



COMMUNITY, SOCIETY, AND HISTORY IN THE LATER MERLEAU-PONTY

MARC RICHIR

INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND INCARNATION

Instead of taking up again the whole question of a doctrine that is only gradually becoming well known, we will approach it in its ultimate version, as glimpsed in some of the “working notes” published by Claude Lefort as an appendix to *The Visible and the Invisible*. We know that it is in the nooks and crannies of Husserl’s work that Merleau-Ponty, who probably never stopped meditating on it, patiently and progressively inscribes his own problematic of the “Flesh.” Merleau-Ponty owes a lot to Husserl concerning the question we are going to treat here (and many others as well), not so much for the positive content of the doctrines of phenomenology’s founder as for the very *terms* with which Husserl first begins phenomenological interrogation. This is particularly true of the problematic of the intersubjectivity of society, and even of History, as we shall see.

In what follows, we must presuppose that the reader is already familiar with the Husserlian doctrine of the apperceptive appresentation of the other [*autrui*] by means of *Einfühlung*, but when necessary we will briefly recall it for the sake of understanding. Let us say right away, in order to initiate the problematic and to eliminate any misunderstandings issuing from its equivocal formulation in the fifth *Cartesian Meditation*, that the appresentation of the other is first the apperception of a *Leib*—a body-of-flesh—by another *Leib*, in which the “life” of the other appears to me without any “reasoning” and without being given

itself “in presence,” and in such a way that it is *mine*, at least in appearance. There is an *immediate* apprehension in the apperception of the other that “I see *my* life” and not the other’s. But I am not a *solus ipse* closed in on itself, but rather an *ipse* phenomenologically open in its life and its time to the other’s life and time. The other is also present—*leiblich*—in its flesh, which is already beyond the separation of soul and body; this presence is paradoxical, however, since it is the coherent presence of a certain absence that I immediately sense myself to be. There is thus in this experience a sort of intentional encroachment [*Ineinander*] and a transgression [*Überschreiten*] of two presences—one which is made here and now in me, the other which is made over there in a “now” that is always lagged or out of synch [*déphasé*] with respect to my own. This originary “desynch” of presence in relation to itself is *already language*, according to certain texts published in the *Husserliana* (Bd XIII, XIV, XV). By means of it, I understand the mimicries, gestures, or manifestations of the other’s “humors” [*Stimmungen*], without having learned them. In these texts (and not as one wrongly believed in the logic-eidetic purification of the first *Logical Investigation*), we will see the true Husserlian concept of language show up on the surface.¹

Merleau-Ponty approaches the questions of the other and of intersubjectivity in a working note dated February 1959. He writes:

[I]n fact what has to be understood is, beyond the “persons,” the existentials according to which we comprehend them, and which are sedimented meaning of all our voluntary and involuntary experiences. This unconscious is to be sought not at the bottom of ourselves, behind the back of our ‘consciousness’ but in front of us, as articulations of our field. It is ‘unconscious’ by the fact that it is not an object, but it is that through which objects are possible, it is the constellation wherein our future is read. . . . It is between them as the interval of the trees between the trees, or as their common level. It is the *Urgemeinschaftung* of our intentional life, the *Ineinander* of the others in us and of us in them.

It is these existentials that make up the (substitutable) meaning of what we say and of what we understand. They are the armature of that ‘invisible world’ which, with speech, begins to impregnate all the things we see—as the ‘other’ space, for the schizophrenic, takes possession of the sensorial and visible space. . . . Not that it ever becomes a visible space in its turn,” in the visible there is never anything but ruins of the

spirit, the world will always resemble the Forum, at least before the gaze of the philosopher, who does not completely inhabit it. (VI, 180)

At first, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty situates himself beyond the dualist encounter of self and other, and thus *in* what Husserl named transcendental subjectivity, precisely in order to understand the transcendental nature of it, including the apparently solitary experience that I may have of objects and things. The question is that of the “communitization” [*Urgemeinschaftung*] of our intentional life, of the chiasm [*Ineinander*] of others in us and of us in them—that is, of *how* it is the case that “transcendental subjectivity is transcendental intersubjectivity” (as Husserl’s poorly thought out formula puts it). In the same movement, the concern is also for that which results in the “*Weltlichkeit du Geist*,” or “worldliness of spirit,” by which we understand that the visible (and not simply “seen”) world is only ever a field of ruins like the Roman Forum. What Merleau-Ponty seeks to think here is thus what we call the *phenomenological community*.

