

**Marija Bulatović**  
University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philology  
bmarija90@gmail.com

## **RETHINKING MERLEAU-PONTY'S CONCEPT OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF MODERN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY**

This paper aims to discuss the cultivation of democratic citizenship in terms of dignity and diversity closely intertwined with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophical concept of *intersubjectivity* as a theory of the human being and one of the essential democratic practices. In the first part of the paper, the author presents introductory reflections on Merleau-Ponty's concept of intersubjectivity tied to the view of the human being as socially and historically situated and engaged in the world, a notion carefully elaborated in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964). In the second part of the essay, placing Merleau-Ponty's notion of intersubjectivity within the context of modern democratic society more specifically, the author discusses the notion of diversity as a juxtaposition or a disposition of "as-ifness", i.e. being able to internalize the other and become more responsive, interconnecting democratic justice and subjective freedom. Furthermore, the author points out that political philosophy requires a paradigm-shift from subjectivity to the intersubjective dimension of subjectivity in order to achieve decency and dignity of institutions and human relations.

**Keywords:** Merleau-Ponty, intersubjectivity, juxtaposition, democratic society, humanism

### **Introduction**

While thinking about the social context as a vast field of overall human activity, one tries to get the full picture of the world and the web of relations being situated in it, but from *one's own* perspective, which is restrictive and partial. The phenomenal and linguistic disposition of an "I" with a lack of panoptical qualities, i.e. the possibility of total perceptive synthesis, necessarily implies *the phenomenal field of activity and inter-acting*.<sup>1</sup> Since the "I" is necessarily situated and engaged in the world, interaction with another "I" is unavoidable and necessary – one of the main ontological qualities hence becomes *intersubjectivity*. The key concept that brings together phenomenology and intersubjectivity is certainly *the concept of subject*, i.e. subjectivity in its wide philosophical spectrum. The status of modern subjectivity implies many layers – ontological, epistemological but also aesthetic and ethico-political layers of the self where the

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<sup>1</sup> Hyphenated on purpose.

last two especially require the engagement in the world. Not surprisingly, there is a strong connection and reciprocity between the crises of social structures, institutional context and the mere existential crisis of the subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> As a reminder, Descartes, Locke and Kant emphasize “the liberal accounts of the self” i.e. the political autonomy, dignity, diversity, responsibility and universal human rights as a means towards building up the theory of modern democratic societies (Marratto 2012: 1). The incline of individualism and individual rights does not have to denote primarily egoism – it denotes the subjectivity, which is always in progress, as a bridge, a form of communication with others.<sup>3</sup> These “liberal accounts of the self” are paradigms which need to be rethought profoundly and that is why the phenomenological standpoint in reflecting the key term of intersubjectivity within the context of democratic practices forms a plausible interpretative triangle. Intersubjectivity elaborated in the light of the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (*l’intersubjectivité*) as a strong phenomenological anchor-hold will be helpful in this essay to explain the hypothesis of intersubjectivity being one of the key practices within modern democratic societies.

### **Merleau-Ponty’s notion of intersubjectivity**

The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty builds up his theory of body and perception by criticizing and rewriting the Cartesian legacy and by negating the opposition between the “I” and the world, the strong binary opposition between the perceiving body-subject and its entourage, the surrounding lifeworld.<sup>4</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, the body as a crucial mode of existence dwells in the world as much as the world dwells in the body-subject. The body for Merleau-Ponty has a key *ontological* and, more importantly, *epistemic value*. Questioning the problem of other minds, Merleau-Ponty paraphrases Husserl in saying that there is no subjectivity which hasn’t been previously intersubjectivity and vice versa. The chiasmic intertwining relation between the body as *res extensa* and the mind as *res cogitans* reflect

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<sup>2</sup> See: Legault, Georges A. 1999. “Devenir responsable dans une société démocratique avancée” *Pédagogie collégiale*, Vol. 13, no 1, pp. 6-11. The author of the essay explains quite clearly the importance of responsibility in modern societies, including the individual and general, i.e. juridical aspect.

<sup>3</sup> See: Cobbaut, Jean-Philippe. 2012. “Identité plurielle, intersubjectivité et apprentissage dans les institutions contemporaines”. *Revue d’éthique et de théologie morale*, Vol. 271, no.HS, pp. 93-110.

