and centre in the various phenomena – the decline of storytelling, the toils of factory labour, the encounter with the crowd, etc – that

culturally mediated). See William Connolly, 'A critique of pure politics,' *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 23, No. 5, 1997.

¹⁴⁷ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, (Cambridge: MIT Press 2002), 83.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 83.

¹⁴⁹ In this vein, while Russon argues that Freud collapses the specificity of subject and object relations, Russon fails to account for the manner in which subject relations can take on the face of object relations.

¹⁵⁰ Theodor Adorno, 'Letter to Benjamin,' *Aesthetics and Politics*, (New York: Verso Books 2002), 111.

¹⁵¹ Adorno, quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute*, (New York: Macmillan Free Press 1977), 175.

Benjamin focuses on, and it is one of the key motifs that he discerns in the work of Baudelaire. This basic point can be seen most stirring in ‘The Eyes of the Poor,’ where Baudelaire describes the meeting of gazes between himself and a poor family, as he sat in a café with his lover. While Baudelaire was moved by the intermingling of his look with theirs, his lover exhibited in conscious form the unconscious misrecognition that permeates the experience with the crowd: “As I turned my gaze to yours, my love, to read *my own* thoughts; as I immersed myself in your eyes...you said to me: ‘I cannot bear those people with their eyes out on stalks! Tell the waiter to get rid of them.’”¹⁵² As Baudelaire turned to affirm his own recognition of the passing family in the gaze of his lover, he expected to find the same embodied simulation; what he received was a failed recognition – a rejected recognition or a failed innervative discharge.¹⁵³ As Benjamin states of such a phenomenon: “What happens here is that the expectation aroused by the gaze of the human eye is not fulfilled. Baudelaire describes eyes that could be said to have lost the ability to look.”¹⁵⁴ It is these sorts of experiences that Benjamin saw as the core of Baudelaire’s encounter with the crowd, and the centre of his attempt to recuperate shock for the purposes of long experience: in this case, he not only aims to draw attention to the encounter with the other, but also to the crisis of the gaze exhibited in the response of Baudelaire’s lover.

¹⁵² Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, (London: Oneworld Classics 2010), 53.

¹⁵³ Kelly Oliver provides a poignant critique of recognition and the problems of alterity contained in it: namely, that recognition is based on sameness (recognition of what is already knowable) or the hostility of misrecognition. I am sympathetic to her concerns to transcend this problem and to her own gloss on the principles of an original sociality. However, I find her overly positive and affirmative take on this sociality to be problematic, and see her principle of the exchange of social energy in the relation of self and others to be amenable to the embodied character of misrecognition contained in Benjamin’s account, as well as to the startling/shocking character of the sorts of innervations Benjamin seeks. See Kelly Oliver, ‘Witnessing Subjectivity,’ *Ipseity and Alterity: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Alterity*, (ed.) Shaun Gallagher, Stephen Watson, Philippe Brun and Philippe Romanksi, (Rouen: Publications de l’Université de Rouen 2004).

¹⁵⁴ Benjamin, ‘Motifs,’ 339. Benjamin is not referring specifically to ‘Eyes of the Poor,’ but I take this case to be instructive in understanding the ethico-political consequences of what he is saying.

But in turning his back on the crowd, Baudelaire ultimately acquiesces to the immediacy of immediate experience, giving it “the weight of long experience.”¹⁵⁵

The recuperative core of the critical reading of Baudelaire that Benjamin undertakes aims to resurrect these experiences in the service of a deeper, political understanding of the phenomenon.¹⁵⁶ In aiming to understand Baudelaire’s work through Freudian motifs, Benjamin seeks to extract and understand the phenomenon as a part of the very being of experience and the experience of being under modern conditions: the anaesthetization of the body-as-subject represents the cutting off of the possibility of collective innervation in what should be the mutually disjoining and affirming encounter with the crowd of others. If Mikhail Bakhtin is correct to assert that with Baudelaire, and the Romantics and Symbolists, death “ceases to be an aspect of life itself and becomes again a phenomenon on the border between my life here-and-now and a potential other kind of life,”¹⁵⁷ then Benjamin’s critical reading of Baudelaire attests this to his acquiescence to modern conditions and aims to excavate the immanent truth contained in the experience of the crowd. Far from death being the link to the “other” kind of life/world, it is the very death or misrecognition of the other that blocks the possibility of an other world, the possibility of utopia: the utopian desire for alterity is simultaneously the desire to break with the solitude of bourgeois reality. In these respects, it is the alterity that the other represents for me, and creates in myself, that opens up the possibility of a world other than this one through the recognition of the other as other than myself. This is simultaneously a matter of a perspective other than mine, a person who is non-identical with me, and of a constellative human innervation

¹⁵⁵ Benjamin, ‘Motifs,’ 343.

¹⁵⁶ I would suggest that Cohen’s reading of Benjamin neglects this political intent: while Benjamin often oscillates in the various versions of his writings on Baudelaire’s recognition of the crowd, the conflict is not Benjamin’s reading, but Baudelaire’s shifting relationship to the crowd and the fact that he ultimately merely “registers” its experience as isolated experience. The last aphorism of ‘Motifs’ makes it clear that Benjamin reads a shift in Baudelaire’s work. See Cohen, *Proface Illuminations*, 209-212.

¹⁵⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel,’ *The Dialogic Imagination*, (Austin: University of Texas Press 1981), 200.

that emerges through a radical break/brake¹⁵⁸ with the existing conditions of experience and existence: of the collective action of the crowd as a being informed by multiplicity. The anaestheticization of experience subjects being to the solitude – without end and laden with an eternity of repetition – of the crowd: to collective existence as impotence and isolation, as a being-alone-together. Thus, the recuperation of experience and subjectivity can only be effected by pulling the emergency brake, by shocking the crowd out of waking death, consequently producing the possibility of an institution of experience – of the long experience that capitalist modernity has destroyed.

But, we return here to where we began and ended the previous chapter: the potential relationship between Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin. Benjamin's work does not present the body as merely ordered by chaos, and as a monadological entity devoid of the possibility of ethical relations as Levin contends.¹⁵⁹ Nor does it present an *extinction* of the cognitive or historical subject.¹⁶⁰ Rather, Benjamin finds the mortification/mutilation of *subjectivity* – and more particularly collective and constellative intersubjectivity – not necessarily the subject: under the sway of capitalist existence, the body¹⁶¹ undertakes a defensive response – simultaneously resistant and acquiescent – to the new environment, to the alienating and correlative field, that it enters into. The phenomenology of the urban, capitalist environment and the presentation of the anaestheticization of human experience does not reject, or contradict, the ontology of the flesh as elaborated by Merleau-Ponty. On the contrary, it adds a necessary *political* wrinkle, an

¹⁵⁸ Regarding the dual usage of brake and break: Benjamin's approach aims to pull the handbrake to isolate, draw out and retain those experiences that escape our grasps; and he does so in the service of breaking with the failed intersubjective relations and recognition that permeate modern life.

¹⁵⁹ Levin, 'Justice in the Flesh,' 36.

¹⁶⁰ See Buck-Morss, *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, ch. 10. In a similar vein, Darko Suvin argues that Benjamin fails to conceptualize any "positive" subject in 'On the Concept of History.' See, Suvin, 'The Arrested Moment in Benjamin's "Theses": Epistemology vs. Politics, Image vs. Story,' *Neohelicon*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2001. I turn to the question of historical intersubjectivity and ethical experience in the next chapter.

¹⁶¹ We must make note that, via Merleau-Ponty, the body must be conceptualized as a perceptual being – as the subject of perception itself.

experiential content or a phenomenological layering that will help to radicalize the potentials of this ontology. If we wish to translate Benjamin's arguments into the language of the flesh, we find that the flesh's living character includes its defensive preservation of itself, and the parrying of portions of the experiential nexus of self-others-things to defend the functioning of the organism against the destructive potential of shocks. Indeed, the anaesthecization that Buck-Morss describes entails a sensory and neurological deadening or closing off of the human sensorium and its capacity for innervation. By closing itself off from the world, and encouraging the reflex actions typical of voluntary memory and isolated experience, the intertwining of the living flesh and its environment – the very essence of “experience” – becomes abridged. To describe exploitation as both economic and embodied/biopolitical means that the commodification or reification that takes place in the production process – where beings are incorporated by the commodities that they possess – also takes place in the process of experience. In the production process, I come to relate to others not as a living human being caught up in a social, intersubjective process (collective innervation) but as the bearer of a thingified commodity (my labour). Likewise, in the process of experience, my body becomes thingified, deprived of its sensuous character and relating to others as objects relate to other objects: their mutual existence is inconsequential and is not characterized by a conscious and existence-forming intertwining, but by a defensive deflection of intersubjective experiences. The outward appearance of reified existence is ultimately reproduced in the internal functioning/organs of the body as flesh. This comes via “repetition and application in relation to social practices and norms,” and forces the body to “incorporate new behaviours and cultural forms.”¹⁶² Yet, with capitalism, rather than expanding the experiential possibilities, we have a contraction: the flesh is

¹⁶² Lawrence Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2008), 93.

mortified, hollowed out as a soulless entity capable of only peripheral – unconscious – relations with the outside world.

Yet, this does not entail the death of the subject, but merely the shrinking and the mortification of subjectivity in its specific historical incarnation. Because it is only the sphere of potential action, the manner in which the subject functions at present, this sentiment still holds out the possibility of a resurrection of sensuous being and intersubjective relations. It is in these respects that the work of Merleau-Ponty acts as the dialectical counter-point to Benjamin's. Capitalism alters the manner in which the flesh functions, conditioning it to function other than in its "natural" form. I use the term "natural" here in the natural-historical or dialectical sense. This is intended not to assert the centrality of a first nature – absolute and fixed – but simply to undermine any contention that the second nature of capitalism is itself "natural," and to historicize the potentiality of a first nature gone wrong. The first nature of the flesh was informed by its openness to experience and the "external" world – even if this contained its malleability. The second nature of capitalism is a suppression of this openness, and a turn towards the "interior" of isolated being and experience. Indeed, if Merleau-Ponty provides us with an account of the sensuous character of the body as a "natural" phenomenon, Benjamin provides us with an account of the violence the second nature of historical being subjects it to – as well as the manner in which the body adapts to this violence.¹⁶³ This dialectic plays out the two fold action of subjecting nature to history, and history to nature, in a chiasmatic intertwining intended to dislodge both. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh cannot be looked at as merely some unsullied and perfect/identical form of being; in fact, its non-identical character defies this possibility. What it posits is an open realm of intersubjective action, facilitated by the

¹⁶³ See Theodor Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural History,' *Things Beyond Resemblance: On Theodor W. Adorno*, (New York: Columbia University Press 2006) and Buck-Morss, *Origins of Negative Dialectics*, 55.

open character of being itself. Of course, the wrinkle added by Benjamin is the very idea that this intersubjective and sensuous being can be closed off. But the manner in which Benjamin does this also highlights the manner in which individuals become differentiated from each other: it points to the separation or multiplicity that can be contained in being (even if the interior of bourgeois existence represents an ultimately repressive manifestation of this). This militates against the erasure of the individual within a potentially oppressive originary belonging. The larger point is that this collision demands two things: the sublation and return of the sensuous subject and the re-opening of its relationship to self-others-things through a break/brake in the current order of experience (the recuperation of subjectivity); and the conceptualization of an intersubjective sphere that converges with the multiplicity of existing subjects (the political problem of accommodating a de-centered conception of subjectivity).

* * *

If the flesh is an opening onto others and the world, one whose future or existence is never written in advance (an opening that is open), then we cannot merely presume being to be “electric” or affirming: we must acknowledge that being can be closed off. In this context, and in the context of his work on storytelling and Baudelaire, Benjamin laments the decline or deformation of human experience and sensibility, and the essentially inhuman social relations that come about in the face of these developments. Storytelling presented something akin to the social relations embodied in Merleau-Ponty’s work, ultimately representing a transformative intersubjective experience. These interactive relations are muted with the rise of the novel, and all but destroyed in the form of information. But these changes are symptomatic of a general decline of experience. Through his psychoanalytic approach to memory, experience and the bodily sensorium, Benjamin suggests that the changes taking place in literary expression and

reception were not limited to these spheres. Rather, the tendency towards monadic and anaesthetized being was mirrored in the experiences of the urban crowd, factory labour and gambling, and the shock experience of capitalism more generally. In essence, the processes of objectification and reification took hold of human capacities in mortifying the flesh and turning it into a mechanistic form of being. Consequently, we find a crisis of perception, in which the look/gaze is not returned, and our means to meaningful human interaction become suppressed. In these respects, Benjamin does not present a dualistic, monadic or “wild”/unstructured conception of the body – let alone a conception that is incapable of ethical relations. Rather, he presents an account under which the body responds to the external conditioning that treats it as an “object,” ultimately conditioning the flesh to operate in an inward and closed manner. The dualistic (disembodied) and monadic (misrecognition) character that experience takes on under the pressures of urban capitalism are ultimately the result of the very defensive and agentic structure of the subject as a psychoanalytically-functioning, embodied entity (i.e. an entity with a principle of organization, capable of expansion *and* retraction). And, in these respects, Benjamin’s work is not a confirmation of this situation, but a lament and a call for the recuperation of experience and subjectivity/agency: a call for the resurrection of our corporeal being, a re-sensualizing of our bodily capacities and our potential for intersubjective relations and recognition.

Benjamin offers us only a minor gesture as to the direction this might take: the recuperation of subjectivity and the re-opening of the sphere of sensuous being lies in the collective innervation that manifests itself in revolution. As he argues, it is in revolutions that the alienated conditions contained in second nature are subjected to an attempted reversal – to the recuperation of them within the realm of our own subjective action. It is with these attempts

that the possibility of dealing with the problems of the human organism has the possibility of being solved. Hence, it is through the emergence of a revolutionary collective innervation that draws us closer to others, and manages to transcend the anaesthetic misrecognition, that the sensuous being of a first nature might be brought into the realm of a possible resuscitation and sublation: to pave the way for this recuperation of human capacities, we “first have to displace the problems of the second nature in the process of humanity’s development.”¹⁶⁴ In these respects, his alleged “uncritical consent to technology”¹⁶⁵ is actually the result of the *reality* of the body’s alienated intermingling with technological developments in the context of capitalist experience. Indeed, his positive presentation of technological possibilities of revolutionary transcendence – particularly in art – stem from the need to confront technology in the face of the increasing encapsulation of the aesthetic/perceptual realm by the technological means of artistic and capitalist reproduction.

The question we are left with is how (or from where) Benjamin sees this potential collective innervation coming about. This would seem to require the re-emergence of a genuine form of “subjectivity” that could facilitate the possibilities of intersubjectivity. As Benjamin states in ‘Central Park’: “From the perspective of spleen, the buried man is the ‘transcendental subject’ of historical consciousness.”¹⁶⁶ That he puts “transcendental subject” in quotations should tip us off to an ulterior intention. As he explains elsewhere, “spleen is nothing other than the quintessence of historical experience.”¹⁶⁷ Thus, Benjamin does not intend to posit a truly transcendental subject; for him, the buried human is an inherently experiential being-in-the-

¹⁶⁴ Walter Benjamin, ‘A Different Utopian Will,’ *Selected Writings. Volume 3*, 135.

¹⁶⁵ While this quote comes directly from Levin (‘Justice in the Flesh,’ 36), Eagleton also notes the technologism in Benjamin’s writings, but conceives of it as “one term of an antithetical couple, of which the other is ‘culturalism.’” See Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, (London: Verso Books 1981), 175-176.

¹⁶⁶ Benjamin, ‘Central Park,’ 165.

¹⁶⁷ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Study Begins with Some Reflections on the Influence of *Les Fleurs du mal*,’ *Selected Writings, Volume 4*, 96.

world, but one whose experiential content/capacity must be uncovered. In this vein, the division of society into classes hides behind the capitalist presentation – so useful for fascist purposes – of society as composed of equal individuals within the amorphous crowd. The poetry of Baudelaire aimed to see through such an image, and focused on the figure of the ragpicker. The ragpicker, like the proletariat, owned no commodity other than his/her own labour. But the ragpicker's misery went a step further and represented the apotheosis of human misery: not only was s/he subjected to selling their labour, but the ragpicker lived off the refuse of the city – utilizing the trash that the capitalist process shed. Benjamin's work is composed of the same sorts of recuperations as the ragpicker undertook, picking the seemingly mundane or discarded from the scrap heaps in order to find the missing truths contained in it.¹⁶⁸

While there are a number of paths – or rags – within Benjamin's work that we might pick through to address the political problem that confronts us, I want to return to his move to the analysis of subjectivity and alterity at the level of history as the potential breaking point for a mode of emancipatory practice/subjectivity. Indeed, collective innervation as a transformation of first and second nature remains a latent possibility, and one that requires me to fill in some gaps that were left in the conceptualization of history or historicity in the previous chapter, which includes the further conceptualization of alterity as an historical phenomenon – as, perhaps, *the* phenomenon that can enact a historical awakening in the service of a collective innervation. In these terms, I turn to a utopian political reading of Benjamin's understanding of history, founded in both the process of excavating and redeeming the past, both as historical object and subject. As we will see, for Benjamin the past contains not only the buried subject(s) that must be excavated for the explosion of an emancipatory, intersubjective relation but the dream-image that this intersubjective relation aims to achieve: the classless society, a realm of

¹⁶⁸ Benjamin, 'Second Empire in Baudelaire,' 48.

originary belonging, that can spark the desire for a new form of political relation. This would be predicated on the return of the repressed – the repressed embodiment of human subjects, and the repressed others that escape their experiential relations in the world.

Chapter 4

Between Ontology and Ethics: Benjamin's Concept of History as Utopian Politics

"It is in the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory. What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also all that which did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. Theory must needs deal with cross-gained, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such admittedly has from the start an anachronistic quality, but is not wholly obscure since it has outwitted the historical dynamic."¹

-Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*.

"There are two historicities. One is chronic or even derisory, full of misunderstandings, in which each age struggles against the others as against aliens by composing its concerns and perspectives upon them. This historicity is forgetfulness rather than memory. It is dismemberment, ignorance, externality. But the other historicity, without which the first would be impossible, is the *interest* which attaches us to what is not ourselves. It is the life which the past in a continuous exchange finds in us and brings to us."²

-Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*.

Taking up the challenge of Nietzsche's rebuke of the historian as a "spoiled idler in the garden of knowledge" prone to "the smug avoiding of life and action,"³ Hayden White's 'The Burden of History' sought to set a new agenda for historiography, proclaiming the need to break with the "thoughtless obstructionism" contained in the "study of the past 'as an end in itself.'"⁴ Addressing the question in the context of the declining status of history as an academic field, White placed the blame on "outmoded conceptions of objectivity" derived from nineteenth century artistic and scientific methodologies. For the discipline to regain its potency, he suggested it is necessary to adapt new modes of representing history that go beyond conceiving of the past as a mere object of contemplation, and transform it into a way of understanding and resolving the problems plaguing the present.⁵ It is in this context that I will address Benjamin's concept of history. But it is in the context of the demand for new historiographic methods that Benjamin's work has been taken up by historians, even holding a certain pride of place in the

¹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, (London: Verso Books 2005), 151.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1973), 72.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing 1980), 7.

⁴ Hayden White, 'The Burden of History,' *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1978), 41.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

1990s and experiencing a renaissance at the end of the decade with the English language translation of the *Arcades Project*. Perhaps understandably, much of this interest has been garnered by cultural history, where Benjamin's approach is in line (even if conceived of ahead of time) with the reigning orthodoxies of the discipline.⁶ Yet within cultural history and within the contours of a more general historiographical approach, it is claimed that Benjamin teaches things that "all historians already know," namely that they wrench objects from the past in accordance with the needs of the present. In this context, Benjamin's disavowal of the in-itself of the historical "object" merely suggested that "history was a constellation of past and present through which the present would find an image of itself and thus see more clearly."⁷

If this is what historians take out of Benjamin, they fail to adequately understand his unique contribution to White's attempt to rescue history from its own perils, imposing upon his concept of history an ultimately monological obscuring of the dialectical relationship of past and present, and reducing his contribution to an academic exercise. This ignores the very transformative intention of Benjamin's work, which aims not to see the present (or past) more clearly but to disrupt the very understanding and existence of both: the present does not find an image of itself in the past, or a clearer image of itself through the past, but finds in the past an other that simultaneously produces otherness (and the potential explosion of an other way of being) within itself. Hence, the cultural-historical approach misses⁸ that Benjamin's historical approach is not merely a historiographical or epistemological endeavour, but a politico-ethical one. Reading Benjamin's work in the context of White's plea for a new living historiography,

⁶ See both Vanessa R. Schwartz, 'Benjamin for Historians,' *American Historical Association*, Vol. 106, No. 5, December 2001; and, Jacques Rancière, 'The Archaeomodal Turn,' *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. Michael P. Steinberg, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1996).

⁷ Schwartz, 'Benjamin for Historians,' 1724, 1740.

⁸ Both Irving Wohlfarth and Michael Lowy suggest that Benjamin's work includes a critique of cultural history, for treating culture in a reified and autonomous manner. See Wohlfarth, 'Smashing the Kaleidoscope: Walter Benjamin's Critique of Cultural History' and Lowy, "'Against the Grain": The Dialectical Conception of Culture in Walter Benjamin's Theses of 1940,' both in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*.

this chapter aims to draw out the radical and disruptive character of Benjamin's treatment of the concept of history. In this vein, I suggest that Benjamin's understanding of history is predicated on, or contains, a utopian politics – that genuine history, which militates against the reified history of "homogenous, empty time," contains a utopian structure. In this vein, while Susan Buck-Morss suggests that Benjamin sought to write philosophy as history, I suggest that he attempts to write history as ethics – and, more specifically, as intersubjectivity predicated upon a politico-ethical demand with utopian aspirations.⁹ Or, put another way, the structure of history is presented as the structure of an ethical experience – particularly in the form of an active and creative intersubjectivity. Thus, the messianic emergence of a political experience represents the re-opening of the ontological conditions of life and, concurrently, the resurrection of an intersubjective capacity that is rooted in an ethical experience. In asserting this, and in drawing this chapter into the ideas developed in the previous one, we must remain cognizant that this is an intersubjective and ethical experience that can also be elided. Indeed, contained within the different conceptions of history and historical perception there are two different and opposed tendencies. As Merleau-Ponty elucidates, one is structured by forgetfulness, externality and the renunciation of alterity (the attempt to impose our own being upon the being of another), while the other is a relationship of openness and transformation. The latter one for Benjamin in fact represents the conditions for the breaking of the anaesthetization of experience, for it is through intersubjectivity at the historical level (through the process of the return of the historical

⁹ This challenges the readings rendered by both Angela McRobbie, 'The *Passagenwerk* and the Place of Walter Benjamin in Cultural Studies: Benjamin, Cultural Studies, Marxist Theories of Art,' *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 6, Issue 2, 1990; and, Darko Suvin, 'The Arrested Moment in Benjamin's "Theses": Epistemology vs. Politics, Image vs. Story,' *Neohelicon*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2001. Vis-à-vis McRobbie, far from being "strangely depopulated," Benjamin's history is stuffed to the breaking point with subjects; and, vis-à-vis Suvin, far from avoiding naming subjects, Benjamin avoids naming *the* subject of history and consequently opens history to an intersubjectivity via ethical experience.

repressed and its redemption) that the intersubjectivity of the present historical moment can be opened up to the possibility of utopia.

I. The Ontological and Ethical Sites of Utopia

Amongst critics, an influential tendency has been to view Benjamin's concept of history as calling for a romantic return to the past, which carries with it a problematic (or negligible) politics. This position has been put forth by both Jurgen Habermas and Richard Wolin. Habermas sees Benjamin's concept of history as eminently conservative. For him, Benjamin's concept of now-time necessitates the conservation of a seemingly unsullied past, and its original meaning. The gaze of the present aims to redeem the past as it truly is because this being or tradition threatens to disappear, and the relationship between generations is deemed a "causal" one. Here, redemption is conceived of as only a matter of holding onto that which threatens to dissipate. Thus, what Habermas reads in Benjamin's thought is a nostalgic longing for a primordial state of fulfillment in the relations of human beings and their environment/nature. On this reading, Benjamin wants to redeem/rescue some form of semantic potential deposited in myth, a feature which ultimately divorces his work from questions of political practice. Within this critique, Habermas appears to be defending Marxism against Benjamin: Adorno is declared the "better" Marxist, and Habermas contends that Benjamin engages in "redemptive critique" (which aims to recuperate what was lost) rather than ideology-critique (which aims to de-reify the existent). In defending Marxism, Habermas is content to criticize Benjamin's work because it aims to marry the "anarchistic" concept of now-time to historical materialism, which is allegedly evolutionary/progressive by nature. In these latter respects, Habermas is concerned

with Benjamin's pessimistic appraisal of the possibility of tradition's unity against its forgetting, a matter that threatens emancipation.¹⁰

If Habermas's account of Benjamin's work represents the first misrecognition as tragedy, Wolin's represents the second as farce. Like Habermas, Wolin reads Benjamin through the lenses of a conflict between redemptive critique and ideology critique, with the former aiming to return to things their "proper" and primordial names and the latter aiming for the sublation of the fragmentation of modern life. Again, Benjamin misses the mark and Adorno is declared the "better" Marxist and more consistent critic of ideology. The core of Wolin's argument lies in the suggestion that Benjamin, while often correcting himself, ultimately falls into a romantic valorization of a golden age of experience and community that existed in the past – a reconciled society that emerges through the medium of idealistic, collective dreams. Wolin suggests that these dreams are problematic enough in and of themselves.¹¹ But his larger issue appears to be with the historical method/opposition that they present. While conceding that in some works Benjamin is more consistent with Adorno's interpretation of Benjamin's methodology,¹² Wolin argues that there is an overriding tendency in Benjamin's work to undialectically and uncritically oppose a redeemable and reconciled past and an oppressive and catastrophic present. These are represented as the black and white choice of forms of existence, and Benjamin problematically

¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, 'Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism – The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin,' *New German Critique*, No.17, Spring 1979, 37-39, 49-51. David McNally provides a convincing critique of Habermas. See McNally, *Bodies of Meaning: Studies on Language, Labour and Liberation*, (Albany: State University Press of New York 2001), 188-191. As Michael Lowy points out, Habermas belongs to the contradiction school, which finds Benjamin's attempt to intermingle Marxism and theology a contradictory failure. See Lowy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*, (New York: Verso Books 2005), 20.

¹¹ Various, he suggests: they valorize the past, neglect the necessity of the present, are pure theory incapable of being translated into practice, are not reconcilable with class identities/analysis, etc.

¹² Habermas, Wolin and Susan Buck-Morss all seem to give the authority and monopoly of Benjamin's early constellative methodology to Adorno. More to the point, Wolin suggests that Adorno is the more consistently practical of the two theorists. This ignores that it was Benjamin who became more centrally concerned with the concrete practice of politics in Europe under Nazism and with the problem of transformation. Adorno's work remained outwardly apolitical and he largely concerned himself with philosophical debates. McNally provides a pertinent critique of Adorno's critique of Benjamin for its misunderstanding of the basic political impulse that informed his project. McNally, *Bodies of Meaning*, 216-219.

chooses a primordial golden age as the direction of the future.¹³ As Wolin states: “according to Benjamin’s complex schema, old and new are ultimately interchangeable; for the ‘old,’ classless society of prehistory will ultimately become the ‘new’ or utopia; and the ‘new,’ the ruins of modernity, will at this point turn into the ‘old’ – i.e., ‘prehistory’ in the Marxian sense.”¹⁴

While Habermas and Wolin do not phrase it as such, they are criticizing Benjamin simultaneously for an alleged romanticism and a utopian politics. The elements of romanticism are clear. The criticism of Benjamin's utopianism, while latent, are familiar critiques of utopia and utopian politics generally. Yet, they fail to grasp the full possibilities of a utopian politics generally, and Benjamin's mobilization of such a politics explicitly. In this context, I want to turn to Miguel Abensour's understanding of utopia as persistent, as well as to the sites of this persistence, in order to understand the critical utopianism contained in Benjamin's work. As Abensour notes, utopia is often decried as holding – in its emphasis on harmony, unity and permanence – totalitarian implications: the utopian project, if successful, “would invariably produce a closed, static, authoritarian society that negates temporality and does violence to plurality and individual singularity.”¹⁵ In Benjamin's work, Habermas and Wolin discern this as a return to an unsullied pre-history before the problematic emergence of modernity. Yet, this fails to fully grasp the potentiality of a utopian politics, following traditional critics in limiting

¹³ See Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, (Berkeley: University of California Press 1994), 163-183, 214-235.

¹⁴ Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 176. In a more recent essay, Wolin maintains much the same position and goes further, criticizing Benjamin (and Benjamin scholars) for maintaining a connection to the politics of a radical break and messianism. He contends that this is an antiquated historico-political conception that refuses to embrace the “gradual and progressive historical change” that has been facilitated by “the justly chastened demands of the political and historical present.” Wolin seems to entirely miss the critical import and ethico-subjectivity contained in Benjamin’s work generally, and his critique of progress specifically. See Richard Wolin, ‘Between Proust and Zohar: Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*,’ *The Frankfurt School Revisited, and Other Essays on Politics and Society*, (New York: Routledge 2006).

¹⁵ Miguel Abensour, ‘Persistent Utopia,’ *Constellations*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2008, pg. 407.

the political import of utopia by ironing over differences within the tradition.¹⁶ In refusing such a simplistic dismissal, Abensour has emphasized the heterodox and historical character of utopian thinking. Centrally, he argues that utopian theorists themselves have become cognizant and receptive to the criticisms that have been lobbed at utopia, and this has forced them to re-write its meaning. In distilling the insights from a “new utopian spirit,” Abensour reconceives utopia as “persistent utopia.” The fundamental core of utopian thought lies in “the orientation toward what is different, the wish for the advent of a radical alterity here and now.”¹⁷ Persistent utopia emerges from the recognition of the need to preserve this alterity even in the process of striving for utopia. Thus, utopia’s persistence is tied to the duality of the very definition of the word: the permanent oscillation between the good place and the non-place – the non-identical depth that emerges from refusing to divorce the good place from the non-place. Rather than being a permanent one off that would allegedly realize humanity for eternity, persistent utopia represents a permanent attempt to realize the unrealizable/indeterminate, and by virtue of this impossibility the permanent alternation between fulfillment and defeat, between the opening and re-opening of the utopian desire. In this sense, the end of utopia is always also its beginning: “the ever-reborn movement toward something indeterminate.”¹⁸ Here, utopia is related to a perennial impulse or desire for something “other” than the given, and is “a stubborn impulse toward freedom and justice – the end of domination, of relations of servitude, and of relations of exploitation.”¹⁹

¹⁶ On this phenomenon, see both Russell Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age*, (New York: Columbia University Press 2005) and Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, (London: Phillip Allan 1990). Both spend much of their work illustrating the varied traditions of utopia, in largely criticizing or rejecting the blueprint model.

¹⁷ Abensour, ‘Persistent Utopia,’ 407.

¹⁸ Ibid., 407.

¹⁹ Ibid., 407.

To further explain this persistence, Abensour turns to exploring two “sites” of utopia: an ontological and an ethical one. The former emerges in the work of Ernst Bloch, for whom utopia’s persistence “has to do with Being. To the extent that Being is thought at once as process and as incompleteness, utopia and its persistence are inscribed in the very economy of Being.”²⁰ This economy of being is fundamentally informed by lack: the “Not” or “Not-Yet” which informs simultaneously lack and transcendence (though never exhaustion of lack). Lack as contained in being drives the human towards the place in which we have gone beyond lack. The essence of this non-identical ontology is that the lack constitutes a driving force: it is the point of emergence, and continuation, of movement itself. But, given the perennial character of being as movement, Abensour concludes that “the Not-Yet is the experience – a sort of repetition of the origin – of the non-accomplishment of Being.”²¹ Lack is thus what informs the moment of invention, which in turn represents the exit from lack and the drive towards accomplishment. In this sense, Bloch contrasts the human with being, and sees in this difference the continual striving towards utopia as the realization of being. Yet, because being always exceeds its realization (because it retains a surplus), the principle of hope is never exhausted. In essence, utopia is driven by the tension created by the unbridgeable chasm between being and the human, or essence and existence. The Not-Yet is an experience of this chasm and tension, which puts into motion the moment of exit or innovation – a striving towards that which escapes us. Yet, because this non-accomplishment is a permanent characteristic of being, utopia never subsides for it can never be realized: it persists. Consequently, the “non-accomplishment of being” is utopia’s “indistinguishable source, the secret of its persistence, its surest principle.”²²

²⁰ Ibid., 408.

²¹ Ibid., 409.

²² Ibid., 409.

On the other hand, Levinas re-orientes our thinking about utopia by thinking it “under the sign of the Encounter”²³ or ethics, rather than ontology. For him, the persistence of utopia emanates from the site of sociality, which is to say the human or ethical:²⁴ utopia is opened by the irreducibility of the other in an encounter that breaks the spell of the nexus of power/knowledge that is emblematic of ontological and autarchic positions and their fixation on essence, and refuses to reduce the other to an object of knowledge which can then be reduced to the same. More to the point, the encounter – which brings into existence the possibility of the human bond – precedes thought, consequently denying the dualistic colonization of the other, and forces us to recognize sociality as originary.²⁵ Moreover, by virtue of the infinity of anterior encounters, there can be no “mastery of the social,” no imposition of the same on the other. Here, Abensour reads in Levinas' work a utopian politics predicated on “a pluralism that is not fused into unity.”²⁶ Such a fusion would efface the alterity of the other, which is exactly what constitutes the ethical: the alterity of the face to face relationship, and a proximity that exists as a concern for, or obligation to, the other. This alterity drives the notion of transcending relations of domination via the fidelity to the other in their very difference and suffering: “The alterity of the other is inseparable from his destitution. The misery, the poverty, and the nudity of the other are his manner of summoning me: his suffering the mode of his proximity.”²⁷ The encounter is the moment in which the alterity of the other attaches to the self, opening up a world beyond the autarchy of the self, by rupturing its self-identity and imposing an ethical obligation manifested as “‘being caught up in fraternity,’ self-sacrifice, the institution of ‘one for the other.’”²⁸

²³ Miguel Abensour, ‘To Think Utopia Otherwise,’ *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, Vol. 20/21, No. 2/1, 1998, pg. 253.

²⁴ Abensour, ‘Persistent Utopia,’ 410.

²⁵ Abensour, ‘To Think Utopia Otherwise,’ 255.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 257.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 257.

²⁸ Miguel Abensour, ‘An-archy Between Metapolitics and Politics,’ *Parallax*, Vol. 8, No. 3, December 2010, 11.

While these might appear as opposed positions, Abensour argues that Levinas discerns an ambiguity in Bloch's work "to the extent that beneath the ontological text another text circulates that is more on the side of the human than on that of being."²⁹ I contend that the same ambiguity exists in Benjamin's work.³⁰ In particular, there seems to be a slippage or oscillation from the *Arcades Project* and 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century' (the ontological) to 'On the Concept of History' (the ethical). I want to draw on this understanding of utopia to explore the nature of Benjamin's work, essentially suggesting that using the language of a politics of utopia can tease out the politics latent in it. While Benjamin makes recourse to the terminology of classless society, his image of it is not a static or identical rendering; moreover, the image of the classless society becomes driven by the desire to redeem the trampled generations of history as an ethical encounter. Perhaps more to the point, and perhaps in more than the "latent" connection contained in Bloch's work, in Benjamin's work the ontological and ethical sites of utopia are connected. The ontological (and non-identical) characteristics of the historical object meld and open up the ethical demand that is placed on the present by the past. In effect, redemption entails shattering the historical object to release the oppressed from their containment within the self-same, homogeneous empty time that would sacrifice them in accordance with the demands of progress. Hence, the ambiguity of – or oscillation in – Benjamin's work is mirrored in the ambiguity of persistent utopia, which, in Abensour's words, "consists not of choosing such-and-such a 'solution,' but in being able relentlessly to imagine new figures of a free and just political community[.]"³¹

²⁹ Abensour, 'Persistent Utopia,' 412.

³⁰ While Abensour has devoted a book to Benjamin's relation to utopia, there he largely deals with Benjamin in the context of the connection between desire and utopia, rather than on the basis of the sites of utopia's persistence. See Miguel Abensour, *L'Utopie de Thomas More à Walter Benjamin*, (Paris: Sens & Tonka 2000).

³¹ Abensour, 'Persistent Utopia,' pg. 417.

II. Benjamin, Brecht and History as Ideology Critique

Before directly addressing the critiques rendered by Habermas and Wolin, I want to return to Benjamin's historical methodology. The theory of constellations contained in the 'Prologue' to the *Trauerspiel* represents a substantial moment in the development of Benjamin's later historical thinking. Indeed, the development of Benjamin's thought involves the transposition of his constellative epistemology to the realm of concrete history – though this transposition takes on new dimensions. In particular, Benjamin's growing engagement with Marxism – and his attempts to wrest historical materialism away from the progressivist positivism of the Second International – gives it a new inflection, one reflected in his general critique of the historicist approach. In providing a historical approach with an emancipatory impulse, Benjamin suggests the necessity of breaking with “the concepts of the ruling class” which “have always been the mirrors that enable an image of ‘order’ to prevail.”³² Of course, this order is tied to a conception of progress through homogenous, empty time and Benjamin's work aims to break with it in order to open up the contained and repressed possibilities. Hence, in providing a new conceptual matrix, he states: “Definitions of basic historical concepts: Catastrophe – to have missed the opportunity. Critical moment – the status quo threatens to be preserved. Progress – the first revolutionary measure taken.”³³

One of the basic premises of a constellation was that phenomena needed to be redeemed. With Benjamin's later historical perspective, this continues to animate his attempt at a new analytical tableau. Indeed, in the context of history, phenomena must be rescued from their “enshrinement as heritage” in the historical narratives of the ruling classes: they must be redeemed and freed from this fixity, blasted out of their reified presentation within a continuity. To allow them to continue in their existent position is part of the catastrophe that allows the

³² Walter Benjamin, 'Central Park,' *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 2003), 164.