The key concept of this research is that of the existential. The concept is somewhat paradoxical, because it is imported from a different context in *Being and Time*, wherein for Heidegger it concentrates the cohesion of the structures of existence, that is, the characters or modes of the being of Dasein according to which Dasein is always already referring in its being to that which it questions, and is thus always already *taken by* or *thrown into* that which it questions in projecting itself. The situation is indeed that of transcendental subjectivity as transcendental Intersubjectivity, but the paradox here comes from the fact that the existentials “are the *sedimented* meanings of all our voluntary and involuntary experiences”—since sedimentation is a properly Husserlian concept, falling under the originary passivity of consciousness. Consequently, what appears in Merleau-Ponty as a very rich idea is that the Heideggerian “facticity” of Dasein is understood by means of sedimentation, at least as *historical*, even though in Heidegger the historicity of Dasein could reveal itself properly only as destiny [*Schicksal*] in the opening of resoluteness. Furthermore, by appearing as historical, facticity becomes *communal*, since it is the sedimented deposit in which the meaning of human experience is enclosed (so to speak), just as much in the course of individual experience as in collective experience.

What we must understand, then, is that by its very constitution (which is sedimentation), the existential structure explodes into a multiplicity of existentials, in which the sedimented communal meaning itself explodes into a constellation of sedimented meanings structuring our

experience of the world in advance; in this sense, they are transcendental structures. This constellation of an exploded facticity of Dasein—necessarily unconscious since it proceeds from the passivities of consciousness by means of its sedimentations—is also, Merleau-Ponty says, the “articulation of our field,” on the inside of which alone can a project or projects have meaning according to the existential structures, that is, where “our future can be read.” Merleau-Ponty specifies that this is the “interior armature” of the invisible. These sedimentations are thus of a very strange nature, since they are not the visible (or maybe the all too visible) sedimentations of terms, signs, beings, or entities (as in Husserl), but rather are sedimentations (themselves invisible) of *meaning* and not of signifiers and signifieds. This unconscious thus does not have a positive content; it consists in the plural sedimentations of the plural and indefinitely multiple experiences of meaning. Made up of empty places or voids, “it is like the interval of trees between the trees,” and it makes up the depth of experience, “the common level” of trees, which anchors them in what Husserl distinguished (as early as the *Philosophy of Arithmetic*) as the “sensible multiplicities” borrowed from passive synthesis. In this sense, this already properly phenomenological “unconscious” is, for Merleau-Ponty, the transcendental condition of the possibility of the *experience* of objects and things. As if there were, through the communitarian historicity of these sedimentations of a new kind, a communal historicity *hidden* in the very structuration of *passive* syntheses (or of *ontological* modes of the facticities of Dasein)! Let us underline in passing the extraordinary novelty of such a thought in which what Heidegger had begun in *Being and Time* finds its most concrete prolongation.

But that’s not all: Merleau-Ponty adds right away that it is somehow in the hollows of these articulations or of these invisible constellations of the invisible that what he calls the (substitutable) meaning for what we say and hear—i.e., speech—resides. Rather than consisting in the temporal unfurling of ready-made significations, speech is the profoundly communal manner of bringing the substitutability of meanings into play between the existential structures and the already sedimented invisibles of meaning, even when I speak or write or think alone. This is nearly impossible to understand, and remains to be thought, but it is what seems to *impregnate* all of the visible. A *mute* and *invisible* form of impregnation, in a sort of *logos endiathetos* which is both a resource for the *logos prophorikhos* and as we might have guessed, also the place of new possible passive (and thus unconscious) sedimentations of *meaning* in another form of the same historicity. A mute and invisible impregnation which also makes the visible world (which is much more

than the “seen” world) appear as the ruins of spirit, that is, of *meaning*. But Merleau-Ponty adds a phrase that relaunched this interrogation: this is the case “under the gaze of the philosopher” who “does not live entirely in the visible.” From whence comes this philosophical sense for meaning—i.e., the sense for the invisible? What is this invisible that is not merely the intelligible, since it goes so far in its unconscious dimension as to structure what Husserl had taken up as passive syntheses? If passive syntheses fall under what we call the *phenomenological* unconscious more profoundly than under the symbolic unconscious of psychoanalysis, would there then be both an unconscious and a properly phenomenological *historicity*?² Would there consequently be an irreducible worldliness, not only of transcendental subjectivity and Intersubjectivity, not only of Dasein and *Mitsein*, but also of *Geist*? In this sense, would there thus be a communal and historical *Weltgeist*, and thus also a *Zeitgeist*?