<sup>4</sup> See more: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2005.

similarly to the community of Egos existing and interacting (Csordas cites Husserl 2008: 117) – the relation between the subjectivity and intersubjectivity, one "I" and another "I" is also chiasmic and inseparable:

I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but, on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and through them, all the rest (2005: 525).

Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the being-in-the-world as embodied cogito, "mental life rooted in bodily behavior", although being presented more than half a century ago, still remains one of the richest and most fruitful interpretations of subjectivity as an "open-ended process of emergence" (Marratto 2012: 2). Although implicitly, Merleau-Ponty speaks about the category of intersubjectivity already in the *Phenomenology of Perception (Phénoménologie de la perception; 1945)* defining it as a "revealed subjectivity" to itself and to the others (2005: 421). Intersubjectivity as a "transmodal openness that immediately allows it to understand and imitate others" (Zahavi cites Merleau-Ponty 2001: 164) is to be understood primarily as an ontological implication and then as an ethico-political one. Intersubjectivity as intercorporeality is implicitly elaborated to define the mode of existence which is neither a community of autonomous cogitos nor "participants in the same shared subjective substance" (Csordas 2008: 113). The ontological implication of intersubjectivity is developed further on in Merleau-Ponty's study *The Visible and the Invisible (Le visible et l'invisible; 1964)* deeply connected to the notions of "chiasm", "flesh of the world" and the "invisible":

When coming to the incarnate subjectivity of the human body, which I continue to refer to the *Lebenswelt*, I must find something that is not the "psychic" in the sense of psychology (that is, a *Gegenabstraktion* to Nature in itself, the Nature of the *blosse Sachen*), I must reach a subjectivity and an intersubjectivity, a universe of *Geist* that, if it not be a second nature, nonetheless has its solidity and its completeness, but has this solidity and completeness still in the mode of the *Lebenswelt* ---- That is, I must also, across the objectifications of linguistics, of logic, rediscover the *Lebenswelt* logos (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 167).

The "flesh of the world" is an element of ontology, an emblem of the being, that Merleau-Ponty proposes standing equal to the flesh of the subject which is visible. However, this ontological element referring to the incarnation of the body-subject denotes opening up of the being towards the other and towards the world, surpassing its own existential mode but never really abandoning its position. The being is the bearer of this ambiguous modality of existence:

just as, speaking about intersubjectivity, “I” must stand for the other so must the other stand for “me” constituting the intersubjective world (Merleau-Ponty 2005: 521).

### **Open ontology, open society? Intersubjectivity and democracy**

The other person, at least in perception, is never a mere object for us. However, speaking in terms of practices in modern democratic societies, we believe that it is necessary to strengthen and emphasize the importance of this openness to the point of view of others in a specific social environment and institutional framework. Political implications in Merleau-Ponty’s writings can be found especially in *Humanism and Terror* and *Adventures of Dialectics*, however, even in his non-political writings we can find the traces of the idea of practical engagement in the surrounding world. As Merleau-Ponty notes, the experience of our own subjectivity must contain an anticipation of the other, the seeds of alterity (Zahavi 2001: 163), a crucial element within the context of democratic society which includes citizen participation, equality, political tolerance, transparency, human rights, rule of law and multi-party systems as some of the key principles of modern democratic rule as a form of power exercised by adult citizens through their freely selected representatives. Our hypothesis is that in modern democratic society “the For-Themselves – me for myself and the other for himself – must stand out against a background of For Others – I for the other and the other for me” (Merleau-Ponty 2005: 521). This kind of constitution of subjectivity within the intersubjective field is characteristic and problematic for the world of adults who apprehend the other as the negation of the “I”. The “I” should try to consider the position of the other who does not inhabit our skin, the disposition of “as-ifness”. Also, some of the interpreters believe that, more than any other kind of judgment, political judgment is “best undertaken as an intersubjective enterprise”, since the field of politics truly represents a battleground of diverse discourses of power, interests, values and decisions (Coleman 2018: 4). Analogously to the phenomenon of perception, politics is also the field of difficultly reconcilable confronting perspectives, therefore intersubjectivity nurtured within a social context as *openness to others* leads to the construction of *an open society* – a society in which individuals are confronted with personal decisions but also the decisions of others thought as their own. The openness of the society implies *the openness of civic space* – public space where individuals are able to communicate, organize, and participate without any obstacles.