³³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 1999), 474.

present to be shown as the realization of freedom and progress. Against this, Benjamin paraphrases Strindberg to the effect that “hell is not something that awaits us but this life here and now.”³⁴ And hell appears as the Sisyphean – as eternal sameness in which nothing is created and the catastrophes of the present and past not only cannot be transcended but are continually repeated. True progress becomes possible through the revolutionary rupture with the existent via a redemption of the past. Benjamin views this break with semblance/eternal sameness as the only authentic form of political experience. While the concept of constellation suggested the malleability or transitory character of truth, we now find it taking on a political component: truth and the unique experience represent the break in the historical continuum and the transformation of the catastrophe of the present. Hence, break becomes the very meaning of progress – or progress becomes the break with the status quo. All of this represents a new mode of historical perception, which itself inaugurates a genuinely new relationship of subjects to history, and a new relationship of subjects within history. This dispenses with the concern to present the historical object the way it really was, which severed the object from the subject who perceives it and thus concentrated knowledge on possession of a moment in the past (to be known and possessed, but not recuperated or redeemed). Redemption entails not merely a redemption of the phenomena in terms of a recuperation of a “not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been,”³⁵ but simultaneously drawing the past into the nexus informing knowledge of the present. Hence, historical knowledge becomes self-knowledge through the alterity of the past.

For Benjamin, the redemption of the past takes part in a redemption of Marxism itself. But, in the same vein as his constellative epistemology, this is not merely a recuperation but a transformation. The very concept of redemption entails freeing historical materialism from the

³⁴ Ibid., 473.

³⁵ Ibid., 388-389.

restrictions of closed systems and sedimented meanings. Hence, it requires pushing Marxism to its extreme in order to draw it away from its cooptation into bourgeois/positivist modes of thinking about history (progress, continuity, etc) and emancipation (freedom within the context of the existing productive relations and their progress).³⁶ It is in this vein that Benjamin lays out his starting point: “It may be considered one of the methodological objectives of this work to demonstrate a historical materialism which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress. Just here, historical materialism has every reason to distinguish itself sharply from bourgeois habits of thought. Its founding concept is not progress but actualization.”³⁷ The meaning of actualization lies in what Benjamin sees as the original, revolutionary meaning of progress: the actualization of social goals, in the sense of the realization of the very term humanity. Progress in its bourgeois incarnation presupposes a conception of humanity that grows through the empty, homogenous time of self-defeat (humanity’s increasing subjection under the reign of technological development). In Benjamin’s reconfiguration, progress takes on a discontinuous, ruptural meaning in accordance with his assertion of the uniqueness of political experience, an experience of interference “where the truly new makes itself felt for the first time, with the sobriety of dawn.”³⁸ Thus, historical materialism presents a new configuration of time/history, one no longer beholden to the eternal sameness of homogenous, empty time nor to the predictability/inevitability of continuous history. But, here, we also confront the idea that revolution, rather than being the locomotive of history, is the attempt by humanity to pull the emergency brake. In these respects, history would be the arrest of development, in the form of

³⁶ It should be noted that Benjamin’s is a dissident reading of Marx. Lowy’s contention that it is not “revisionism” but “a return to Marx himself” seems to obscure the extremely heterodox character of Benjamin’s re-reading – a heterodox character that Lowy is, at the same time, so willing to affirm. See Lowy, *Fire Alarm*, 14-15. I would suggest that Benjamin’s sentiment is similar to E.P. Thompson’s, in that Marx is on our side and not vice versa. In these respects, Benjamin has no qualms about reading Marx in concert with any number of theorists who did draw – or would have drawn – the ire of Marx’s polemics.

³⁷ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 460.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 474.

the attempt to stop and recognize the past as something that is incomplete – and in which the present course of history will not actualize the humanity of that past, given that it is largely repressed and its oppression justified through the ideology of progress. Of course, this involves redeeming the past, at least at this point in terms of resuscitating it and bringing it into dialogue with the present. Doing so would involve a genuine experience of the past as embodied in long experience via the explosion of involuntary memory.

In summing up this redemption of Marxism, Benjamin writes: "On the elementary doctrine of historical materialism. (1) An object of history is that through which knowledge is constituted as the object's rescue. (2) History decays into images, not into stories. (3) Wherever a dialectical process is realized, we are dealing with a monad. (4) The materialist presentation of history carries along with it an immanent critique of the concept of progress. (5) Historical materialism bases its procedures on long experience, common sense, presence of mind, and dialectics."³⁹ As Benjamin points out in (1), knowledge emerges via the rescue of objects – the rescue from their embedded and fixed position within the dominant historical narrative, which seeks to repress (or entirely forget) their revolutionary and critical content. The political character of history lies in recuperating or recognizing these objects at moments of danger – moments of oppression and resistance in the present that threaten to be suppressed and forgotten, and moments in which the past itself may be lost – to draw the present into crisis by attaining a higher knowledge of the present, through actualizing the past (i.e. making the past present via redemption). In concert with (4), these past moments can often be ones that show the very betrayal of progress: they are moments that exhibited a critical, emancipatory content that was repressed in the process of historical "progress." The idea of history decaying into images is key to unravelling the monadological structure of history. The terminology of image aims to de-

³⁹ Ibid., 476.

center the historical object: by decaying into images, history takes on a non-identical character tied to the temporality of perception and recognition, as well as the variability and multiplicity of meaning. Benjamin connects the notion of image to language and philology, and suggests reading history and reality like texts. The conclusion he draws from this is that the past contains meanings that transcend its own era, meanings that can be utilized for the constructive purposes of the present, but only by wrenching objects from their reified context so they can be “filled by now-time.”⁴⁰ This politically charges the past, giving it an entirely new meaning – one that only has the potential to be actual in the moment it presents itself. But, perhaps more to the point, this image emerges via a process of excavation, which is part of the class struggle that seeks to trace the origins of the historical object as something subject to the process of becoming and disappearance. Given that the dominant narrative seeks to repress the past, Benjamin views these moments as buried underneath ideological rubble or hidden in a chamber that “has been closed and locked.”⁴¹ He equates digging through the rubble, or entering the room, with political action. The very act of aiming to recuperate these lost pieces of the past (both objects and subjects) entails incorporating them into genuine memory and long experience. This requires meticulously digging through the rubble and severing – or alienating – the objects from their typical associations in order to split the historical atom and its destructive energies. The destructive energies are contained not in the inventory list of the objects that are found and ready to be placed in the sphere of empty, homogenous time;⁴² rather, they are found in constructing an image of the object which would ultimately shatter this empty, homogenous time and facilitate the recuperation of these buried memories for the political purposes of the present, consequently

⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History,’ *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, 395.

⁴¹ See both, Walter Benjamin, ‘Excavation and Memory,’ *Selected Writings. Volume 2, Part .2*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 1999), and Walter Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History,”’ *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, 402.

⁴² Benjamin, ‘Excavation and Memory,’ 576.

calling “into question every victory, past and present, of the rulers.”⁴³ Class struggle is contained in the struggle over the meaning (and significance) of the past, as well as over its recuperation or repulsion. And this signifies the depth of meaning contained in objects. As Terry Eagleton points out, there is a sense in which this very procedure of “excavation is out to deconstruct the homogeneity of history.”⁴⁴ Here, excavation signifies both the interrogation of the meaning of historical objects (particularly as they are presented by the victors) and the search for useful objects that have been hidden or forgotten in the rubble.

In this context, the criticisms offered by Habermas and Wolin suffer from a number of fatal, conceptual misrepresentations. In the first place, the very contours of Benjamin’s concept of history are intended to be an ideology critique. This is part of what makes excavation a political action – its attempt to unearth the rubble that contradicts the ideology of progress that animates bourgeois conceptions of history. Indeed, Benjamin’s historiographical method aims to draw the present into a historical crisis by showing the transiency of being (hence exposing the second nature of capitalist modernity) and the potentials of transcending the present. It also acts to show that the present has become victorious only by virtue of its own historical repressions and violence. This is central to the demand for a break with homogenous, empty time as the reification of history as an object of knowledge: a rejection of history’s presentation as a fixed and permanent set of events, characterized by continuity and progress, and contained in a static relationship. In these respects, Benjamin aims to give history its living flesh, in a two fold sense. In the first place, he aims to dispense with the “contemplativeness” that characterizes the epic element in history, opening up the sphere of subjectivity and viewing history itself as a complex interplay of subjects with emancipatory intentions. Second, in order to enact such a historical

⁴³ Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History,’ 390.

⁴⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, (London: Verso 1981), 56.

subjectivity, Benjamin aims to open up the historical object, conceiving it as a mutable being no longer fixed and static. The demand for a new mode of perception that would be capable of reorganizing our understanding of history in turn demands that we move away from the monological conception found in positivist/historicist thinking, as well as its attachment to identity thinking. This begins with the assertion of the non-identity of knowledge and the claim that truth is in flux. For Benjamin, this emerges out of a renovation of Marxism and its understanding of history: history must liberate “itself from the schema of progress within an empty and homogenous time,” for such a liberation “would finally unleash the destructive energies of historical materialism which have been held back for so long.”⁴⁵ As he further argues: “To grasp the eternity of historical events is really to appreciate the eternity of their transience.”⁴⁶ Hence, the event as object – its meaning or interpretation – is also transitory. Yet, Benjamin’s claim is not intended to suggest the complete relativity of the world or truth: rather, it suggests that “truth” is structured by the unique character of the experience that comes through the interaction of “subject” and “object,” which shape and transform one another. Hence, he suggests that truth is “bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike.”⁴⁷ This suggests a depth of meaning which ties itself to the concrete moment, and the unique experience, in which subject and object come to find/confront one another.

In distancing Benjamin from Marxism (or at least an “adequate” version of it), much of the blame is placed on the influence of his close friend, Bertolt Brecht. And yet, Brecht’s work on the structure of theatre and its relationship to representations of history can help to get at the

⁴⁵ Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena,’ 406-407.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 407.

⁴⁷ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 463.

ideology critique contained in Benjamin's work.⁴⁸ In attempting to break free of the historicist consciousness that turns events and social structures into something self-evident, permanent and natural, Brecht introduced the Alienation-Effect into his theatre. The A-Effect attempts to dislodge, or alienate, events and social structures from naturalizing conceptions/associations by turning them into something extraordinary and "un-natural." As Brecht states: "A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar."⁴⁹ There is something here of Marx's dialectical deconstruction of the commodity. While the commodity is often seen as "an extremely obvious, trivial thing," Marx attempted to show that it is only under specific conditions of possibility that the commodity emerges as a central force in society.⁵⁰ In essence, the objects are jarred from their self-apparent context and, like Baudelaire's *correspondances*, this procedure has the character of a shock experience. Brecht seeks to shock the self-evident representation of the historical object by detaching its associations and showing the conditions and possibilities of everyday existence and, hence, simultaneously the possibilities of its manipulation as a product of a specific mode of historical being.⁵¹ This would turn daily existence into an historical event – in the dual sense of a historically situated event and a historically transitory event. Against the historicist presentations of historical being and events as permanent and/or final, the A-Effect draws out the differences between the social structures of various epochs, showing them as singular and separable monadic structures (hence not subject to mere "quantitative" transformation/relations). By comprehending and representing all epochs as historically specific, the A-Effect ultimately

⁴⁸ The question might be raised of whether the chicken or the egg comes first, or who influenced who. I would suggest a dialectical or constellative approach in reading Brecht and Benjamin.

⁴⁹ Bertolt Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre,' *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, (London: Methuen Publishing 1964), 191-192.

⁵⁰ See, Karl Marx, *Capital (Volume 1)*, (New York: Penguin Books 1990), ch. 1.

⁵¹ Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, (London: Eyre Methuen Limited 1978), 76, 102-105; Brecht, 'Short Organum,' 191-192.

alienates the present and shows it to be one of many possible modes of being.⁵² Benjamin's entire notion of tearing moments from their context – i.e. from the rosary bead-like organization that modernity imposes upon them – plays out the simultaneous role of illustrating their non-identity and opening up the realm of history. In tune with Benjamin's notion of the transiency of the present (its very historicity), Brecht suggests that the entire effect of a static representation of historical being is upset: "The audience is no longer taking refuge from the present day in history; the present day becomes history."⁵³

III. Benjamin's Ontological Site of Utopia: Memory and Excavation, Dreams and Images

The illustration of the transitory character of historical being is an indictment of the present as itself merely a temporary configuration. But this does not entail a nostalgic longing for an earlier era. Rather, historical moments – including the present – act as monadic entities that interact, not through the retroactive or monocausal determinacy of the present, but through a mutual collision and interpenetration. Brecht incorporates this premise into the scene structure of his historical representations in the theatre. He suggests that "the scenes should...be played quite simply one after another...without taking account of what follows or even of the play's overall sense."⁵⁴ In this manner the scenes are presented as independent monads – or, as a series of self-contained historical moments – "so that the action progresses by jumps."⁵⁵ By representing history as a montage of events and images unglued from our ordinary associations both in terms of temporality and causality, the moments do not seamlessly flow into one another, but are characterized by jumps and ruptures that break the flow of a simple teleological progression. This allows the events to be displaced from their imposed sequence: each

⁵² Brecht, *Messingkauf Dialogues*, 36-37, 43; Brecht, 'Short Organum,' 176, 190; Brecht, 'Indirect Impact of the Epic Theatre,' *Brecht on Theatre*, 59-60.

⁵³ Brecht, *Messingkauf Dialogues*, 76.

⁵⁴ Brecht, 'Short Organum,' 279.

⁵⁵ Brecht, *Messingkauf Dialogues*, 75.

individual scene is torn from its context. Without a necessarily (and necessary) linear thread tying together an entirely resolved plot, the contradictions, transformations and potentialities that are fulfilled or unfulfilled in given scenes can be related to other scenes and it can be seen that trajectories and relations were reversed or reinforced, and that things *could* have transpired other than the way that they did. Consequently, the scenes alienate one another: they become other than what they are in and of themselves, and as they would be in the context of a linear development.⁵⁶ In this context, historical moments retain a monadic independence, but they collide and disrupt each other in instances of dialectical interpenetration that drastically upset the meaning of both moments.

Rather than opening a past that we must return to, Benjamin argues that moments of historical awakening produce an entirely new relationship between the past and present that illuminates the *possibility* of a dialectical future: the historical prophet “perceives the contours of the future in the fading light of the past as it sinks before him into the night of times.”⁵⁷ The past is never lost, or dead, but hangs in time waiting to be resurrected in a dialectical collision that will ultimately unhinge the present (and the past). But Benjamin denies that there is a mythical past that can be recaptured. Indeed, the past itself can never be known outside of its dialectical relationship to the present. Moreover, this relationship is not permanently fixed, and Benjamin is quick to point out its fleeting nature: it “emerges suddenly, in a flash” but “in the next moment is already irretrievably lost.” Indeed, the goal is not to recognize history “the way it really was” but to seize hold of this image “at a moment of danger” and awaken “a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been.”⁵⁸ And the recognition of what has been must play an integral role

⁵⁶ Brecht, *Messingkauf Dialogues*, 104; Brecht, ‘Short Organum,’ 278-279.

⁵⁷ Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena,’ 407.

⁵⁸ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 462-3, 470, 473.

in our understanding of what our present is. By refusing to herald “the dead to the table,”⁵⁹ history repels and forgets its own failures, even where it aims to herald change.

None of this entails a simple return to the past. Habermas and Wolin neglect this, because they seek to impose the necessity (or historical materialist orthodoxy) of comprehending history as a linear, progressive development. Within this, they assume that a presupposed long experience will be able to inform some present notion of political action (or that the ideology critique of *Negative Dialectics* will magically fall from the sky and inspire political action), and treat memory as a merely conservative faculty. All of this is at odds with Benjamin’s project. In drawing into question the direction of history, Benjamin is also drawing into question the simple, linear narrative about the development of radical subjectivity, and the nature of “subjectivity” itself. Indeed, the very premise of his concept of “origin” is that objects/subjects come into being and disappear; the philosophical history/science of origin that he puts forth aims to excavate threads that have “become lost, only to be picked up again by the present course of history in a disjointed and inconspicuous way.”⁶⁰ In mirroring the problematization of subjectivity, history cannot be represented as a line, even if we problematize this line with the concept of false consciousness and the ignorance of history’s objective direction. This would mirror the ideology of progress, and continue to subject the past to instrumentalist considerations of its irrationality, or its necessary transcendence. Such a conception would place the emergence of fascism in the 20th century outside of the historical continuum, and repress the very being (or non-being) of the victims of fascism to a contingent occurrence irrelevant to the development of a “humanity” that contradicts itself by this act of exclusion-as-anhilation. Hence, as Benjamin cites Lotze, “In opposition to the readily accepted doctrine that the progress of humanity is ever onward and

⁵⁹ Ibid., 481.

⁶⁰ Walter Benjamin, ‘Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,’ *Selected Writings. Volume 3*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 2002), 269.

upward, more cautious reflection has been forced to make the discovery that the course of history takes the form of spirals – some prefer to epicycloids.”⁶¹ The point here is that humanity emerges in bursts and flits, and history is the melancholic longing for the re-emergence of these moments and their political potentials as they dissipate behind the flow of progress. Benjamin’s progress is aimed at recuperating these moments, as moments of subjectivity and humanity – to recuperate the various incarnations of the project of humanization, to recuperate the potentials of its actualization, to bring it back into being against its forgetting or mortification. The ideology of progress ultimately presupposes what it should be explaining, and inevitably delays it: it assumes the emergence of subjects (and their realization via teleological and mechanical forces) and their liberation. In the concept of epicycloids, we find a reiteration of the notion of recognition as a break with the heretofore reign of misrecognition. With Benjamin, recognition and intersubjectivity come into being as the creative emergence of human interrelations and actions which traverses linear threads (of quantitative growth) and connects that which is different (the others who are not merely our own projection). When history comes to a standstill, knowledge and the remembrance of the past become a possibility. And this knowledge is not merely one that seeks to achieve knowledge of the object-in-itself: “knowledge *within* the historical moment is always knowledge *of* a moment.”⁶² As a specific relation, dialectics at a standstill indicates not a static knowledge of what was always already there, but knowledge of what comes together with the now to transform both historical moments: it is knowledge of the transiency and intersubjective character of the moments of history.

Furthermore, Habermas and Wolin fundamentally misunderstand Benjamin’s account of memory and redemption. While Benjamin refers to memory as “conservative” this only has

⁶¹ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 478.

⁶² Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena,’ 403.

meaning in the context of its opposition to reminiscence (or voluntary memory) in which the past/experience is destroyed and forgotten. As we saw in the previous chapter, Benjamin cites Reik to the effect that this process of destruction (or repression) of the past was tied to the inability of the organism/ego to meet the demands that this repressed memory placed on it: consciousness parried painful/dangerous memories or experiences in trying to remove them from the conscious register. Consequently, Benjamin invokes Carl Jung in suggesting that the sin of modern man is his “unhistorical” consciousness; and, more to the point, that “higher consciousness is thus guilt.”⁶³ This higher consciousness requires the conscious recognition of the past, a consciousness in which one knows “that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious.”⁶⁴ Our guilt lies in failing to preserve their memory, and in repeating the catastrophic barbarism that trampled them in the first place. Indeed, in failing to conserve/register the past – or in treating past victims as those instrumental beings over whom progress had, and continues, to trample – we are subject to the melancholy and acedia of those who unconsciously contribute to the incomplete emancipation of the past, and to our own failed emancipation. Given the flow of progress, and the fleeting character of experience, memory aims to conserve and resuscitate these repressed beings via an ethical experience: it allows these beings to return in a unique experience capable of facilitating a political experience. As Benjamin says in rebuttal to Horkheimer’s contention that past suffering is complete, memory has the ability to modify this suffering/oppression in bringing it back to life.⁶⁵ In these respects, Benjamin’s concept of memory contains a creative component⁶⁶: “memory brings about the

⁶³ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 399.

⁶⁴ Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History,’ 391.

⁶⁵ See both, Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 471, and Benjamin, ‘Eduard Fuchs,’ 268.

⁶⁶ The creative character of memory is something also developed by Merleau-Ponty. See, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity: Course Lectures from the the Collège de France (1954-1955)*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2010).

convergence of imagination and thought.”⁶⁷ In essence, imagination acts to arrange memories when they flit by – it puts them to use, drawing correspondences between historical moments and interpreting the objects of history in accordance with the openness/non-identity of their meaning/being against their fixity and conformism. In the idea of now-time, this is centrally predicated upon the subjectivity of the present, and upon the present political situation conceived of as crisis. It is the now that seeks to recuperate the past through the co-ordinated efforts of memory and imagination. And, of course, this allows the present to potentially recuperate the past – but only in that particular time/moment of the past’s emergence, which is to say in the now of its recognizability under conditions of emergence/y. Under such conditions, the present opens up via the surplus contained in the historical object. The political action contained in this act of memory seeks to create an institution of experience, one capable of incarnating itself as long experience and long memory.

In tune with the conception of anaesthetics, Benjamin refers to historicism and its attempts to represent things “as they really were” as having a narcotic effect: it dulls the historical senses, and allows for the repression of the past (our passing it by) to appear as natural. The processes of deconstructing and excavating history were intended to redeem and liberate the surplus energies that were hidden within this mode of historical understanding.⁶⁸ To draw out this surplus, Benjamin turns to the concepts of dreams and awakening. In surveying the cultural history of the nineteenth century, Benjamin sought to retain the “dreams” – in the form of utopian experiments – that emerged out of the collective consciousness of the epoch. Rather than being simple ideological manifestations, such images expressed an inner truth contained in the collective consciousness and material relations of the epoch. In the first place, they

⁶⁷ Benjamin, ‘Central Park,’ 171.

⁶⁸ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 463.

represented the starting point for the critique of the historicism that represented the eternal return/same that cannot be broken. If historicism represented the failure of historical experience, collective dreams represented the potential of the emergence of genuine experience and the transformation of social existence. Dreams represent a potential, because they still retain the quality of a repressed reality/experience – a repressed wish, which is not entirely clear to the collective which dreams it. But Surrealists such as Louis Aragon were content to remain within the realm of dream (conceived as mythology and the irrational), rather than finding the “constellation of awakening” that would bring these insights not only to light or conscious attention but to political fruition – to political praxis.⁶⁹ Psychoanalysis broke with this separation, representing dreaming and waking as parts of the total consciousness of subjects, even if dreams retained a repressed quality. Experiences that were parried in order to protect the psyche from the onslaught of shock experiences often seeped into dreams, which in turn allowed the subject the chance to relive the experience for the purposes of coming to terms with it and incorporating it into long experience. Understanding these dreams requires reading them psychoanalytically, as wish symbols in need of decoding to extract memory’s surplus energies. Moreover, psychoanalysis broke with the individual character of Surrealist dreams, transposing the phenomenon to the level of the collective.

In the context of excavation, the now of recognizability is “the synthesis of dream consciousness (as thesis) and waking consciousness (as antithesis)”⁷⁰: it is a moment of awakening, in which the dream is retained in, and engages with, waking life rather than maintaining itself at a repressed distance from it. Indeed, awakening is the moment of rupture

⁶⁹ Ibid., 458.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 463-464.

and the realization of that which has been repressed. As Benjamin states in his preparatory notes for 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century':

- Not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been. Structure of what-has-been at this stage. Knowledge of what has been as a becoming aware, one that has the structure of awakening.
- Not-yet-conscious knowledge on the part of the collective.
- All insights to be grasped according to the schema of awakening. And shouldn't the "not-yet-conscious knowledge" have the structure of dream?⁷¹

Here, Benjamin fuses the notion of the collective consciousness/phenomena with the language of dreams/awakening. Both the collective un/consciousness and the phenomena that comes to conscious knowledge are eminently historical. The realization of a specific moment in a specific light is unique to a particular epoch, which "rubbing its eyes, recognizes just this particular dream image as such."⁷² Against Adorno's objections,⁷³ Benjamin saw in collective consciousness the very means for conceptualizing collective agencies: it was in the concept of society's awakening and unearthing of its unconscious dream images that genuine history and experience could emerge.⁷⁴ As a historical category, specific to the now and based on the mediation of the non-identical image by the oppressed, this conception of agency resists the alleged mythification of a collective subject devoid of division⁷⁵: the oppressed seek to resuscitate those who are excluded by the fragmentation of "humanity." Indeed, the very act of wresting history from the conformism of positivist conceptions indicates a class struggle over the meaning and significance of the past, though this only comes to the fore with the emergence of the moment of political contestation over the image of the past.⁷⁶ The now of recognisability was what facilitated the historian's ability to undertake a dream interpretation of the present which sought to shatter its illusions about itself and free the oppressed from this narrative. In

⁷¹ Benjamin, 'Materials for the Expose of 1935,' 907.

⁷² Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 464.

⁷³ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics*, (New York: Verso 2002), 111-114.

⁷⁴ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 389-390, 399.

⁷⁵ In following Adorno, Wolin regurgitates this critique of Benjamin. See Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 179-180.

⁷⁶ My suggestion here draws on the argument made by Matthias Fritsch, *The Promise of Memory: History and Politics in Marx, Benjamin and Derrida*, (Albany: SUNY Press 2005), 174.

essence, sleeping consciousness carries with it the automatic movement in which we need not consciously act and can forget the events that transpire before our eyes (but are retained in dreams). Sleeping represents “the moment of waiting” – a moment tied to the teleological conception of history that holds that awakening will come of its own accord. Awakening requires acts of cunning that can break us from sleep, while retaining the dream contained in the sleep state.⁷⁷ In this conceptualization, the repressed past is retained in dreams: dreams represent that which has been, but which we only have a “not-yet-conscious” knowledge of. As the past comes to a standstill in the now of recognizability, this moment represents a “dialectical reversal” of the heretofore accepted or acknowledged consciousness of the past. It represents a moment of awakening (a break) in which memory ruptures the sleeping consciousness and excavates the dreams contained in it. It is in dreams that we find not only what has been severed from knowledge/knowing (the past), but also the wish to recognize/redeem it. As Benjamin summarizes the new historical method: “The new, dialectical method of doing history presents itself as the art of experiencing the present as waking world, a world to which that dream we name the past refers in truth. To pass through and carry out *what has been* in remembering the dream!”⁷⁸ In these terms, the moment of awakening represents an act of memory: the retaining via memory of the image contained in the dream, to affect the moment of awakening.

In analyzing the dreams of the nineteenth century, Benjamin finds the recurrence – particularly in the form of failed revolutions and political movements – of dreams of a classless society. This emerges centrally in ‘Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century’:

Corresponding to the form of the new means of production, which in the beginning is still ruled by the form of the old (Marx), are images in the collective consciousness in which the new is permeated with the old. These images are wish images; in them the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organization of production. At the same time, what emerges in these wish images is the resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated

⁷⁷ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 390; Benjamin, ‘Materials for the Expose of 1935,’ 907.

⁷⁸ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 389.

– which includes, however, the recent past. These tendencies deflect the imagination (which is given impetus by the new) back upon the primal past. In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to elements of primal history (*Urgestichte*) – that is, to elements of a classless society. And the experiences of such a society – as stored in the unconscious of the collective – engender, through interpretation with what is new, the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions.⁷⁹

This passage informs much of Wolin’s critique of Benjamin. For Wolin, Benjamin relies on a notion of the memory of a pre-historic classless society, a previous civilization which had “yet to be tainted by the capitalist division of labour and the fatal separation between the ‘use value’ and ‘exchange value’ of goods.”⁸⁰ As I suggested, this ignores the creative and imaginative element contained in Benjamin’s conception of memory. What memory seeks to preserve is an experience that would otherwise be forgotten. And, in the context of the above quote, we need to be cognizant of the fact that Benjamin continually refers to the *image* (and *wish image*, at that) of a classless society, not its realization in the past. If his concept of history has taught us anything, it is that history-as-object cannot be known as it really was: it is caught up in the intertwining of the two moments situated within the flow of time. Thus, it is permeated by the consciousness of the present (just as the present becomes permeated with it), and only becomes recognizable at a specific moment in a specific light. The image of the classless society – classless society as *dream* – seeks to dislodge the very solidified foundations of the present, drawing it into crisis in transforming past and present. In the constellative sense, as the image of the classless society rises up it has a monadological effect: it draws into itself the being of other historical moments, and fundamentally shifts the character of the present. This draws out the “not-yet-conscious” memory of the past – the origins of the present in the trampling of the image of classless society – and draws out the possibility of the utopian future.

⁷⁹ Walter Benjamin, ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,’ *Selected Writings. Volume 3*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 2002), 33-34.

⁸⁰ Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 173-177, 180.

In this vein, we can read the concept of the “not-yet-conscious” image of the classless society – an image that would seem to persist throughout history in different incarnations, and through the consciousness of various moments – through Abensour’s reading of the ontological site of utopia. That Benjamin refers to the *image* of the classless society represents not so much the reality of it, as the ontological condition of striving for it: the impulse or desire to overcome the permanent lack inscribed in being. If history is characterized by a permanent transience, despite the alleged “Golden Age,” then the recurrent image of the classless society is not so much the return to the place itself, as the return to the ontological origin of its emergence as indicative of a lack. If we link this up with Merleau-Ponty’s savage ontology, we find the very means to theorizing the transformation of being and the attempt to institutionalize the perennial lack that characterizes being within the context of hyperdialectics. In this direction, the image contains the invisible as a meaning that ruptures and transforms the very character of the visible, bringing it into a new light, interpenetrated by the savage character of the ontological place of utopia. In the concept of ontology as primordial, Merleau-Ponty aims to highlight the lack contained in the acculturated and hierarchical character of Cartesian ontologies (and the rationalist politics they perpetuate). In reading Benjamin this way, we can also remain cognizant that the images of classless society (e.g. the Paris Commune, the Spartacus League, the Fourierist phalanstery) that persist throughout his work were all failures or, more accurately, trampled by the “progress” of history and the actions of the victors to suppress that which challenged the narratives of progress (the non-identical). When they emerge as dream images, these moments do not emerge as the confirmation of a living reality that we have passed by, but emerge as the failed attempts at instituting utopia. The “ought to be” is something that thus characterizes any failed moment in the past.⁸¹ Consequently, the return to the monadological origins of the

⁸¹ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 466.

moment of classless society is in fact the persistent return of history's attempted transformation. In line with Abensour's reading of Bloch, we find the persistence of a dual lack: the lack contained in the present, and the lack of actuality that permeated the past as well. Thus, the image of utopia persists because the lines of utopia are cut via the dialectic of emancipation (that is, emancipation conceived as catastrophe). In this sense, Benjamin's historiographical method aims to resurrect and redeem (or "invest" and "orient") these moments of utopia "otherwise" – that is, against the grain.

IV. From Ontology to Ethics: Redemption and the Tradition of the Oppressed

Benjamin's characterization of the image of the classless society that is unearthed through memory and excavation points to a more substantive role than ideology-critique in his concept of history, for memory and excavation likewise aim to unearth a subjectivity within history. In these respects, subjectivity is directed explicitly towards redeeming political practice against its mortification within the contours of capitalist modernity. Hence, more centrally in the context of the conception of intersubjectivity developed thus far, excavation is also political action by opening up the relation of intersubjectivity by attempting to redeem the dead – to bring to life the presence of past generations in the face of the threat of the disappearance of the past under the weight of progress. Here, Benjamin seeks to dispense with instrumentalist approaches to history,⁸² and thus the suffering and oppression of the past (or present) cannot be justified by the progress of the present (or future) in the name of some abstract humanity. In this connection, Benjamin cites Herman Lotze: "The reason of the world would be turning to unreason if we did not reject the thought that the work of vanishing generations should go on forever benefiting those who came later, and being irreparably wasted for the workers themselves."⁸³ For Benjamin, the strongest means for re-opening subjectivity lies not in the thought of future

⁸² Christian Lenhardt, 'Anamnestic Solidarity: The Proletariat and its *Manes*,' *Telos*, No. 25, Fall 1975, 137.

⁸³ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 479.

generations: the call for the working class to wait for the conditions of revolution to present themselves opens itself up to the eternal sameness of working for an emancipation that is always beyond us, putting off indefinitely all subjectivity in accordance with the development of the productive forces. Rather, the oppressed class as the subject of history is tied to the ethical demand that emerges via “the image of enslaved ancestors.”⁸⁴

Thus, against Horkheimer’s contention that “past injustice has occurred and is completed,” Benjamin contends that “history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance.”⁸⁵ In refusing to view the past as complete, Benjamin asserts remembrance’s ability to modify “what science has ‘determined’”: the present can carry on the failed projects of the past. We find here that remembrance is recognition, and that remembrance as recognition re-opens the realm of alterity and intersubjectivity that is closed off via the powers of missed or failed recognition. The subjectivity of the present is opened up by the opening of another being, and the possibility of another form of being that the past can produce in the present. Indeed, wresting “tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it” is simultaneously a process of wresting inter/subjectivity away from the forces that work to efface and deny both, by affectively burying them under the weight of the reigning historical construction (progress through homogenous, empty time) which seeks to aggrandize the present. For Benjamin, entering the historically repressed chamber is tantamount to opening up the whole process of intersubjectivity in order to liberate the present not from the weight of the past but the weight of its own failure to actualize its self-proclaimed project of freedom from toil and dependence – which is to say the failure to actualize humanity and its happiness. The act of the historian is not simply a defence of a certain historiographic method, but the attempt to draw out the potentials

⁸⁴ Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History,’ 394.

⁸⁵ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 471.

through which subjects can redeem the past in saving themselves at a moment of danger – which is to say that only in the now of recognizability do contemporary subjects come to see the crisis that they themselves have fallen into. Overpowering the conformism of the present entails rescuing the dead from the continued amnaesthetic relationship that the historical victors force them into in order to protect the present.⁸⁶

In this vein, in ‘On the Concept of History’ Benjamin states that “the subject of historical knowledge is the struggling, oppressed class itself.”⁸⁷ Excluded from the historical narrative, the oppressed class represents the philosophical contradiction/negation of the historicist or universal history approach – it is the embodied truth that the object of history transcends its “concept.” More to the point, its existence represents the sublated dis/continuity of history: on the one hand, the continued existence of the oppressed represents the negation of the present’s claims to representing humanity as a discontinuous break with the past, illustrating the continuity of its solidarity with the oppressed (of the) past; on the other hand, the oppressed class, as the embodiment of historical (lack of) knowledge and as itself constituted out of the continuity of oppression and the long experience it implies, holds out the possibility of avenging and liberating “the generations of the downtrodden”⁸⁸ that have been stepped over on the long march of history, consequently representing the potential to break with the catastrophe of history as the history of oppression. In unravelling the false and oppressive narrative that dominates the historical discipline and the popular consciousness, this would supply the means to re-configuring history itself and to inaugurating a new conception of historical subjectivity that breaks with the teleological aspects of universal history. But a different version of this statement in the ‘Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History”’ points to the intersubjectivity contained in this

⁸⁶ Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History,’ 391.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 394.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 394.

subjectivity: “the history-writing subject is, properly, that part of humanity whose solidarity embraces all the oppressed.”⁸⁹ This claim coalesces with and expands the other claim. As the subject of historical knowledge, the struggling, oppressed class holds the potential for the historicist mode of perception to be broken: it supplies a new angle or position of vision via the non-identity of the oppressed, which acts to rupture the existing view point and allows for a new meaning to be brought to the very relationship between past and present. Indeed, in aiming to draw the past into the present, the history-writing subject acknowledges the being of the past (both as an object of knowledge and as a set of subjects capable of being resuscitated and placing an ethical demand on the present) as a living entity. We can see the influence of Benjamin’s constellative methodology here, for what occurs is not the death of objectivity or reality in favour of an empty relativity, but the transformation of the meaning of the historical object which must still live up to the criteria of its own pretensions – the actuality of the immanent proclamation of humanity’s realization remains the measure, but the historical object (the object of recognition) has taken on a new perspective.

Thus, in reading Benjamin through the notion of utopia, we must note two key traits of the image of the classless society. In the first place, these images are of the interstitial experiences of classless society, which have generally failed. They fundamentally lack an integral actuality: they are not incorporated as the genuine experience of a classless society, but represent experiential moments *within and against* the contours of fundamentally hierarchical and oppressive historical moments. In this vein, we might think of the social histories of E.P. Thompson and Jacques Rancière. In tracing the formation of the English working class, Thompson sought to save various figures from the “condescension” of history, illustrating their role within the revolutionary tradition despite even the left’s treatment of their contribution as

⁸⁹ Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena,’ 404.

minimal or obsolete. At the same time, he sought to understand the spaces and places that contributed to the possibility of the formation of class identity, conceived of as an institution of experience or places of the formation of class consciousness/subjectivity.⁹⁰ For his part, Rancière is attuned to the sort of Fourierist schemes that inform Benjamin's conception of the transformation of the nature of work rather than theorizing liberation within the context of the drudgery of manual labour. In searching for emancipation from class society, Rancière focused on the interstitial character of working class artistic expression outside of the place of work.⁹¹ In probing these interstitial realms, neither Thompson nor Rancière aim to return to some obscure 18th century society for letters or 19th century workers' journal. Rather, they seek to represent the types of spaces which illustrated an experience that not only contributed to the formation of collective subjectivities, but which represent non-hierarchical forms of social experience. This is likewise the case in Benjamin's account of the decline of storytelling. By no means does Benjamin valorize storytelling as *the* experience par excellence, as a lost kingdom that we must return to; nor does he find modernity entirely devoid of redeeming characteristics.⁹² Rather, what interests Benjamin is the *form* of experience that storytelling exhibits: a non-identical exchange that illustrates the embodied character of intersubjective exchange. More to the point, as with the images evoked by Thompson and Rancière, the forms of storytelling that Benjamin often focuses on existed in the interstices of the pre-modern world – in the spaces of craft production, and embodied as a form of working class expression/experience – in ways that are not inherent to the overarching social body. Indeed, these were moments of intersubjective

⁹⁰ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (New York: Penguin Books 1980).

⁹¹ See both Jacques Rancière, 'The Myth of the Artisan: Critical Reflections on a Category of Social History,' *Work in France: Representations, Meaning, Organization, and Practice*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1986) and Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, (New York: Verso 2012).

⁹² Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 225-226.

experience within the artifice of larger relations of domination (not through them). As an interstitial moment, such experiences carry out a two-fold role: first, impugning the unnatural character of the current historical epoch, showing it to be contingent and capable of transformation; second, representing a failed moment of liberation that requires redemption through a dialectical confrontation between such lost moments and the claims to wholeness of the repressive present. Benjamin aims to recuperate such moments from the mutilation of history, releasing their surplus energies. The recurrent emergence of such images of experience represents the wish to transcend the relations of domination and hierarchy that stultify the senses, expressions and very existence of the oppressed. In the recurrent image of the interstitial, we find the call for the caesura that will extend this time of non-domination against the forces of progress that trample it.