Such is the extraordinarily fecund difficulty that Merleau-Ponty leads us to think. He writes, still in February 1959, that “Intersubjectivity, the *Urgemein-Stiftung*, is very much beyond lived experience.” We must come from this to the apparently most simple experience of the encounter with the other, in order to understand it better. Let us limit ourselves to some citations from the working notes, in the guise of a recall.

What the other says appears to me to be full of meaning because his lacunae are never where mine are. Perspective multiplicity. (VI, 187, May 1959)

The other, not as a ‘consciousness,’ but as an inhabitant of a body, and consequently of the world. Where is the other in this body that I see? He is (like the meaning of a sentence), immanent in this body (one cannot detach him from it to pose him apart) and yet, more than the sum of the signs or the significations conveyed by them. He is that of which they are always the partial and non-exhaustive image—and who nonetheless is attested wholly in each of them. *Always in process of an unfinished incarnation*. . . . Beyond the objective body as the sense of the painting is beyond the canvas. (VI, 209–210, September 1950; emphasis added)

Being is this strange encroachment by reason of which my visible, although it is not superposable on that of the other, nonetheless opens upon it, that both open upon the same sensible world. And it is the same encroachment, the same junction

at a distance, that makes the messages from my organs (the monocular images) reassemble themselves into one sole vertical existence and into one sole world. (VI, 216, November 1959)

The Weltlichkeit of minds is ensured by the roots they push forth, not in the Cartesian space, to be sure, but in the aesthetic world. The aesthetic world is to be described as a space of transcendence, a space of impossibilities, of explosion, of dehiscence, and not as objective-immanent space. (Ibid.)

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. It is to this surface of separation and of union that the existentials of my personal history proceed, it is the geometrical locus of the projections and introjections, it is the invisible hinge upon which my life and the life of others turn to rock into one another, the inner framework of intersubjectivity. (VI, 234, January 1960)

The invisible is a hollow in the visible, *a fold in passivity*, not pure production. (VI, 235, February 1960; emphasis added)

The mind quiet as water in the fissure of Being . . . there are only structures of the void. But I simply wish to plant this void in the visible Being, show that it is in the reverse side. (Ibid.)

All these texts—and we would be able to sate ourselves just by following through on these citations—show that the other is for Merleau-Ponty (as for Husserl)³ the site of the revelation of our *incarnation*, of a *living* incarnation, to the extent that the incarnation is never achieved lest it fall either into an de-anchoring of the flesh with respect to the body-of-flesh [*Leib*] (this de-anchoring tends to be produced in the schematizing and productive imagination [*Einbildungskraft*]), or into a total incorporation of the flesh into a body-of-flesh closed in on itself and consequently turned into a *Körper*, a cadaver. For Merleau-Ponty this incarnation clearly means that in the apperception of the other's body-of-flesh, the other is "appresented" as an *incarnated meaning* of which the visible manifestations (mimicry, gestures, physiognomy) are the indefinitely fluent "signs," which Husserl very significantly related to "clues" or "indices" while specifying that these clues are an integral part of the temporalization of the other *in language*. This meaning itself

is, just as the *rapprochement* with the meaning of a painting indicates, an “aesthetic” meaning in the Kantian sense, or a meaning that can be rigorously reflected only *without* a (a priori or empirical) *concept*, since every concept in reality aims at “reifying” the other or at least at identifying the other, and consequently at leading the other back to the Same. Yet this meaning comes to be by the “desynch” and the mutual encroachment of two visibles, which themselves are not superposed on one another to the point of coincidence. It thus comes to be, as invisible, in an originally intersubjective temporalization in which presence is temporalized as the very divergence that tries to catch up with itself by placing the lacunae of the other in my own. We must understand lacunae here in the sense of the lacunae of the visible (and not the seen)—i.e., in the sense of principally invisible lacunae, *irreducible* to the visible. Just as there is something about the life of the other that will always and forever escape me, so too do I come to understand through the other that there is something of my own life that will always forever escape me, though not in the same way. Intersubjective encroachment is thus not at every intersection of two wholly positive ensembles, but rather at a “junction at a distance,” in such a way as to rejoin itself somewhere, in the invisible (the meaning) as *existential*. And this encroachment is already “in me” since for Merleau-Ponty, it makes the “aesthesiological worlds” of my diverse senses regroup in one sole sensible mass, and thus constitutes it as an “aesthetic world.” Transcendence, incompatibilities (which transgress the principle of noncontradiction), explosion, dehiscence are thus all generalized, and we know that the traits that characterize what Merleau-Ponty discovers as the flesh are found in this. The flesh is in effect what enigmatically holds all this together as an elementary tissue—or as Levinas says, an “elemental” of an inextricable complexity—a tissue that is supposed to have a “metaphysical structure” for Merleau-Ponty. And he tries to think this tissue, with a “surface of separation” (which is also a surface of juncture) between me and the other, as the tissue around which my life and the lives of others pivot, crossing and weaving into each other in the “lining of intersubjectivity.” Even if the image of “geometrical site” is clumsy (here we refer to an unpublished working note), it allows us to understand that the Dasein’s existentials (i.e., the invisible constellations of the invisible that allow us to *orient* ourselves with respect to meaning) are anchored in the multiple and “perspectival” crossing, which means that this possibility is *ontological* in the Heideggerian sense (the possibility of something and the world *ek-sisting* in the transitive sense), and furthermore as originally intersubjective—which was not the case in *Being and Time*.