Thus, on the one hand, in the dream image of the classless society, Benjamin aims to conserve experiences of moments (or attempted moments) of emancipation. Their failures to attain integral actuality necessitate their redemption. But in invoking a utopian politics or a site of utopian possibilities, Benjamin's work oscillates between the image of classless society ('Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century') and the memory of the oppressed whose experiences of classless existence failed ('On the Concept of History'). Here, we find in Benjamin's work the traces of what Abensour finds as a second site of utopia's persistence: the ethical site ("under the sign of the Encounter"⁹³). In this context, Benjamin invokes utopia as redeeming "that" which existed (a place, though an interstitial one) and "those" (as a multiplicity of subjects) that existed within these interstitial spaces across a varied temporal landscape. Simply put, it is subjects that make (and are made by) these spaces, and history requires the redemption of both. The image of utopia as lack calls for the present to alleviate the suffering of the past, through the

⁹³ Abensour, 'To Think Utopia Otherwise,' 253.

transformation of the present. This is not a return: it is the opening of a historically rooted intersubjectivity. While Benjamin proclaims the “struggling, oppressed class” to be the subject of history, this is a non-identical, dialogical subject. Indeed, in the figures of Spartacus and the members of the Spartacus league, the participants in the French Revolution and the Communards, we find fundamentally different embodiments of oppression and emancipatory experience throughout history. The recuperation of them in a new historical constellation illustrates the very lack contained in the singular moments. Redeeming and alleviating the suffering of these subjects does not imply returning to the epochs which saw them subjected to the Hegelian slaughter-bench of history, but it does require recognizing alterity and answering the ethical demands it imposes.⁹⁴ Hence, the emancipatory project that can be read in his critique of the decline of experience demands a resuscitation of the experience of the other. Simon Critchley argues that ethical experience is not the passive experience of a being-as-object or something that is imposed upon it, but a function of subjectivity. As he states, “ethical experience is an *activity* whereby new objects emerge for a subject involved in the process of their creation...Ethical experience is activity, the activity of the subject, even when that activity is the receptivity to the other’s claim upon me – it is an active receptivity.”⁹⁵ Essentially, the actions of the subject (which is to say subjectivity itself) open up new objects in the historical fold of being; and it is through the opening up or discovery of this realm of alterity that these new “objects” (i.e. historical subjects) place an ethical demand upon the present, which facilitates the active reception by, and interrogation of, the self.

⁹⁴ Benjamin, ‘Materials for the Expose of 1935,’ 912. As I noted in the previous chapter, this reading goes against Angela McRobbie’s contentions regarding the central project of the *Arcades Project*. Angela McRobbie, ‘The *Passagenwerk* and the Place of Walter Benjamin in Cultural Studies,’ 14.

⁹⁵ Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, (New York: Verso 2007), 14.

Merleau-Ponty's understanding of intersubjectivity runs parallel to this, conceiving of subjectivity as existing between subjects who jar one another from their priorly existing position to establish not only a new relation between them, but a new identity for each. Yet, as I suggested, the assumption that Merleau-Ponty's intersubjective relation merely takes place in a deterministic or automatic/smooth fashion remains problematic, and Benjamin points out the extent to which such experience is as likely to be stunted as affirmed. But in his concept of history the point is to show that at the level of history itself, such an ethical experience opens up subjects not only to transhistorical or diachronic intersubjectivity but to the temporal or synchronic alterity that is abridged in the anaesthetic character of the experience of capitalist modernity. The elision of others at both levels is the very refusal of emancipation not only for those others who are excluded, but for the historical self who is denied the very possibility of their engagement. Subjectivity, conceived as answering an ethical demand, is predicated upon the self resuscitating the excluded (taking up the ethical demands of the repressed generations of the past) for the very purposes of forming a transhistorical collective subject that can rupture the reality that excludes them.⁹⁶ Indeed, these others are never truly destroyed and their existence lurks within the recesses of memory and the world we live in, the past being likened by Benjamin to the very air we breathe. Moreover, past generations remain expectant of the coming of present generations as their potential redeemers: "there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim."⁹⁷ This weak messianic power is something that the present retains, but it is indicative of the ethical demand placed on the present by the past. Answering this

⁹⁶ Rancière, 'The Archaeomodern Turn,' 32.

⁹⁷ Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History,' 389-390.

demand requires opening up the past to the possibilities of an ethical encounter via the deconstruction of the historical object. Again, Benjamin assigns this project to historical materialism: “Historical materialism must renounce the epic element in history. It blasts the epoch out of the reified ‘continuity of history.’ But it also explodes the homogeneity of the epoch, interspersing it with ruins – that is, with the present.”⁹⁸ While this alludes to an aspect of ideology-critique reminiscent of the other members of the Frankfurt School, this form of history finds its incarnation in the practice of concrete subjects, for the very relationship of past and present is conceptualized by Benjamin in terms of the beings/subjects representing these nodal points.

V. Messianism, Time and Politics

All of this re-raises the very question of the nature of utopia for Benjamin, which in turn re-raises the meaning of “redemption.” Benjamin uses “redemption” in the context of its meaning within the Jewish messianic tradition. To unravel – or render a reading of – what he is trying to do with the concept, we may gain some insights from Benjamin’s close friend, Gersholm Scholem, and his 1932 article on ‘Kabbalah.’ Benjamin held the article in high regard,⁹⁹ and the section on “tikkun” is particularly pertinent. As Scholem recounts, the light of the infinite emanated from Adam Kadmon (“primordial man”), bringing to the world the “original design in the mind of the creator.”¹⁰⁰ Out of Adam Kadmon, vessels formed that were intended to contain the light and, originally, they were “joined together in a common vessel in accord with the ‘collectivity’ that was their structural nature.”¹⁰¹ But neither Adam Kadmon nor the vessels could contain the light, and they shattered into individual pieces. Tikkun denotes

⁹⁸ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 474.

⁹⁹ Lowy, *Fire Alarm*, 35.

¹⁰⁰ Gersholm Scholem, *Kabbalah*, (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House 1974), 140.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 138.

“the laws by which the process of cosmic restoration and reintegration works itself out”¹⁰²; or, put another way, it represents the reconstruction and redemption of the broken vessels. As Scholem is quick to point out, the redeemed figure of Adam Kadmon and the vessels is different than the original. After the breaking of the vessels, the shattered pieces take on the character of “parazufim” or faces, and become the “principal manifestations of Adam Kadmon.”¹⁰³ In essence, the breaking gives the pieces a new shape, and out of it they emerge as faces of “long suffering” engaged in a cathartic reconstruction. Within this reconstruction, the faces become “a medium for reindividuation and redifferentiation of all the emanated beings into transmitters and receivers of influx,” and the relationship between them takes on the character of “looking face-to-face,” the central characteristic of “intellectual and erotic unions.”¹⁰⁴ Within this union, a new face is born, in the form of the Ze’eir Anpin (short-faced or impatient). As Scholem explains, “The structural unity of *Ze’eir Anpin* is assured by the workings of a principle called *zelem* [image]...which involves the activity of certain lights that help serve as a constituent element in all the *parazufim* but are especially centered in *Ze’eir Anpin*.”¹⁰⁵ In the initial stages of tikkun, a spiritual light emanates, filtering out what obscures or blocks the pieces, allowing them to transition to another phase in their redemption. While illuminated, the pieces continue to exist in incorrect places. The completion of tikkun requires that the pieces be returned to their spiritual place by the inward actions of “man.” Such inward acts would enable the spiritual light to complete the outward restoration.¹⁰⁶

In reading Benjamin, Habermas and Wolin misread or misrepresent the conception of redemption, presenting it as merely the return to a primordial state (of language, for Habermas;

¹⁰² Ibid., 140.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 140.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 141.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 141.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 142-143.

of prehistorical harmony, for Wolin). As Scholem's account illustrates, *tikkun* represents something more complex than a simple return. In this vein, Lowy takes a cue from Scholem, arguing that Benjamin's use of redemption implies a return to a sublated conception of a primordial classless society. As he summarizes his version of Benjamin's redemption: "the classless society of the future – the new Paradise – is not the return pure and simple to the society of prehistory: it contains in itself, as dialectical synthesis, the whole of humanity's past."¹⁰⁷ While Lowy is closer to the intent of Benjamin's work, his description retains a certain vagueness, failing to adequately explain what is being sublated, and what constitutes utopia outside of a return at a higher level. Moreover, the idea of primitive classless society is underexplored, isolated to a scant reference to Benjamin's review of Johann Jakob Bachofen.¹⁰⁸

In treating utopia ontologically and ethically, I would point to Benjamin's use of the language of images and the interstitial character of the moments that he often cites. I would further add that Lowy's conception lacks a sufficiently dialectical conception: it counterposes merely the present moment and the primordial, where the future has somehow incorporated whatever has occurred in between. Certainly, my focus on examples such as the Paris Commune and the Spartacus League may be deemed insufficient, for they are moments that are inspired *by* the image of classless society. But we must acknowledge, in accord with the constellative/monadological principle at the center of Benjamin's work, that these moments in turn *become* dialectical images, something which Benjamin's own use of them intends to convey. For this reason, I am inclined to read the image of the classless society not as a primordial era, but as the ontological

¹⁰⁷ Lowy, *Fire Alarm*, 67. While Lowy gives this reading of Benjamin's work, he argues via a citation from Scholem that "The completely new order contains elements of the completely old one, but even this older order does not lie in the real past. It is rather a question of a past transformed and transfigured into an enlightened dream by the rays of utopia." This is entirely in keeping with my reading of the ontological site of utopia, and consistent with rejecting the rather narrow and confused readings of Benjamin given by Habermas and Wolin. See Michael Lowy, 'Jewish Messianism and Libertarian Utopia in Central Europe (1900-1933),' *New German Critique*, No. 2, Issue 2, Spring-Summer 1980, 106.

¹⁰⁸ I would suggest that it is limited in Benjamin's work to this same review.

and ethical site of utopia. Consequently, I will read Scholem's account of tikkun in a different light, one that will return me to the question of Benjamin's relationship to Marxism, only this time in its connection to theology.

In suggesting earlier that Benjamin sought to redeem Marxism, by no means was I suggesting that he turned his back on theology/messianism as some accounts would have it. Rather, Benjamin's work aims to redeem theology through Marxism, and to redeem Marxism through theology. Consequently, rather than the logical coherence of Benjamin's work being found in either the Marxist or theological strain (with the other side being an unwelcome or metaphorical intrusion) or there being an irreconcilable contradiction between the two,¹⁰⁹ the relationship between them is an intersubjective one: a dialectics at a standstill in which each mediates/constellates the other, giving it a new truth content contained in the specificity of their interconnection (but never collapsing their difference). In passing, I have hinted at some of the content of Marxism's redemption of theology in the previous chapters: Marxism profanes theology,¹¹⁰ bringing the theological-messianic realm into the world of concrete and practical history. This profaning is a politicization that demands the outward praxis and engagement of human subjects, rather than their inward action.¹¹¹ Indeed, the transcendent and metaphysical character of the theological elements in Benjamin's work is – with his encounter with Marxism – profaned and given an immanent and worldly political form. Here, too, the historicity of being is taken into account to dispense with any metaphysical abstraction that would obfuscate the temporal location of worldly being. But, while pushing in this direction, Marxism succumbs to

¹⁰⁹ Lowy suggests the three schools of Benjamin scholarship. Lowy, *Fire Alarm*, 20.

¹¹⁰ I have borrowed this phrase from McNally, who deals extensively with the issue in *Bodies of Meaning*, ch. 5.

¹¹¹ While Anson Rabinbach correctly shows that Benjamin was concerned with political issues in his early messianism, and draws into question the overnight character of his conversion to and embrace of Marxism via Lacis and Lukács, he seems to ignore the Marxian streams within the messianic anarchism of Ernst Bloch and Georges Sorel that had a formative influence on the early Benjamin. See Anson Rabinbach, 'Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern Jewish Messianism,' *New German Critique*, No. 34, Winter 1985, 115.

its own metaphysics of the worldly in the form of its dependence on the development of the productive forces and history's "natural course" – political praxis again comes to lie outside of the realm of human agency. In answer to this problem, Benjamin turns to re-theologizing Marxism to recuperate its revolutionary core.

While there are a number of avenues we might probe in understanding this, two aspects of the theologizing of Marxism are particularly relevant in connection with redemption: remembrance and messianism. In the final thesis of 'On the Concept of History,' Benjamin notes that "the Jews were prohibited from inquiring into the future: the Torah and the prayers instructed them in remembrance."¹¹² The idea of the future in the Marxist lexicon contemporary with Benjamin's writings served as a fetish: the drive for quantitative growth directed the gaze of Social Democrats squarely towards the future, and away from the past. Concomitantly, as the "idea" of the classless society was defined as an "infinite task," the practical revolutionary aspects of Marxian theory were delayed indefinitely (via an eternal return), until the conditions for revolution could develop of their own accord at some indefinite point in the future.¹¹³ By turning towards the past via remembrance, Jewish theology played the role of disenchanting the future, stripping it of its teleological character and drawing out the crisis in which the past threatens to be forgotten and oppressed (again).¹¹⁴ The Jewish concept of remembrance, and ban on the future, allowed the present to answer the ethical demand of the past by carrying on and completing (i.e. redeeming) the past; that is, it enabled the past to "make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete."¹¹⁵

¹¹² Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History,' 397.

¹¹³ Benjamin, 'Paralipomena,' 402.

¹¹⁴ Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History,' 394.

¹¹⁵ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 471.

For Benjamin, this fundamentally theological concept becomes central to historical materialism, which can now address the incompleteness of the past (its non-identical character).¹¹⁶ The incompleteness and unhappiness of the past is caught up with the incompleteness and unhappiness of the present. In these respects, Benjamin appears to be linking his theological concepts of remembrance and redemption with Lotze's conception of progress. For Lotze, progress cannot be achieved through "the unrewarded efforts and often by the misery of those who went before."¹¹⁷ Redemption as progress implies alleviating (retroactively) the suffering of the downtrodden of the past via answering the claims that the past has placed on us to realize the utopian dreams of emancipation from toil. This requires memory of the past as a moment of experience. Indeed, the very capacity for subjectivity is informed by long experience, and the struggles out of which it comes. Remembrance of struggles in the past implies the restoration of the *movement* that sought to alleviate suffering in the first place; and, from the perspective of Benjamin's conception of origins, history takes on an epicyclic nature because these threads can disappear from memory by processes of regression/repression, only to be picked up again.¹¹⁸ It is only in these terms that Benjamin can see the past as weighing on the present like a nightmare: "the idea of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the idea of redemption."¹¹⁹ The failures of the attempts at breaking with oppression and actualizing happiness instill in the present a "secret agreement" in which the present can redeem the past. Thus, the past does not exist as something divorced from the present, but as a part of the very essence of the present: it shares the breathing air, living space and very lineage of the past. And it is for this reason that

¹¹⁶ Benjamin, 'Eduard Fuchs,' 269.

¹¹⁷ Lotze, cited by Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 478-479.

¹¹⁸ The dialectic of emancipation in Benjamin's work cannot be conceived as "a series of progressive leaps," as Peter Ives contends. The entire critique of progress suggests that history is as much about regression as progression, and the notion of breaks suggests a rupturing with the very being that exists, and militates against its reduction to series or growth. See Peter Ives, *Gramsci's Politics of Language: Engaging the Bakhtin Circle and the Frankfurt School*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2004), 118.

¹¹⁹ Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History,' 389-390.

Benjamin sees the present as being “endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim.”¹²⁰

Benjamin’s notion of a messianic power and messianic time breaks with the characterization of history as homogenous, empty time, inaugurating historical time as endowed with qualitative distinctions and ever present potentialities – i.e. as a break with the ever same or the return of the same. While Marx presented revolution as a locomotive of world history, he likely did not have in mind the concept of an infinite progression through a self-same eternity. But this was how his revolutionary ideas were translated in the work of his later followers. And this in turn paved the road to the indefinite delay of revolution based on the immaturity of either the productive forces or the working class itself. By introducing messianism into Marxism, Benjamin shatters this: “every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter.”¹²¹ The very idea that the messiah may come at any second breaks with the myth of progress and acknowledges that it is in remembrance of the past – and not waiting for the future – that liberation and redemption lie. And this remembrance is not a force external to human capacities, but an ever present potentiality. It remains potential because it requires a qualitative break with the present: “Redemption depends on the tiny fissure in the continuous catastrophe.”¹²² As I stated previously, a genuine conception of progress – which is to say, the true meaning of redemption – implies a break with the existing direction of history. Pulling the handbrake of the locomotive institutes an authentic political experience of that which, otherwise, would be passed by. In interfering with the heretofore repression of the past, the new as intersubjective recognition and relation can make its appearance.¹²³ In breaking with the

¹²⁰ Ibid., 389-390.

¹²¹ Ibid., 397.

¹²² Benjamin, ‘Central Park,’ 184-185.

¹²³ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 473-474.

historical continuum, the messianic power of the present has the capacity for the redemption of the entire course of history (including the present).

In translating this into political terms, Benjamin appears to read messianism through the figure of August Blanqui, connecting his image with that of Baudelaire. What Baudelaire sought to express (the decline of experience as intersubjectivity), Blanqui sought to transcend. Indeed, Blanqui resisted the faith in progress that had marred Social Democratic thinking: “he always refused to develop plans for what comes ‘later.’”¹²⁴ What was important for Blanqui was the drive “to do away with present injustice,” or the “firm resolve to snatch humanity at the last moment from the catastrophe looming at every turn.”¹²⁵ This presents revolution as a messianic act, one that could come at any moment as a cataclysmic break with the present. It is as the ever present possibility of humanity’s emergence that theology can enable Marxism (the automaton) to win every time. But far from being a volunteerist or indeterminate form of negation, Blanqui’s messianic conception – when read through Baudelaire – represents an attempt at illustrating the coming into being of the ethical experience necessary for revolutionary subjectivity: it represents the actuality of the past, and locates the roots of subjectivity in the actualization of the past. Here, the break with the present represents a sublation of continuity and discontinuity. Revolutionary messianism aims to break with the oppression and exclusion of the present, in order to establish the continuity of the present with that which has been excluded: it breaks with what is purported to be “complete” (happiness, emancipation) in order to re-inaugurate the movement that seeks their completion. Redemption in these terms entails the resurrection of the since disappeared traces of the past (subjects and objects), and the recuperation of their revolutionary project. Hence, in looking towards the past with indignation

¹²⁴ Benjamin, ‘Central Park,’ 188; Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 339.

¹²⁵ Benjamin, ‘Central Park,’ 188; Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 339.

at the class character of society, the Blanquist project wishes to save the past and the present from the inevitable and indefinite sacrifices that would purportedly serve the purposes of the future. This can only be established through the determinate character of the non-identical elements that have existed throughout the historical continuum – that is through their excavation and retention in an institution of experience.¹²⁶ Revolution and redemption are only possible in the context of the determinate character of the past.¹²⁷

In this context, we can turn to re-reading Scholem's conception of *tikkun* through Benjaminian lenses. The breaking of the vessels represents not the primitive experience of classless society, but the primordial character of the ontological place of utopia as lack. Certainly, this account involves the idea of society as fallen, but it sees – as Benjamin's angel of history does – *all* of history as catastrophe. In borrowing from Merleau-Ponty, this posits originary belonging as an ontological, not an historical, reality and demands the bringing into being of intersubjective relations. Dreams of emancipation emerge from the latent, interstitial moments that seek to create emancipation. The idea of the breaking of the vessels allows for the monadological “reindividuation and redifferentiation” (which is to say fragmentation and de-centering) of the various moments (both subjects and objects) of history. This breaks with the concept of totality contained in Lukács' philosophy of history, and rejects the idea of a total subject or object of history.¹²⁸ The subject of history exists within history, and it exists within it as a differentiated and fragmented being, formed in the hinge of the being of multiple beings. In

¹²⁶ I find Tiedmann's argument that Benjamin regresses into a volunteerist anti-politics negligent: it ignores that the conditions of possibility for political praxis lie in the determinate character of the emergence of an institution of experience – as the resurrection of the tradition of the oppressed. In ignoring this, and missing the ontological character of the place of utopia (i.e. that it is not the end of history), Tiedmann inexplicably regresses into the very concept of progress (waiting for the development of productive forces) that Benjamin rejects. See Rolf Tiedmann, ‘Historical materialism or Political Messianism? An Interpretation of the Theses ‘On the Concept of History,’” *Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics*, ed. Gary Smith, (Chicago: University of Chicago 1989), 200-201.

¹²⁷ See in particular, Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 402, 473; Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History,’ 391.

¹²⁸ McNally notes that Benjamin never fully adopted this aspect of Lukács' work. See McNally, *Bodies of Meaning*, 173.

essence, the single catastrophe of history creates the oppressed as a fragmented/dialogical being, experiencing oppression and lack in various incarnations. The looking face to face of the long-suffering is the moment of dialogical intersubjectivity which can shatter the monological character of universal history: the creation of the individuated faces creates the very possibility of erotic and intellectual (or solidaristic) unions. The present comes to represent the face of the impatient one, who awaits the emergence of the images of the past to hold open the possibility of tikkun. The messianic element is contained in the idea that the flash of light that will illuminate the parts can emerge at any moment. But Benjamin gives this theological rendering of redemption a Marxist coloring by conceiving of redemption as only possible through the outward praxis of human subjects. Revolutionary praxis seeks to establish the redemption of the fragmented being whose coming together has existed only in the utopian dreams that resist incorporation into the narrative of progress. Revolution entails the heralding of the emaciated subjects of the past to the table of history, allowing them to have a say in their own emancipation/redemption of the structure of history via the transformation of the present. To the extent that “origin is the goal,” things do not return to an original place but to the origin of a process/movement that was defeated: it is a process of messianically redeeming (as continuing on) what was cut short and disappeared behind the epicyclic character of historical movement.

While this is not a return, it is a looking backwards which aims to avoid the very dialectic of emancipation which sees each new generation trampled under the foot of progress and time. Because knowledge of history is only possible within historical moments, and because the oppressed class is the subject of historical knowledge as the confirmation of its non-identity, we should read the realization of knowledge in the messianic cessation as something akin to the continually deferred realization that Merleau-Ponty saw in the situation of the right hand

touching the left hand. The very fragmented being of the oppressed within history defies its closure and realization in an end of history. Indeed, it is only in the realm of the ontological site of utopia – something akin to the messianic realm of “universal and integral actuality,” the only place where universal history exists¹²⁹ – that such a realization can exist as completion. But in the realm of profane existence, caught up in the fragmentation of being and time, the completion of historical being or knowledge remains an impossibility. This problem is drawn out in the proclamation that the present fails to touch all moments of the past equally.¹³⁰ In the flow of time, as the present becomes past it also becomes capable of being marred by catastrophe. Within the “displacement of vision” affected by the rising up of the negative, the positive comes into play as “something different from that previously signified.”¹³¹ But this is a process of persistent incorporation, for it occurs “ad infinitum, until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocatastasis.”¹³²

As Anson Rabinbach suggests of the messianic tradition from which Benjamin emerged, the concept of redemption is not “immanent” to history: it is not “an event produced by history” in a deterministic, evolutionary/reformist or progressive fashion. Rather, it is a radical, apocalyptic break conceived of “as the *end of history* or as an event *within history*”¹³³ Within Benjamin’s work, given that historical movement occurs within time and comes via the attempt to transcend the lack identified through the ontological site of utopia that can never be transcended/realized, this redemption/apocatastasis represents a continually deferred moment of realization, defying any conception of the end of history. The concept of the end of history is intimately tied to the concept of homogenous, empty time, which is at odds with historical time.

¹²⁹ Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena,’ 404.

¹³⁰ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 470.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 459.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 459.

¹³³ Rabinbach, ‘Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse,’ 85-86.

Historical time is characterized by the persistence of the apocatastasis, a persistence still subject to the conditions of authentic experience, which is caught up in time, uniqueness, memory and actualization – all conceived of as active phenomenon. Thus, rather than being merely an arrested moment,¹³⁴ it is a moment that arrests the time of progress (devoid of change or meaning) opening up a qualitatively different kind of time,¹³⁵ one attuned to the uniqueness and activity of intersubjective experience as a time of giving new meaning to the world – that is, a time of politics that is itself capable of regression back into empty, homogenous time.¹³⁶ Likewise, this is not merely the destruction of “tradition,” but the emergence and creation of a new tradition: the tradition of the oppressed as the creation of a time and place (the caesurae) of their intersubjective meeting/being. Historical time cannot thus be conceived as a time of eternal sameness, but only as the continual affirmation of the genuine political experience that emerges via dialectical images and the political experience of history/alterity. Thus, as Benjamin states, “The eternal lamp is an image of genuine historical existence. It cites what has been – the flame that once was kindled – in perpetuum, giving it ever new sustenance.”¹³⁷ In keeping the past alive, the present must maintain a continual dialogue with the emaciated spectres of the past, to avoid committing the crime of forgetting and trampling the past yet again. In a sense, then, Benjamin separates the messianic/classless from historical time, for the former presupposes the end or annihilation of the latter. Indeed, the concept of the end of history is intimately tied to the idea of the “revolutionary situation” and to the end of historical development. In returning to classless society its “messianic face,” Benjamin is alluding to the messianic as that which can

¹³⁴ The critique that the arrested moment is an end of history is rendered by Suvin, ‘The Arrested Moment in Benjamin’s “Theses,”’ 190-192.

¹³⁵ Lowy, ‘Jewish Messianism and Libertarian Utopia,’ 108; Peter Osborne, ‘Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin’s Politics of Time,’ *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, (Manchester: Clinamen Press 2000).

¹³⁶ In terms of time, we need to differentiate capitalist clock-time (with its linearity) from other forms of temporality (such as epicyclodic).

¹³⁷ Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena,’ 407.

come at any given moment, and that which maintains its existence as the ontological site of utopia. In this vein, the messianic/classless is not something determined in advance but something that comes about through the process of its own coming into being through time. In these respects, every day engages in the simultaneous assessment of the present and in the concept of the messianic/classless society. This allows for the genuine engagement with the past, rather than the “information”-like accumulation of facts about it. By furnishing this critical relation, Benjamin transforms the everyday and historical encounter into the Day of Judgement: “Every moment is a moment of judgement concerning certain moments that preceded it.”¹³⁸ Or, put another way, we find that every moment seeks a higher face of actuality – a higher phase of the realization of the liberation that continually evades it. This persistent judgement becomes necessary because of the very transiency of time itself, but it likewise locates liberation in the arrest of time and the coming into being in which all of the moments of historical experience can be grasped in their totality: “only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments.”¹³⁹

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[XVIIa] ...the historical materialist determines the presence of a messianic force in history. Whoever wishes to know what the situation of a “redeemed humanity” might actually be, what conditions are required for the development of such a situation, and when this development can be expected to occur, poses questions to which there are no answers.¹⁴⁰

-Walter Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History”’

Benjamin’s work illustrates and transcends two interconnected flaws in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh (and its concomitant theory of intersubjectivity). In the first place, the flesh and intersubjectivity cannot be treated as completely abstract: we must understand them in their concrete, historical incarnations. In the process of treating them historically, we find that far

¹³⁸ Ibid., 407.

¹³⁹ Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History,’ 390.

¹⁴⁰ Benjamin, ‘Paralipomena,’ 402.

from pre-existing, intersubjectivity and human community are created through the innervation of ethical experiences which emerge in the face of (or against) their elision. As Chapter 3 argued, in the context of capitalist modernity the anaesthetization of bodily experience short circuits the flow of the flesh, interiorizing and dulling sensuous capacities. The innervation of intersubjective experience is consequently denied, and the alterity that is central to subjectivity-as-intersubjectivity is ultimately cut off. But, as I sought to show in Chapters 2 and 4, this experience of the elision of alterity likewise exists at the level of history, where it can also be broken. By resurrecting and redeeming the past as “objects” and “subjects” that are repressed in the collective memory, Benjamin seeks to explode the continuum of history in opening us via the alterity of the past and present to an alterity of the future.¹⁴¹ But this is not a simple conservative/reactionary return. Rather, it is a historical opening that seeks to redeem the past and present by transforming the very being/meaning of both. Indeed, redemption is an intersubjective collision, much like the experience of storytelling, which transforms (in accordance with the non-identical depth of the world of things and being) those beings that come into contact with one another. Moreover, redemption is a process of resurrecting the interstitial places and subjects that were annihilated by the victors of history, who sought to impose the identity of their own being upon the oppressed. By excavating the past, Benjamin sees the means to drawing into action the image of the classless society and the transcendence of the present via a constellation of historical subjects.

¹⁴¹ In these respects, Suvin’s argument (in ‘The Arrested Moment in Benjamin’s “Theses”’) that Benjamin lacks a positive conception of the subject and future, while superficially correct, misses that it is the historical redemption via intersubjectivity that opens the future/utopia. Thus, the non-identical subject (the oppressed) opens the way to a future even if these terms defy definition: the image of utopia is itself non-identical and hence non-thematizable and not fixed. Osborne, in a weaker and more poignant critique in the same vein, suggests the need to further theorize the subject (the dreaming collective) that exists in Benjamin’s work. Osborne, ‘Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats,’ 90. In taking Osborne’s critique further in the following chapters, I implicitly suggest this is more a matter of theorizing the (inter)subjectivity necessary for bringing Benjamin’s work to full political import.

The question of the character or nature of an emancipated humanity (as well as the specifics of emancipatory praxis) poses something of a gap or absence in Benjamin's work.¹⁴² This is not to say that Benjamin lacks a theory of praxis. He is centrally concerned with the notion of historical rupture, and the break with the reigning unfreedom and unhappiness that are created via the oppressive structures of capitalist modernity. Moreover, he is concerned to theorize forms of reason and language that can break with these very structures. But, more often than not in his work, this sort of praxis exists only as an insurgent *moment*: as the impulse for emancipation, which can emerge in the moments of collective memory and their transformations into praxis. Even his focus on the interstitial moments of utopian experience are limited to their momentary existence, or the flitting by of their image. The regression into the assertion that a positive optic for critical theory is a taboo is politically insufficient, and Benjamin's work hints at ways of transcending its silences. The injection of messianism into historical materialism constituted a break with the concept of progress towards the revolutionary situation, positing every moment as the moment in which the messiah (or messianic) may come. Moreover, in abiding by the Jewish prohibition on looking towards the future, Benjamin is not concerned with creating an abstract and identitarian utopian construct that would be imposed on the world. Rather, the concepts of remembrance and redemption instruct us to look to the past as a means to opening up a future. For Benjamin, this entails understanding the character of the interstitial moments of emancipatory experience – be they in storytelling or the insurgence of the Paris Commune – neither as merely epistemological contours of historical understanding¹⁴³ nor so we

¹⁴² From varying perspectives, this is the critique rendered by Suvin, 'The Arrested Moment in Benjamin's "Theses,"' Habermas, 'Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism,' and Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin*, 176. While there is perhaps some truth to this critique, it underplays the political import of Benjamin's concept of history which is not just an epistemology, but a phenomenology of history: it seeks to explain how we do, and should, perceive/experience history (including as anaesthetic/amnesiac misrecognition).

¹⁴³ Suvin, 'The Arrested Moment in Benjamin's "Theses."'

can return to them¹⁴⁴ but so that we can extend the types of intersubjective experience and action that they brought into being. These moments of the caesura are ones in which emancipation came to the fore through new ways of being.

While Benjamin is quick to mention the flitting up of the interstitial – or its image – his work fails to adequately theorize what it is that takes place in the vacuum of the arrest of time, in the moments of ethical and intersubjective experience and praxis as a new form of time (vis-à-vis the eternal recurrence of progress). As Peter Osborne says of this contour of Benjamin's thought: "Revolutionary political action is evoked, but it is never actually thought."¹⁴⁵ Specifically, what needs to be thought are the roots of the utopian/revolutionary impulse, and the political nature of such a utopian/revolutionary construct beyond the merely emergent or insurgent break with historical progress. But this should not be taken as a means to dismissing even the possibility of the existence of a positive political optic latent within his work. In order to overcome these un-thought elements and to construct a politics out of the gaps in Benjamin's work, the following two chapters move away from our being tied to his "authenticity" and read him in a constellative relationship that can bring to fruition a political concept that is attuned to his concerns – and one that can be transformed in accordance with Benjamin's concerns. With the critical acumen we have attained through the exploration of the historical character of the relations of intersubjectivity (and their elision) in Benjamin's work, we can return to theorizing the moment of emancipation/politics through Merleau-Ponty's work.

¹⁴⁴ Habermas, 'Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism' and Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*.

¹⁴⁵ Osborne, 'Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats,' 89.

Chapter 5

The Bio-Phenomenological Invariant of the Zoon Utopicus: Nature, Capacity/Potential, Ethics

“The content of the global movement which ever since the Seattle revolt has occupied (and redefined) the public sphere is nothing less than human nature. The latter constitutes the arena of struggle and its stakes.”¹

-Paolo Virno, ‘Natural-Historical Diagrams.’

“When I met him on the stairs, Salamano was busy swearing at his dog. He was saying, ‘Filthy, lousy animal!’ and the dog was whimpering. I said, ‘Good evening,’ but the old man went on swearing. So I asked him what the dog had done. He didn’t answer. He just went on saying, ‘Filthy, lousy animal!’...I asked him again a bit louder. Then, without turning round, he answered with a sort of suppressed fury, ‘He’s always there.’”²

-Albert Camus, *The Outsider*

In reading Benjamin through Merleau-Ponty, I placed the theory of intersubjectivity at the center of Benjamin’s interrogation of capitalist experience. Thus, Benjamin offered a critical theory of society that illustrated the mortification of human experience, and consequently the exploitation and reification of intersubjective capacities – what I referred to as the elision of alterity. This complicates the far too common tendency in Merleau-Ponty’s work to treat bodily experience in a positive fashion or intersubjectivity as a simple fact that emerges without conflict or complication in mundane activities and devoid of a specifically political import. Yet, the problem posed by critical theory’s interrogation of society through the spectre of domination and the elision of subjectivity risks obfuscating the possibilities of emancipation as a political concept.³ Benjamin’s later work begins to go beyond this paradox, positing the utopian possibilities of an ethical inter/subjectivity at the level of history. Yet, if his work fails to fully

¹ Paolo Virno, ‘Natural-Historical Diagrams: The “New Global” Movement and the Biological Invariant,’ *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2009, 92.

² Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, (trans.) Joseph Laredo, (London: Penguin Books 2000), 31.

³ While he makes no particular reference to Merleau-Ponty in his discussion, Miguel Abensour suggests the opposition between the political and critical paradigms. Miguel Abensour, ‘Philosophie politique critique et émancipation,’ *Politique et Sociétés*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2003.

theorize a positive political or ethical optic,⁴ then I want to return to Merleau-Ponty in order to begin developing this, while retaining Benjamin's insights. Benjamin imposes two necessary conditions or challenges: first, to incorporate the critical interrogation of capitalist experience, and its affects on the body; second, to begin thinking a utopian politics that might transcend or negate this dystopian universe. In uniting these demands, we can say that the insights Benjamin injects call for a theorization of the body as containing a utopian, ethical capacity, but one that also acknowledges dystopian possibilities.

To move in this direction, I want to draw on a provocative claim Paul Ricoeur makes regarding Merleau-Ponty's work: "To understand the term 'capacity' correctly, we must return to Merleau-Ponty's 'I can' and extend it from the physical to the ethical level."⁵ Merleau-Ponty utilizes the notion of the "I can" (or "I am able to") to denote an "order of instructive spontaneity,"⁶ rooted in the corporeal capacities of the body. However, I want to refute Ricoeur's claim, showing that Merleau-Ponty's bodily "I can" is indicative of an ethical capacity, and thus the ground for a theory of utopian intersubjectivity. Ricoeur is correct to link the "I can" in Merleau-Ponty's work to a physical level, for it is a function of the corporeal schema conceived as a psychophysical order. Yet, it is at this level that Merleau-Ponty suggests that the corporeal schema exhibits "a *natural* rooting of the for-other."⁷ The corporeal schema is exactly what Ricoeur claims it is not: an ethical "I can" constitutive of a utopian capacity – though one that can also be abridged because it is rooted in openness and desire. The idea of the

⁴ For an account that directs this critique specifically at Benjamin, see David Michael Levin, 'The embodiment of the categorical imperative: Kafka, Foucault, Benjamin, Adorno and Levinas,' *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2001, 9-10. For an account that suggests this as a general problem for the Frankfurt School, see Asher Horowitz, *Ethics at a Standstill: History and Subjectivity in Levinas and the Frankfurt School*, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 2008).

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992), 181.

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'On the Phenomenology of Language,' *Signs*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1964), 97.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2003), 210.

body as a “capacity” or “potential” is key: the for-the-other is not something that is pre-existent, or pre-formed. That is to say, though we are always-already “social” this sociality is not necessarily of the order of intersubjectivity or the ethical. And, yet, intersubjectivity and the ethical retain the possibility of rupturing their elision via a resistant, utopian political capacity.

While Chapter 1 outlined the contours of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh in terms of an ontology of the social, we now need to turn to the import of the flesh for a body-politics, particularly in the face of Benjamin’s contribution. Centrally, this re-thinking calls for a re-phenomenologizing of the flesh in developing a theory of the utopian body, but in a manner that acknowledges the body’s double belonging to the world of utopian and dystopian possibilities. In providing such a reading, I draw on the work of Paolo Virno and Miguel Abensour. Working via a biopolitical approach, Virno explores the realm of political praxis as a function of the political struggle over the “bios.” In these respects, he posits a potential transformation of human nature via a re-opening of the potential at the roots of the human animal. In conjunction with this, I draw on Abensour’s description of utopia as rooted in an ethical site that emerges from the encounter with the other, which entails the transformation of the relations contained between people, inaugurating an intersubjective order that breaks with the autarchy of the self in re-opening alterity as a perennial/persistent project. Reading Merleau-Ponty in the context of these insights brings a greater political nuance to latent elements in his work. Conceptualizing what I refer to as the bio-phenomenological invariant, we must begin by recognizing the radical indeterminacy, openness and depth at the roots of his ontology. Far from being a simple, positive ontology, “brute being” represents a constant, militant break with the given via the latent potential contained in human corporeity. Moreover, through an esthesiological analysis of the body, we find the ontology of the flesh describing an originary openness to being and the other –

the assertion that, like Salamano's dog, the other is always there. While this manifests itself as an originary sociality (or capacity for solidarity), given the paradoxical nature of desire, it becomes embodied in particular forms of relations – including those which reify and elide the being/alterity of the other. The utopian capacity found in this line of thought lies in theorizing the means through which we can contact and re-open the primordial capacities contained in human corporeity – our primordial capacity for sociality and solidarity. The re-emergence of this radical indeterminacy is the opening of a political and ethical project.

I. Points of Departure: Bios, Politics, Utopia

One of the goals of biopolitics has been to return to the bios and body as political concepts. In doing so, its innovation lies in seeing the bios (or human nature) as a site of political struggle⁸ – as increasingly subject to the intrusions of political mechanisms and control. As we saw with Benjamin, the body/bios has become a central site of capitalist exploitation: within the production process, “labour-power” is contained within the human bios, as the conglomeration of corporeal capacities, and utilized for the purposes of the production of surplus-value; and, in daily experience, our intersubjective capacity is likewise subjected to an anaesthetization process that saps it of the capacity for sensuous engagement and ethical experiences. Yet, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri suggest, resistance has perhaps been underexplored in biopolitical theory. They trace this to an inconsistency or ambiguity in Michel Foucault's own usage of biopower (“as the power over life”) and biopolitics (“the power of life to resist and determine an alternative production of subjectivity”).⁹ While this inconsistency or ambiguity remains latent in Foucault's work, it has morphed into a lack of insight into the

⁸ Paolo Virno, ‘On Multitude and Beyond: An Interview with Paolo Virno,’ *Cultural Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2014, 223.