By the sad necessity of his premature death, it will always be difficult to think rigorously what remains inchoate in Merleau-Ponty. This does not prevent his thought of meaning as incarnate existentials from opening not only onto a new thought of incarnation, but also onto an entirely new conception of meaning and of the intelligible as not always already given in the “universe of significations,” or in what he named the universe of “things said.” He even goes so far as to risk this proposition in a note already cited from February 1960: “[S]edimentation is the only mode of being for ideality” (VI, 235).

First of all, what is this new thought of incarnation in virtue of which what we have called *phenomenological* community is in reality an *incarnated* community? It is entirely contained in the difficult concept of encroachment or the chiasm, of juncture-at-a-distance across the void or the invisible. And correlatively, the invisible is not a reservoir of the visible, but rather its irreducible reserve—not originally presentable, and even unrepresentable—which pushes philosophical language to its limits. In this regard, we must go a bit farther than Merleau-Ponty himself does in order to understand it, and we must *add* the trait of *absence* to those he assigns to it—i.e., *originary* absence, in that its character as the nonpresentable and the unrepresentable authorize it, given that the notions of presentation and representation lead to thinking it in the first place. This gives a stronger and greater consistency to the notion of flesh. It also allows us to grasp the entire dimension of non-presence, of the absence of the other’s life from mine in our encounter, and the manner that this absence is distributed both in the lacunae of the meaning we make *together* and in the holes of absence in presence, which give to meaning the phenomenological horizons of its depth. But this leads us, on the other hand, to distinguish what was still confused in Merleau-Ponty, namely, that which is the *presence* of meaning in its temporalization into presence and the holes of absence in it which also just as originally *spatialize* it from *within*, by constituting what Merleau-Ponty names the “folds” of passivity (of present time flowing between its presentations and retentions). Finally, along the same line, this allows us to grasp the dimension of the flesh in the imagination, not as “the faculty of representation” (which is a sort of metaphysical abstraction, or today, technology), but rather as the free schematizing power of contact with the given, and in this sense, an “existential,” structuring a priori the proof of things and given objects as Merleau-Ponty understands it. If we have a critique of him, as little authorized as this may be given the incomplete status of his work, it would be to say that his conception of the invisible is perhaps too *mas-*

sive, and thus dissolving, as if the visible were only the decoration of a gigantic and inextricable obverse side, and thus despite what he says of it, quasi-positive. This dissolving or excessively “fluidifying” power is furthermore due only to a very equivocal indecision with regard to the distinction (which must nevertheless be made) between presence [*Anwesen*, not *Vorhandenheit*] and absence [*Abwesen*]. This again opens the possibility, already opened by Merleau-Ponty, but which we must explore, of thinking *Wesen* consequently between *Anwesen* and *Abwesen*, rather than as *Sein*, *Seyn*, or Being. This possibility leads us into what we call proto-ontology.