⁹ Maurizio Lazzarato also notes the duality of these terms in Foucault's work, though sees more of a positive resolution between them or an affirmation of resistance. See Lazzarato, ‘From Biopower to Biopolitics,’ *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, No. 13, 2002.

processes of subjectification/resistance in latter day incarnations of biopolitics. For Hardt and Negri, the emancipatory potentials of biopolitics must be understood through “the creation of new subjectivities that are presented at once as resistance and de-subjectification.” This would recuperate the original Foucauldian intention which “aimed not merely at an empirical description of how power works for and through subjects but also at the potential for the production of alternative subjectivities, thus designating a distinction between qualitatively different forms of power.”¹⁰ This suggests that resistance denotes a complex interconnection between bios and history as an “event”: simultaneously, as a rupture with the existing order and as an innovative transformation of the nature of life.

Such a re-conceptualization of biopolitics as political praxis emerges in Virno’s resuscitation of the concept of human nature as a site of struggle. Rather than discussing the specific traits, drives or instincts of human nature, Virno is concerned with what he refers to as the “biological invariant.” To explain this concept, he posits a question that attempts to theorize the revolutionary contours of biological transformation and the biological contours of revolutionary transformation: “can human beings *experience* human nature?”¹¹ This effectively asks whether humans can experience the conditions (or innate characteristics) that make experience possible in the first place: “‘human nature’ effectively denotes the ensemble of innate dispositions that guarantee the very possibility of perceiving phenomena, to be emotionally involved, to act and discourse.”¹² In providing an affirmative answer to the question, Virno explicitly rejects the treatment of the biological invariant as a non-accessible, transcendental

¹⁰ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 2009), 56-59.

¹¹ Virno, ‘Natural-Historical Diagrams,’ 93. Although I focus below on ‘Natural-Historical Diagrams,’ much of my reading of this essay is informed by Virno’s other works. See in particular, Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2004) and Paolo Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2008).

¹² Virno, ‘Natural-Historical Diagrams,’ 94.

subjectivity. Rather, he suggests that the invariant retains the determinate characteristic of indeterminacy or openness. In theorizing our access to the invariant, Virno turns to the “natural-historical,” which “consists in demonstrating that the conditions of possibility of human praxis possess a peculiar empirical counterpoint. In other words, there are contingent phenomena which reproduce point-by-point the inner structure of the transcendental presupposition. Besides being their foundation, the ‘eternal’ exposes itself, as such, in such and such a given socio-political state of affairs.”¹³ Essentially, the invariant and its empirical counterpoints possess a relationship of non-identical reversibility in which, at various moments, each exposes the other. In utilizing the metaphor of a map, he suggests: “The map is the diagram of a territory, part of which is constituted by the diagram of that territory, part of which...to infinity.”¹⁴ The relationship posited here is not causal, but co-constitutive and reversible. Human nature exposes and experiences itself when contingent historical events offer a map or diagram of those very invariant capacities – when events expose the conditions of possibility of the anthropogenetic process – and vice versa.

The openness of human nature resists positing natural-historical diagrams as the emergence of an essentialist nature. Indeed, the very core of human nature lies in potentiality as “a deficit of presence,”¹⁵ something that is constitutive of temporality itself. As Virno point out, actuality has a dual meaning, denoting “what is in act” or in the process of being, as well as “what is present.” The first represents a statement of realization or actualization, while the second denotes the temporality of the present. The “inactual” carries with it a mirror duality, denoting a temporal statement (the “not-now” or “not present”) and a statement of the non-actual

¹³ Ibid., 94.

¹⁴ Ibid., 95.

¹⁵ Ibid., 95.

or non-realized as “something potential.”¹⁶ Biological potentiality lies in the language faculty (the capacity for speech divorced from the specificities of given linguistic systems), “instinctual non-specialization” (the organism’s incomplete character), neoteny (the retention of earlier phases of phylogenetic development – their non-adaptation to socio-cultural control) and, by virtue of the first three, the lack of a circumscribed or univocal environment. All of this represents the non-presence of the human organism as an orientation towards disorientation: the human being is always potential and incomplete. The various manifestations of potential in acts are only their temporal coming into being, which do not represent the essence of potential itself: while complimentary, potential and act retain a heterogeneity that is tantamount to the relationship between the capacity for speech and particular incarnations of speech.¹⁷ Outside of all essentialisms, Virno thus conceives of the invariant as rooted in biological capacities, which are not predetermined but remain in *potentia* and in perpetuity. These capacities are the raw material of human experience that come to the fore only via their historical opening and re-opening as *potential/capacity*. At the same time, the social and political creation of pseudo-environments produces an order by the imposition of repetitive and predictable behaviours that act to stabilize this indeterminate being – they limit the possibilities that the openness of the biological invariant entails. Yet, this is coupled with the lack of a univocal environment “in which to insert oneself with innate expertise once and for all” that characterizes the political counterpoint of the biological invariant.¹⁸ This makes human beings “dangerous” animals: they are subject to a state of insecurity and displacement.

¹⁶ Paolo Virno, ‘L’azione innovativa: L’animale umano e la logica del cambiamento,’ lecture at the Fondazione Collegio San Carlo di Modena, October 7, 2011. Translated as ‘The difficulty of saying “no”’ by Arianna Bove. Available at http://www.generation-online.org/p/fp_virno14.htm

¹⁷ On Virno’s understanding of potential, see Brett Neilson, ‘Potenza Nuda? Sovereignty, Biopolitics, Capitalism,’ *Contretemps*, 5, 2004.

¹⁸ Virno, ‘Natural-Historical Diagrams,’ 97.

The point of Virno's natural history is to extract or collect "the social and political events in which the human animal is put into direct relation with metahistory, that is with the unmodifiable constitution of the species."¹⁹ This occurs when the maps of human nature begin to portray or illustrate the non-identity of the empirical and its invariant counterpoints – when we "portray the absence of a univocal environment."²⁰ More particularly, we find this emerging when non-specialization emerges as the assertion of the growth of instinctual capacities rather than their contraction, reification or repression, and when neoteny re-asserts the incomplete transformation or utilization of capacities in the given social environment. When this occurs the "always already" of the human organism (indeterminacy, openness, potential) returns "for a moment to the 'primal scene' of the anthropogenetic process."²¹ Here, we experience the most vivid diagrams of human nature, but often times these diagrams are closed via the cultural re-writing or re-imposition of a pseudo-environment that contains "the inarticulate and chaotic *dynamis*" (i.e. potential) at the roots of the human animal. The fundamental political point lies in elaborating a theory of action predicated upon praxis as a contingent re-opening or re-appropriation of the anthropogenetic process outside of all determinism and oppressive harnessing of this potential (e.g. the commodification of labour power or the reification of being generally). The bio-potential of human nature becomes the arena of political struggle, though this exhibits the ambiguity or neutrality under which these potentials can be a source of further oppression or a form of emancipation. Leaving this ambiguity aside, Virno describes the emergence of the invariant as "a full *historical*, phenomenological, empirical display of the ontological condition of the human animal...It is as if the root has risen to the surface, finally revealing itself to the naked eye." This would constitute "a fundamental biological configuration

¹⁹ Ibid., 98.

²⁰ Ibid., 98.

²¹ Ibid., 99.

which becomes a historically determined way of being, ontology revealing itself phenomenologically.”²²

In relating the biological to political action (or in turning the biological into a site of political action), Virno veers towards intersecting the biological invariant and utopia in describing this as a physiological distancing from the eternal present, in the service of opening a political alterity. This is an opening of alterity that shows the inactual/potential that the present represses or exploits.²³ The utopian contours of biopolitics also emerge in his suggestion of the need for natural history to intersect with a political ethics,²⁴ in paving the way for entirely new forms of subjectivity that would include an exodus from state and capitalist power relations. Against the reifying effects of the capitalist exploitation of human capacities, this would require political action to institute an ethical way of life – an ethical transformation of human nature and human creation, in the production of being-together via a we-centric and intersubjective sphere. This dovetails with Hardt and Negri’s understanding of biopolitical subjectification as including “the invention of new forms of the relation to the self and others.”²⁵ Here, the very openness of human nature is re-opened via forms of political action that seek to create new possibilities of human action, and consequently human interaction.

Drawing on this, I want to begin thinking the possible connection between biopolitics and utopia, in conceptualizing Merleau-Ponty’s “I can” as a politico-ethical capacity. To do this, Miguel Abensour’s analysis of utopia is key. For Abensour, the fundamental core of utopian thought lies in “the orientation toward what is different, the wish for the advent of a radical

²² Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 98.

²³ Virno, ‘L’azione innovativa: L’animale umano e la logica del cambiamento.’

²⁴ Virno, ‘Natural-Historical Diagrams,’ 103.

²⁵ Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 58.

alterity here and now.”²⁶ Persistent utopia emerges from the recognition of the need to preserve this alterity even in the process of striving for utopia, and in the face of utopia’s persistent reversion into dystopia/domination. In light of Virno’s work, we might deem the preservation of persistent utopia as the need to preserve the very potential – including the temporality rooted in potential – at the root of the human animal. Consequently, rather than being a permanent “one off” that would allegedly realize humanity for eternity, persistent utopia represents a permanent attempt to achieve the realization of the indeterminate (pure potential), and by virtue of this impossibility the permanent alternation between fulfillment and defeat, between the opening and re-opening of the utopian desire/capacity. In this sense, the end of utopia is always also its beginning, “the ever-reborn movement toward something indeterminate.”²⁷

As we saw, Abensour suggests that this persistence emerges from an ontological and an ethical site. Building on the insights from biopolitics, the bios becomes the meta-site in which the ontological and ethical sites of utopia are themselves located: by virtue of its potential being, which is never exhausted by particular incarnations, the human bios is always capable of “other” deployments and incarnations of its capacities, both utopian and dystopian. The possibility of this alterity as a re-subjectification is central to Abensour’s conceptualization of utopia. Persistent utopia “designates a stubborn impulse toward freedom and justice – the end of domination, of relations of servitude, and of relations of exploitation.”²⁸ In the face of dystopia, this would entail a transformation of the very conditions of possibility of human interactions, by way of intersubjective creation: a rupturing with the mass-monadic and anonymous being that permeates modernity via a collective action that retains the *écart* (the perennial gap that precludes totalization) that is the very essence of alterity. Utopia, as an an-archic rupturing of

²⁶ Miguel Abensour, ‘Persistent Utopia,’ *Constellations*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2008, 207.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 207.

the reigning forms of interaction and power, would thus represent “a transformation of the power in potential to act in concert: it signifies the passage from power *over* human beings to power *with* and *between* human beings, the *between* being the place where the possibility of a common world is won.”²⁹ In a sense, utopia denotes the attempt at instituting an intersubjective space against the autarchy of individual being. As an-archic action, this would both rupture the reigning political order (with its forms of subjectivity and power) and represent a turning (away) towards an ethical form of subjectivity that retains the element of alterity, and thus refuses the movement towards a politics of closure/essentialism.

II. The Bio-Phenomenological Invariant

While Merleau-Ponty does not develop a specifically biopolitical theory of the body,³⁰ Roberto Esposito suggests the ability to take Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the flesh beyond his own conceptualization. Indeed, the central contribution of the flesh lies in turning the body outward, towards exteriority/externality, and thus situating the flesh “environmentally.” By positing body and world as located in the hinge of one another, the flesh suggests the political character inscribed in the body’s being: it is partially constituted by the world which it is “in” and “of.” Moreover, if the body-as-flesh is the seat of the bios’ fundamental capacities (for motility, sense, speech, etc), we should recall Virno’s assertion that capitalism – as the historical conjuncture that founds biopolitics – is a particular mode of the consumption/production of subjectivity as a modality of bodily potentiality. That is to say, capitalism is a specific mobilization of the sensuous capacities and potentials attached to human existence.³¹ Esposito’s

²⁹ Miguel Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, (Cambridge: Polity Press 2011), 96-96.

³⁰ My biopolitical reading of Merleau-Ponty – focused centrally on *The Visible and the Invisible* and *Nature* – provides a different, though not irreconcilable, reading than Todd May’s, which is based on *Phenomenology of the Perception*. See May, ‘Living the Biopolitical: Body and Resistance in Foucault and Merleau-Ponty,’ *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, Vol. 36, Issue 1, 2015.

³¹ Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 81-84.

account of Merleau-Ponty shows how he contributes to escaping the silence on the resistant elements of the bios. This begins with the hyperdialectical rejection of the body's self-sameness via the assertion of its internal and external fragmentation (including its intersubjective/outward orientation). This directly confronts the unitary, totalitarian body's attempts to close the body on itself against the alterity of the outside; against this, the flesh opens the possibility of breaking any attempt to contain the bios' dynamic qualities.³²

While Esposito offers only a brief gesture in thinking Merleau-Ponty's potential contribution to biopolitics, I want to take this further through a reading of Merleau-Ponty's third lecture, entitled 'Nature and Logos: The Human Body,' from his course notes from the College de France on *Nature* and his 'Working Notes' for *The Visible and the Invisible*. The courses on *Nature* seek to re-animate the biological or "natural" features that inform the corporeality of the body. His 'Working Notes' indicate the centrality of such a project for his turn to ontology: "Necessity of a return to ontology -- the ontological question and its ramifications: the subject-object question[;] the question of inter-subjectivity[;] the question of Nature[.] Outline of ontology projected as an ontology of brute Being – and of logos...Plan for Part One: to see (by immanent analysis) what 'Nature' has become – and *consequently* life – and consequently man as psycho-physical subject."³³ In this brief description, Merleau-Ponty discloses that his ontology is caught up with concerns about nature, and that he is concerned to understand the "nature" of the human body and of human life. The lectures – which begin to develop, in embryo, the flesh – enclose the body in a bio-natural world, but one removed from the dualistic binaries that clouded western thought. This links up with the project of biopolitics in a manner

³² Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2008), 159-162. See also, Roberto Esposito, 'Interview [with Timothy Campbell],' *Diacritics*, Vol. 36, No. 2, Summer 2006, 52.

³³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Working Notes,' *The Visible and the Invisible*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1968), 165-166.

that can politicize Merleau-Ponty's thought. The lectures – in concert with the 'Working Notes' to *The Visible and the Invisible* – offer a means to applying the later, general ontology of the flesh to the body, in reconceptualising elements of human (inter)subjectivity in a biopolitical context and offer a means to situating the political import of brute or savage being in potentiality, particularly as a utopian potential that holds out the possibility of breaking with the power over life, via the power of life to re-create the conditions of its own possibility. Read through Virno and Abensour, Merleau-Ponty offers a phenomenological and biological account of solidarity and ethical capacities rooted in the potentiality of the body's phenomenal and esthesiological being. This might be viewed as akin to Virno's idea of political praxis as "ontology revealing itself phenomenologically": the ontology of intersubjectivity is represented as merely a capacity that comes into being phenomenally, via particular incarnations of this potential/capacity. Hence, the body contains a primordial quality that resists closure, and can thus rupture established being via a neotynic return that re-opens the very capacity for the production of intersubjectivity. But, to do this, we need to begin by showing the body-as-flesh as rooted simultaneously in indeterminacy and potentiality, as well as invariance and transformation.

We can start charting this path by re-christening Virno's biological invariant in Merleau-Ponty's terms as the bio-phenomenological invariant. By bio-phenomenological invariant, I mean to suggest that Merleau-Ponty turns to a biologically (or naturally) rooted phenomenology in his later ontology. I refer to this as bio-phenomenological, rather than bio-ontological, because – as a whole – it is an ontology that shows itself phenomenally: it expresses itself in the lived experiences and practices of embodiment. At the same time it is an ontology in which these phenomenal appearances do not exceed or exhaust being (which retains a surplus). In this vein, the *Phenomenology of Perception* sought to establish the body and body-image as an

invariant element of being via its present position, but also as something that is “an open system of an infinite number of equivalent positions directed to other ends.”³⁴ The body represents our mode of being in the world, the invariant appearing of being in the world, but it also represents an open system of potential – the body can always be “otherwise.” Of course, in developing his late ontology in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty aims to correct any residues of a philosophy of consciousness approach that may have remained within his phenomenology of bodily experience. In this vein, he sought to undermine aspects of the intentionality of the subject that permeated earlier phenomenology: intentional consciousness constituted the object, but there was no exchange or interaction between the two. His ontology of the flesh aims to understand how world and flesh are created from a similar realm of being, and thus intertwined with one another – that is, the flesh or subject was in and of the world and not wholly a subject but also not wholly an object acted upon. This intertwining includes the intertwining of body (and psycho-physical being) and world in a manner congruent with biopolitics and an invariant capacity. But we also need to establish that the body transcends its phenomenal appearance.

With the concept of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty deploys what he describes as a savage ontology that contacts a primordial (“brute”/“wild”) realm of being. This primordial being has overcome “serial time, that of ‘acts and decisions,’” and is “the mythical time reintroduced.”³⁵ What Merleau-Ponty has in mind here is an ontology that is the raw material or potential of the ontic, rather than a mere abstract encompassing of the totality of the ontic world. Brute being is akin to the capacity for speech, which becomes embodied in (but is never exhausted by) the act of speech itself. Thus, it is instructive when Merleau-Ponty refers to this ontology as descriptive

³⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (New York: Routledge 2005), 163.

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty, ‘Working Notes,’ *Visible and the Invisible*, 168.

of “a time before time, Being before functioning.”³⁶ This latent being represents potential in a manner that seeks to overcome the Sartrean division of the in-itself and the for-itself. Sartre fails to transcend the Hegelian distinction in which one can become what one is (e.g. a waiter) by taking responsibility for what one is (e.g. by playing the part of a waiter) and thus by becoming what being already determines. Merleau-Ponty replaces the “in-itself” (something specific) with an *etwas* (something) to indicate being as a hollow of possibilities. Indeed, being is “inseparable” from this “hollow of emptiness” in a sense that describes something more than an opposition between being and nothingness (or in-itself and for-itself). Rather, he suggests that being is always “inflated with non-being or with the possible, that it is not only *what it is*.”³⁷ This indicates the centrality of “openness” to being as a potentiality that always defies the limits of factual/empirical existence. The *etwas* of being is something “always on the horizon, the positive determinations of which are the trace and the absence.”³⁸ In the “something,” the trace denotes the existence of a fraction of being, which does not exhaust being as such and thus retains elements of absence via being’s excess. We might read this as suggesting that all traces of being in the phenomenal are thus haunted by the absence constitutive of an originary potentiality that defies positive determination in the sense of the in-itself becoming the for-itself: the trace only ever partially embodies the primordality of being, and is constantly afflicted with absence or lack by virtue of the excess of being.

Here, we begin to see Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to discover what he refers to as the *urstiftung* or primordial/originary institution. This *urstiftung* is not merely a transcendental modality of being; rather than being the condition of possibility of human experience, it is tantamount to the condition of the condition of possibility of human experience. Centrally, the

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 213.

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty, ‘Working Notes,’ *Visible and the Invisible*, 180-181.

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 228.

primordial character of this ontology is indicative of its own indeterminacy and precariousness. As openness, it is subject to continual creation and recreation. In explaining this, Merleau-Ponty invokes the history of geometry. Subject to historicity and ideality, the “history” of geometry is never closed, but retains the openness we have been describing as an ontological potentiality. As he explains: “there is an unfinished history of geometry which remains open, while at the same time there is a corpus of geometry which forms a system in which the early steps seem to have been cancelled insofar as they were partial or contingent developments...Both the early stages of geometry as well as all its later advances contain a certain surplus of sense over and beyond their manifest or literal sense such as it is lived each time by the geometer.”³⁹ The *urstiftung* does not denote a metaphysics of the true in the vein of Plato’s theory of the forms; rather, it denotes the opening of a possibility of continual expression or recreation of the institution, and is thus anchored to a genesis divorced from essence and anchored instead to surplus and indeterminacy. Here, transcendence denotes a reconfiguration of the existing institution: “The movement, the *Beweglichkeit*, of geometry is unified with its ideal sense only because the ideal sense is the sense of a field, a sense of initiation or a sense of openness which involves continuous production and reproduction.”⁴⁰

In translating this into a more general ontology, the flesh describes “the *Urstiftung* of ‘foundations’ which, as in mythical thinking, are always before the everyday and the empirical.”⁴¹ In this sense, Merleau-Ponty describes his own philosophy as a philosophy of structure, but we can see here a concern with the institution of structure itself, which finds time and space to be particular forms of institution outside of “objectivity” and thus subject to

³⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Resume of the Course: Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology,’ *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, ed. Leonard Lawler with Bettina Bergo, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2002), 6.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 207.

sedimentation and reactivation.⁴² It is perhaps because of this, and because he aims to get at an understanding of the *urstiftung* as the institution of the institution (or the expression of expression) that Merleau-Ponty refers to his savage ontology as “vertical” or uses geological metaphors to describe it. This represents a ground of being that requires constant excavation, not for the purposes of unearthing the identical and complete metaphysics that lies buried beneath ontic being, but because the being of this vertical ontology is – like the ontic – always incomplete. This incompleteness, far from being a fault, reflects the hyper-dialectic that must constantly interrogate itself, and is thus “a philosophical *theme*” rather than a symptom of an “unhappy consciousness”: “the incompleteness of the reduction (‘biological reduction,’ ‘psychological reduction,’ ‘reduction to transcendental immanence,’ and finally ‘fundamental thought’) is not an obstacle to the reduction, it is the reduction itself, the rediscovery of vertical being.”⁴³ In essence, the reflection on reflection that the phenomenological reduction aims at cannot be closed without falling back into the sort of transcendental position that Merleau-Ponty seeks to avoid. As he describes the philosophical/ontological problem that he confronts in ‘Nature and Logos: The Human Body’: “Brute or savage being against sedimented-ontic being. Ontology that defines being from within and not from without: at every level of Being is infrastructure, framework, hinges, and not offered in perspective and calling for the construction of what is behind these appearances...This means that ontologies concern the leaves of one sole Being in which we already are at the moment we speak, and which can be globally defined as what is not nothing. – Nature, life, man, and so *Ineinander*.”⁴⁴

We need to grasp savage being against the sedimented and reified ontic being that often corrupts our understandings (or practices). Merleau-Ponty does so via the idea of the “hinge” or

⁴² Merleau-Ponty, ‘Working Notes,’ *Visible and the Invisible*, 258-259.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 220.

interbeing. This constitutes the phenomenological intention or rooting of his ontology – which is thus not a “pure” ontology as a “there is.” As the phenomenon is enclosed in the field of phenomenality (i.e. even the phenomenological reduction cannot ignore that we are in the world, and it is thus not absolute), being is never pure. Thus, we also find the localization (both temporal and spatial) of the phenomenon and its being. In this sense, the phenomenal field is an inextricable realm that we are always already in, which, to quote Marc Richir, produces the paradox that “as soon as we begin to philosophize, we simultaneously *outline* this structure *anew*, we invent it at the same moment that we thought we were discovering it.” Richir further notes that “from now on it will be impossible to philosophize otherwise than in the singular, for the singular is our only way of access to the universal.”⁴⁵ This singularity emerges from the particularity of the *ineinander* (the in-between) that always permeates being’s appearing, and in this context Merleau-Ponty’s ontology must be read phenomenologically – as always caught up in the appearing of being, though this appearing is rooted in temporality and singularity and retains a utopian excess via potentiality and capacity.

We must also understand nature and “life” as central to understanding elements of this ontology. This constitutes the “bio” element of the bio-phenomenological invariant. Thus, Merleau-Ponty is beginning to conceptualize the nature of the body as a lived, biological organism subject to no forms of determinism, but also not absent of a structural characteristic or limitation. It is a living and perceiving body, as well as a lived and perceived body which allows it access to the very conditions of its own existence/experience. This entails turning to the being of the body as the roots of life and experience. The body appears as the invariant appearing of experience itself – and, consequently, as something that we can experience, both in the form of

⁴⁵ Marc Richir, ‘The Meaning of the Phenomenology in *The Visible and the Invisible*,’ *Thesis Eleven*, No. 36, 1993, 80.

our own body and the body of others. And, yet, this very invariance is located in the indeterminate paths that the ontology of the flesh opens up: the body exists as always caught up in a process of becoming, subject to history and a subject within history. But we must also be cognizant of the body's embedding within nature. Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to suggest that "Nature is the primordial – that is, the nonconstructed, the noninstituted; hence the idea of an eternity of nature (the eternal return), of a solidity."⁴⁶ Ultimately, nature is the *urstiftung* that his ontology of the flesh aims at.⁴⁷ But we should be quick to qualify this: while nature may be non-instituted, it would appear to be instituting and thus subject to indeterminacy on the back of its invariance. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty is quick to indicate that nature is not an "object" that is "in front of us," but is "our soil...that which carries us."⁴⁸ In these respects, his deconstruction of the claim that "nature is at the first day" is instructive: it indicates the necessity of understanding the flesh in the present as containing "an 'ever new' and 'always the same.'" This is more accurately described as an "Existential eternity"⁴⁹ that is subject to what Virno described as the "just now" and the "always already." Nature may be the *urstiftung*, but like any institution it is that which brings forth a realm of possibility that is subject to transformation or the "ever new," despite being anchored by the "always the same." It is in this context that Merleau-Ponty retains his tendency to describe the flesh through notions of pregnancy, and suggests the need to "do a psychoanalysis of Nature: it is the flesh, the mother."⁵⁰ Nature appears as something other than a

⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 4.

⁴⁷ For Merleau-Ponty, ontology and nature are inseparable. In the lecture introducing his first course on nature, he suggests that "[nature] cannot by itself solve the ontological problem but that neither is it a subordinate or secondary element in any such solution." See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Concept of Nature, I,' *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1970), 130-131.

⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 4.

⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty, 'Working Notes,' *Visible and the Invisible*, 267.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 267.

pure object, as that “from which we have arisen,” giving birth to the world of being itself. This is a case of being borrowing from the primordial in presenting itself always anew.⁵¹

III. The Corporeal Schema of the *Zoon Utopicus*

In order to undertake a psychoanalysis of nature, Merleau-Ponty turns to the question of the human body (as flesh), which *is* the bio-phenomenological invariant. The body is anchored in the general ontology that was just outlined, which attempts to break with the in-itself of “objective being.” In opposition to this, Merleau-Ponty calls for a turn to the *lebenswelt* (lifeworld) as something that can affect the passage from “biology” to “the being of life.” The lifeworld breaks with objective being in trying “to disclose the ‘organic history’ under the historicity.” The attempt at such an *urhistorie* seeks to replace the notions “of transcendental subjectivity, those of subject, object, meaning – the definition of philosophy would involve an elucidation of philosophical expression itself...as the science of pre-science, as the expression of what is before expression *and sustains it from behind*.”⁵² In exploring the *urhistorie* of the body, Merleau-Ponty turns to psychophysical subjectivity via a hyperdialectical conception of nature and biology that attempts to find a pre-objective or prescientific realm that refuses the idea of an objective space, time or being in front of or before us. He seeks to open “unto the Nature that ‘we are,’ unto the Nature in us – and thereby to begin a revision of the ontology of the object, a fortiori, since the leaf of nature detaches from the object and rejoins our total being.”⁵³ In the context of the reflection on philosophical reflection, nature can only be comprehended as *perceived* nature. But this in turn opens up what is perhaps most important in understanding any conception of the “bios” for Merleau-Ponty: namely, that the human body – in its phenomenological and biological/natural significance – must be understood as a perceiving body

⁵¹ Merleau-Ponty, ‘The Concept of Nature, I,’ 132-133.

⁵² Merleau-Ponty, ‘Working Notes,’ *Visible and the Invisible*, 166-167.

⁵³ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 212-213.

or “as that which perceives nature which it also inhabits.”⁵⁴ The perceiving body reinserts the human into nature, rather than divorcing it from being via the “I think that” that would inform a disembodied subject that is exterior to being⁵⁵ or nature. In these respects, we return to the *ineinander* as the opening of a new dimension of being, namely the *lebenswelt* as field of experience and the perceiving and experiential body as an entity that blurs the lines between “the phenomenal body and the objective body.”⁵⁶

To understand the psychophysical nature of the human body, Merleau-Ponty attempts to excavate its primordial characteristics, capacities and relations. Yet, in order to do this, he adds to the vertical element of his ontology a lateral one: in borrowing from philosophical anthropology, he refuses to separate humans from animals (or animality). By describing this as a lateral move, Merleau-Ponty intends to suggest that the difference between humans and animals is not qualitative: despite differences, they retain a “kinship.”⁵⁷ The general move towards understanding the human via what I have described as the bio-phenomenological invariant entails following Merleau-Ponty’s attempt “to take [the human] at [its] point of emergence in Nature.” As he continues: “Just as there is an *Ineinander* of life and physicochemistry, i.e., the realization of life as a fold or a singularity of physicochemistry – or structure, so too is the human to be taken in the *Ineinander* with animality and Nature.”⁵⁸ This establishes the necessity of starting from the body as an invariant element of experience (even if a modifiable one), rather than positing the human or subjectivity on the basis of an entirely abstract and unconstrained becoming, as is the tendency in variants of post-humanism. Esposito suggests that, far from representing a break with humanism, this mode of thought reproduces the anthropodicy of

⁵⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Nature and Logos: The Human Body,’ *In Praise of Philosophy*, 196.

⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 214-215.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 208.

humanism, presenting humanity as a unique species because it is able to throw off the shackles of animality and entirely shape itself. For this approach, “There is no ontological constraint, fixed character, or natural invariant that binds [man] to a specific natural modality. He is not nothing, since he can become anything, create himself again and again according to his liking. Properly speaking, he is not even a being, but a becoming in perpetual change.”⁵⁹ Moreover, starting from the body, Merleau-Ponty’s approach rejects even a modified version of these philosophies, which would see humanity as constituted by a union of animality and reason. Indeed, the primordial approach to the body aims to understand the being of the body before reason, and thus to understand humanity as a form of corporeity.

Consequently, the flesh describes a general ontology that is directed towards experiential and existential concerns as rooted in the body as a bio-phenomenological invariant. In particular, it describes the invariant element of being-in-the-world, which is centrally organized around the openness of the invariant. In linking such being to our corporeal existence, the structure of the bio-phenomenological invariant – which is to say, simultaneously, the structure of experience – is portrayed or contained specifically in what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the corporeal schema. The corporeal schema represents the primordial, prereflective and preobjective relation that our body has with/to/in the world (including others and things). In being primordial and containing the qualities of both invariance and transformation, we need to think the schema as rooted in the potentialities of our corporeal being. Thus, it cannot be read in a limited sense, as reduced to the universe of the objective or phenomenal body; rather, it exceeds the being of either of these, and the latter is merely a particular incarnation of potentiality or a particular embedding/appearing of

⁵⁹ Roberto Esposito, ‘Politics and Human Nature,’ *Angelaki*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2011, 79. In her own rendering of Merleau-Ponty, Carol Bigwood suggests the need to return to the body and nature in the face of the anthropocentric and culturalist/idealist approaches of post-structuralists. See Carol Bigwood, ‘Renaturalizing the Body (with the Help of Merleau-Ponty),’ *Hypatia*, No. 6, No. 3, Fall 1991, 59.

the schema. If we begin with the bare fact of the body's being as the root or *urstiftung* of experience and our connection with the world then we need to turn to understanding the basic contours of its contact with the world, others, things – its very perceptual, sensuous and connective capacities. In these terms, the body is not a thing but “a relation to an *Umwelt*.”⁶⁰ While I will explore the meaning of *umwelt* in more depth below, we need now only note that Merleau-Ponty uses it to signify the world as a perceptual entity, something that the body is in and of – it is a world for-the-body, but only in a relation in which the body is also for- and of-the-world. The corporeal schema – as the ground of perceptual and sensuous being – structures the potentialities of the body as a relation. Consequently, Merleau-Ponty turns to an esthesiological account of the body.

An esthesiological account of the body acknowledges being-in-the-world as being constituted by being open to the world – by the sensuous organs, which are (once again) in and of the world. We might think of this in contrast to the Sartrean position. For Sartre, the exemplary case of experience in the world is the situation in which one person looks through a keyhole in a door at an “other.” This relationship is one in which the looker acts as a subject (via vision) and objectifies the other that they look upon. But in this situation, the looker is outside of the world, hidden behind the door, though their eye may be exposed/visible. The eye acts as the stand in for consciousness and its attempts to objectify the body of an other as an object. The body of the seer is obscured by the door, and their eye becomes the true “actor.” This bears the hallmarks of a high altitude thinking in so far as the body of the viewer is outside of the realm of the viewed. An esthesiological approach takes the corporeity of the body – the body of the self and of the other – and its sensibility (as sensing and sensed) as the a priori condition for experience and contact with the world and others. What Sartre illustrates is but a particular case

⁶⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 209.

of the experience of others – and, more specifically, a one-sided case bearing the hallmarks of a reified existence. Our corporeity is informed by the entirety of the sensorial human system, dependent on the surface of the body as the flesh (in the colloquial and the technical sense) that makes contact with the world, though this need not exclude vision as a particular modality of this sensibility/corporeity – it means acknowledging vision as a modality of the esthesiological capacities of corporeal being. Ultimately, our corporeity is our means of contact with the world, and vice versa, a means of being intertwined, intersubjectively, with the world and others.⁶¹

What needs to be further emphasized is the idea that the esthesiological, corporeal body is an “open totality”: it gets beyond the in-itself and for-itself, as well as all manner of essentialist determinations, by divorcing being from a *particular* object (either the self/body, the other/body or the external world) and representing the body as an entity whose being cannot be entirely closed or enclosed. In displacing subjectivity from a vision embedded within subject-object terms, this corporeity admits of the ambiguity and incompleteness of our interactions and intentions. As Merleau-Ponty states: “Body-things, penetration, at a distance, of the sensible things by my body. Things are what are missing from my body in order to close its circuit.”⁶² The point here is that the dual character of the body allows for the intersubjective relation, which is ingrained in the very structure of its being: as an open, non-identical totality in circuit with the outside (a circuit that always short-circuits at the moment the body would transcend itself to become the other, thus retaining its immanence), the body and the outside allow for a mutual encroachment, a positive exchange. To understand this, we need to first re-acknowledge the *écart* that separates the beings in relation: they never pass over into one another, but they do transform one another in their process of intersubjective engagement, in the intertwining of their

⁶¹ Ibid., 276-281.

⁶² Ibid., 218.

corporeal schema. Likewise, in being sensoriality without a particular object it remains in potentia, always capable of re-opening its world in a new constellation or a new signification of a priorly given (or newly emergent) object. For example, vision is a hollow that always awaits the entrance of visible things into its sphere. Hence, there is a continual absence accorded to the object-less state of being that is the essence of an “open totality.” The eye is “made for a future vision (the embryo)” and remains a hollow until there is the contingent emergence of a particular field of vision that disrupts the existent one. But the eye/vision is attached to a corporeal body that likewise participates in this open schema as seeing and seen.⁶³

The central point of this esthesiological approach is that this primordial contact is part of the brute/savage being that is “preobjective”: that is, the body (before reason) is intertwined with the world and others, via relationships of “ejection”/projection and “introjection.” In essence, the body as a double leaf participates in the world by extending itself into the world, and by having the world extend into it.⁶⁴ Here, Merleau-Ponty challenges the traditional trope regarding subjectivity, in which the other represents “a freedom seen *from without* as destiny and fatality, a rival subject for a subject.”⁶⁵ On the contrary, from the esthesiological perspective, *intersubjectivity* denotes an originary belonging formed by a common connection to being – a common contact and circuit with the world and others. Perhaps more to the point, it is through the esthesiological character of the corporeal schema that the body becomes a being-for-the-other as an a priori (or pre-temporal) condition – that it contains “a *natural* rooting of the for-other.”⁶⁶ To begin with, this mode of organization – centered on perception and senses – is always-already oriented towards alterity, towards what is not itself and towards the outside. This is contained in

⁶³ Ibid., 209-210.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 268, 278-279.

⁶⁵ Merleau-Ponty, ‘Working Notes,’ *Visible and the Invisible*, 269.

⁶⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 210.

the body's two-fold character: "the body as touching-touched, seeing-seen, the place of a kind of reflection and, thereby, the capacity to relate itself to something other than its own mass, to close its circuit on the visible, on a sensible exterior."⁶⁷ Contained in this is the idea that the body's corporeity is an originary investment and elevation towards the outside/alterity, primordially informed by a demand "for something other than body, but asking for it by its own bodily weight."⁶⁸ It is by virtue of the body's corporeity that it can experience other corporeal bodies, and its own corporeity always-already contains a drive towards the outside. Yet, because of the paradox of immanence and transcendence, there is always a simultaneous union and separation of myself and the outside, even if this relation is repressed through cognitive mechanisms that usurp the originary recognition that constitutes our primordial contact with the world.⁶⁹ In the context of the primordial character of this originary contact with the world, and this original capacity, my body remains an esthesiological piece of flesh – with the capacity for both "projections and introjections" – and thus "the inner framework of intersubjectivity," the root of a capacity or potential for the transitive experience to be formed by a genuine alterity that acknowledges the *écart* that separates the self from the other.⁷⁰ The touching-touched and seeing-seen illustrate the body as a public organ, something with which to see and be seen in a lateral relation that is – before its socio-political incarnations – devoid of hierarchy. This is constitutive of the very condition of possibility of intersubjectivity: the body's openness to the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 209-210.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 219.

⁶⁹ This is one of the major themes of Axel Honneth's attempt to re-think reification. See Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012).