This is not valid without next rebounding on the conception of ideality. Merleau-Ponty’s proposition (“Sedimentation is its sole mode of being”) appears to us a bit risky. Because it again risks englobing in indifference what we had at first discerned as his strong thought of an existential sedimentation of facticity or of an originary and ontological passivity (which had been the Husserlian thought of sedimentation as the occultation of ideality, behind which there is a but its *blind* signifier). Once again, the concern here is for modes of temporalization: that of ideality is exactly to appear at the *same* time (in the “same” time of spatialization and temporalization) as the *effacement* of its conditions of temporalization, which opens (better than any other meaning temporalizing itself into presence) to its “setting” [*prise*: in the sense that wet concrete “sets”], and to its re-setting in sedimentation, to the reversal of the light that there is in illumination when it temporalizes itself (in what Husserl called originary *Sinnbildung*) back into the obscurity of a signifier (the Husserlian *Gebilde*) in which no horizon of meaning lives, and which thus literally places itself *outside the world*. In other words, there is an irreducible hiatus between the incarnated phenomenological community of meaning and meanings, and the true, blind system of signifiers that we call the symbolic *Gestell*, which unties itself from lived experience, incorporates itself, and thereby disincarnates itself by placing itself outside of the world. And there is correlatively a similarly irreducible hiatus between the ontological passivity folded and structured by the invisible as radical absence (the passivity that we have named the *phenomenological* unconscious) and passivity itself encoded by the mechanical repeatability of blind signifiers (which falls under what we call the symbolic unconscious). If we are to understand better what Merleau-Ponty understands by what we have called the incarnated phenomenological community and ontologico-existential (and historical) passivity, there still remains the task of understanding what he means by “savage mind.”

SAVAGE MIND, SOCIETY, AND HISTORY

We find an explication of savage mind in a note from February 1959:

[L]anguage realizes, by breaking the silence, what the silence wished and did not obtain. Silence continues to envelop language, the silence of the absolute language, of the thinking language. . . . But . . . these developments must . . . issue in a theory of the savage mind, which is the mind of praxis. Like all praxis, language supposes a *selbstverständlich*, an instituted, which is *Stiftung* preparing and *Endstiftung*, the problem is to grasp what, across the successive and simultaneous community of speaking subjects, wishes, speaks and finally thinks. (VI, 176)

In other words, according to Merleau-Ponty's terms in the same note, the concern is to "restore the very presence of a culture," that is, of "this intersubjectivity which is not perspectival but vertical, which is, extended into the past, existential eternity, savage mind [*esprit sauvage*]" (VI, 175). According to this vertical view of mind, it is "one sole movement . . . that one coins out in judgements, in memories, but that holds them in one sole cluster as a spontaneous *word* contains a whole becoming, as *a sole grasp* of the hand contains a whole chunk of space" (VI, 236). In this *Weltlichkeit*, which we've seen is the flesh or incarnated, the mind is not "insular" but "the milieu where there is *action at a distance* (memory)" (VI, 242).

Savage mind is thus the mind of the incarnated phenomenological community. This constitutes both the (living) present of a culture or of the *Lebenswelt*, and the existential immemorial eternity of the community of flesh, by being historical in the sedimentation of the existentials wherein the facticities of Dasein are incarnated. There is thus hidden in it an implicit historicity, which unfolds itself behind the explicit historicity (which we've called symbolic) of events, of the life and death of "civilizations" or rather of cultures. In other words, it is the "verticality" (or rather maybe the "transversality") intrinsic to savage mind that makes their common humanity, and which allows us to recognize human beings rather than animals. And this verticality is well beyond the perspectivalist views, wherein one relativizes the points of view of one culture with respect to another. It is even that which makes all verticality of movements one and the same movement, which one senses is not only temporalizing (opening unto memory, Merleau-Ponty says), but also spatializing and co-extensive

with a “transcendental geography,” itself to be understood in a horizon of a “transcendental geology.”

But why, in the end, is this mind a “savage” or “wild” mind? Why not be content with characterizing it as “transcendental”? Merleau-Ponty’s starting point in the cited note from February 1959 is that of language, or rather the praxis of language, as englobing in itself a praxis of silence, from which language first appears. This praxis is what Merleau-Ponty names elsewhere as “praxis of speech” or “operating speech.” And here in a striking way, he opposes a first *Stiftung* that goes without saying (which we call a *symbolic institution* of language) to the very movement of speech that “realizes” something of the silence, something of the *mute* apperception or the apprehension of the world, by breaking it. Even if this *Stiftung* or symbolic institution prepares an *Endstiftung* or final institution (which is a new institution), we anticipate that this novelty cannot be already inscribed, unless by contradiction, in the initial *Stiftung*, but rather that it will be the sedimented “result” of a movement of making meaning, an eminently “praxical” movement, because it is adventurous and not predetermined. It is this very movement that constitutes the *savageness* of mind, since in its praxical adventure, it owes to symbolic *Stiftung* only the relative determination of its starting point, but which at first blush escapes it in that it constitutes exactly the *selbstverständigkeit* part of it. What goes without saying in its self-evidential givenness proceeds always from symbolic institution, and it is only what is not obvious that savage mind puts itself in play again. The savageness of mind comes from its heterogeneity, in hiatus with respect to the obviousness of the symbolically instituted. That does not mean that it could not change places and appearances at the wish of the symbolic re-elaboration subtended by it by passing from a *Stiftung* to an *Endstiftung*. If there is consequently a historicity of the savage mind, or something like an intrinsic diachrony, then it is by means of these changes of places and appearances resulting from the intracultural symbolic re-elaborations, without this preventing that it remain *inexhaustible* in a historicity that Merleau-Ponty will call “vertical.” It remains to be seen if this historicity is itself intrinsically savage.