⁷⁰ On transitivity and elements of this intersubjective alterity, see Merleau-Ponty, 'Working Notes,' *Visible and the Invisible*, 234, 269. For the outlines of the transitive relation, and Merleau-Ponty's work on child development, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Child's Relations with Others,' *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1964).

world represents not an autarchic imposition but the capacity to be affected by and to affect the outside, a mutual participation in the being of each other.⁷¹

What much of this presupposes, and what has perhaps the strongest political and utopian import is esthesiology's structuration by *desire*. Desire is the moving and motive force of the flesh/body (which is the "I of desire"), a power that informs the very esthesiological and perceptual capacities that make the body not an insular being. As Merleau-Ponty describes it: "the body as the power of *Einfühlung* [empathy] is already desire, libido, projection-introjection, identification."⁷² In these respects, desire – as tied to the body⁷³ – denotes "an elevation toward": an elevation toward the outside, as an indeterminate "hollow" of future potentials. Central to unpacking this is the subsequent claim that the esthesiological character of the corporeal schema is "a libidinal structure" or "a relation of being and not of knowledge."⁷⁴ As Abensour has suggested via his reading of Emmanuel Levinas, relations of knowledge are of the order of the I-it, and inherently objectifying/reifying rather than "intersubjective": they are colonial and colonizing, imposing the "I" upon the other, while abstracting from them via the third person perspective. As a relation beyond the non-transcendence of knowledge or the insularity of being,⁷⁵ desire (informed by empathy) pushes the body towards the other, and creates the possibility or capacity of taking on or being affected by the existence of the other, being affected by their sentiments/feelings in a manner that opens the possibility of a "we" or association. This represents intersubjectivity as mirroring the paradox of immanence and transcendence that the body exhibits: intersubjectivity would thus constitute a case of

⁷¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 223.

⁷² Ibid., 210.

⁷³ Through the work of Foucault, May likewise affirms the corporeal character of desire. May, 'Living the Biopolitical,' 161.

⁷⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 210.

⁷⁵ Of course, it must be noted that Merleau-Ponty's ontological orientation would also appear to be at odds with Levinas' work.

overlapping, whereby self and other open up a realm of overlap/sharing, that simultaneously includes the irreducible *écart* that maintains their separation as a folding or overlapping of flesh to flesh. The place of overlap would represent a “we” (as multiplicity) that refuses to be reduced to a “One” on the order of colonization or subsumption within the self or a third term. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the other alienates me from myself, and this is the condition of possibility of my transformation according to the intersubjective ejection that I take into my own being. This introjection or incorporation occurs when “I see by the eyes of the other”⁷⁶ or when I can take on their behaviour or approach to the world as part of the realm of possibility, though as something that still transcends my own being.

Ultimately, desire – as the structure of esthesiological being – produces a carnal relation that transcends the body’s own narcissism, opening it to a generality, in which “I live the offered behaviours as my own, and I see them animated by a corporal schema.” The esthesiological animation of corporeal being opens this as possibility: “it is because I perceive that the other is possible for me as an other perceiving the same sensibles that I perceive.”⁷⁷ Hence, my perception of the other’s corporeal schema is the condition of possibility for me to experience my own corporeity. These sorts of acts or associations precede the cognitive mechanisms that inform relations of knowledge, and the esthesiological focus establishes an originary sociality as the condition of possibility of experience (including the experience of the elision of alterity) via the encounter with the other: there is an originary engagement or investment with the world and others, rather than the insular detachment and objectification emblematic of relations of knowledge/cognition. Desire as pleasure is structured by the affirmation of the other in the self, or by the co-feeling that ruptures the cognitive closure of the universe of being. It is as a being-

⁷⁶ Ibid., 279.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 224-226.

for-other that the body serves its function, and affirms an originary schema of empathy and affectivity. Here, the weight of intentionality is thrown off, and the body becomes a truly intersubjective being opened to an originary passivity. My body still contains the capacity for intentionality, or the approach to things and the capacity to “eject” my body into them. Simultaneously, my body (as the touching-touched) is also touched by them, and incorporates parts of their being into itself. But this indivision of being is not the universal interchangeability of roles/speakers/hearers,⁷⁸ nor does it reduce being to the One of identity as the discovery of “a rationally motivated agreement”⁷⁹ that transcends the plurality of subjective positions. Such a conception of intersubjectivity reduces the other to “what one knows of oneself.”⁸⁰ For Merleau-Ponty, the experience of the other (in its primitive or individuated forms) is a means of learning to transcend myself via what I learn from the other. It is a leaving of one self, via the alterity of the other.

IV. Desire and *Umwelt*: A Corporeal Socio-Historical Configuration

The difficulty with desire is that it lacks an immediate object and is thus, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, “something entirely other than an automatic operation.”⁸¹ This establishes two interrelated consequences. First, desire – as constituted by the openness at the heart of being – is the root of subjectivity (which is always-already intersubjectivity), as the condition of possibility and motive force of the latter’s creation. Second, because it is both non-automatic and structured by its own non-closure, desire is always the attempt to realize the unrealizable: the non-identity of the body as the seat of desire creates the perennial condition of the deferred realization or the

⁷⁸ Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, (trans.) Frederick Lawrence, (Cambridge: Polity Press 1987), 297.

⁷⁹ Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 315.

⁸⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1973), 3.

⁸¹ Merleau-Ponty, quoted by Fabio Ciaramelli, ‘Friendship and Desire,’ *Free Association*, 8, 2001, 378.

constitutive gap at the heart of being-as-flesh.⁸² Consequently, subjectivity – as the enactment of embodied desire – retains the contingency and agency at the root of its aleatoric condition. The particulars of this can be appropriated from Merleau-Ponty's reading of love in Proust. Desire, as with love, "entails a beyond oneself." But this manifests in the duality or paradox that the other is always-already there, but the other is also always-already absent as the lack at the heart of openness and the non-automatic functioning of desire. Merleau-Ponty describes love as a "hollow in us, not the presence of the other."⁸³ In fact, the presence is a presaging of the absence (the grounds for it) and rooted in the absence that is desire's non-automatic functioning or object. Love and lost love (like desire and its failure, or its eclipse into something else) are unified as a singular reality. In this, love – as seemingly transcending, or expressing a sublimated form of, desire – is the reality of the intersubjective relation insofar as "it allows us to see everything that someone is, how someone is the world itself, being itself, a world, a being from which we are excluded; in the experience undergone of this pain, one is beyond desire and domination."⁸⁴ This love recognizes the very alterity of the other. Yet, while the basic relation of love as affect and solidarity may appear at the very core of the body's capacity, the non-mechanical functioning of desire opens the possibility of the failure to achieve the sociality that desire desires: the originary desire or orientation towards being-for-the-other can capsize and wind up in relations of domination that efface both the other and self and, hence, the preconditions of intersubjectivity.

In his psychoanalytic analysis of Etienne de La Boétie's *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, Fabio Ciaramelli draws out the modalities of this problem. As he notes, sociality is predicated on desire as a transcendence of the self – as the striving for an affection and being-

⁸² In suggesting this, I have drawn loosely on Renaud Barbaras, *Desire and Distance: Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception*, (Redwood City: Stanford University Press 2005), ch. 5.

⁸³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the College de France (1954-1955)*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2010), 37.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

together that is “another’s good” or “toward the other.” Yet, this requires the creation of relations that do not exist a priori: they must be achieved via the institution of the social and social space. But the economy of desire is paradoxical, as La Boétie’s text shows with respects to tyranny/ domination and friendship/ solidarity: both emerge from the desire for fulfillment of the lack that constitutes individual existence. As Ciaramelli puts it, “If it is true, therefore, that desire gives rise to friendship, it is no less true that friendship – incapable, as this relation is, of achieving a unity in fusion, since it is nourished by the unsurpassable duality of its terms – is lived as a failure to achieve that immediate fulfillment desire dreams of accomplishing.”⁸⁵ Ultimately, the striving towards alterity or sociality can result in a repressive desublimation of desire, because desire cannot be fulfilled absolutely. Desire seeks a union founded on solidarity or affection, but because of the difficulty of fulfilling this immediately and totally, desire submits itself to “an allegedly originary unity,” found in the “charm of the One.” Essentially, tyranny (or domination as effacement of the *écart* that informs alterity) fulfills the social drive in an “immediate” and reified way via the illusion of a natural or pre-given identity, in place of the difficulty of living under the indeterminate and unstable conditions that the mediation of desire via friendship would provide. The end result is domination rather than friendship or solidarity.

For Merleau-Ponty, our esthesiological being – with its rooting in desire – results in an “obsession” with others:⁸⁶ by virtue of the body’s outward orientation, others are always-already there, as a primordial condition of our existence/experience that cannot be transcended. But the particularity added by the experience of the elision of genuine alterity is that, as capacity/potential, desire and ethical capacities become enacted/embodied in various forms/practices including in the guise of reified relationships and modes of subjectification –

⁸⁵ Ciaramelli, ‘Friendship and Desire,’ 373.

⁸⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Man and Adversity,’ *Signs*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1964), 231.

including the capitalist homogeneity of the masses as commodities coming to represent a modern stand in for the tyranny of the One. In this vein, the originary belonging that constitutes the precondition of experience cannot be seen as a political or social belonging: it is existential and ontological. Consequently, we need to incorporate the ambiguity and ambivalence that characterizes the other in our primitive or pre-instituted relation to them. Abensour's persistent utopia grasps this ambiguity/ambivalence as caught up in the dialectic of emancipation, in which the desire for emancipation turns into its opposite, domination (and even the desire for domination).⁸⁷ In Merleau-Ponty's terms, as an underdetermined relationship without a particular object and hence aleatoric, our relation to others can manifest itself as "a mass of pleasures and of pains that are not closed in on themselves, but [are] used by us to please and to suffer from the world and from others (pleasure and reality)."⁸⁸ As he further explains: "Freud: To sense is already to be human. To be flesh is already to be human. 'Pleasure' is haunted by 'reality'...Freudian Eros and Thanatos rejoin our problem of the flesh with its double sense of opening and narcissism, mediation and involution. – Freud truly saw with projection-introjection and sadomasochism the relation of the *Ineinander* of ego and world, of ego and nature, of ego and animality, of ego and *socius*."⁸⁹ Here, the duality of openness is manifested: pleasure and pain both remain in the hold of being, as the other can be our salvation or our torture (as master or as the slave that besmirches our insular and totalitarian being). Hence, Sartre's dualism is confirmed, but only as one side of the relationship of desire and alterity. If desire is a latency that leads to varied relations with the outside and others – characterized by *both* pleasure and

⁸⁷ On this dialectic as central contribution to utopian studies, and as largely ignored or misunderstood, see Christine Nadir, 'Utopian Studies, Environment Literature, and the Legacy of an Idea: Educating Desire in Miguel Abensour and Ursula K. LeGuin,' *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2010.

⁸⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 210-211.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 224-226.

pain, affirmation and failure,⁹⁰ introjection and projection – then we need to note the political significance of the economy of desire: namely, that it is ambivalent, and this ambivalence is mirrored in the body. As a corporeal schema, which is both open to, and of, the world, the body manifests itself in myriad forms. In the case of the negation of the other via the repressive anonymization of all within an essentialist One that denies an outside, the other appears in the dystopic guise of a loss of the “otherwise” and thus constitutes our singularity and loneliness – a closure and failure of the originary sociality that desire desires. But, even this false unity is always already broken by the *écart* that sunders the body from the outside, and which makes the body non-identical with itself: the originary sociality created by desire is structured by a non-identity that is informed by the corporeal schema as an open totality, which cannot be closed or fixed. In this context, desire and its primitive sociality represent a capacity prior to the constitution of subjects but still the raw material of the creation of an intersubjective space,⁹¹ or of the embodiment and objectification of intersubjective potential. This, in turn, creates the condition of possibility of a socio-history of esthesiological and intersubjective being. That the body is *of* the world, suggests that the body is written on by the world but that the body also retains its ability to express itself against its determinacy. Indeed, the corporeal schema is itself an openness that includes not only its embeddedness in a socio-historical environment, but simultaneously the retention of the latent potentiality of the schema beneath this environment – a neotynic retention of the originary openness. The socio-historical (as phenomenal) is an in-between, the chiasm between body and world.

⁹⁰ See Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawler, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2004), 271-272.

⁹¹ In making this assertion, I draw from Virno's use of Gallese – though I contend that Merleau-Ponty presents a similar sentiment. See Virno, *Multitude*, 179.

To understand this socio-historical character, we need to understand the concept of *umwelt* that Merleau-Ponty adopts from Jakob von Uexküll. In Uexküll's concept of *umwelt*, Merleau-Ponty finds a non-dualist understanding of subject and world. As he states: "The *Umwelt* marks the difference between the world such as it exists in itself, and the world as the world of a living being. It is an intermediary reality between the world such as it exists for an absolute observer and a purely subjective domain. It is the aspect of the world in itself to which the animal addresses itself, which exists for the behaviour of an animal, but not necessarily for its consciousness; it is the environment of behaviour as 'opposed to the geographical environment[.]'"⁹² In suggesting something prior to consciousness, we must think of the *umwelt* "at the level of the organ, at the level of the embryo."⁹³ This is centrally an esthesiological starting point, oriented towards the interconnection of sensuousness, behaviour and world.

Umwelt denotes the world that our bodily-organism creates, and yet is determined by, in its being/functioning: stimuli "are given to neural elaboration and translated into a linguistic system of the nervous system."⁹⁴ This is structured, first, by the body's very opening onto and in the world. In avoiding a causal claim, Merleau-Ponty suggests somewhat evasively that the body is neither first nor second, denoting its complicity with the relationship to the outside world, but also, simultaneously, its determination. In this sense, the *umwelt* has an esthesiological match in the organism, the *gegenwelt*: the esthesiological organs take on a particular functioning within the *umwelt*, but this is particular because objects and organs retain a surplus of meaning and potential. What comes to structure (as part of the corporeal schema) the potentialities of the *gegenwelt*, is the *merkwelt*: the specific perceptual triggers or stimuli that come to enact sensory organs, which read the symbolic meaning of these triggers. The *merkwelt* is "a 'grill' interposed

⁹² Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 167.

⁹³ Ibid., 167.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 171.

between the animal and the world.” The *gegenwelt* is only a structured potential or limitation; the actual responses and actions of the organism are determined by the *wirkwelt* – that is, the manner in which the impulses “sing” in a particular environment. The *wirkwelt* is tantamount to instinct, though structured by the symbolic matrixes that inform our relation to the world. It offers up the specific responses that organisms exhibit to the *merkwelt* of a given *umwelt*, and often comes to displace the *merkwelt* – that is, by virtue of habituation, our sensory organs can fall into the backdrop via the force of habit of response to the environment. In essence, the body and world define one another, with each precipitating responses from the other and with neither holding the power of causal determinacy. As Merleau-Ponty summarizes: “The *Umwelt* is the world implied by the movement of the animal, and that regulates the animal’s movements by its own structure.”⁹⁵

In translating this to conceptualize the specificity of socio-historical regimes, we need to understand how the originary sociality of desire is “sung” by the human organism – or how it is structured and experienced/lived. Under a capitalist *umwelt*, we can say that the affective agencies of the body are subjectified to register others as merely objects in a world of reified beings ruled by the dictates of capitalist competition – and acted out, not at the level of “consciousness,” but through embodied behaviour. Here, the symbolic meaning of the other is no longer interpreted by the sensorial system as “human” or “other,” but simply as another exchange value or object there for instrumental purposes – i.e. they are reduced to the identity inherent to the colonizing logic of capitalism. Likewise, in the example of Nazism that Virno draws from Primo Levi, we find that “the tears of this old Jewish man are not human”⁹⁶ because a particular institution of the organization of esthesiological (as embodied neural) capacities

⁹⁵ Ibid., 175.

⁹⁶ Virno, *Multitude*, 183.

rejects the “other” as human or as part of the same human community as the one who negates their humanity.⁹⁷ Through these mechanisms, the empathetic and ethical capacities of the body – its being as a site of a natural rooting of the for-the-other – capsizes in an economy of desire that usurps the *écart* of others via an allegedly originary One that is threatened by alterity. This is the coming into being of the totalitarian body, in which the symbolic image of the One is a regression into an allegedly original indivision that refuses difference. Under these circumstances, the subsequent individuation in which the self becomes a self and the other becomes an other is denied, as is the possibility of being-for-the-other as an act of genuine intersubjectivity. This exhibits the ambiguity that characterizes the capacity and openness endemic to desire: both affirmation and negation are rooted in the lack and uncertainty contained in the deficit of presence that characterizes potential, and always allows for the possibility that things can be “other” than how they are.⁹⁸ Our desire and orientation towards the outside is not fixed or fulfillable, but is a structural characteristic of the indeterminacy of the relation of being generally and, therefore, the very condition of possibility of experience and intersubjectivity. Thus, as Ciaramelli asserts, the lack at the heart of being is “the source of the possible,”⁹⁹ though we need to add that the possible includes dystopic negation.

Consequently, Merleau-Ponty refers to the stabilization of esthesiological orders via the *umwelt* as an “institution of nature.” As he explains it: “We must understand life as the opening of a field of action. The animal is produced by the production of a milieu, that is, by the appearing in the physical world of a field radically different from the physical world with its

⁹⁷ It bears noting that I am interpreting this against Virno’s own claim that negation is a purely linguistic phenomenon. For Merleau-Ponty, language and body hold an analogic relationship (via expression) and hence the “linguistic” negation is something that plays out at the level of bodily expression and hence behaviour and affect. I turn to the problems of Virno’s account in the next chapter.

⁹⁸ Virno, *Multitude*, 20.

⁹⁹ Ciaramelli, ‘Friendship and Desire,’ 370.

specific temporality and spatiality. Hence the analysis of the general life of the animal, of relations that it maintains with its body, of the relations of its body to its spatial milieu (its territory), of inter-animality either within the species or between two different species[.]”¹⁰⁰ But the notion of institution is the key to understanding a non-transcendental human being or nature, for it opens up the possibility of experiencing the conditions of possibility of experience and consequently their modification. “Nature” (and the bio-phenomenological invariant as *urstiftung*) is a launch pad which both structures and is the condition of possibility of action. The esthesiological organs retain a certain orientation, an orientation towards the outside and towards sensory perception, but are “built from experiences and in this sense [are] at first blind.”¹⁰¹ Via the accumulation and repetition of experience, behaviour comes to take on “a structuration.” The repetitive ordering, which is to say the institution that establishes the *present* incarnation of capacity, comes to take on a permanency when it is embedded as culture; likewise, the very capacity of sensibility as the latent potential for intersubjectivity via the body’s empathetic capacities morphs into a system, as particular forms of intersubjective action or esthesiological experience. Merleau-Ponty cites Schilder to the effect that “the corporeal schema has a libidinal structure...and sociological [sic].”¹⁰² Thus, while desire structures the orientation of the body towards the outside, social conditions or biopowers likewise come to structure the nature of desire and its concrete embedding – even if desire can retain its originary function, as the desire for the outside and the body’s education via alterity. Consequently, while Merleau-Ponty wants to assert the intersubjective fact of being (i.e. that the invariant and existence are always intersubjective), we also need to realize that this corporeal relation is embodied in historically specific situations and circumstances. The contingency of capitalism thus represents a particular

¹⁰⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 173.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 313. I borrow this from Merleau-Ponty’s account of genetality specifically.

¹⁰² Ibid., 225.

form of subjectification structuring the corporeal schema, producing the reified and monadic relations that Benjamin describes, which possess a “match” in the esthesiological functioning of capitalist subjects. In these instances, reification is not a closing off of the relation to the outside world nor even a negation of the outside world via a totalizing and irreversible inward turn. Rather, reification and the elision of alterity merely represent a particular embodiment of the mode of relation to the outside world.

At the same time, this structuration is not “total” or “physiological.” Rather, the esthesiological organs are present as the possibility of diverse organizations, and thus the corporeal schema is transformable or susceptible to different articulations: it is armed with “instruments of observation and action” but not pre-established responses, for body and world form a diacritical system and neither the scope/function of sensory organs nor sensorial triggers are pre-established. They are structured through the mutual praxis of body and world, and ingrained through habituation to particular chiasmic experiences of the sensory organs and thus to particular meanings attached to sensory triggers. Ultimately, the body as a “machine” is instituted and capable of being instituted otherwise, because the body retains a surplus potential, and the world as symbolic matrix retains a surplus of meaning.¹⁰³ The potential for transformation is rooted in the very indeterminacy of the body itself, as well as in the symbolic surplus at the root of “ambiguous perception” – the idea that the esthesiological organism is rooted in symbolic matrixes that do not exhaust the meaning of experienced phenomena, nor have these symbolic matrixes integrated the totality of experiential content. We return here to the notion of ontological depth, for the corporeal schema retains its originary indeterminacy. In fact, the body of experience or the body-object is only the phenomenal appearance or trace of the corporeal schema: “present substitute of a past that no longer is – the trace for us is more than the

¹⁰³ Ibid., 221-222.

present effect of the past. It is a survival of the past, an enjambment.”¹⁰⁴ Indeed, the corporeal schema retains a primacy over and above the concrete incarnation in the *umwelt*, and acts as the condition of possibility of that *umwelt*. As an orientation towards the outside and experience, the corporeal schema can only ever be the condition of possibility for the institution of time, space, and the conditions of possibility of experience, which do not exist a priori. Consequently, this condition of possibility retains its indeterminacy – its lack of a univocal environment and its transformability – positing a permanent “enjambment,” which refuses the closure of the body’s being within the “objective” or the “actual.” The body retains its archaeological structure or moorings, as the possibility of the re-opening of the corporeal potentials/capacities. Thus, insofar as the *umwelt* is open and subject to transformation, it represents an organic non-specialization and neotyny: the ability of organs to break with existing functions, and return to an earlier (unshaped) phase of development or symbolic meaning. Essentially, the “being” of humans as organic bodies is established via their perceptual and sensory capacities in so far as they are the “pre-empirical architectonic, the preobjective, the pivots, hinges, and structures of organisms and species”¹⁰⁵ that take on a shape via their contact with the world, but that retain a primordial being that exceeds their phenomenal appearance. This – the body as the hinge and being as an in-between – constitutes the reversibility of the body and world, self and others.

V. Utopia and Natural-Historical Diagrams: The Encounter as Biopolitical Opening

Benjamin’s account of capitalist experience encloses the bios within a political *umwelt* as the current embodiment of the bios in a particular set of historical circumstances. Capitalism, as a mode of subjectification, produces particular modulations of the bio-phenomenological invariant. Thus, in the experience of modernity, Benjamin suggested the collective solitude of

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 276.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 207.

the crowd as a sort of being-alone-together. In the context of desire, we must view this as a particular institution of the social, which denies both individuality (for it is a mass individuality as “repetition of the same”) and sociality (for the collective is a repressive and exploited “we,” utilized solely for the purposes of capital accumulation).¹⁰⁶ In effect, we find here a dialectical negation of each concept through its other: individuality rooted in a homogeneity that denies the expression that would be individual; sociality/collectivity that denies the collective its own mode of action by suppressing each potential member within their own individuality. The individual and the social deny themselves, and negate the creative or affirmative content that would seem to be the essence of each. This speaks to the very poverty of modern life that creates the condition of possibility (or necessity) of utopian transformation. In his classic text, *Paths in Utopia*, Martin Buber locates utopia’s specificity in the attempted renewal or (re)creation of “society” outside of (or against) its corrupted or poor incarnations.¹⁰⁷ As Abensour summarizes the crux of this utopian position: “It reconstructs the social destroyed by capitalism and the state, multiplying small communities ‘behind the state’s back’ and against the state in order to remake the social fabric, to reconstitute it, to remake the social bond.”¹⁰⁸

Merleau-Ponty adds to this an account of how the body’s primordially can act as an agency of resistance which transforms the conditions of possibility of subjectivity and experience at the level of bio-phenomenological institution. That is, the indeterminacy and primordial alterity endemic to the bio-phenomenological invariant can act to rupture its sedimented incarnations in re-opening the *umwelt* and the body’s sensuous capacities to new institutions. In elaborating on this reading, we can borrow from Herbert Marcuse’s suggestion that revolutionary

¹⁰⁶ Jason Read, ‘The Production of Subjectivity: From Transindividuality to the Commons,’ *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, No. 70, 2011, 121.

¹⁰⁷ Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press 1996), 14.

¹⁰⁸ Abensour, ‘Persistent Utopia,’ 413.

transformation would have to develop on the basis of a biological foundation, with the moral or ethical elements contained in human nature being the condition of possibility for solidarity: “Political radicalism...implies moral radicalism: the emergence of a morality which might precondition man for freedom. This radicalism activates the elementary, organic foundation of morality in the human being.”¹⁰⁹ This locates solidarity in the instincts or desire (that is, “morality as a disposition of the organism”), as exhibited in the “erotic drive to counter aggressiveness, to create and preserve ‘ever greater unities’ of life.”¹¹⁰ The ever greater unities emerge in the project of the creation of solidaristic relations via the re-activation of an in-grained sociality in combating the surplus repression at the roots of capitalist society.

For Merleau-Ponty, the body as the power of empathy denotes such a primordial capacity for solidaristic relations with the world and others – the expression of flesh through our engagement and intertwining with them. As Jean-Philippe Deranty argues, this would constitute “an ethics of being in the world, where the ethical duty is to be a full participant recognizing the existence and right of all that participate in one’s own flesh.”¹¹¹ In this context, the full “humanity” of the flesh can only be expressed through the exercise of our solidaristic capacity, in the service of negating the inhumanity that effaces and excludes the alterity of others. From the perspective of a phenomenological account of desire, the originary capacity/desire for sociality as a transcendence of lack is pre-temporal, denoting the condition of possibility of sociality and individuality, both of which are instituted.¹¹² The repressed represents not a “need” or “instinct” but a potential as neotynic re-opening of capacity. Here, the very sociality of the body can never

¹⁰⁹ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, (Boston: Beacon Press 1969), 10.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹¹ Jean-Philippe Deranty, ‘Witnessing the Inhuman: Agamben or Merleau-Ponty,’ *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 107, No. 1, Winter 2008, 182.

¹¹² This challenges the individualizing tendencies in Marcuse’s appropriation of Freud. See Nancy Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*, (New Haven: Yale University Press 1991), 122-135 and Arnold L. Farr, *Critical Theory and Democratic Vision: Herbert Marcuse and Recent Liberation Philosophies*, (Lanham: Lexington Books 2009), Ch.4.

be fixed, and consequently it retains a perennial resistance to its reification or sedimentation: always retaining its originary openness, it can never properly be closed (as the closure of the conditions of possibility) in a fixed schema. Such closure is rooted in totalitarian thinking. But, in order to fully think these motifs in Merleau-Ponty's work in terms of political resistance, I want to return to the themes drawn from Virno and Abensour.

While Merleau-Ponty suggests that the body is diacritical and that the *umwelt* (as the expression of this diacritical quality) "is open, transformable,"¹¹³ the praxis that would transform it is not something he explores or explains. Virno's understanding of the biological invariant can provide a means to theorizing transformability via a form of radical praxis. The element of praxis contained in Virno's biological invariant was rooted in its own indeterminacy. In particular, the biological invariant (conceived as potential) portrayed itself in natural-historical diagrams in which the conditions of possibility of human experience (indeterminacy) found an empirical counterpart and re-opened the ontological potential at the phenomenal level: "ontology [reveals] itself phenomenologically"¹¹⁴ when the possibility of potentiality is re-opened – when neotyny returns human experience to the primordial beginning of the anthropogenic process, or to the conditions of possibility of experience itself. This would appear to occur under a number of conditions: when cultural habituations break down through states of emergency; when new permeations of human capacities (the explosion of semantic excess/surplus) break cultural habituations and produce a state of insurgence; or, when the potentials of human capacities are themselves used as the raw material of cultural habituations – that is to say, when the creative capacities of human subjects are put to work by the social system itself. At these points, there is a re-opening of the capacity to experience and create human nature anew and, consequently, a

¹¹³ Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 221.

¹¹⁴ Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 98.

transformation of the being of the human organism and its world (i.e. a breaking or re-opening of the *umwelt* and the body-as-flesh).

For Merleau-Ponty, the conditions of possibility of experience lie in the body's corporeal being, and in its esthesiological relationship to the world. Our embodiment and capacities for sense, motility and becoming inform the very conditions of possibility of experience. This was the fundamental insight that informed embodiment in *Phenomenology of Perception*. With the *The Visible and the Invisible*, this element remains but it is deepened via the ontological assertion that the world and body are made of the same flesh. This establishes experience as a situation of folds and overlapping within being. The idea of the flesh as a fold of being entails that it is something that can experience the world as it experiences itself – that the very corporeity of the flesh creates the condition of possibility for an overlapping of flesh to flesh and visible to visible (or invisible). What is central to understanding this corporeity as utopian at its core is that it seeks to establish the variability of the fold itself: that our capacity for a form of radical praxis lies in our expression of our corporeity, or our ability to create and re-create our relations to the world – to orient the folds of being otherwise.¹¹⁵ While this constitutes the invariance of being, something we cannot escape, the being of the flesh is also embodied in contingent and preliminary ways, subject to particular situations: while corporeity is the always-already of invariance, the particular modulations of it constitute the just-now of mutation or transience. But, within this, it is through our corporeity and associated capacities that we can experience the other (as another fold of being), and through the other that we truly experience the possibility of utopia. A disembodied subject can only – solipsistically – experience the other, as an object of constitution or a subject that challenges the self's own claim to subjectivity by

¹¹⁵ Todd May, 'To change the world, to celebrate life: Merleau-Ponty and Foucault on the body,' *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 31, No. 5-6, 2005, 528.

objectifying/constituting it. Without the other, this disembodied subject would be possible. But the other undermines constitution as a philosophical concept, and illustrates its contradictory character as well as the intersubjective force of the world. For Merleau-Ponty, the world can only exist when considered from the perspective of a body open to other bodies, which undermines the objectivity that constitution asserts. More particularly, the other creates a hinge between myself and the world, and opens up the non-identity of the world and the self. This brings us to the centrality of the event (and advent) of the encounter to thinking utopia, and to thinking the biopolitics contained in utopia.

As I suggested in the previous chapter, on Abensour's reading Levinas posits the centrality of ethics and the encounter to utopia. Yet, what is offered there is perhaps a bit too simple of a formulation, or one that fails to account for the specificity of the encounter in the context of the specific forms of subjectification and biopolitical exploitation of sensuous capacities. We should note the centrality of the encounter to Benjamin's work as well, but we find here the ambiguity/ambivalence of the phenomenon.¹¹⁶ On the one hand, the *flâneur* entered the modern crowd in an attempt to provoke an encounter, to confront the crowd by walking against the grain. And, yet, this encounter showed the suppression or elision of alterity, and the power of the market: the crowd itself responded in a manner that failed to acknowledge the provocation of the *flâneur*, instead betraying the deferential bowing and continuing on symptomatic of the mechanistic nature of voluntary experience; and, in turn, the market turned the experience of the *flâneur* into a commodity value, subject to the power of instrumental rationality that it levelled upon all subjects with the consecration of its power. Here, the embodied capacities give way to the bodily comportment endemic to capitalist experience – that of the factory worker, the member of the crowd, the gambler, etc, all acting without agency, joy

¹¹⁶ On this front, and for a direct discussion of Benjamin and Levinas, see Horowitz, *Ethics at a Standstill*, 108-120.

or memory. At the same time, the encounter with the historical other – with the past as something that truly transcended the present, and with the oppressed as an historical subject that transcended the narrative on time and memory that creates an always the same – constituted an advent/event that retained a transformative and symbolic value, as the debt or obligation to the other contained in redemption. In accepting the “claim” that the past places on the present, there is the opening up of the possibility of a collective innervation – the creation of a collective connection, via a corporeity rooted in the embodied ethical capacities.

Merleau-Ponty’s thought can provide a political reading of the character of this collective innervation. He never transcends ontology to the extent that Levinas demands, but the concept of the encounter can bring some semblance of a utopian politics to the reading I have been offering: it is in the potentiality of the encounter, as the activation of the originary desire that animates the body’s corporeal schema, that the corporeal schema might be re-opened in breaking the esthesiological system’s negation of the other/alterity. While Merleau-Ponty never accepts the absolute transcendence of the other (for he rejects the dualism of immanence and transcendence), the other still evades me as something that transcends my own inner being/frame, and which re-opens my own possibilities with a transcendent response or experience in, of and to the world. Far from being simply an epistemological relation of the order of I-it, this constitutes the core of an ethical insight, for this difference creates the possibility of an ethical relation with utopian potentials. The encounter is still informed by the *écart* that makes the other other than myself – that assures their transcendence of me – and that opens up something beyond myself. If the relation with the other is truly an alterity, I can not experience them as merely the same or as part of the sedimented realm of meanings/being for myself: “if the other person is really another, at a certain stage I must be surprised, disoriented.

If we are to meet not just through what we have in common but in what is different between us – which presupposes a transformation of myself and of the other as well – then our differences can no longer be opaque qualities. They must become meaning. In the perception of the other, this happens when the other organism, instead of ‘behaving’ like me, engages with the things in my world in a style that is at first mysterious to me but which at least seems to me a coherent style because it responds to certain possibilities which fringed the things in my world.”¹¹⁷ This highlights the manner in which the other opens up a world beyond my own, beyond what I could see or experience. Yet, Merleau-Ponty’s non-mechanistic account of desire refuses the presupposition of an ethical summoning, or at the very least opens up the possibility that this summons may capsize through the narcissism of the self or through a repressive subjectification of ethical capacities. In the cases Benjamin invokes, we see two separate regimes of ambiguous perception, in which the other is always there, but is corporeally responded to according to different symbolic matrixes. In the case of the *flâneur*, the other is absorbed into the order of the Same; in the case of the historical oppressed, the other breaks with the self’s autarchy, freeing up the semantic excess that the Same represses or belies.

The lack or denial in the elision of the other is exactly the source of the start of an politico-ethical project, which lies in the search for (or experience of) an ethical *subject* as a process of intersubjectification that surprises and disorients me, subjecting my own approach to the world to a transformation – to a utopia beyond the existent world, with its reifying tendencies that close off any “otherwise.” Indeed, the exclusion of the other entails a closing off of the self within a self-same universe (the One of identity or the same), laden without change and subject to the sort of collective loneliness and eternal return Benjamin describes. Thus, solipsism becomes a practical and ethical problem, rather than a merely epistemological one: the insularity

¹¹⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1973), 142.

of being has the consequence of denying ethical capacities/necessities, in closing the self off from others or in turning them into little more than objects. Consequently, the ethical summoning that characterizes the encounter is no longer a merely phenomenological description, but something to be created or produced,¹¹⁸ which would thus be an acknowledgement of alterity by the transformation of subjectivity as an opening by means of dispossession of the self. In these respects, an ethical intersubjectification requires that we see beyond the other as a mere corporeal appearance, and see the other as a subject who re-opens the world that I took to be objective in a manner that demands an action that opens this world to a multiplicity of egos: “the perception of the other founds morality by realizing the paradox of an *alter ego*, of a common situation, by placing my perspective and my incommunicable solitude in the visual field of another and of all the others.”¹¹⁹ The ethical relation is something to be created via the contingent use and re-activation of our perceptual capacities according to the originary corporeal schema that becomes embodied in a particular *umwelt* – a particular *umwelt* that creates the condition of possibility of not recognizing the other as other. If the body is a relation to an *umwelt*, the idea that the other must “become meaning” implies a transformation of this very relation – of the nexus of self-other-world as ingrained in the corporeal being of the body.

The potential praxis of the human body is located “as a *spontaneity which teaches me what I could not know in any other way except through it.*”¹²⁰ While my corporeity retains an invariance, the very essence of that invariance as indeterminacy is the condition of possibility of a praxis that transforms my being, and which I can only know through the process of that transformation. The body retains a spontaneous capacity for action/expression that defies the

¹¹⁸ Michael Yeo, ‘Perceiving/Reading the Other: Ethical Dimensions.’ *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics, and Postmodernism*, ed. Thomas W. Busch and Shaun Gallagher, (Albany: SUNY Press 1992), 40-42.

¹¹⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘The Primacy of Perception,’ *The Primacy of Perception*, 28.

¹²⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘On the Phenomenology of Language,’ *Signs*, 93.

historical writing that would structure and limit it. Indeed, the determinate gap which resists the closure of being (or the body's corporeal schema) emerges in those situations in which the body "sings" its corporeal schema anew, as a re-activation of invariance as indeterminacy/openness. It is through the duality of the encounter that this spontaneity emerges: through the expression of my body in such a way that it brings us back to the lifeworld, and breaks with reified being in opening up the body's potentialities, which exist as cause and result of the encounter with the other who represents the transcendence of the insular being of the constituting consciousness. This can occur in the first place because "the body proper is a premonition of the other person, the *Einfühlung* an echo of my incarnation, and that a flash of meaning makes them substitutable in the absolute presence of origins."¹²¹ Again, this substitutability is not an identical interchangeability; it is of the order of belonging to the same world and corporeity as the power of expression.¹²² And, yet, this belonging still requires the individuation that would produce both self and others capable of a relationship that could constitute intersubjectivity, rather than an autarchic subjectivity or intrasubjectivity. The premonition of the other that is my body (and likewise hers) already presupposes the being of another prior to the "ego" itself – or at least their possibility. Indeed, the indivision of being presupposes an other as part of "the haze of an anonymous life" mired in the sort of transitivism that structures the confusion of self and others, a level at which "there is neither individuation nor numerical distinction." But it is out of this generality – as a utopian exit from anonymity and solipsist experience – that "others and my

¹²¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Philosopher and his Shadow,' *Signs*, 175.

¹²² In exploring language, Merleau-Ponty explicitly rejects such a position of substitutability, which would necessitate a universal language beyond equivocation (and consequently denying the power of expression), and which would in turn reduce the other to "what one knows of oneself." See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*, 3-4. As Michael E. Gardiner suggest, the "anonymous corporeality" that Merleau-Ponty speaks of "binds us together in a complex, mediated whole, but, again, without subsuming the difference between self and other, or transcending our unique positioning in time and space." See Gardiner, "'A Very Understandable Horror of Dialectics': Bakhtin and Merleau-Ponty," *Weak Messianism: Essays in Everyday Utopianism*, (Oxford: Peter Lang Publishers 2013), 102.

body are born together from the originary ecstasy,”¹²³ or an originating ecstasy that gives birth to the possibility of intersubjectivity. It is only by disaggregating ourselves from anonymity and sedimentation that intersubjectivity is possible as an expression of our corporeal capacities. In this context, it is the moment in which I truly experience another – when they surprise and disorient me – that their approach to the world attaches itself to the self, in summoning a different response to the world that unseats autarchic insularity. This is the sort of “queer experience” that inaugurates a new expression of meaning, in which the “intentional transgression” of Husserl’s philosophical project becomes a political transgression or ethical summoning.¹²⁴ Consequently, transitivity would take on a mature character as the possibility of an ethics based on an individuation as intertwining that retains the *écart* of difference.

Building on this line of thinking, we must assert the corporeal character of intersubjectification, *as a process* that transforms the ethical and esthesiological capacities. If utopia is of the order of the ethical or the encounter, as an experience that “introduces” us to the other, then the encounter is the moment (or advent) of the potential for biological transformation, as the natural-historical diagram that re-opens our openness to the world via the experience of another openness. Thus, the *umwelt* and the functioning of the corporeal schema can be transformed via the encounter as the condition of possibility of experience, and of the creation of the *umwelt* as an intersubjective symbolic institution. Mauro Carbone describes this experience of the sensible as an “event-advent,” signifying the opening of a succession of actions and therefore possibilities: “the ‘event-advent’ of appearing functions as an *aesthetic shock*, which ignites the astonishment in our encounter with the sensible, suspends our habits and dispossesses

¹²³ Merleau-Ponty, ‘The Philosopher and his Shadow,’ *Signs*, 174-175.

¹²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, ‘Man and Adversity,’ 231.

us of the ability to distinguish reciprocally between the active and the passive.”¹²⁵ We need to connect this sentiment to Merleau-Ponty’s account of the surprise and disorientation affected by the advent of the encounter as originary experience (the encounter as an advent that breaks the mechanistic experience of the other in the crowd) and the ethical project that it produces. While the experience of the encounter “threatens to fall into non-sense,” it likewise has the potential to “open us to another meaning.”¹²⁶ It is in the latter respects, as an aesthetic shock, that we experience the condition of possibility of experience, its natural-historical diagram: namely, the ontological condition of the flesh as a deferred realization (or open totality) haunted by indeterminacy and the premonition of the other. Ultimately, the habitual behaviour produced by the *umwelt* is broken by the spontaneous experience of the sensible, and the other’s summoning of me as an aesthetic shock (as a rupturing/caesura of the esthesiological experience habituated through the *umwelt*) requires a re-opening of the sensorial response to their very alterity. This aesthetic shock is precisely what shatters the reified capacity in re-opening the affective and solidaristic agencies of the body via a dispossession of the self that releases or breaks the semantic meanings imprisoned in the esthesiological organisms’ “linguistic” interpretation of the world. We thus experience a neotynic return through which our contact with others returns us to the conditions of possibility of experience – which includes communication, empathy and being-for-the-other – and re-opens the human corporeal schema to new instantiations.

Ultimately, the other opens and mirrors the determinate gap or slippage that is constitutive of the very indeterminacy and becoming of the body. It is this very experience that opens the experience of the chiasm, a term that Merleau-Ponty borrows from Valéry. In Valéry’s words: “Thereby a sort of simultaneous reciprocal limitation occurs. You capture my

¹²⁵ Mauro Carbone, *The Thinking of the Sensible: Merleau-Ponty’s A-Philosophy*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2004), 45.

¹²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 143.

image, my appearance; I capture yours. You are not *me*, since you see me and I do not see myself. What I lack is this me that you see. And what you lack is the you I see. And no matter how far we advance in our mutual understanding, as much as we reflect, so much will we be different.”¹²⁷ In this situation the chiasm operates as a collective innervation, connected to the very possibility of the corporeal schema as an experience of the inversion of my own corporeal schema in the other. But we need to see this not as, in and of itself, the realization of a true essence informing the ontological condition. Rather, it is the re-emergence of potential as the hollow of subjectivity. It is in the *experience* of reversibility that “there is a passage from the ‘For Itself’ to the For the Other – In reality there is neither me nor the other as positive, positive subjectivities. There are two caverns, two opennesses, two stages where something will take place – and which both belong to the same world, to the stage of being.”¹²⁸ This cavern or hollow (the something/*etwas*) merely breaks with reified being in opening up the potential for a positive affirmation: it is the moment in which the pairing of self and other is opened as a possibility – as the plurality of an association without fusion (because it is informed by the *écart* that makes the other always transcend me), and which relies on our mutual transcendence of the relationship of activity and passivity, which becomes the intertwining of answering the inverted ethical obligation that the corporeal being of each imposes on the other. All of this lays the groundwork for a corporeal expression of a new ethical relation, which is founded in the originary capacity and shatters the reified life of the body in creating the alterity that the encounter with the other demands – in creating an alterity that was held captive in being’s sedimentation and denial of alterity. In this sense, expression – the expression of the body’s own indeterminacy and capacity – is a rupture with “being” as previously constituted, and henceforth

¹²⁷ Paul Valéry, quoted in Merleau-Ponty, ‘Man and Adversity,’ 231-232.

¹²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, ‘Working Notes,’ 263.

the acknowledgement of “a unity exposed to contingency and tirelessly recreating itself.”¹²⁹ In producing a new *umwelt*, with concomitant changes to the sensorial system and its linguistic translation of phenomena, this is not just another experience, but the production of a new set of conditions of possibility of experience: the construction of a possible bodily comportment that truly becomes a being-for-the-other, as the construction of connective and affective tissue for the possibility of collective action. It is the creation of a capacity for a qualitatively richer experience of the intertwining/chiasm.

* * *

One of Abensour’s fundamental contributions to thinking utopia lies in his idea that the utopian text aims at the education of desire. As he states, “the point is not for utopia (unlike the tradition that calls for the ‘moral education of humanity’) to assign ‘true’ or ‘just’ goals to desire but rather to educate desire, to stimulate it, to awaken it – not to assign it a goal but to open a path for it.”¹³⁰ Thus, the utopian text aims to open up a realm of alterity – to allow people to imagine an “other” mode of potential being, particularly as the non-repressive we-being of an intersubjective space that respects, simultaneously, the alterity of the other as well as the temporality within which this is disclosed and, therefore, the very aleatoric nature of any we-being. In essence, “desire must be taught to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire otherwise; it must learn to shatter the dead weight, to alleviate the weakness of appetite, to liberate the firebirds of desire, to give free rein to the impulse of adventure.”¹³¹ The attempt to avoid the imposition of identity-thinking inspired doctrinal forms is why ambiguity retains such a central role in utopian writing: it is an ambiguity or openness that is

¹²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, ‘On the Phenomenology of Language,’ 97.

¹³⁰ Miguel Abensour, ‘William Morris: The Politics of Romance,’ *Revolutionary Romance*, ed. Max Blechman, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1999), 145-146.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 145-146.

intended to carry on.¹³² The dialogical form thus opens a conversation about truth and freedom, for this form is part and parcel of the attempt to fashion a political community, and this element of the literary analysis is itself political: the function of the utopian text takes pride of place over the form or content.

In the context of my reading of Merleau-Ponty, the idea that utopia entails the education of desire takes on a new meaning for it is *through the other* that desire is educated – educated to break the autarchy of the self, to feel and empathize with the oppression of the other as a debt of responsibility, and therefore to desire otherwise than the insularity of singular being and to transform the existing social space. But this is not simply the release of the primordial capacities, as a pre-determined order. It is a re-institution of them, for primoridality itself retains the quality of potential. The very non-identity of the flesh – the in-between of act and potential, visible and invisible – represents a refusal of closure. If utopia is about a dialectic between the desire for another world, and the education of that desire as an opening, then it is tied to both the ontological (the potentiality of the body) and ethical (as enactment, via intersubjectification, of that potential) place that Abensour speaks of. Desiring otherwise is rooted in the very ontological movement beyond the given (the adventure of a new way of life), and it is simultaneously educated by the alterity of the other – educated as a for-the-other. While this puts forth the biopolitical demand of understanding intersubjectivity as a political project attached to transformations in the corporeal schema, we now need to move more directly into the question and problem of the forms of subjectification implied in this utopian political insight, as well as the potential models for understanding this political project/process.

¹³² Miguel Abensour, *Le Utopie de Thomas More à Walter Benjamin*, (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2000), 35-60.

Chapter 6

Towards a Political Theory of Intersubjectivity: Anonymity, Individuation and Social Institution

“In Merleau-Ponty being-inside the concrete reality of bodies implies an even more fundamental relation to alterity, being among others, in the perceptive modalities and the linguistic forms of being. And the experience of alterity is always traversed by a project to construct the common.”¹

-Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*

“The political problem would be rather that of conceiving the institutions where this dynamic would find a place. What institutions would permit the repetitive dynamic between the preindividual and the individuated?”²

-Paolo Virno, Interview

Intersubjectivity is often understood in the context of the *philosophical* problem of "other minds."³ In these respects, the study of intersubjectivity aims to verify or confirm the being of others: given that I only have first-person access to my own experiences, how can I know that the other is also a subject? Merleau-Ponty often addresses intersubjectivity in these terms, using it to describe an epistemological dilemma and an ontological condition. To borrow his malapropism of Husserl: "Transcendental subjectivity...*is* intersubjectivity."⁴ This suggests that the character or structure of human existence denies the autarchy of the self, for we are always-already caught up in concrete situations that intertwine us with others. In Chapter 1, intersubjectivity was largely considered in this context, through the specific attempt to understand an ontology of the social. Yet, at the same time that he refers to intersubjectivity in ontological (or phenomenological) terms, Merleau-Ponty also uses it in *political* terms.⁵ While this was alluded

¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 2009), 30.

² Paolo Virno, 'On Multitude and Beyond: An Interview with Paolo Virno,' *Cultural Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2014, 222.

³ On this front, see Dan Zahavi, 'Intersubjectivity,' *Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, (New York: Routledge 2012).

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Marxism and Philosophy,' *Sense and Nonsense*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1964), 134.

⁵ James Schmidt notes the neglect of this element in Anglo-American accounts of the "problem of the other"; I would suggest that this neglect also animates much of the Anglo-American Merleau-Ponty scholarship. See James Schmidt, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism*, (New York: St. Martin's Press 1985), 58.

to, Chapter 1 largely attempted to understand Merleau-Ponty's ontology in the context of his political engagements, rather than understanding intersubjectivity as a specific political theory. It is to this issue that I want to turn in this final chapter, building on Chapter 5's conceptualization of a dystopian/utopian subjectivity rooted in the intersubjective and ethical capacities of the body.

In terms of the political theory of intersubjectivity, Merleau-Ponty suggests that humans are caught up in "a natural and historical situation" from which they are, simultaneously, incapable of abstracting themselves from and to which they are incapable of being reduced. Here, the existential conditions of contingency, decision and division include the ability to act and transform one's situation, though only through immanent engagement with it. Under such conditions, the individual is neither an isolated consciousness nor an absolute legislator; rather, as a "social being," the individual is a producer-product (or generic subject). Merleau-Ponty interprets this common situation through Marx's proposition that the *character* of intersubjective relations are determined by "a certain way of appropriating nature in which the mode of [one's relationships] with others takes shape."⁶ This shows a concern for not merely the epistemological dilemma, but with the political nature of the existential bonds that unite us: human beings are relational, and embedded in the externalizing/externalized characteristics of the body as a corporeal being that is capable of sensing and suffering. If this is all enclosed within a "generic" being that is the endowment of history as intersubjective process or unfolding, then our embedding within this generic being includes the possibility "of rupturing the given structures of society, and of acceding through praxis to 'the reign of liberty[.]'"⁷

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, 'Marxism and Philosophy,' pg. 129.

⁷ Ibid., pg. 128.

In pulling on the political threads of Merleau-Ponty's mobilization of intersubjectivity, this chapter aims to draw together the various insights thus far developed in order to put forth a political theory of intersubjectivity. Far from merely positing that being is always-already social, a political theory of intersubjectivity views intersubjectivity as a particular form of political action – or, as the movement towards a particular mode of being-together across and through the alterity that is characteristic of being as such. Thus, such a political theory draws its sustenance from a particular understanding of the body and its capacities/potentials – an argument that was developed in the previous chapter. To further develop this account, we must think through the parameters of processes of subjectification as intersubjectification, as well as the phenomenal forms of such processes. To do so, the chapter begins by drawing on the work of a number of scholars who have sought to recuperate the critical import of anonymity in Merleau-Ponty's work, seeing anonymity not as an abstract or neutral account of the body, but as fundamentally tied to indeterminacy and temporality. Building on this, it turns to the process of individuation as a mode of the production of subjectivity out of this anonymous being. Individuation not only lays the ground work for understanding the instituted nature of society and the individual, but calls for intersubjectivity as an expression of the multiplicity of being. Next, the chapter turns to the problem of social institution, particularly Merleau-Ponty's account of proletarian being as a form of such social institution. While his account of proletarian being ultimately describes a failed intersubjective project, this failure still expresses the political project that the politics of the flesh demands – namely the institution of a mode of subjectivity rooted in being-together in a manner that allows for the further expression of difference.

I. Re-Interpreting Anonymous Being

Throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes reference to the anonymity of being (or to the "prepersonal" or "original past"). This suggests something beyond

or before first-person experience. In this vein, he seemingly presents perception as an anonymous faculty that is not under the purview of an "I" but is a function of the anonymous "one" that denotes the generic character of all perceiving subjects, or that all perceiving subjects are anonymous in their relation to the world. As he summarizes this position: "if I wanted to render precisely the perceptual experience, I ought to say that *one* perceives in me, and not that I perceive."⁸ Here, both the I and the other "are brought together in the one single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception."⁹ These sentiments have lead critics to suggest that, in such a conception of anonymity, Merleau-Ponty neglects the particularities of difference (in particular sexual and gendered differences) in his theory of embodiment, and thus falls back on a de facto norm rooted in a universalist (or masculine) understanding of the contours of the body/perception.¹⁰ Here, it is claimed that anonymity denotes "the impersonal or a shared generality of human existence,"¹¹ and that Merleau-Ponty's work contains a version of what Dan Zahavi has referred to as the radical anonymity thesis, in which "the anonymous life is apparently a life with neither individuation nor numerical distinction."¹² Consequently, Merleau-

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (New York: Routledge 2002), 250.

⁹ Ibid., 411.

¹⁰ See Judith Butler, 'Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*,' *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, ed. Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1981); Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1994); Luce Irigaray, *Two Be Two*, trans. Monique Rhodes and Marco F. Cocito-Monoc, (New York Routledge 2001); Shannon Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism and Feminism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2001). For overviews of these positions, see Diana Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics After Anti-Humanism*, (Lanhan: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers 2007), 197-221; Megan M. Burke, 'Anonymous Temporality and Gender: Rereading Merleau-Ponty,' *philoSOPHIA*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Summer 2013.

¹¹ As Burke summarizes the critics' positions. Burke, 'Anonymous Temporality and Gender,' 140.

¹² Dan Zahavi, 'Anonymity and first-personal givenness: An attempt at reconciliation,' *Subjektivitat – Verantwortung – Wahrheit*, ed. David Carr and Chr. Lotz, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang 2002). According to Zahavi, while Merleau-Ponty flirts with versions of this thesis, he ultimately concludes that anonymity and individuality "can be two moments that both belong to the structure of the concrete subject."

Ponty is accused of falling into solipsistic and potentially patriarchal conceptions of the body, thus introducing a philosophical model of domination.¹³

While sensitive to the particular concerns regarding gender and difference that animate this criticism, a number of scholars have defended Merleau-Ponty's work, seeing anonymity as rooted in indeterminacy or temporality, both of which include the openness to socio-historical forms that come to structure and shape the being of the body in ways that do not exhaust the potential for further (or resistant) forms of subjectivity. Sylvia Stoller deconstructs a fundamental equivocation in criticisms of Merleau-Ponty, differentiating anonymity from neutrality in a way that draws to the fore the phenomenological intentions of his account of difference. As she states: "anonymous does not mean that subjects face each other 'neutrally,' nor does it mean that their bodily identity is completely 'unknown' or even one of 'anyone and everyone.'"¹⁴ While anonymity may denote an originary commonality in which self and other are, in Merleau-Ponty's words, "two sides of one and the same phenomenon," this still allows for the difference which separates us and makes our experiences not susceptible to being "superimposed on each other."¹⁵ Ultimately, commonality does not preclude difference or differentiation, and existence includes the being of a plurality of persons. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is fundamentally concerned to understand the phenomenon of difference, its coming into being as the emergence of differentiation. Indeed, far from starting from difference, Merleau-Ponty is concerned with the conditions of possibility of difference, and the disclosure of differentiation as a process. Fundamentally, "anonymity" is rooted in both a surplus that makes possible different deployments or comportments of embodied experience

¹³ See in particular, Shannon Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*.

¹⁴ Sylvia Stoller, 'Reflections on Feminist Merleau-Ponty Skepticism,' *Hypatia*, vol. 15, no. 1, Winter 2000, 176.

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, as cited in *Ibid.*, 176-177.

(including gendered ones) and in the dual non-identity of being, which Stoller calls the "double difference" of the relation to the other and the relation to oneself.

Alia Al-Saji emphasizes the indeterminacy and temporality at the roots of anonymous being in focusing on the notion of "a past that has never been present." Centrally, she understands sensibility as characterized by an indistinct temporality, which becomes actualized in forms of perception as particular rhythmic attunements to the world: sensibility is the ground out of which perception emerges. Thus, the body plays out the role of an individuating function that breaks with anonymous being, conceptualized as a form of prereflective experience. Yet, the body as a function of the originary past retains its openness, even if it is already habituated into a particular style or rhythm of being. As she states: "For Merleau-Ponty, bodies are individuated by their style or rhythm. It is in this sense that lived bodies can be compared to works of art, for both are 'individuals' in Merleau-Ponty's sense."¹⁶ Essentially, the body's intertwining with the world includes the malleability of the very bodily rhythms that are lived. Through engagement with the world, and repetitions of new rhythms, the corporeal style can be "improvised upon" so that it recasts the "I can." In this sense, sensory life is a virtuality that is not preconstituted. Instead, it is always permeated with a surplus (as the unconscious): "The communion and polysemy of sensory life hence leave traces in perception, even while its rhythms overflow perceptual representation. Thus, although sensory life can be described in terms of negativity or lack, it is clearly a lack that is *felt* and that makes a difference in the perceptual outcome...This unconsciousness points to the peculiar 'spontaneity' that belongs to sensory life as 'original past[.]'"¹⁷ Surplus assures the possibility of transforming the actualization of particular "styles" of the perceptual capacities contained in the corporeal schema,

¹⁶ Alia Al-Saji, "'A Past which has Never Been Present,'" Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty's Theory of the Prepersonal,' *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 2008, 53.

¹⁷ Ibid., 62.

"but not without breaking with historically sedimented forms."¹⁸ Thus, Al-Saji asserts that "perception is hence a culturally and historically specific process."¹⁹

Drawing on Stoller and Al-Saji, Megan M. Burke explores the idea of "anonymous temporality" as a surplus containing political potentials. As she states: "For Merleau-Ponty, anonymity is a structure of temporality that is prior to the cogito; it is a time that actualizes the reflective self."²⁰ To understand this, Burke draws on the notion of the phantom limb, explaining that the feeling of the lost limb is structured by the habituated experience that cannot simply be passed over or moved beyond because of the loss of the limb. Essentially, the acculturation of experience structures the lived body of the "I" in a matter that precedes the knowing self-presence that would presumably emerge after amputation. Thus, the previous experience constitutes a different time of being that undergirds and structures (or "haunts") my present being. As Burke explains: "anonymous time is the generative past of my present. It is only a level beneath me in so far as they are before the *cogito*. In other words, my 'I,' my present happens at a time after sensing, but is nevertheless continuously informed by my sensing. It is not 'I' who perceives, *since 'I am a time beyond sensing*, but rather '*one* perceives in me."²¹ Building on this insight, she suggests that gendered norms are "internalized and sedimented" as part of one's bodily norms, but at a level prior to the cogito and in a manner that makes these ways of being appear natural to the self-conscious "I." Thus, this anonymous past "generates particular gendered cogitos....anonymity illuminates how it is that gender becomes habit; existing prior to reflective experience means gender is deeply embedded or sedimented into one's 'I.'"²² Yet, such constructions retain an excess or surplus that is rooted in indeterminacy. The very

¹⁸ Ibid., 63.

¹⁹ Ibid., 63.

²⁰ Burke, 'Anonymous Temporality and Gender,' 138.

²¹ Ibid., 148.

²² Ibid., 150.

shifting of gender norms – their rooting in the historical – suggests the malleability of such anonymous experience, and thus the conditions of possibility of its transformation. Hence, "insofar as anonymous time enfolds the emergence of my 'I,' my self is at once more than just the 'I.'"²³ Consequently, gender retains a two-fold character, denoting at the same time, a sedimentation that leads to unreflective relations and actions, and a surplus when it breaks with that sedimented realm of existence via lived experiences.

Stoller, Al-Saji and Burke all make important contributions to the debate regarding Merleau-Ponty's use of anonymity. But they draw primarily on *Phenomenology of Perception*, which has been the particular target of critics. I want to turn to Merleau-Ponty's specific deployment of anonymity in the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*, which substantiate and add new contours to understanding anonymity, centrally the relationship between corporeal potentiality and acts of expression. To begin with, Merleau-Ponty makes a statement that seems to confirm the radical anonymity thesis: "The I, really, is nobody, is the anonymous; it must be so, prior to all objectifications, denomination, in order to be the Operator, or the one to whom all this occurs."²⁴ Yet, he immediately qualifies this by describing the anonymous as a non-identical, non-achievable or non-realizable negativity. The anonymous or primary "I", which is really a "one" (*un*), "is the unknown *to whom* all is given to see or to think, to whom everything appeals, before whom...there is something."²⁵ In essence, this is the abstract subject who stands before the world of experiential content. But this "I" is a negativity that is "ungraspable" and is therefore not the thinking, speaking, experiential "I"/subject. It is the subject "prior to all objectifications." The concrete I ("the named I, the I named") is the

²³ Ibid., 151.

²⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Working Notes,' *Visible and the Invisible*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1968), 246.

²⁵ Ibid., 246.

objectification or signification of this primary and primordial I. The act of speaking, listening, seeing, etc, is the negation of the primary "I" that preceded objectification; and objectification thus becomes a *leistung* (performance, achievement, power), which is achieved through the bodily relation to the world, whose originary quality lies in its anonymous openness.

The openness of anonymity (its originary indeterminacy or surplus) represents the corporeal potential located in the body. The objectified I, which is the subject, is the translation of a hollow of subjectivity: the performative translation of an originary negativity as openness, which becomes the particularity of the amorphous openness that is an originary potentiality. We might read this through Paolo Virno's understanding of potential as faculty/capacity, which was alluded to in the previous chapter. Virno argues that we cannot think potential in terms of a potential act, but only as a capacity/faculty. Speech is the prime example. The capacity for speech must be conceived as a different order than the potential act of speech; that is, we cannot think the "potential" for speech as capable of being realized in acts (nor as an ideal model). The potential lies separate from the incarnations/acts, which would in fact represent the negation of the potential. Potential as capacity/faculty is opposed to such a philosophy of presence in so far as the speech faculty – which is different than acts of speech – cannot be "present." Likewise, potential as a generic faculty cannot be conceptualized in the act, with the latter denoting a "partial" fulfillment of the former. Rather, there is a heterogeneity between them.²⁶ Indeed, the generic qualities of capacities present a negative relationship between potential (not-now) and act (the now), and refusal to equate them entails the refusal to limit the possible occurrences to a predetermined essence. Hence, potential "is a *perpetual* not-now, a lasting non-actuality."²⁷ For

²⁶ Paolo Virno, *Deja Vu and the End of History*, (London: Verso 2015), 83.

²⁷ Ibid., 90-91.

Virno, this is symptomatic of the radical virtuosity – in the sense of virtuoso – that characterizes human praxis.

While we cannot include "the body" as a potential in and of itself, the body's movements and perceptions are forms of acts rooted (but separated from) the body's capacity as motility, tactility, perception and comportment. Indeed, no singular movement can encapsulate fully the potential acts that the body is capable of and, for Merleau-Ponty, the body speaks a language that mirrors speech. In this sense, the body becomes a performative enactment or expression of capacities. As Merleau-Ponty states: "the *self* of perception as 'nobody,' in the sense of Ulysses, as the anonymous one buried in the world, and that has not yet traced its path."²⁸ The latter claim suggests the performance that escapes or exits the anonymous (as un/pre-conscious or un/pre-reflected) and produces the subject out of "'a lake of non-being,' a certain nothingness sunken into a local and temporal *openness*."²⁹ Tracing a path signifies a type of action, embodied in speech, perception and motility, which makes the acting subject "the subject of a praxis." But prior to this praxis, the power to perform such acts is constituted by the lack/surplus/non-presence that is contained in its being as the possessor of such powers of performance – that is, the flesh as a potential mass for performative/expressive enactment.

All of this is congruent with the accounts rendered by Stoller, Al-Saji and Burke. Anonymity must be understood in its two-fold significance: first, as the preconscious, prepersonal, prereflective world of habituated being; second, and simultaneously, as a lack and surplus that is at the heart of being, and which represents something that is defied by anonymity – anonymity negating itself by its own weight. By connecting this more particularly to a conception of potentiality, we can see the full complexity contained in the various meanings of

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, 'Working Notes,' *Visible and the Invisible*, 201.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 201.

leistung: "power" as the potential of being contained in the hollow/negativity of the originary anonymity; "achievement" as the translation of this hollow into a particular form of being; "performance" as the praxical action which also signifies the non-coincidence or non-identity between that which is translated into being and the originary hollow/potential. In this vein, Merleau-Ponty draws a connection between painting and being. He suggests that the "'amorphous' perceptual world" is, in and of itself, devoid of a mode of expression, but that it calls such modes of expression forth from the painter in an effort to express the perceptual world. Ultimately, "this perceptual world...is more than all painting, than all speech, than every 'attitude,' and which, apprehended by philosophy in its universality, appears as containing everything that will ever be said, and yet leaving us to create it."³⁰ Ultimately, the act of creation comes on the back of the potentiality contained in the perceptual world. While this world precedes and activates such capacities, what will be created from it is contained in *leistung* as a form of action, as a relation to the world rooted in anonymity as an overcoming or transformation of it.

II. From Anonymity to Individuation

Re-reading Merleau-Ponty's deployment of anonymity is important to recuperating the political implications of his work; more particularly, understanding anonymity as rooted in indeterminacy, temporality and potential allows us to understand it in the context of processes of subjectification. Indeed, the anonymous represents a pre-reflective mode of being, which can be rooted in past instances of subjectification. Consequently, the differences contained in gender are not ones that Merleau-Ponty seeks to naturalize or ignore, but ones whose emergence he seeks to understand. At the same time, anonymity also denotes a surplus that can rupture/transform habituated and sedimented modes of being, something rooted in the very non-

³⁰ Ibid., 170.

identity of the self with itself and the outside. In these respects, Stoller, Al-Saji and Burke make seminal contributions to extracting the political import of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and to extracting a critical attention to difference in his work. Yet, they also neglect to transition this into a larger proposition about the political significance of intersubjectivity, and in fact neglect the intersubjective elements of Merleau-Ponty's thought. Indeed, much of their discussion focuses on the question of identity politics and Merleau-Ponty's potential contribution to understanding subjectivity at the individual level. Connecting intersubjectivity to anonymity would imply thinking difference from the perspective (or in the context) of a political subjectivity. Moreover, it would involve a movement to new forms of subjectivity.

To begin thinking along these lines, we might draw a political parallel between the accounts of gender as habituated practices that produce anonymous experience and Benjamin's account of voluntary memory and isolated experience in his excavation of everyday experience under capitalism. For Benjamin, the factory worker, member of the crowd and gambler all act in accordance with anonymous being as a prereflective (and therefore reflex-like) relation to the world, which defies their essential agency through processes of acculturation. This is particularly pertinent to the crowd, whose anonymous indifferentiation (including its amorphous organization) was easily harnessed for the purpose of usurping the individual in the midst of the crowd's mechanical being and its corollary herd instincts. Here, the "one" of anonymous being is no longer a philosophical prepersonal that is faceless or nameless, but a political anonymity that effaces the subjective capacities contained in embodied being. This draws out the two-fold character of intersubjectivity, which is not merely a mode of collective being but the being of a social individual, whose collective belonging must likewise resist the effacement of individual

being as well.³¹ In thinking a political theory of intersubjectivity, we must therefore think intersubjectivity as a process of subjectification against the mass being that permeates certain forms of political being – be they fascist (the one of race), capitalist (the one of the market/commodification) or patriarchal (the one of the masculine universal). Moreover, Benjamin theorizes the ability to break these forms of subjectivity/experience through the depth of the historical past in a manner congruent with Al-Saji's understanding of a past that has never been present – as something containing an historical excess or surplus capable of rupturing habituated being and its self-same, ideological self-assuredness. In returning to Merleau-Ponty, we must begin thinking intersubjectivity according to or in the context of its ontological potentials as "flesh" in which we are made of the same stuff as "others" but that others ultimately/always transcend us. The question we are left with is how to go about conceptualizing a political intersubjectivity that has fully imbibed the contours of the flesh – the peculiar mixture of unity and difference, immanence and transcendence.

To connect anonymity to an intersubjective political *project* (or *process*), I want to turn to a bridging concept. As I suggested in Chapter 1, the social retains an indeterminacy. Here, we need to take this further by acknowledging that society itself is instituted out of – or on the foundation of – the corporeal capacities or the characteristics of the flesh of the social. In this context, Virno's account of individuation is instructive, and pertinent to thinking through Merleau-Ponty's work. This account draws on the work of Gilbert Simondon, who was a student of Merleau-Ponty. Individuation refers to the *production* of subjects as a process, which rejects the pre-constitution of either the individual or society. Both "individual" and "society" are

³¹ Arnold Farr suggests that criticizing Herbert Marcuse's tendency towards individualization misses that he is seeking to rescue individuals from mass society. Arnold L. Farr, *Critical Theory and Democratic Vision: Herbert Marcuse and Recent Liberation Philosophies*, (Lanham: Lexington Books 2009), Ch.4. Something similar undergirds Benjamin's work.

products of a process of individuation and, consequently, capable of being ruptured in the service of opening the possibility of something new. The fundamental problem with presupposed or static approaches to individuals or individuation is, in Donald Landes' words, that they see "*becoming*" as an inessential aspect of ontological explanation, a mere ontic unfolding of the deeper truth of the preexisting principle of individuation."³² Drawing on Simondon, Virno turns to what "precedes" individuation, namely the pre-personal or pre-individual realm, "something common, universal and undifferentiated."³³ This pre-personal realm is the raw material of subjectification/individuation or its potential: that is, the latter emerges out of particular deployments or comportments of the former. Thus subjects emerge as a process of individuation from the one of the pre-individual/personal or the "common." Fundamentally, the individual/subject lies in the hinge or intertwining of the pre-individual and the individuated, for the individuated is never the full enactment or "translation" of the pre-individual. The individuated is a particular singularity that never exhausts the common that is represented by the pre-individual, and the subject "should be understood as a permanent mixture of the Common and the Singular."³⁴ Thus, the subject as an individuated "I" remains a precarious being, with subjectification being always "reversible" and never complete.³⁵

But, individuation should not be understood to reduce singularity to the individual or individuality – nor, perhaps more nefariously, does the collective reduce individuation. Rather, Virno suggests: "By participating in a collective, the subject, far from surrendering the most unique individual traits, has the opportunity to individuate, at least in part, the share of the pre-individual reality which all individuals carry within themselves. According to Simondon, within

³² Donald Landes, *Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression*, (New York: Bloomsbury 2013), 24.

³³ Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2004), 76.

³⁴ Paolo Virno, 'Interview: Reading Gilbert Simondon: Transindividuality, technical activity and reification,' *Radical Philosophy*, Issue 136, March/April 2006.

³⁵ Virno, *Grammar of the Multitude*, 78.

the collective we endeavour to refine our singularity, to bring it to its climax."³⁶ The ultimate result is the "social individual." This would be something tantamount to a subject that shares in the potential of the common, but who differentiates themselves within and via this commonality: "'Social' should be translated as pre-individual, and 'individual' should be seen as the ultimate result of the process of *individuation*. Since the term 'pre-individual' must include sensory perception, language, and productive forces, we could also say that the 'social individual' is the individual who openly exhibits a unique ontogenesis, a unique development (with its own different layers or constituent elements)."³⁷ In this sense, Virno advocates a particular form of subjectivity (the multitude) as a being-with, in which the "with" implies and demands the defence/maintenance of an alterity that refuses to reduce any "collective" to a singular will that usurps singularity. Indeed, the "many" remain a many because they are produced out of an individuation that leaves behind (or exits) the universality of the pre-individual and, simultaneously, through their being-with further individuates their collective being from such a unity. Moreover, the *process* of individuation is permanent and precarious. By this, Virno means that we are constantly reproducing or returning to individuation in the production of new subjectivities. Given the restlessness and openness of human nature, this process can never be complete: the nature of potentiality is something that continually haunts all forms of individuation, because individuation fails to exhaust the potential contained in the pre-individual,³⁸ and therefore returns via a neotynic regression to the origins of the process of individuation. This calls for forms of politics that would not reduce this indeterminacy.

³⁶ Ibid., 79.

³⁷ Ibid., 80.

³⁸ See also, Paolo Virno, 'The Multitude and the Principle of Individuation,' *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2003. For a useful elaboration of subjectivity and Virno's account of it, see Jason Read, 'The Production of Subjectivity: From Transindividuality to the Commons,' *New Formations*, Issue 70, 2010.

While Virno's work provides a number of insightful means for reading Merleau-Ponty politically, before turning to this we need to note a particular shortcoming – in the context of a biopolitical reading of Merleau-Ponty – of Virno's work, namely the idea that language (or, more particularly, speech) is the medium of the common/pre-individual that facilitates individuation. Virno draws a direct connection to Merleau-Ponty in elaborating his appropriation of Simondon's conception of individuation, isolating three particular elements of the realm of the pre-individual: first, the “biological basis of the species, that is the sensory organs, motor skills apparatus, perception abilities”; second, language or the language faculty; third, “the prevailing relations of production,” which are historically constituted but precede the particular individuation which makes use of them. In explaining the first of these three elements, Virno states: "In this regard, Merleau-Ponty maintains something very interesting: 'I am no more aware of being the true subject of my sensation than of my birth or my death.' And later in his study he writes: 'sight, hearing and touch, with their fields, [...] are anterior, and remain alien, to my personal life.' Perception cannot be encapsulated by the first person singular pronoun. It is never an individual 'I' who hears, sees, touches; it is the whole species as such...The pre-individual nature inscribed in the senses is a generic biological endowment, which is not susceptible to individuation."³⁹ By contrast, Virno argues that the common possession of the language faculty facilitates differentiation and individuation, via the singularizing use of speech: "while language belongs to everybody and to nobody, the passage from the pure and simple ability to say something to a particular and contingent utterance determines the space of an individual's notion of 'my own.'"⁴⁰

It bears mentioning that Virno's use of the prepersonal and preindividual coalesces in some respects with the work of Stoller, Al-Saji and Burke. Indeed, that Simondon refers to this

³⁹ Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 76-77.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 77.

realm as the metastable, which seeks to pinpoint what precedes individuation,⁴¹ is in line with the elements of indeterminacy and temporality that are central to recuperating the political efficacy of anonymity. Moreover, Virno's focus on the specificity of particular relations of production as the markers of a prepersonal, historical realm that we are always-already subject to, operates in a similar vein to the understanding of gender as anonymous or preconscious in the sense that it is something one "does" prior to reflection as an historical endowment. Yet, ultimately, Virno's account utilizes and attests to Merleau-Ponty's work a variant of the radical anonymity thesis. This has a number of problems. In the first place, Virno appears to suggest that anonymity precedes or precludes individuation in so far as our perception or intentionality is undifferentiated – that it is the same for all subjects. This moves towards the very high-altitude thinking (and universal exchangeability of perspectives) that Merleau-Ponty seeks to refute throughout his work, and ignores that, as experiential beings utilizing experiential capacities, we can only ever know these faculties in the context of our first-person experiences. Even if they are "generic" faculties (and this seems very much debateable), we would have to recognize an originary differentiation between self and others. Moreover, Virno's disembodied turn to language as the sole means of individuation represents a significant and problematic (because dualistic) departure from the embodied approach of Merleau-Ponty – as Al-Saji's work in particular suggests via the notion of bodily rhythm. Hence, we need to account for differences in bodily motility and spatiality in the context of the anonymity of priorly articulated subject-positions via individuation and thus further subject to resistant forms of subjectivization.

While Virno's understanding of potential as faculty/capacity is useful, we need to significantly expand its scope, including understanding it in the context of the specific

⁴¹ Donald Landes draws an equivalence between Simondon's metastable and Merleau-Ponty's work throughout *Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression*.

“language” the body speaks via its comportment. In this vein, Iris Marion Young’s seminal essay ‘Throwing Like a Girl’ suggests that the body as a mode of experience connected to perceptive capacities *is* subject to individuation as a distinction between subject positions, and therefore refuses the radical anonymity thesis and refuses a fundamental essence to the “I can.” Young draws on both Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir in asserting that “every human existence is defined by its *situation*; the particular existence of the female person is no less defined by the historical, cultural, social, and economic limits of her situation.”⁴² Consequently, the body is inscribed within a particular regime which structures the more general contours of embodied experience. Young explores the body’s “structures and conditions” within a specific life space, noting the differences between female and male bodily comportment. While not ignoring physiological differences, she suggests that the particularity of comportment comes from “the way each sex *uses* the body in approaching tasks.”⁴³ Indeed, Young suggests that at the level of lived experience the female body is used in ways that suppress its latent capacity: it largely retains an immanence that abridges its transcendent qualities; its intentionality is inhibited, which hems in its motility/“I can” and “severs the connection between aim and enactment”⁴⁴; and it exhibits a “discontinuous unity” which severs the body from itself and its relation to the world. Consequently, the female body is often reduced to the order of an object at the level of lived experience. Far from being anatomical and rooted in a feminine essence or the result of linguistic individuation, these inhibited bodily capacities are rooted in perceptual modalities of women’s lived experience within a particular historical (and patriarchal)

⁴² Iris Marion Young, ‘Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality,’ *Human Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, April 1980, 138.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

situation.⁴⁵ Thus particular power relations attach themselves to the body as a human sensorium that is neither objective nor anonymous (in the sense of non-difference).⁴⁶

To put this into the language of biopolitics, the human body as bios is constructed in a political way, which differentiates not only the meaning of the body, but its lived and experienced capacities. Hence, we need to recognize, again, that the body as a mode of being in the world is subject to processes of individuation on the two-fold level outlined above: as inherited or prepersonal/habituated positions that come to shape how differentiated subjects act and experience the world (such as gendered or classed ones); and, as the capacity to individuate or comport the body otherwise than this anonymous/prepersonal form. Virno's understanding of potential adds to Young's account of bodily motility the idea that the body can always be comported otherwise – that the historical and contingent inscription of power relations are particular and subject to resistance by virtue of the body's originary indeterminacy and ethical capacity, both constitutive of the potential contained in the body's "I can." Moreover, this "otherwise" is an indeterminate other, not rooted merely in the dysfunction of an objective capacity, but in the production of particular modes of subjectivity divorced from such essentialisms.⁴⁷ Thus, the relation between the bio-phenomenological invariant and history becomes key to the comportment and expression of bodily capacities at the micropolitical level. In these respects, Maurizio Lazzarato provides a poignant way of thinking about subjectification,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁶ In this context – the context of the difference created through the perceptual aspects of the lived body – it should be noted that Young is also quick to point out that her description is not a universal one, for lived experiences show different levels of this general phenomenon and not all females experience it in the same ways.