Our perplexity increases when we notice that Merleau-Ponty is seeking to think both the synchrony and the diachrony of wanting, speaking, and thinking a community. This is the whole question of a *Weltgeist* which would also be a communal *Zeitgeist*, and which would be *that which* wants, speaks, and thinks, and of that which the discernible wantings, speeches, and thoughts would be like total parts. This is a difficult question, whose Hegelian anchorage we know, and

about which we wonder if it is not based on an abstraction, at least at this level. If it is more or less easy (and it is already a great difficulty) to grasp something like a *Weltgeist* through the articulations and symbolic institutions of cultures (and it is at this level of the problem that we would situate Hegel), if there is an incontestable ground of legitimacy for historical periodization—if for example Imperial France is already profoundly different from Revolutionary France—then it is a lot more difficult, if not impossible, to grasp “what” properly “wants, speaks, or thinks” through these different periods without making something like a subject out of the “substance” of savage mind, exactly as Hegel does (though mind is understood in a sense different from Hegel’s). In virtue of its savageness, is the savage mind not intrinsically *an-archic* and *a-teleological*? Do we not find here, at the very heart of Merleau-Ponty’s thought in the making, a true antinomy, even an irreducible aporia? Can existential eternity, which is, in his words, the immemoriality of the flesh of the spirit, accommodate a savage and intrinsic historicity without contradiction? If there is historicity, is it not increasingly symbolic, or ceaselessly “re-alimented” in its internal drift by the savage movement of the savage mind? And this, in the irreducible inadequation of every *Endstiftung* with respect to every initial *Stiftung*?

It is not the case that this line of Merleau-Ponty’s thought is insistently present throughout his working notes. We read in a note entitled “*Wesen* of history”: “[T]he being society of a society: that whole that reassembles all the views and all the clear or blind wills at grips within it, that anonymous whole which through them *hinauswollt*, that *Ineinander* which nobody sees, and which is not a group-soul either, neither object nor subject, but their connective tissue, which *west* since there will be a result” (VI, 174). But does this whole exist, and in the same way as all the existential sedimentations of the historical facticity of *Dasein*? And if it makes only *Wesen*—that is, beyond *Sein*, similarly beyond *An-wesen* and *Ab-wesen*, as the invisible chiasm [*Ineinander*] of invisible chiasms, and in this sense like the “connective tissue” of the group—then is it not to “resubstantialize” it and above all to “resubjectivize” it by considering it like a whole that furthermore is declared or announced in collective wanting [*hinauswollt*]? Or again, if Merleau-Ponty aims incontestably at what we called a “phenomenological common sense” as the meaning of the incarnated phenomenological community, and if, as history has shown many times, this meaning is capable of *resisting* or *refusing* this or that symbolic institution of science, this or that social *Stiftung* (supposedly always already recuperated in its *Endstiftung*), then is it capable of wanting, and of wanting something? Do we not find the already old political aporia of the “general

will," the phenomenological root of which would be the impossibility of the *sensus communis* to want *something*, because it is simply a-teleological (and an-archic)—or in other words, because if it wanted something, this something could only be *selbstverständlich*, which would no longer allow for understanding in what way history is ceaselessly the place of conflict, and which finally would reduce the community to the plane of an integrally symbolically instituted society in the clarity or explicitness of what is obvious?