⁴⁷ Whether she intends it to or not, Young's analysis often seems to veer towards a notion of the female body as socialized to be comported in dysfunctional ways – ultimately, "throwing like a girl" appears to imply an incomplete fulfillment of bodily potential.

suggesting that revolutionary transformation is not just a political project, but also an issue of forms of life/being at the level of “individual conducts.”⁴⁸

Here, we return to the themes enunciated in the previous chapter – namely, the ambivalent character of desire and its connections to, simultaneously, utopia and dystopia as functions of the human corporeal sensorium. As my reading of Merleau-Ponty suggested, desire is a bodily capacity, not something linguistically structured. It is rooted in relations of affect/empathy that can be enacted in innumerable and indeterminate ways. This roots a radical politics in the re-articulation of desire as an originary capacity for solidaristic being that ruptures and transforms modes of bodily conduct. Extended to bodily motility as a function of desire and to desire as a function of bodily motility, potential as capacity/faculty opens the body up to being understood as the root of processes of subjectification, both as the result of biopower (subjectivity imposed from without, or a preconscious and sedimented subjectivity) and biopolitics (resistance to biopower through the bios’/body’s own being and the formation of new modes of subjectivity). Here, we can maintain individuation and processes of subject formation as *internal* to the biopolitical perspective rather than seeking a transcendent leap to language that obfuscates bodily agency. We might recall Uexküll's suggestion that the body-*umwelt* relation includes a symbolic translation of worldly phenomenon at a micropolitical level via the body’s organs as perceptive elements of our being-in-the-world – as the root of our experiential and lived relation to the world. Thus, relations and values emerge – or are rooted – in the body as a mode of affective relation to the world, but one that retains a “linguistic” character. But it is through the very “linguistic” character of the body that expression begins: the body is the root of, to quote Lazzarato, “gestures, bodily attitudes, movements, facial expressions, etc” all of which

⁴⁸ Maurizio Lazzarato, ‘The dynamics of the political event: Process of subjectivation and micropolitics,’ <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0811/lazzarato/en/print>. See also Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, trans. Joshua David Jordan, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2014).

represent particular modulations of ethical and political being.⁴⁹ By inscribing this in the particular context of power relations, Young expands this intuition beyond a merely philosophical/biological assertion. But in thinking beyond the inscription of power relations on the body, we need to think bodily comportment – in so far as it includes the capacity to be oriented otherwise – as containing the ethical and political possibility of being produced via intersubjectification. This includes not merely the element of my own being or comportment of my body, but the manner in which this comportment is open or closed to the being of others. Indeed, returning to the question of a political theory of intersubjectivity, we need to consider intersubjectivity as a particular mode of bodily comportment – which is to say a particular relation to the other that is contained in our bodily relation to them.

III. Individuation as Intersubjectification

The avenues opened up thus far can allow us to provide a reading of Merleau-Ponty through Simondon. Simondon's influence on Merleau-Ponty (or vice versa) is not obvious: there are no references to Simondon in his major works, and some have suggested a certain opposition or antipathy between their particular philosophical approaches. Yet, the concept of individuation and its pre-individual antecedent or incipit can be utilized for a politically efficacious reading of Merleau-Ponty, and one that is not entirely imposed from the outside. Indeed, one scholar has suggested that Simondon's work involves a memorialization (as a taking up) of Merleau-Ponty's work.⁵⁰ Establishing this connection might further politicize the idea that nature (including our embodiment) represents the primordality of being, which is never exhausted in the phenomenal appearing of the body as the product/producer of particular institutions of the socio-historical.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalist and the Production of Subjectivity*, 183.

⁵⁰ Landes, *Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression*, 22-23.

⁵¹ Mario Neve suggests that nature exists as the preindividual "reality of the possible" from *Phenomenology* to Merleau-Ponty's last works. Mario Neve, "'Milieu,' Luogo e Spazio. L'Eredita Geestetica Di Simondon e Merleau-Ponty,' *Chiasmi International*, Issue 7, 2005, 156.

To further think through this, we can turn to two working notes from Merleau-Ponty's lectures on *Nature* that address Simondon's doctoral dissertation – a rare instance of Merleau-Ponty citing such a work, and his only references to Simondon's work specifically.

In the second note, Merleau-Ponty discusses Simondon's accounts of collective/organic regulation and individuation, while equating aspects of this to his own philosophical lexicon. At the outset, Merleau-Ponty suggests the need to broaden the embryological approach of science in understanding regulation to include "the regulation of an organ and the regulation of an individual."⁵² This regulation implies the functional structuration of the social/collective, which "presupposes" individuation as a transformation of nature and history. Nature and history are, thus, not self-same but subject to qualitative transformations. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty asserts that what "is in common between history and nature is that they are individuations – but they are irreducible *precisely for that reason* – Historical individuation is irreducible."⁵³ As individuations, history and nature are forms of institution created through processes of subjectification/creation, rather than being objects of scientific study – and they are lived, rather than observed. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty describes Simondon's position as "trans-perceptive": "perception is for him on the order of the inter-individual, unable to account for the true collective."⁵⁴ Simondon challenges the authenticity of individuality and the collective, instead seeing these as products of the process of individuation. But, we need to note simultaneously that the history of these entities entails transindividuality as a historical culture⁵⁵ which is formed from the different articulations of the preindividual via individuation – and, thus, part of anonymous being. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is a particular form or part of the

⁵² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Unpublished Working Notes,' *Chiasmi International*, Issue 7, 2005, 42.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁵ On this issue in Simondon's work, see Jason Read, 'The Production of Subjectivity: From Transindividuality to the Commons,' *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, No. 70, 2011.

phenomenon of human existence. In this context, we should think perception as a realm symptomatic of the common ground of humanity, constituted by humans as sensuous beings. Perception possesses a meta-perceptual antecedent/incipit, which is prior to the being of a subject as an individuated form of sensuous/perceptual capacities. As Merleau-Ponty states, "We do not constantly perceive, perception is not coextensive with our lives."⁵⁶ This is partially emblematic of the anonymity that permeates being, but it is also emblematic of institutions that stand behind the realm of first-person experience: anonymity includes priorly articulated subject positions that are habituated prior to conscious action or appropriation. But these are themselves facilitated by the body's embedding within the world, which is primordial or pre-instituted, as the institution of institutions. As Merleau-Ponty states: "the philosophy of brute (or perceptive) being...reveals to us institutions beneath the flux of *Erlebnisse* [experiences] and the fulgurations of the decision – but for it, the nexus remains the perceptive field, insofar as it contains everything: nature and history."⁵⁷ In this context, Merleau-Ponty draws an equivalence between his understanding of institution and Simondon's preindividual, with the concept of individuation representing the translation of this metastable ground into the being of experience (or that which has become) and the subject which experiences it. The complex relation Simondon attests to the interplay between this ground/foundation and the lived world retains the indeterminacy and potential that is necessary to account for the openness of new individuations, which would confirm the metastable character of the ground out of which these new individuations emerge.

The focus on foundation, and the transformative capacities that characterize the metastable/indeterminacy, raises the issue of the nature of historical individuation more directly. While Merleau-Ponty clearly acknowledges that history is the product of individuations, we must

⁵⁶ Merleau-Ponty, 'Unpublished Working Notes,' 42.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 42.

turn to the meaning of historical individuation, which is the topic of the first working note. Merleau-Ponty notes that modern biology is infused by "the idea (Simondon p. 231) of heredity as prolongation of ontogenesis, of individuation, themselves understood as *vital processes* and not as phenotypal adventures – The constitution of a tradition, of a memory, of a past, of a history, of an order of 'choice' do not therefore indicate a creation *ex nihilo*."⁵⁸ Far from the absolute freedom of the cogito, creation is constructed out of an ontogenetic process which is its ground. To put this in political terms, human nature and biological being are subject to particular institutions, which represent the ground of biopolitical action, and this tradition or institution can be re-opened when the ontogenetic process returns to its origins via a neotynic return to an originary openness (or a re-opening of the institution or the pre-individual potential). Of course, Merleau-Ponty embeds this being within a particular field that – like anonymity – is inherited from a historical culture. In this context, he reframes, in the same vein as ambiguous perception, the very notion of the unconscious. The unconscious is equated with ambivalence, and not with a truth whose appearance is simply masked by a reality that cannot be known: "by principle perception is imperception,"⁵⁹ and this partiality/ambivalence of perception constitutes the very ground or field of freedom – or the surplus that is the condition of possibility of the transformation of the existent institution. Consequently, Merleau-Ponty notes that the "relations between an individual and its unconscious are relations with the 'indestructible,' i.e., not an enemy of freedom, but the field of freedom."⁶⁰ He describes "freedom" in opposition to abstract creation or negation, and instead conceives of it on the order of "modulation" and a form of gestation/care-taking or "inheritance." This again points towards corporeity and its subjectified

⁵⁸ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 41.

comportment as a preconscious/anonymous realm that, far from negating agency or action, is the condition of its possibility and its ground.

If this offers a connection to Simondon's work, albeit in an abbreviated and cryptic form, the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*, and Merleau-Ponty's synopsis of his own work, draw out the potential connection between anonymity and individuation, and highlight the latter as a process of intersubjectification. In the working notes, Merleau-Ponty links anonymity specifically to a potentiality for creation/expression that defies a closed identity/essence or the predetermination of an ideal type/norm – which, in the context of anonymity's Janus-faced quality, represents its surplus form. Moreover, he distinguishes his notion of being from the "represented" in denying the potential of an identity or mirroring: vertical being denotes something that "none of the 'representations' exhaust and which all 'reach,' the wild Being."⁶¹ Wild being (as the non-identical that undergirds all signification) is thus distinguished from "the In Itself" and tied to particular "cuttings" of the folds of being. In gesturing to the political implications I have been suggesting, Merleau-Ponty states: "the (predicative-cultural) truth as this Individual (prior to the singular and the plural) upon which the acts of significations *cross* and of which they are cuttings."⁶² We should first note the "anonymity" that is overcome by the particular significations that produce the individual as a form of singularity or plurality – which is to say that the anonymous denotes the "I" prior to such significations. But Merleau-Ponty further suggests the being of subjects as always-already embedded within a social structure, "as structurations of Being (a way of thinking oneself within a society is implied in its social structure) and where the structurations of Beings are modes of consciousness."⁶³ Hence, the social and the individual are particular institutions or articulations of social/political space, ones

⁶¹ Merleau-Ponty, 'Working Notes,' *Visible and the Invisible*, 253.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 253.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 253.

which we are born into/inherit from a past. Yet, this past is a "past which has never been present" in the two fold sense of anonymity as simultaneously unreflected life (the prior articulation of subjectivities) and as the past potentiality that has not yet been exhausted, for it retains a permanent surplus. Hence, Merleau-Ponty states: "The meaning of being to be disclosed: it is a question of showing that the ontic, the '*Erlebnisse*,' 'sensations,' 'judgements'...is in reality abstractly carved out from the ontological tissue, from the 'body of mind.'"⁶⁴

Fundamentally, this posits a process of individuation/intersubjectification as an exit out of "anonymity" (here conceived as a "non-difference") that facilitates an individuated expression that is explicitly posited against the Sartrean irreconcilability of consciousnesses. In approaching this from the perspective of embodiment, Merleau-Ponty argues that existence is permeated by a sameness or generality that defies both "ideality" and "real identity." As he states: "The same in the structural sense: same inner framework, same *Gestalthafte*, the same in the sense of openness of another dimension of the 'same' being...there is first their underlying bond by *non-difference*."⁶⁵ This is what facilitates the possibility of a solidaristic being-with that is the essence of intersubjectivity, one which includes a mutual encroachment and "multiple chiasms" but does not obscure or colonize the very alterity of the other. Indeed, modeled on the body as perceptive/sensuous being, such an intersubjectivity implies that "there is no coinciding of the seer with the visible. But each borrows from the other, takes from or encroaches upon the other, intersects with the other, is in chiasm with the other."⁶⁶ Encroachment denotes not the imposition of identity, but a mutual process of dis-identification – or the realization of the non-identity of the body-as-flesh. Hence, as a process, individuation implies that "the chiasm binds as obverse and reverse ensembles unified in advance in process of differentiation – when in sum

⁶⁴ Ibid., 253.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 261-262.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 261-262.

a world that is neither *one* nor two in the objective sense – which is pre-individual, generality."⁶⁷ This rather cryptic note draws together a number of ideas. The reference to the pre-individual and generality denotes the primordial realm of the flesh as part of the common, or that which is shared as the innate potential or capacity of embodied beings. It is the realm of non-difference that is common by virtue of its generality and its pre-individual character: our embodiment, including the particular capacities for perception/sensuous experience, motility and relations of affect rooted in desire. And, while this denotes anonymity as the foundation of particular comportments of being, we must also include within this prior individuations or objectifications of those capacities. The element of individuation lies in freeing or re-opening the capacity for non-domination located in the common and its potentialities, as an overlapping of beings in the process of differentiation that coincides with a mutual encroachment. Merleau-Ponty's attempt to transform the "problem of the other" is in fact an attempt to open the possibility of this sort of relation, through recourse to a philosophy of sensuous and experiential being, a move through which "one acquires a wholly new idea of the 'subjectivity'[sic]."⁶⁸ Thus, rather than understanding "freedom" as something constituted out of a conflict between rival subjects who gain or lose their freedom through rationalist imposition, freedom emerges as an affective quality within the context of a "transitivism by way of generality," which no longer opposes passivity and activity, but seeks to express an intersubjective space that transcends binaries and facilitates the capacity for further individuation. As a foundation/institution that facilitates the particularities of speech, language illustrates the individuating elements of expression: it allows for an inauguration of meaning that is not predetermined, and it likewise allows for a multiplicity of expressions rooted in the same linguistic system (as generic or common).

⁶⁷ Ibid., 261-262.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 269.

Merleau-Ponty draws out this implicit political project more explicitly in his overview of his intellectual itinerary, submitted as part of his candidacy to the Collège de France. He concludes this work by pinpointing a shift in his own work from perception to expression: "The study of perception could only teach us a 'bad ambiguity,' a mixture of finitude and universality, of interiority and exteriority. But there is a 'good ambiguity' in the phenomenon of expression, a spontaneity which accomplishes what appeared to be impossible when we observed only the separate elements, a spontaneity which gathers together the plurality of monads, the past and the present, nature and culture into a single whole. To establish this wonder would be metaphysics itself and would at the same time give us the principle of an ethics."⁶⁹ This passage is suggestive of the politics/ethics of the flesh. If the flesh is characterized by the paradoxical character of an originary belonging that includes the irreducible and transcendent alterity of the other (and the self), then a politics or political subjectivity of the flesh necessitates a principle of the being-multiple (as being-together), or what Merleau-Ponty refers to here as "a spontaneity which gathers together the plurality of monads." Of course, the reference to monads should be read in the context of the utopian ethical relation (or the constellative intersubjectivity) that Benjamin's concept of history seeks to express. Such a subjectivity includes the very embodied/carnal relation of affective solidarity as something that refuses to efface the alterity of the other, while signifying a return to the site of a lost potential contained in the surplus of the past that has never been present. Merleau-Ponty describes such an action as part of the phenomenon of expression. In his lexicon, expression denotes a particular coming into being (or creative enactment) of a potentiality contained in an institution, but one which is not itself already expressed – and could not have been expressed previously. In effect, this would be an expression (as act) based on the

⁶⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'An Unpublished Text,' *The Primacy of Perception, and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1964), 11.

institution (as potential or facilitator of the act), but one whose potential only emerged and became possible at the moment of the expression itself. This is represented by the difference between language as a system of words, and language as a spoken medium that brings into being (or expresses) a new meaning that was not, and could not be, known before the act itself. The new expression borrows from the existent linguistic system, but it is not the system for it transcends it as a unique singularity, as the coming into being of a new potential. The expression of this monadic constellation – the bringing into being of the being-multiple as an expression of intersubjectivity – would be tantamount to a collective innervation rooted in the ethics of the flesh. Indeed, that this appeared "impossible" prior to its spontaneous coming into being illustrates that this intersubjective innervation is the expression of a possibility of ethical relations that, while rooted in the "I can" of the body, had yet to be expressed – with its expression representing a transformation of human meaning and possibility. Yet, despite being the establishment of "metaphysics itself," we cannot think this as the realization of an essence, but only as the activation of a potential that does not exhaust potential.

It is in this sense that we must begin thinking intersubjectivity on the order of intersubjectification, or intersubjectivity as a type of relation or political action to be established vis-à-vis its elision: it is an outcome, not something pre-existing, even if its conditions of possibility lie in primordial capacities – but primordial capacities that are ambivalent. The project represents something tantamount to Hardt and Negri's claim that Merleau-Ponty's thought was always striving towards "the common." From a Merleau-Pontyan perspective, the common would be the political translation of the hinge of being that his ontology of the flesh constantly refers to: a source of the unity and multiplicity that a "plurality of monads" would require if they were not to remain at the level of a Hegelian struggle of consciousnesses, in which each "seeks

the death of the other."⁷⁰ While such a death struggle is emblematic of a type of "intersubjectivity," in which I and the other seek to impose our own rationalism on each other, the primordial experience of childhood – devoid of the consciousness of the irreconcilability of perspectives on the world, or the knowledge of the private character of consciousness – teaches the sort of political intersubjectivity that the "common" can be rooted in. Yet, this must be seen as a project/outcome that ruptures the impoverished intersubjectivity rooted in philosophies of consciousness. In turning to an intersubjectivity of the body/sensible, "it is necessary to rediscover as the reality of the inter-human world and of history a surface of separation between me and the other which is also the place of our union, the unique *Erfüllung* of his life and my life."⁷¹ The flesh as a reciprocal site of introjection and projection (mutual encroachment) suggests the ability to overlap one another in ways that do not usurp the being of others (a la totalitarianism) nor reject the other as an externality or isolated monad (a la liberalism). Rather, the flesh is the emblem and potential of the possibility of a realm of the common that overlaps and facilitates the empathetic concern for the other, which manifests in a transformation of the self and other – which would be the essence of intersubjectification.⁷² Thus, intersubjectification as a process or outcome (as an *Erfüllung*) would be rooted in the potentialities or capacities of the flesh. This involves the full expression of the empathetic capacities contained in the body as desire, which would facilitate the production of an intersubjective space that mirrors the unity and difference emblematic of the flesh itself. Moreover, this would entail the paradoxical production of the "social individual," which draws together the three composite parts of intersubjectivity as a process: the individual/separation, the social/unity, and the concrete

⁷⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 414.

⁷¹ Merleau-Ponty, 'Working Notes,' *Visible and the Invisible*, 234.

⁷² On unity, difference and transformation, see in particular, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1973), 134, 142.

situation or institution through which these poles can be mediated without appearing as oppositions, and without "terminating" in that institution.

IV. Institution-Advent-Expression

To adequately think through a political theory of intersubjectivity requires thinking through a number of political problems. The first relates to the dynamic between the preindividual and the individuated, which Virno summarizes: "What institutions would permit the repetitive dynamic between the preindividual and the individuated?"⁷³ Indeed, if we are to avoid falling into essentialist thinking, and are to affirm a creative dynamic in political subjectification, we cannot simply assert individuation as a political goal that realizes an inherent essence. The preindividual (and its political articulations in "institution/s") must be constructed on the model of a common that facilitates and acknowledges the primordially of indeterminacy in the creation of an alterity that allows for solidaristic relations, and allows for the continual exchange that maintains the alterity (and being-together) that is necessary for solidarity to be more than identity. In this vein, we must also think the specificity of the event (particularly as an encounter in which the possibilities of human experience and their transformation re-emerge) in its relation to the preindividual as institution. But the event immediately raises a dilemma that has marred radical democratic thought: the reduction of politics to a merely ruptural moment, and the consequent inattention to the relationship between spontaneity or insurgency (as an individuation emblematic of multiplicity) and institution (as a stable infrastructure for the continual existence of multiplicity).⁷⁴ While spontaneity is a key function of political

⁷³ Virno, 'On Multitude and Beyond,' *Cultural Politics*, 222.

⁷⁴ Miguel Abensour notes that this criticism has often been leveled at his work. Miguel Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, (Cambridge: Polity Press 2011), xxv. Simon Critchley directs this criticism at "Rancière and many others." Simon Critchley, 'Five Problems in Levinas's View of Politics and the Sketch of a Solution to Them,' *Radicalizing Levinas*, ed. Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco, (Albany: SUNY Press 2010), 52.

praxis/expression, such spontaneity does not emerge out of nothing, or out of the pure will⁷⁵: rather it emerges out of an institution or a foundation, even if this implies a break with sedimented being in some form. In the context of a utopian/ethical demand, this takes on a political primacy, and we need to think institutions beyond the fixed and inflexible character that would limit future forms of subjectification and transformation.

Merleau-Ponty's lecture notes from his courses *Institution and Passivity* provide a means to thinking through these problems, by re-conceptualizing the subject and its relationship to praxis in a way that is perhaps central to unravelling a political theory of intersubjectivity. As with the flesh, Merleau-Ponty turns to the concept of institution in order to think praxis and subjectivity beyond the confines of the constituting consciousness so central to the phenomenological tradition and the Cartesian understanding of subjectivity. To begin with, constitution implies an absolute presence in every instant, which in turn transforms the subject's own past into a "spectacular" relation, as just another object of knowledge that is self-same and transparent to the subject itself. Moreover, because the act of constitution depends on the constituting power of consciousness, there is no reciprocal interaction (no intersubjectivity) between consciousness and its object: consciousness as subject is constituting and the object/world is constituted. This presents two particular problems. First, the objects do not overlap with the being of consciousness, throwing consciousness onto itself through their very interaction and producing the possibility of event or history; rather, consciousness is always pure presence to itself, without history or movement. Second, there is no room for other consciousnesses – that is, the closed character of the world passes over to the closure of the world to others outside of my own constituting capacity. As Merleau-Ponty states, "when

⁷⁵ As Elaine Stavro points out, "Rather than explore the novelty of the revolutionary act, Merleau-Ponty was more interested in what sustains a revolutionary movement." Elaine Stavro, 'Merleau-Ponty and Revolutionary Agency,' *Theory & Event*, Vol. 17, Issue 1, 2014.

consciousness considers others, their own existence is for consciousness only its pure negation; it does not know that they see it, it knows merely that it is seen. Diverse times and diverse temporalities are impossible and form only a system of reciprocal exclusions."⁷⁶ Indeed, the solipsism inherent to constituting consciousness lies in the very act of constituting, which is entirely dependent on the subject that constitutes, for "the constituted makes sense only for me and for the 'me' of this instant."⁷⁷ The re-worked understanding of anonymity draws into question simultaneously the idea of an absolute presence of the subject to itself (by asserting a surplus/excess that denies presence), as well as the reduction of temporalities and time to a single nodal structure (anonymity is preconscious, and surplus is historical). Moreover, the very idea of a political theory of intersubjectivity is intended to simultaneously assert the intersubjective character of power relations (as in gender and capitalist relations) as well as to assert the political project of a world open to diverse temporalities and new modes of subjectivity that challenge reified and solipsistic forms.

The turn to "institution" aims to break with these problems in inaugurating a new understanding of both the intersubjective character of our existential situation and the forms of political subjectivity contained in it. The result is a unique definition of institution as a mediating and mediated concept that overcomes the duality of subject/object and passivity/activity. As with the flesh, this is dependent upon understanding that the subject is in and of the world. Indeed, the subject as instituting is enclosed within the temporal flow that makes up its history, rather than in the instant. Ultimately, institution represents the fundamental historicity/temporality and creativity/openness of human praxis, and its intersubjective field of meaning/being. As Merleau-Ponty defines it: "by institution, we were intending here those

⁷⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the College de France (1954-1955)*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 2010), 76.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 8.

events in an experience which endow the experience with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense, will form a thinkable sequel or a history – or again the events which deposit a sense in me, not just as something surviving or as a residue, but as the call to follow, the demand of a future.”⁷⁸ Hence, institution refers to the sedimentation of experience into a coherent field of meaning that embodies the conditions of possibility for praxis. As we saw in the previous chapter, this includes the "natural" or biopolitical institution by which the body "linguistically"/symbolically interprets – via corporeal organs and capacities – the *umwelt*. Yet, here, Merleau-Ponty refers to a more general notion of institution that retains the same hallmarks: the world sediments into a system of experiential and symbolic meanings as a form of anonymous being. But “institution” is not merely sedimentation. Rather, this sedimentation is exactly what brings into being the means of transforming and giving new expression to the experiences that institution draws together: as the instituting-instituted, it is an opening that creates the conditions of possibility for its own transformation. In this vein, Miguel Abensour describes Merleau-Ponty's understanding of institution as an experiential and practical *matrix*, possessed by an “imaginative dimension, one of anticipation, which in itself has the potential to engender customs, or rather attitudes and behaviours, consistent with the emancipation it announces.”⁷⁹

Merleau-Ponty argues that this understanding of institution fundamentally changes the relation of the subject with the world, others, "doing" and time. The subject, as in and of the world, is born into a relation – simply by virtue of "living" – that defies its own intentional designs/acts on the world; the world is there, and while the subject is not determined and retains freedom, this freedom is confronted by obstacles and a particular situation. Hence, the subject is

⁷⁸ Ibid., 77.

⁷⁹ Abensour, *Democracy Against the State*, xxvii.

instituting *and* instituted, with these binaries being inseparable. The instituting-instituted facilitates the very possibility of event and advent, which are the particular "genius" and "genus" of our being in the world as a creative process irreducible to the given, but not abstractly conceived. As Merleau-Ponty states, "The subject [is] that to which such orders of events can advent, fields of fields."⁸⁰ Effectively, the instituting agency (which confronts the subject's already instituted being) is a field of praxis in which the field is transformed via the advent that carries the institution in new ways that are accessible because of the very field that the institution is. It is this very instituting-instituted that moves away from "radical solitude" in positing a new relation to the other: the institution (as instituting-instituted) is common for both of us, and the very means of our communication and intersubjective relation (as our hinge). We co-exist because we engage with the same world, are product-producers of it, and the product (as instituted) is accessible to both as part of a world that is the field of our action and experience; even the other's actions are accessible to me in this way because it is the same world/field that makes such actions intelligible. Rooted in the "between" as a field that is not merely external to the subject or constituted by it, coexistence is no longer a problem "because the instituted is not the immediate reflection of the activity of [the subject] and can be taken up by himself or by others without a total re-creation being at issue. Thus, the instituted exists between others and myself, between me and myself, like a hinge, the consequence and the guarantee of our belonging to one selfsame world."⁸¹ This rolls into the elements of "doing" or praxis as a "symbolic activity" constituted by the non-dualistic relationship between "doing" and "seeing" – between passivity and activity. The passive is active, in the sense that the intersubjective field confronts me even as a "seer" and forms or informs my capacity for action. Likewise, acting

⁸⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 6.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

takes on a passive character when it is known that my actions are also seen and therefore capable of being taken up, as a style of being, by others. In these terms, action is not teleological or closed – it is an opening, susceptible to adaptation and innovation. But this in turn is rooted in the very temporal transformation that is enacted by institution.

Returning to the notion of event/advent, Merleau-Ponty contends that "institution [is] what makes possible [a] series of events, [a] historicity: in principle event-ness."⁸² In the first place, this is because institution rejects the notion of creation *ex nihilo* – that is, abstract creation as abstract negation. Institution denotes a determinate form of creation which emerges out of, and because of, the institution itself. Merleau-Ponty likens institution to "birth" in the sense of an act that is the "institution of a future" and the "openness of a future." This denotes a non-determinate future, a future which will change the instituted, "but this very change is called for by its *Stiftung*" – that is a change inaugurated or made possible by the institution itself.⁸³ The very language of *stiftung* is derived from Husserl, who used it "to designate first of all the unlimited fecundity of each present which, precisely because it is singular and passes, can never stop having been and thus being universally; but above all to designate that fecundity of the products of a culture which continue to have value after their appearance and which open a field of investigations in which they perpetually come to life again."⁸⁴ Hence, action is caught up in the temporal flow of the institution itself even where it ruptures or re-makes it; in fact, it is the tradition opened by the institution that establishes this possibility of re-making, that makes possible what can be made as a re-making. Drawing on the Husserlian inspiration that resembles the epicyclic history in Benjamin's work, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the true form of

⁸² Ibid., 13.

⁸³ Ibid., 9.

⁸⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,' *Signs*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1964), 59.

memorialization lies not in preserving, but in giving a new life to the past. By virtue of this, there is with institution a "trans-temporality" divorced from essence and from "decline," "realization" or telos. Trans-temporality is the containment within time, and the consequent "lateral" relationship between "nows" in which institutions of the past are taken up and given new forms which mutate their past forms in ways irreducible to a telos contained in the origin. This is the relation announced by the language of "advent" which, as opposed to an event that contains a singularity, announces a succession as "a beginning and a continuation which, insofar as it is not walled up in its singularity and finished once and for all like an event, points to a continuation or recommencements."⁸⁵ In these respects, Merleau-Ponty argues that institution draws on the past as a "symbolic matrix" susceptible to new inflections or significations, which in turn transform the potential contained in the institution itself. In being indefinitely open, institutions are subject to regression, progression and stagnation. The past – or institutions of/in the past – is thus returned to as a new means of transforming the now, or re-instituting the now via reintegration or transformation of the past institution that was left behind. Similar to Benjamin's images, Merleau-Ponty's notion of the past as symbolic matrix opens up the non-identity of the "object" itself, as well as its action as a subject that provokes the now. Hence, we cannot think of institution on the order of entelechy, for there is no particular potential to be realized; there is only the inauguration of a future that is not pre-determined, but which contains a field that limits and facilitates action. Again, this is subject to "pre-maturation" and "regression," always returning to the origins ever anew because they open not an end point but a beginning as an openness to creation and action within a temporal flow.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,' 68.

⁸⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 19, 22-23, 25-26.

While this represents a fairly general explanation of institution, Merleau-Ponty turns to a more directly political problem – the idea of social institution. This raises the issues of the ontology of the social discussed in Chapter 1, but now as a form of institution – as a creation (a created-creating/instituted-instituting). To begin with, social institution must be understood on the order of the symbolic and non-essentialist principles that institution implies with advent and expression. Institution, as the matrix/field that forms the social, is "the symbolic apparatus of this intersubjectivity."⁸⁷ The institution of the social creates a "pattern" and matrix of social being, or a structure of social interaction/exchange. Merleau-Ponty likens this to perception, insofar as perception is also informed by a "*sens*" (both sense and direction): we have a particular picture of the world and its operations, which is informed by our relation – via institutions – to history and others that has lead to the present. And, yet, this structure or matrix often informs our actions without our knowing it, as with anonymous being. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: "The subjects living in a society do not necessarily know about the principle of exchange which governs them, any more than the speaking subject needs to go through a linguistic analysis of his language in order to speak...Rather than their having got it, it has, if we may put it in this way, 'got them.'"⁸⁸ While this sentiment draws from structuralist anthropology, Merleau-Ponty makes clear that this structure is not impermeable; rather, it is part of a system of structures ("a structure of structures") which is transformable and subject to individual or collective innovation. This is precisely the sentiment that institution and individuation were intended to express, and the core of the Janus-faced quality of anonymity. Indeed, the social is not an object outside of us, but something within which we live and experience as the field of our existential modalities – something we live in by virtue of existing, but which does not restrict us absolutely.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 74.

⁸⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'From Mauss to Claude Levi-Strauss,' *Signs*, 117.

In the latter respects, while the particular form of society might be idealized/ontologized in a rigidified or ideological sense, there is, for Merleau-Ponty, no "ideal" society, nor any entelechy or telos – no "true" society. But there are societies that are "false" (or more false): "they follow the letter of institution but not its spirit, which consists of not being limited, prohibited, enclosed on an island of customs. The spirit of institution consists in setting an unlimited historical labour underway."⁸⁹ In these societies, custom takes on a de facto fixture, divorced from both conscious action and from the critical interrogation of the roots of society itself. Hence, these societies deny the very act of institution, or ignore and deracinate its possibilities – both as origin-institution and as future-institution. Consequently, they revert to a rationalist imposition that denies the existential condition of being. In positing institution as universal, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that it is an "existential" universal caught up in the hyperdialectics and critical interrogation that questions or aims to answer the foundation of the problem of human co-existence. These sorts of "open societies" – though not being "true" – at least allow themselves to be subject to history, including recuperating and taking up the historical origins (perhaps even the originary openness) that instituted "society" in the first place.⁹⁰ But, perhaps more to the point, this openness to transformation is intended to be fed by a social motor – the drive towards the recognition of the singularity and alterity/difference of the beings that constitute the social itself. According to Merleau-Ponty, "The truth [of societies] is not in the individuals, it is not in the sum of individuals – it is in the field of social gravitation. This field is capable of posing and resolving 'problems.' It is the real seat of the dialectic."⁹¹ This dialectic aims at the realization of an intersubjectivity, in which the social fabric allows subjects to confront a common situation that allows for mutual recognition and mutual

⁸⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 72.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 62-63, 72.

⁹¹ Ibid., 73.

coexistence, in a manner that opens itself to challenges to this order itself. This implies the recognition of the very historicity of the social and its institution⁹² – their embedding within a temporal flow that can only end with either the death of the other (which would end the existential condition of the human) or with the death of the human as human (their transformation into the static being of the pebble).

V. Luxemburg and the Biopolitics of the Mass Strike

The notion of social institution becomes particularly (and politically) compelling when we acknowledge that perhaps the first instances of Merleau-Ponty's use of the concept relate to his writings on the proletariat. In this context, I want to re-read Merleau-Ponty's account of proletarian being through the lenses of his later writings, with their greater emphasis on alterity and in the context of his critique of Lukács – which includes his unwillingness to accept an identical subject-object of history, in relativizing social institution and refusing its closure. In this vein, I want to take a minor detour to help draw out the political import and lineage of this concept of institution, by suggesting that we should read Merleau-Ponty's understanding of proletarian institution in the light of Rosa Luxemburg's work on spontaneity. Although Luxemburg's work has rarely, if ever, been discussed in connection with Merleau-Ponty's, this is far from an idiosyncratic move. In his eulogy for Merleau-Ponty, Sartre states: "Through friends and through the writings of Rosa Luxemburg, he had been converted to the idea of the 'spontaneity of the masses,' which was close to the general movement of his particular movement. When he saw 'reasons of state' smouldering behind the masses, he turned away."⁹³ While Sartre makes the fundamental connection between Merleau-Ponty and Luxemburg, I also want to challenge the idea that Merleau-Ponty "turned away" from the spontaneity of the masses.

⁹² Ibid., 74-75; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1973), 101-102.

⁹³ Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Merleau-Ponty vivant,' *The Debate Between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1998), 574.

This seems to repeat Sartre's own, overly simplistic, narrative – much regurgitated by commentators – that Merleau-Ponty turned away from politics generally, or that his increasingly critical engagement with Marxism is ipso facto a retreat into a moderate liberalism. It is because of the suppression of spontaneity by the state/party, and therefore the reification of proletarian institution, that Merleau-Ponty began calling for a non-communist left in face of the historical trajectory of the Soviet regime. The maintenance of the conditions of possibility of spontaneity (as a mode of expression of the masses) is central to retaining the non-identity of the social.

Luxemburg's understanding of spontaneity is directed specifically against the abstract version posited by what she deems the "anarchist" mentality that permeates both anarchist and vanguardist understandings of the mass (or general) strike. From different perspectives, both of these schools posit the mass strike as a matter of the pure will – whether this will is to be exercised at any moment or repressed until the moment is "right." For Luxemburg, spontaneity involves a "spontaneous" element, but one that is educated and transformed through its own emergence, and which is therefore not rooted in the "immediacy" of the act, but mediated and shaped by experience itself. Thus, in analyzing the Russian Revolution of 1905, she provides what we might call a phenomenology of working class resistance, via the mass strike as the mode of becoming of the working class as revolutionary subject. In this context, she makes two remarks particularly relevant to thinking through the political implications of Merleau-Ponty's account of institution. First, "the mass strike, as shown to us in the Russian revolution, is not a crafty method discovered by subtle reasoning for the purpose of making the proletarian struggle more effective, *but the method of motion of the proletarian mass*, the phenomenal form of the proletarian struggle in the revolution." Second, "The mass strike has now become the center of the lively interest of the German and the international working class because it is a new form of

struggle, and as such is the sure symptom of a thoroughgoing internal revolution in the relations of the classes and in the conditions of the class struggle."⁹⁴ Here, we see that the mass strike represented the institution of proletarian being in a two-fold sense: on the one hand, as a mode of the proletariat's institution of itself as subject; on the other, as the production of a new mode of being/acting in concert vis-à-vis the order of capitalist exploitation. In both senses, it represents an immanent transformation of social relations – an internal attempt at a transformation of their being and significance. But, in this context, the mass strike should also be seen – at least in the context of Merleau-Ponty's thought – as an intersubjective experience, constituted by the dialectic of spontaneity and organization, and driven by an impulse/desire for solidarity.

For Luxemburg, the 1905 Russian mass strike illustrated the dialectical interconnection between spontaneity, organization and event, as the core of historical transformation. In these respects, the Russian experience shattered the theorizations from Germany which saw the mass strike as occurring both from above via party/union organization, and emerging all at once as a singular movement. Instead, Luxemburg saw a series of seemingly disparate phenomena that came together into a mass strike through the dialectic of spontaneity and organization, with each spontaneous outburst or uprising in turn spurring an organizational movement that in turn further spurred more mass spontaneous uprisings outside the organizational movement/moment. This implies the opening of the mass strike as a particular form of action, as well as its transformation in the process of its utilization. As she describes this, in the context of the increasing intensity of its utilization in Russia: "On closer inspection, however, it can be seen that the mass strike was

⁹⁴ Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions,' *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, ed. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson, (New York: Monthly Review Press 2004), 171.

appearing in other forms than those of the previous period."⁹⁵ As the parties/unions aimed to grasp and direct the spontaneous emergence of mass movements, these movements further expanded their own force beyond the organizational efforts. Hence, a la Merleau-Ponty's institution, the matrix introduced by the institution is also the means to transforming it, or taking it in new directions – the opening of a particular mode of being includes innovation, for it opens a path rather than providing an ending. This dynamic includes the mutual conditioning of individual and mass strikes, with mass strikes taking up the momentum built by local ones, and with each expressing the strike in new forms. Here, the dialectic is represented as a mutual conditioning or "reciprocal action," in which cause and effect constantly change places. Luxemburg saw an open, revolutionary insurrection as the logical and inevitable outcome of such events, but this traversed a series of "defeats" which made such actions look "premature," but were actually the condition of possibility of a larger transformation.⁹⁶

The further element we need to note in the progression of the mass strike is the centrality of solidarity to the spontaneity of the masses. Indeed, the mass strike is rooted in its gradual progression from a local phenomenon to a mass phenomenon that draws on the solidarity that the more minor actions inspire in the populace. Hence, Luxemburg sees the centrality of events in St. Petersburg during a bloody suppression as the rallying cry of a larger phenomenon, whereby solidarity strikes broke out elsewhere that escaped the organizational capture of social democratic parties, further expressing the spontaneity of the masses. As she states, "But this first general direct action reacted inwardly all the more powerfully as it for the first time awoke class feeling and class consciousness in millions upon millions as if by an electric shock. And this awakening of class feeling expressed itself forthwith in the circumstances that the proletarian

⁹⁵ Ibid., 180.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 188-199.

mass...quite suddenly and sharply came to realize how intolerable was that social and economic existence which they had patiently endured for decades in the chains of capitalism. Thereupon there began a spontaneous general shaking of and tugging at these chains."⁹⁷ Luxemburg expresses a particularly anti-orthodox understanding of class consciousness here, seeing it as something that simultaneously emerges in the process of action and in the context of a particular situation, rather than merely arising from consciousness of one's position in the relations of production. Moreover, this is a coming together or coming into being of the proletariat, founded on a form of intersubjectivity in which a response to a set of circumstances/events leads to co-feeling and mutual action via the mass strike as a vehicle for that expression – with the "electric shock" grasping the masses as something tantamount to Benjamin's collective innervation. The mass strike aims at a transformation of the existent institution of the social, and a reversal of the exploited conditions that the proletariat finds itself in. This is far from assured, and is predicated upon confronting a particular economic, political and, dare I say, existential condition/situation.