All this leads us to think that the whole aimed at by Merleau-Ponty is a *transcendental illusion*, from the phenomenological point of view. In relation to this *apeiron*, the whole can only be a regulative idea, the symbolic horizon of an infinite task—which, in Husserlian terms, is a teleological horizon of meaning without a phenomenological *arche*. Merleau-Ponty owes much more to Husserl than one generally believes, as is particularly clear since the publication in 1974 of the *Nachlass* on intersubjectivity (the essential analyses of which Merleau-Ponty probably did not in fact know) in *Husserliana* XIII–XV. But on the point that concerns us, if Husserl seems often less profound than Merleau-Ponty, he nevertheless appears more rigorous. Husserlian teleology is the means of phenomenologically thinking the *contingency* of the *selbstverständlich* givenness of every symbolic institution.⁴ It is in order to appear to misconstrue the originary and irreducible duality (which is architectonic and in no way metaphysical) between the phenomenological and symbolic dimensions of experience that Merleau-Ponty becomes snared in the trap of the transcendental illusion—the price that he continued to pay to Marxism, which we know long haunted him. There is too much materialism, here refined to an extreme and fecund point, of an existential sedimentation of the multiple facticities of Dasein, and not sufficient attention paid to everything that makes up the symbolic dimension of life in society. Finally, in order to take up again the terms of the working note, there is only the symbolic that "gathers" the clear or blind views or wills, and we know thanks to Claude Lefort, that in the social field, the symbolic is always ipso facto political.

Having indicated these reservations, which are not without importance, it remains for us to envisage what Merleau-Ponty tells us in a beautiful working note concerning the problematic of the historicity of savage mind and its geographical or geological inscription. What we approach here concerns not only its temporalization but also its spatialization:

For history is too immediately bound to individual praxis, to interiority, it hides too much its thickness and its flesh for it not

to be easy to reintroduce into it the whole philosophy of the person. Whereas geography—or rather: the Earth as *Ur-Arche* brings to light the carnal *Urhistorie* (Husserl, “*Umsturz . . .*”). In fact it is a question of grasping the nexus—neither ‘historical’ nor ‘geographic’ of history and transcendental geology, this very time that is space, this very space that is time, which I will have rediscovered by my analysis of the visible and the flesh, the simultaneous *Urstiftung* of time and space which makes there be a historical landscape and a quasi-geographical inscription of history. Fundamental problem: the sedimentation and the reactivation. (VI, 258–59, June 1, 1960)

In other words, the depth or thickness of the flesh of history, which alone is supposed to make the internal historicity of savage mind, of the mind in its *Weltlichkeit*, must not be a pretext to reintroduce a philosophy of the person (as if persons alone were proper to the incarnation of history, even though they risk incorporating it, which is not at all the same thing) but on the contrary must be understood as such, starting from Husserl’s famous unpublished text on the Earth, under the horizon of the transcendental earth as unmoveable soil of all experience. It is consequently the originary spatialization of carnal *Urhistorie* that is in question, not so much as Husserl explicitly thought it in the unpublished texts on intersubjectivity (e.g., *Hua* XV), but rather as the spatialization of the human group on a territory, which as temporalization/spatialization in a “landscape” can only be a “landscape of the world” and thus a “transcendental landscape.” Consequently, the “carnal” or “savage” history can only be a “transcendental geography” by savage (or transcendental) temporalization, and cannot fall under an archeology that itself, in its transcendental dimension, would suppose an *arche*. In this context, the fundamental problem is that of sedimentation and reactivation. But in a sense, it is already no longer Husserlian, since it no longer concerns the sedimentation and reactivation of particular formations of meaning (e.g., logical as in *Experience and Judgement* or as geometrical in “The Origin of Geometry”) but rather those by which we have begun, namely, the existential sedimentations constitutive of the facticity of *Dasein*, which alone are likely to constitute the “landscapes of the world” and be in themselves *invisible* structures of the invisible.

Here we return to the mystery of our starting point, to that kind of second-degree sedimentation that is supposed to constitute the intrinsic historicity of savage mind and which no doubt is both a new thought and a strong thought in Merleau-Ponty, from which we must eliminate the idea of a kind of collective will or mind, in that what it tries to think

is much deeper and even more mysterious. As to the problematic that we are outlining concerning the encounter of the savage phenomenological dimension and the symbolic cultural dimension proceeding from symbolic institution and from experience, Merleau-Ponty sketches at the end of the last of his *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France (1952–1960)* the following question: “What could be the relation between this tacit symbolism or indivision and the artificial or conventional symbolism, which seems to be privileged, to open us to ideality and to truth?” (*Themes*, 199). The question is posed in the context of an interrogation of the materials of psychoanalysis, which leads him to the “idea of the human body as natural symbolism” (*Themes*, 199). If there is a carnal *Urhistorie* through the existential sedimentations of facticities, then it can be only the *meeting* of this “natural symbolism” that we call phenomenological and a properly so-called symbolism, which is co-extensive with the symbolic institution of culture. And this encounter would itself be sedimented in the fixed and unconscious entanglement of the two—even if we must go farther than Merleau-Ponty’s restrained and somewhat abstract conception of a “second” symbolism as “artificial or conventional symbolism.” This opened way (and Merleau-Ponty in his *Theme* of 1960 explicitly announces a follow-up to it) is what we have systematically explored in our *Phénoménologie et institution symbolique*, by rigorously distinguishing an always inchoate phenomenological symbolism from a “symbolic” symbolism, itself *instituted in rupture* with the first, in what constitutes the blindness of symbolic unconscious, a machine-like blindness—in *Gestell*—referring to no “artifice” nor any “convention.” But as Merleau-Ponty glimpsed, it is indeed by the properly symbolic field of symbolic institution that we seem to open ourselves, if not immediately to ideality, then at least to truth.

It is no doubt because he did not clearly measure for himself all the consequences of his distinction between the “tacit symbolism or indivision” and what we will call a “symbolism of division” (which is no less tacit than a “conventional symbolism”) that Merleau-Ponty comes to transpose the Husserlian sedimentation in the first degree to an existential sedimentation of the second degree, in an indistinction of the two that make one incarnated phenomenological community, society and history implode in the other, in a short-circuit of symbolic and *eo ipso* of political institution of society and history. The concern here is for that to which the transcendental illusion bears witness, namely, an *architectonic error* as Kant says, which Merleau-Ponty did not commit in the passage from the *eidos* to savage mind. In this context, what he had audaciously thought as “existential sedimentation” is probably

nothing more than the very characteristic “setting” [*prise*] of the phenomenological symbolism of indivision *by* and *in* the “symbolic” symbolism of division, of blind coding and cut-ups. For as Kant might say, they are spontaneously but blindly *determinant*. It thus does not seem to us for the reasons indicated that the Merleau-Pontyan idea of a carnal and originary history of savage mind is completely tenable. Historicity comes rather from what constitutes the concrete tenor of our life and our experience (i.e., from what is inextricably interwoven in its savage, inchoate, undivided, and indeterminate phenomenological dimension) and from its symbolic dimension *giving* us beings, things, their qualities, and their relations of structure as always-already-made. If the motor of historicity is indeed savage mind in its nonadherence to cultivated mind, its *motif* is nevertheless always already taken up by symbolic institution. Existential sedimentation is thus not only to be taken *from* savage mind, as Merleau-Ponty invited us to do, but also from symbolic institution, or at least from the inclination that is the natural tendency of this latter to *autonomize* itself in relation to the phenomenological, to machinize itself in a blind symbolic *Gestell* of every question of meaning—and in this regard there is indeed a sort of kinship between the first-order Husserlian sedimentation and this second-order existential sedimentation. For the rest, it is in virtue of this kinship that something remains profoundly just in the Husserlian conception of history as teleology of meaning: the originary meaning of the *Sinnbildung* is forever on the way to losing itself, exactly because it does not have an *arche*, and it is thereby called upon to be tirelessly taken up again or reactivated in line with a symbolic historicity as symbolic drift taking it from its capture and taken again in what can appear only as the symbolic re-elaboration within the same tradition. It is also true, *mutatis mutandis*, for the second-degree sedimentation—since it is by the phenomenological reopening of the existential, beyond its “setting” [*prise*] in symbolic existentiality that the first-degree sedimentation can be conjured—that the question of the meaning of such a *Sinnbildung* under the horizon of the question of meaning in general can be reactivated. That this latter has been subsumed by Husserl under the name “Reason” is a factual given, if not a factual “setting,” which must not be obsessed: if we take philosophers at their word, they would always be wrong, because they would be enclosed in the mechanical inertia of their “system.” It is this that after Heidegger made so many others less grand, but also less redoubtable than he. Let us keep on doing this with respect to Merleau-Ponty, and try, as we hope to have done here, to take up his questions as living questions again, situating them there

where they situate themselves, without pretending that he speaks like an oracle. The fidelity to the tradition, to the question of its meaning, does not work without the ineluctable infidelities to its ancestors. Such is the very life of mind.

NOTES

1. This is the case of Jacques Derrida's *Speech and Phenomenon*, trans. D. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).
2. See our works *Phénoménologie et institution symbolique* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1988), and *La Crise du sens et la phénoménologie* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1990).
3. See our study "Le problème de l'incarnation en phénoménologie," in *L'Ame et le corps* (Paris: Plon, 1990), 163–84.
4. See our work, *La Crise du sens et la phénoménologie*, op. cit.