Luxemburg's account of the mass strike as a political sublation of the binaries of spontaneity/organization – as well as moment/totally, institution/rupture and activity/passivity – mirrors Merleau-Ponty's own philosophical attempts in the concept of institution. Here, action is not ex nihilo creation, but involves the immanent attempt at transforming the historical form of a given social institution and its attendant social relations. Likewise, spontaneity constantly pushes the boundaries of the possible, in a way that defies determination and an abstract plan. But, perhaps more pertinently, the notion of the spontaneity of the masses as rooted in solidarity as an affective capacity (and not merely a matter of consciousness) can be a further way of thinking through Merleau-Ponty's work (bio)politically. In this context, we need to keep in mind the symbolic function of the "proletariat" as a form of social institution, though this also takes us

⁹⁷ Ibid., 181.

beyond Luxemburg (and Lukács) in refusing the proletarian revolution as the end of institution. While orthodox Marxism provided an objectivist account that rooted this identity in the particular organization of the relations of production, even this represents a symbolic deployment of a mode of social institution that draws together what is already in process of being formed. Indeed, it was not the theory that brought into being the movement, but the theory that responded to the phenomenal emergence of experiences of working class resistance. This interaction is representative of the very dialectic of spontaneity and organization that Luxemburg describes. Borrowing Merleau-Ponty's language in labelling this "symbolic" does not negate the reality of relations of class oppression, but it does denote the subjectivity of the "proletariat" or "working class" as a social institution that draws together seemingly disparate struggles that require something like the mass strike to draw them into a ruptural logic that is more than a series of disconnected local struggles. Indeed, the intersubjectivity enacted via the mass strike is founded on the solidaristic claim that the multitude of groups that make up the working class are for-the-other via their engagement with the attempt to tear down the oppressive fabric of capitalism.

Yet, in Luxemburg's work – as in Lukács'⁹⁸ – class largely winds up being subsumed under a notion of consciousness or knowledge, and she certainly does not go as far as to describe this as a bodily act. In the context of biopolitics, we need to think this through the contours of desire and solidarity as embodied modes of praxis. In drawing on Virno's account of natural-historical diagrams in the previous chapter, I suggested that the encounter with the other constituted *the* event as possible transformation of the human corporeal/sensorial system – that is, the encounter with the other represents the potential transformation of modes of subjectivity and their attendant forms of perception and, we might add in the context of individuation, bodily

⁹⁸ Bryan A. Smith, *Merleau-Ponty's Existential Phenomenology and the Realization of Philosophy*, (London: Bloomsbury 2014), 91.

comportment. Of course, the process of intersubjectification does not emerge from nothing. Rather, it emerges in the concrete context of the event (or, in Merleau-Ponty's language, advent) of institution. Hence, in the context of persistent utopia in relation to the encounter as return to the possibility of institution, the matrix or field of intersubjectivity opens via the ethical relation to the other – this is the moment of alterity in which the face to face relation breaks with the autarchy of the self and opens the possibility of a new social institution. The event is akin to the existential concept of the situation, denoting our inherence in a particular historical world but also representing our ability to transcend it through the contingency and decisions that characterize human existence. In essence, the event/advent denotes the moment at which that decision or act emerges as the possible rupture with the previously constituted modes of being and offers an exit from the anonymity of priorly established subject positions via the introduction of new subjectivities that could not be known beforehand.

Lazzarato provides an insightful suggestion that can help us to think through Merleau-Ponty's account of class subjectivity. In the context of exploring the event of biopolitical action, Lazzarato states: “The crossing of this threshold was instantaneous and collective and produced a rupture, a discontinuity in ‘history’ and subjectivity. The event does not affect the state of things it emerges from without first *affecting the subjectivities* that partake and position themselves in it, saying ‘no’...This instantaneous subjective change is an act of both resistance and creation, resistance to power and creation of possibilities whose limits are not clearly established.”⁹⁹ In the mass strike, this emerges when workers see and *feel* themselves as caught up in a common situation with others, and therefore are willing to act in concert, in a subjectivity that no longer accepts the situation within which they are born and invites the action of a multitude of subjects that confront this common situation. This transformation re-shapes the situation, opening

⁹⁹ Lazzarato, ‘The dynamics of the political event.’

undetermined avenues and possibilities – new modes of subjectivity and the possibility of intersubjectivity as a being-together. More to the point, Lazzarato describes the event and its possibilities as non-discursive: it is felt in the process of its transformation, and felt as the possibility of this transformation. As undetermined, this entails the re-articulation and re-opening of desire as an ambivalent order and as the root of subjectivity. Lazzarato affirms the indeterminacy of collective and individual identities, emblematic of intersubjectification as individuation, though with a particularly existential inflection: “individual and collective subjectivities are not given; they are in the process of making and open to be made. The event returns the world to us as a ‘matter of choice,’ and subjectivity as a ‘crossroad of *praxis*.’”¹⁰⁰ In the context of the biopolitical reading of Merleau-Ponty, we can give a new tint to spontaneity, as denoting the peculiar mixture of a number of features. In the first place, spontaneity is predicated on the creativity and openness inherent in the human-corporeal, existential condition. Yet, this is still built on the back of (or within) an existing framework – namely capitalism as a particular form of social institution, that retains moments that may allow for the rupturing and transformation of it. In these respects, spontaneity denotes not an abstract expression but an openness/creativity within an institution that is the limitation and facilitation of openness/creativity. Moreover, this spontaneity is predicated on the originary character of desire and its ethical potentials as the very root of solidarity as an affective capacity. Rooting spontaneity in desire as a corporeal capacity signifies its embodied character – its attachment to the body's “I can” as an “order of instructive spontaneity.”¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘On the Phenomenology of Language,’ *Signs*, 97.

VI. From Proletarian Intersubjectivity to Proletarian Identity

To the extent that Merleau-Ponty's work has been considered in the light of proletarian subjectivity, it has largely been in the context of Lukács' work and influence.¹⁰² Yet, we get a different image of proletarian subjectivity if we read Merleau-Ponty through Luxemburg's work on spontaneity and the mass strike, and root these in the biopolitics of the "I can." To begin with, in *Humanism and Terror* – where he is allegedly at his most Lukácsian – Merleau-Ponty suggests that what is central to a humanist politics is, as he re-asserted later in his writings on institution, the form of social gravitation that is created. The alleged uniqueness of proletarian institution – the reason why it represents "the sole authentic intersubjectivity" – lies in the fact that, by virtue of its situation, "it alone lives simultaneously the separation and union of individuals."¹⁰³ We return here to the idea of the social individual contained in individuation: a unity within difference and difference within unity, which acknowledges the moment of separation and being-together – a moment of separation that is the condition of possibility of being-together as a non-repressive social bond that binds without permanently binding, and allows for further individuation. This expresses the very essence of intersubjectivity: it is not simply the assertion of a plurality of subjects, but the institution of an intersubjective condition as something that unifies via a common situation (and the attempt to transcend that situation), and creates a field/institution that all can relate to and through without being reduced to it.

In this vein, *Phenomenology of Perception* offers an un-orthodox reading of working class (or proletarian) becoming in the 1917 Russian Revolution. Merleau-Ponty rejects both idealist and objectivist conceptions of class and class consciousness, with the latter reducing working class identity to the fact of the relations of production (or the fact of being working

¹⁰² For examples of this, see both James Miller, *History and Human Existence: From Marx to Merleau-Ponty*, (Berkeley: University of California Press 1979) and Smyth, *Merleau-Ponty's Existential Phenomenology and the Realization of Philosophy*.

¹⁰³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, (Boston: Beacon Press 1969), 116-117.

class), and the former reducing it to consciousness of the relations of production (or the consciousness of these relations). In presenting an early notion of institution, Merleau-Ponty argues that class consciousness emerges from the existential modalities of a particular situation that transcend these deterministic elements: being "working class" entails a way of being-in-the-world, and responding to the particular situation and conditions that confront subjects. As he states: "What makes me a proletarian is not the economic system or 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."¹⁰⁴ This acknowledges that capital/ism represents a particular form of the institution of the social, a particular force of social gravitation, that structures our actions and perceptions, even if in a particularly reified way. But by virtue of the concept of institution, this is not the "end" of the social or institution. Rather, proletarian institution implies carrying capitalist social institutions in a particular way, which also acknowledges proletarian institution as an act of transcendent expression that is *not* the end of history but immanent to the very process of social institution.¹⁰⁵ This retains the Janus-faced quality of anonymity: our being in the world is structured by the prior subjectivities into which we are born and habituated; yet, this retains a surplus that allows us to carry these in new ways, and through new modes of subjectification. The specific manner in which the working class "carries" these institutions implies the gamut of conditions of oppression, including the experiences of the indignities of wage-labour, the anonymity of market forces, and the general features of estrangement from the social world via individualizing and isolating processes. Through this, "I have acquired the habit of reckoning with a *fatum*, or appointed order, which I

¹⁰⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 515.

¹⁰⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 14.

do not respect, but which I have to humour."¹⁰⁶ Yet, carrying/living in these institutions implies no necessary class or revolutionary consciousness, but an experiential commonality contained in bodily comportment ("tasks and gestures") as a response to the world and our situation. This is precisely the non-deterministic element of class subjectivity contained in Merleau-Ponty's work. Revolution is not predetermined, even if it is possible; moreover, it is an act of expression that is not ordered by a telos or representation of revolution.

Ultimately, it is not the development of the relations of production or the event of capitalist crisis that bring about a new social transformation, but the change (or attempted change) in the conditions of life of the working class in their comportment and modes of being-in-the-world. This implies the individuation of new subjectivities via the surplus contained in the historicity of anonymity and, in this particular case, implies individuation as a form of intersubjectification – as a mode of re-making our relations to ourselves and others. According to Merleau-Ponty, this is the result of an "existential project which merges into our way of patterning the world and co-existing with other people."¹⁰⁷ This, then, presumes a new orientation of desire towards others in reconstituting the social institution and the relations contained in it. In this vein, Merleau-Ponty describes the general strike in terms remarkably close to those expressed by Luxemburg, though with a greater emphasis on the intersubjective character of this mode of co-existence and co-feeling. In describing the phenomenology of the working class – its coming into being – Merleau-Ponty focuses on three fundamentally dissimilar class figures: the factory worker, the peasant day-labourer and the tenant farmer. This divorces proletarian being from the particularities of relations of production and identity, instead tying it to the common situation of capitalism and potential modes of being-together. Proletarian or

¹⁰⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 516.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 519.

working class subjectivity emerges through the intersubjective process of these subjects being caught up with one another in carrying social institutions anew, the condition of possibility of which lies in their interaction via the general strike as an ethical encounter and meeting place of intersubjective transformation. This opens the possibility of a transcendence of the singular position of each class figure in feeling themselves as caught up in a common situation and subject to connected conditions that repress or defy the existence of each. Transcendence emerges through the spontaneity and freedom immanent to social institution, and spontaneity and freedom in turn emerge in the concrete context of their expression and experience, as a form of giving meaning to the world. Moreover, spontaneity emerges at a "molecular" level that precedes the "consciousness" or revolutionary will that is seen as necessary by what Luxemburg decried as the anarchist tendency. In thinking through Lazzarato's framework, we might equate this molecular level with desire, as a mode of feeling. In this context, we find a redeployment or re-enactment of desire in the service of re-constituting our relations to the outside/other in the context of the event. This would represent a re-making of the *umwelt*/institution that governs social space and our bodily relationship to it. In this vein, the working class emerges through preconscious experiences of co-existence, which can provide the basis for intersubjectivity. Co-existence emerges through a transcendence of an original difference – "cultural, moral, occupational and ideological differences"¹⁰⁸ – in a manner that allows for a form of unity via solidarity and being-together. In coming together, there is a synchronization of positions, which does not annul their alterity or singularity. Synchronization as solidarity emerges when, as Eleanor Godway explains, "the members of each group feel the others' oppression as their

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 422.

own."¹⁰⁹ Merleau-Ponty saw this specifically when the Russian peasants joined the cause of the workers of Moscow and Petrograd. In such situations, "class is coming into being,"¹¹⁰ with the full becoming implying a transformation of the perceptual and affective capacities of the working classes and their relations to one another. As Merleau-Ponty states: "Social space begins to acquire a magnetic field, and a region of the exploited is seen to appear. At every pressure felt from any quarter of the social horizon, the process of regrouping becomes clearly discernible beyond ideologies and various occupations."¹¹¹ It is this felt oppression and ethical co-feeling that affects the need for a new mode of relation or force of social gravitation, which then emerges as a social project. This would constitute the realization of a new field of force and thus a new perceptive and affective relation to others – a new force of social gravitation.

In thinking through the essence of intersubjectivity, Merleau-Ponty finds in this process a hyperdialectical relation between the binaries of individual and social, particular and general, institution and passivity. Indeed, the very core of intersubjectivity as a political theory lies not in the assertion of a singular mode of subjectivity, nor in the pure plurality of a multitude of subjects. Rather, as a project of co-existence and pairing, it lies in a shared generality that opens onto (or from) the particularity of individual manifestations of that generality. There is an overlap or hinge between self and other that blurs the distinction between the for-oneself and for-another, though without annulling the relationship between ipseity and alterity. The generality that is necessary or informs the particularity of the for-oneself – the self's own constitution as subject – must be accessible to the other, in a manner that defies their merely being an object. Hence, the recognition that my individuality/particularity is accessible – as "a kind of halo of

¹⁰⁹ Eleanor Godway, 'Toward a Phenomenology of Politics: Expression and Praxis,' *Merleau-Ponty, Hermeneutics and Postmodernism*, ed. Thomas W. Bosch and Shaun Gallagher, (Albany: SUNY Press 1992), 167.

¹¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 517.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 517.

generality or a kind of atmosphere of 'sociality'" – is precisely the means of my access to the being of the other, as well as theirs to mine. But the reversibility of this condition/situation is the means through which I can become for-another. As Merleau-Ponty states, "My life must have a significance which I do not constitute; there must 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."¹¹² Essentially, the "I" is centered outside itself; as the flesh suggested, this is rooted in the very openness of the perceiving subject to the world. But part of this lies in the fact that I am always-already constituted by the outside (or instituted in it). Intersubjectivity implies a relationship to the outside that is prior to my being, which deprives the self of an absolute ipseity. Yet, this very sociality is derived from the outward-oriented nature of the body, and rooted in its limited ipseity. Anonymity denotes this double belonging: to the world that is priorly constituted and that I find myself already subject to/instituted in; and to the individual anonymity that lies in the way I carry these institutions, in the deployment of my individual subjectivity within this world. Moreover, the double of this double anonymity lies in the non-possessivity of approaches and engagements to the world, with the individual response of subjects (the wage-labourer, peasant or tenant farmer) being accessible to the others, as well as the general movement of proletarian institution being subject to individuation and innovation by each of these subjects. This is not the universal interchangeability of perspectives, particularly as contained in a third person perspective structured by the objective rules of language. Rather, it is an overlapping between individuated beings, with the realm of overlapping (the "proletariat" as mode of institution) facilitating the further individuation and expression of their very alterity out of this realm of common being. It is in the context of intersubjectivity as the advent of the

¹¹² Ibid., 521.

dialectic between individual (or individuated) and mass action, between individuality and generality, that historical subjectivity can emerge. And this is the substance of proletarian being: it emerges not through the being of a Cartesian subject, self assured and always present to itself, but through the convergence and overlap of the being of a set of subjects who institute their plight as connected, and who re-make their means of being and co-existence in a manner that refuses to annul their singularity, but that allows for a generality/universality that unites them.

Yet, we need to remain cognizant that Merleau-Ponty described societies (or institutions of the social) that were closed/false, ones that could not allow for further expression or which could not solve the problem of co-existence as an intersubjective project. It is through this contention that we should read Merleau-Ponty's account of proletarian being in the Soviet experience after 1917. In a properly phenomenological approach, we cannot regress into abstractions, but must consider the emergence and becoming of a given phenomenon. What Merleau-Ponty's changing account of the potentials of proletarian intersubjectivity suggests is the changing historical trajectory of it as a form of social institution. While *Humanism and Terror* maintained a "wait-and-see" attitude, by the time of *Adventures of the Dialectic* – under the emerging truths of labour camps and the maintenance and strengthening of a repressive state/party apparatus that he had already discerned in the earlier work – Merleau-Ponty could no longer see a potential in the Soviet Union and called for the emergence of a non-communist Left that was anti-capitalist but not pro-Soviet.¹¹³ Much of this is a seemingly commonplace reading of Merleau-Ponty's work. But reading his work through Luxemburg can help us to further establish the contours of intersubjectivity as a mode of institution.

Humanism and Terror repeats a number of features surrounding proletarian being and intersubjectivity that were suggested in *Phenomenology of Perception*. But, I want to focus on

¹¹³ This latter feature is generally ignored or neglected by the readings that ascribe to Merleau-Ponty a "liberal" shift.

the elements of spontaneity deployed there to show how these coalesce with *Adventures of the Dialectic* in advocating intersubjectivity as a political project (modeled on, but not fully constituted by, proletarian being). In *Humanism and Terror*, Merleau-Ponty asserts the spontaneity of the masses, specifically suggesting that this spontaneity is predicated upon an "instinct" that defies the dictatorial power of a Hegelian bureaucratic vanguard – and presumably a Bolshevik variant. On this front, he cites Lenin to the effect that the move beyond "syndicalist" action and towards political praxis requires organization, but does not negate the revolutionary role of the spontaneity/instinct of the masses in the process.¹¹⁴ The very reticence that frames the wait-and-see attitude of *Humanism and Terror* emerges precisely from the overriding subsumption of the masses' spontaneity and class instinct by the organizational role of the Communist Party. Read through Luxemburg's insights, the dialectic becomes undialectical when spontaneity is repressed or negated in favour of the organizational pole/side. Under these conditions, "communist behaviour" becomes "underwritten less and less by class spirit and revolutionary brotherhood, relying less and less upon the spontaneous convergence of proletarian movements and the truth of its own historical perspective."¹¹⁵ The dialectic becomes an identity imposed from outside with the expressed intent of occluding spontaneity and praxis from below, along with their non-teleological, experiential and experimental basis. As in Sartre's account, the party becomes the Cartesian subject, with its needs to quell dissent and the possibility of difference/conflict as agonistic contention; the "other" (as well as alterity as another permeation of institution) becomes antithetical to the very being of the party as subject. But this is (or, in *Phenomenology*, was) not the essence of the proletarian being for Merleau-Ponty – as institution or a mode of intersubjectivity. Institutions that are not "false" (but not true) acknowledge the

¹¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, xix.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., xxi.

moment and conditions of possibility of their own becoming via institution, and proletarian being represented this in its very intersubjectivity.

While Lenin and Sartre assert the necessary organizational role of the party, this misses that the party is not the proletariat and that the former is merely a reflection or response to the emerging forms of the latter. According to Merleau-Ponty, party action (or the party's intervention in historical subjectivity) "would lose its meaning if it were not exercised according to the pattern outlined by history itself, unless the Party's activity were not the prolongation and fulfillment of the spontaneous existence of the proletariat."¹¹⁶ Here, he is not dismissing the role of the party or organization, but asserting the dialectical connection between mass and party, and the need to retain both the element of organization and spontaneity, lest the intersubjective and creative/open element of proletarian being/institution be reduced to an identity. By containing spontaneity, the party imposes a false anonymity/subjectivity on the masses that represses the very surplus of being that is intended to enable the further expression, individuation and innovation that springs from social institution. Moreover, it regresses into the desire for an allegedly originary unity that suppresses the alterity/*écart* that makes the social not identical with itself, and which is the condition of possibility of solidarity and being-together (rather than identity). This is tantamount to de-historicizing the institution of proletarian being, and therefore de-racinating institution itself. Spontaneity is representative of the constitutive gap (between my left hand touching my right hand): spontaneity and mass action represent the indeterminacy of a social that "represents" itself in modes of organization. As a mode of being-in-the-world, proletarian being represents an institution in its two fold capacity as, (1) a being of the social that is non-identical with itself, and (2) a force of social gravitation, a hinge or a common in which a multiplicity of subjects find a common fold for modes of being-together while not eliminating

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 117.

their singularity or their own capacity for expressing this situation in different and agonistic (though not impossible) ways. Yet, in the Soviet experience, we find a regression of proletarian being/institution into a proletarian identity, imposed from without and repressing the constitutive gap that separates the social from itself. As a constitutive and constituting identity, the proletariat is no longer an intersubjective form of social institution but a positive identical subject-object of history – which is to say a constituting subject which colonizes all that stands in its way. As Merleau-Ponty suggests in *Adventures*, this constitutes a regression into a Cartesian subjectivity and its corollary intuitive philosophy that defies time, and does so through the elision or erasure of the other (as an interference with the self). This is rooted in the assertion of a "true, homogenous" society that is no longer intersubjective but autarchic.

The transition from a proletarian mode of being-in-the-world to a proletarian identity would seem to be the implicit, motive force of the 'Epilogue' to *Adventures of the Dialectic*, and Merleau-Ponty's account of the dialectic generally. Indeed, the 'Epilogue' posits – in embryo – the hyperdialectical contention that the dialectic cannot be terminated, but must be ruthlessly applied to itself: it is not an abstract or a priori logic, but something that emerges within the specificity and particularity of experiences. Hence, the properties or consequences of the dialectic "enlighten us only when one grasps them in our experience, at the junction of a subject, of being, and of other subjects: between *those* opposites, in *that* reciprocal action, in *that* relationship between an inside and an outside, between the elements of *that* constellation, in *that* becoming, which not only becomes but becomes for itself, there is room, without contradiction and without magic, for relationships with double meanings, for reversals, for opposite and inseparable truths, for sublations, for a perpetual genesis, for a plurality of levels or orders."¹¹⁷ Hence, the dialectic cannot be sundered from its concrete manifestations and engagements –

¹¹⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1973), 203-204.

something that Merleau-Ponty's turn to a philosophy of institution aimed to convey. Far from being the result of a subject that is entirely present to itself, and existing outside of time, the dialectic is embedded within temporality and the existential condition of intersubjectivity – the world has already been instituted, but this is the condition of possibility of praxis and a future as the continuation of temporality and praxis. He posits this in contradistinction to the "Kantian conception of an ideality of the world which is the same in everyone."¹¹⁸ Such an idealization ignores the very meetings and exchanges between subjects, the very differences that emerge and open onto the world. It is this multiplicity that defies the centered presence of a subject to itself; the subject is always de-centered by the openness of the body to the world, and the existence of other bodies in the world. This dual openness is the condition of possibility of these subjects' "common residence, the place of their exchange and of their reciprocal interpretation," something facilitated because "we are imitable and participatable through each other in this relationship with [the world]."¹¹⁹ This is the very principle of the interaction and overlap of the factory worker, peasant labourer and tenant farmer in the events leading up to the 1917 revolution: their intersubjective exchange created a common mode of being, but only through forms of participation and imitation that neither excluded the others, nor imposed itself upon them. In this context, proletarian being symbolized a being-together as being-with, and being caught up in a common struggle, that did not reduce or eliminate the singularity of each being.

In turning to Merleau-Ponty's account of the "adventures" of the dialectic in the work of Lukács and Sartre, we return to a number of ideas elaborated in Chapter 1. Lukács' account of the proletariat ends dialectical development through the identity established in revolutionary society. This stunts the process of institution through the closure (or disclosure and discovery) of

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 204.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 204.

absolute meaning – a problematic resuscitation of universal history. Sartre's account posits the more nefarious attributes of proletarian identity, positing the party as Cartesian subject in a manner that annihilates time, alterity and institution. The problem here lies not in the dialectical experience of the proletariat (particularly prior to 1917), but with the attempt to turn the proletariat *into* the dialectic. This is the illusion of identity, in its two fold significance as the "I" of a particular being, and as the I=I of that being. When this "I" finds its historical vehicle in the being of the party – or when the party asserts its monopoly of the definition of this "I" that is proletarian identity – there is a regression into the Hegelian bureaucratic state apparatus¹²⁰ of which spontaneity was supposed to be the dialectical opposite. Consequently, the plurality of subjects – the various monads – that found a uniting force via the situation and institution of a particular mode of being-together is repressed by the overarching identity that is imposed from the outside. As Merleau-Ponty states of Sartre's work: "there is a plurality of subjects but no intersubjectivity," for these subjects "are not joined in action, in the relative and the probable, but only in principles and on condition that the other stick rigorously to them, that he does credit to his name and to the absolute negation that it promises. The world and history are no longer a system with several points of entry but a sheaf of irreconcilable perspectives which never coexist and which are held together only by the hopeless heroism of the I"¹²¹

Essentially, this model turns the proletariat into the dialectic, rather than seeing dialectical movements – with their attendant tensions and reversals – in its becoming, and seeing this becoming as another form of social institution. As the dialectic, as an identity, and consequently as the absolute subject that realizes history by realizing itself, the proletariat becomes the representative of a "true, homogenous society" that is prepared not by its own

¹²⁰ Ibid., 228.

¹²¹ Ibid., 205.

movement, but the philosophical consciousness that represents it via the party and its organizational movement. By virtue of the necessity of realizing itself through the heroism of this I, the institution of proletarian being – both as social institution and the institutions of its social being – erases the tensions that dialectical development was supposed to entail, denying dispute and disagreement, because the totality of historical meaning is imputed to be contained in its emergence and becoming via party organization. Far from being the suppression of class power – by virtue of its realization being its own negation – the concept of proletarian identity, as carrier of "true democracy," "is a dream of an 'end of politics' out of which one wants to make a politics."¹²² In asserting the necessity of class politics from the perspective of a non-communist left, Merleau-Ponty refuses the game that presumes one mode of class power can erase class power tout court; the moment a class takes possession of the political artifice, it negates its own revolutionary intention, either immediately or by indefinitely delaying its dissolution of state power. This is why Merleau-Ponty asserts the centrality of the moment between the transfer of power from one class to another: "The essence of revolution is to be found in that instant in which the fallen class no longer rules and the rising class does not yet rule."¹²³ This moment is not necessarily the dissolution of class as a category, so much as the dissolution of class power. Indeed, whether Merleau-Ponty goes this far or not, it is in the moment that precedes the transfer of power that the true intersubjectivity of the proletarian mode of being – the moments exemplified by the general strike as an institution of class being-together – emerges in its purest form. This is precisely the moment at which the constitutive gap takes on a pre-eminent form, and Merleau-Ponty appears to be suggesting that this constitutes the genuine

¹²² Ibid., 218.

¹²³ Ibid., 209.

moment of a politics of intersubjectivity – the moment the flesh realizes its essence as indeterminacy.

In light of this indeterminacy, institution takes on a paradoxical character as the fixed-not-fixed or a pairing that is never a binding. Indeed, "institution" for Merleau-Ponty denotes something other than its traditional deployments: it is a social matrix, a field of action/force rather than being an actual body as in the case of the party. What holds us together is not an external force, but simultaneously a mode of co-feeling and a sensuous/perceptual outlook on the world. Moreover, even thinking it through the traditional spirit if not the word, institution is – as Abensour so adeptly grasps – not so much a mode of stasis as the conditions of possibility of action and innovation.¹²⁴ Within institution, the dialectic between spontaneity and organization places a primacy on spontaneity as the creator or root of the very institutional infrastructure, with the condition that the latter can transform into a blockage of the former when it becomes externalized or ontologizes a particular moment of the spontaneity of the masses. The moment of spontaneity conditions and is conditioned by the "institution," but retains a primacy that includes the ability to subvert or transform any stasis, or any transubstantiation of institution (verb/action) into *an* "institution" (noun/body). But if the question becomes – pace Sartre – whether something like the party is necessary for the creation of the identity/unity that institution denotes, whether the fused group requires the party to hold it together, then, returning to the themes elaborated at the beginning of the chapter, it must be noted that we cannot assume the fact of the individual as the originary moment of subjectivity. Anonymity and individuation (in connection with institution) deny this individualism as the ontological starting point. As a social product, the individual cannot be presupposed as the basic unit (nor can society/the social). Rather, subjectivities are the outcome of individuation/subjectification. But, perhaps more to the

¹²⁴ Abensour, *Democracy Against the State*, xxviii.

point, the necessity of the external unifying body is defied by the rejection of imposing an identity that would obfuscate the very intersubjectivity that institution is supposed to constitute – an overlap in which ipseity and alterity are not opposed, but become the condition of possibility of a being-together as multiplicity that should not be fused into an indissolvable unity.

* * *

While anonymity has been a favoured target of critics, recent scholars have sought to recuperate its analytical and political import. Their insights dovetail with the themes around the ambivalence of the body explored in the previous chapter, and see in anonymity a way of theorizing subjectivity, both as an inherited mode of embodied being and as always containing a surplus that can rupture its sedimented forms in producing new ways of being and being-together. What I have sought to draw out of this, or where I have sought to redirect this sentiment, is towards the process of intersubjectification. While intersubjectivity is often posited as an epistemological problem, Merleau-Ponty also conceives of it as a political problem and project. Intersubjectivity as a political project then comes to express the very politics latent in his ontology of the flesh – though, through the path we have taken with Benjamin, one that complicates and heightens the political import of the flesh. Indeed, the types of experiences Benjamin describes require a form of intersubjectification to shed the dead weight of anonymity-as-subjectivity via the surplus that historical being contains. In this context, the expression of intersubjectivity is characterized by: 1) the preliminary character of any institution of the social, which retains the non-identity emblematic of the constitutive gap that separates the self from itself and others; 2) the mutual intertwining which allows for the projection/introjection relationship to take place, without reducing the other to the self or imposing the latter on the former; 3) the common hinge that facilitates this intertwining and that is the principle of a

common or unity, but one that facilitates individuation as a recurrent form of action/creation; 4) the reconstitution of desire on the level of a for-the-other rooted in the for-the-self, as well as in the abstract generality that modes of action create. While proletarian being began by expressing this form of intersubjectivity in its formative period, under the weight of the political tendencies in the Soviet experience, this regressed into a closed social institution (an identity) that was no longer intersubjective. Hence, Merleau-Ponty's account of intersubjectivity appears to end in a lament or despair for the tragedy of its failure.

Conclusion

We have come full circle with respects to intersubjectivity. At the beginning of this dissertation, I considered it from the perspective of the intersubjective flesh of the social, from an ontological foundation. Yet, with Benjamin's interventions, we see it as needing to be inflected historically, and not merely as a historical being, but in the particularity of this historical being: as a lived reality. This involved the conceptualization of the historical as a monad, under which the present needs to be understood in its specificity, divorced from progress and linearity. The lived reality of the present moment is the reality of capitalist experience. Here, Benjamin found the deadening of sensuous and perceptual capacities, which led to the elision of intersubjectivity and our experience of the other under the stultifying weight of reification. At the same time, the depth of history – its ontological and ethical surplus – constituted a means of transcending this: the experience of history was structured by a utopian relationship, which held out the possibility of shattering this mode of being. These insights from Benjamin allow us to apply new contours to the flesh, and to complicate the ontological account of it. Indeed, experience and intersubjectivity as embodied in the body constitute a complex dialectic that needs to be considered in its concrete becoming, as well as in the context of the general lifeworld of the body and its structure or corporeal schema. Here, the body becomes a historical being, but one whose very openness to the world and history includes the ambiguity of a primordial sociality that can become enacted in the form of domination or solidarity. With this complication added, intersubjectivity takes on the shape of a political project that must be enacted against its elision. In considering it in these terms, the ontological contours find a further expression, as we saw with the concept of anonymity, which posits the two-fold character of the body as subject: its containment within a habituated field of already instituted subject positions, and the surplus

(historical and temporal) that facilitates the possibility of shattering these positions in opening new modes of subjectivity, as individuations. In a sense, this leaves us to consider the phenomenology of intersubjectivity – its coming into being, particularly through the emergence of the proletariat as a mode of social institution.

In the end, Merleau-Ponty's and Benjamin's accounts of intersubjectivity and experience, politics and utopia, end in disappointment: Benjamin's, with the Nazi-Soviet pact and the regression of the left into a reformist politics founded in an ideology of progress; Merleau-Ponty's, with the failures of the Soviet Union and the regression of proletarian politics into the very rationalism it was supposed to oppose. Yet, disappointment is not the final word. Merleau-Ponty's disappointment produces a dual lament: a lament for the failures of the proletariat to enact a genuine intersubjectivity, amidst its regression into a problematic identitarian politics; and a lament at the failure to think politics beyond the simplistic binaries of liberal-capitalism and Soviet-communism. This encourages us not to reject intersubjectivity, but to re-think it; and not to regress into binary thinking (particularly the binary thinking of a bygone era), but to try and think through these binaries in finding a different form of politics. Benjamin's work ends with a warning and a plea: a warning against modernity's continual crises and occlusions, and against the violence of historical amnesia and experiential anaesthetics; and a plea to recuperate (or return to the origins of) the lost energies of the oppressed, lest our forgetting of them contribute to our oppression and our stranding in a world that fundamentally denies or elides the other in its two-fold significance, as the ethical other and the possibility of something other than the given.

While all of this retains a pessimistic tone, this pessimism – and failure, more generally – is part of the economy of the utopian. Utopia's persistence denies finality, and its failure merely signifies its always present striving for something that can never fully be achieved. As Abensour

states: "Despite all its failures, disavowals, and defeats, this impulse is reborn in history, reappears, makes itself felt in the blackest catastrophe, resists as if catastrophe itself called forth new summations."¹ We thus need to embrace failure as the condition of possibility of utopia. This entails accepting that the failure of utopia is also the very condition of possibility of its continual re-emergence – the failure denoting the necessity of utopia in challenging the reigning order, but also signifying that utopia can only be thought through the dual dialectic of emancipation and domination, of fulfillment and defeat. Both require that we retain the ambiguity at the center of desire, its potential political fulfillment as domination or freedom – or as domination *and* freedom. Indeed, the lack of an "object" makes desire (as the root of subjectivity) the very source of the experience and experiment of re-shaping the social order. And the education of desire implies not merely inspiring it towards this transformation, but educating it in the process of defeat, and educating it by keeping the lessons of these failures alive. Benjamin's invocation of redemption and remembrance points to this: "The eternal lamp is an image of genuine historical existence. It cites what has been – the flame that once was kindled – in perpetuum, giving it ever new sustenance."² This represents the attempt not to *return* to the past, but to retain and redeem the past by remembering the lessons of failure.

So, what lessons can be learned from the failures that animate the work of Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin, from the adventures of intersubjectivity and experience, politics and utopia? Or what new avenues for politics can they inspire? In the first place, intersubjectivity denotes a particular mode of being-together, a mode of being in the world. While a particular movement and subjectification may take this as the result of its action or coming into being, we cannot replace this being-together with the identity of a given subject. This is the regression into an

¹ Miguel Abensour, 'Persistent Utopia,' *Constellations*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2008, 407.

² Walter Benjamin, 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History,"' *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press 2003), 407.

autarchic identity thinking that is the antithesis of *intersubjectivity*. Intersubjectivity acknowledges the *écart* that separates the self from others, and which is the condition of possibility of being-together, as opposed to the identity that merely implies a subsumption of the other to the order of the same. Here, the political theory of intersubjectivity demands a mode of being-together – through social institution – that can act as a hinge, or in-between, whereby we participate in the very being of others, while not occluding their difference; moreover, this hinge must supply a means to further institution or further expression of the singularity of subjects, as well as new forms of their being-together. The fundamental dilemma that attaches itself to such a project lies in the inability to predict the "future" forms this it might take.

While I have not labelled it as such in the course of development, we might view the perspective of this dissertation as a phenomenology of subjectivity, or a political phenomenology. This differs from a historiographical or sociological approach: rather than providing a chronological, causal or scientific analysis of phenomena, a political phenomenology draws together the appearance of a number of seemingly disparate phenomena in order to provide a political reading of these events.³ A political phenomenology relates these events through the sort of montage and constellative approach – with its anti-linear understanding of origin – deployed by Benjamin, seeing in these phenomena not a development, but the continual and discontinuous emergence of new institutions and modes of appearance of subjectivity. We find here an expansive and heterodox use of "the political" that challenges the reigning common sense understandings in accordance with the very challenges presented by the subject matter itself, including how emergent modes of subjectivity re-make and create institutions, in challenging old forms. What Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin offered is largely an account of

³ On this approach, see in particular, Mario Tronto, 'Workers and Capital,' *Telos*, No. 14, 1972. See also, Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2004).

embodiment and intersubjectivity in the particular context of an older vision of Marxism, that they largely aimed to challenge. In providing their own political phenomenology, they offered a means to think through, simultaneously, the manner in which the subjectivity of the oppressed classes sought to rupture reigning orthodoxies, and how these subjectivities could transform their official embodiments in the doxa of classical Marxisms. But a political phenomenology must be tied to Merleau-Ponty's hyperdialectical phenomenology, which acknowledges its own partiality and temporality and thus must accede to new forms of analysis, in applying its methods to itself. This is the quintessence of persistent utopia's self-critical stance, implying that each utopian failure is the condition of possibility of another utopia's development. What we are left to ponder is how new instantiations of the chiasm between embodiment and intersubjectivity, experience and utopia, can open up new political avenues and new political possibilities.

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