Open society, synonymous to a modern democratic society, in this aspect implies not only a web of individuals and their mutual micro-interactions as different *subjectivities-in-dialogue*, but also integrates this intersubjective dimension of subjectivities inside the institutional framework as a general, common signification. This statement implies that this kind of quality of existence bears a “double anonymity” – a significance which cannot be constituted only by pure subjectivity as an absolute individuality (Merleau-Ponty 2005: 521), but also the significance of apprehending “myself” within the institutional discourse and apprehending the other individual as “myself from the onset as centred in a way outside myself” (Ibid).

Nurturing intersubjectivity as a communicative practice deeply and inseparably intertwining subjectivity and the world taken as web of individuals and institutions of legal legitimacy seems to involve as much democratic work as possible. To nurture the principles we have denoted as democratic values – equality, political tolerance, transparency, human rights, rule of law, social justice – the individuals through practices of mediation open themselves to others and by this openness they tend to absorb the position of “as-ifness”, of how it is like to be the other making decisions. In this sense intersubjectivity takes the meaning of a *quale* – the quality of an existence, of the subjectivity which tries to take the place of the other subjectivity asking itself what it is like to be the other human being. This concept of intersubjectivity as intrinsic to subjectivity is a strong hallmark of the humanist tradition. However, if intersubjectivity is defined as a practice, the strategies of achieving the position of “as-ifness” ought to be reconsidered since mere intuition or pure empathy would certainly not satisfy the objectives. Intersubjectivity is a communicable form of living together and being responsible to the others but also preserving your own rhythm of individuality – a pluralism of identities within the same social structure. However, without juridical framework and strategies of regulation, the individual sense of responsibility and sensibility would have mere moral implications and would depend exclusively on personal traits. However, not every dispute or conflict needs to be, or cannot be, solved in court or within a legal framework. We may notice that law as a strategy of regulation of the “living-together” modus implies the legal model but also an implementation of intersubjective strategies first as a preventive practice. Nurturing the intersubjective aspect of our individuality is a thorough way of self-discipline depending on at least three factors: a) individual traits and character which always makes our identity unique, b) education in wide sense of raising social awareness and providing metacognitive insights and c) social participation

that mostly implies sharing common interests, cultivating also the sense of commonness which through mediation and dialogue leads to deeper understanding and coordination in the public realm. If we are not able to understand the *intensity* of the specific existence, at least we can learn how to decentre and metacognitively become aware of the *quality* of the existence of the other.

## Conclusion

In the previous interpretation we have tried to show that the philosophical concept of subjectivity cannot constitute itself without the notion of intersubjectivity as a communicable form of existence which allows us to *live together* – to co-exist, to have mutual respect for different positions, to communicate and cooperate. This Merleau-Pontian interpretation of intersubjectivity was very fruitful in understanding the foundations of an open society and its principles. In conclusion, we have come up to three main points that could be extracted as relevant in this exploration of intersubjectivity within the social, political and juridical context:

1) the paradigm of subjectivity taken in its modern sense and socio-political framework needs to interpret subjectivity as *parole*, in-action – *the intersubjective dimension of subjectivity*,

2) nurturing the value of intersubjectivity, we nurture *the sense of commonness*, of mutual reconnaissance, which implies that we keep our right to an individualistic perspective, the diversity of subjectivities inside of a group or society with which we are affiliated, but also learn how to take into consideration the aspect of “as-ifness” and finally

3) emphasizing the relation between individuals but also between larger units such as institutions and organizations, we define intersubjectivity as a *key principle* among the assets of democratic values which can be achieved through different strategies and projects.

This importance of intersubjectivity within the civic space and social, political and juridical context underlines a very important component, the core of any society– a strong *liaison* between the *subjective freedom* within the intersubjective field, *democratic justice* and *respectability of institutions*. Understanding the other in a way similar to the one we understand ourselves is an essential step towards an open democratic society.

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**Marija Bulatović**

**Université de Belgrade, Faculté de philologie**

## **REPENSER LE CONCEPT D'INTERSUBJECTIVITÉ DE MERLEAU-PONTY DANS UN CONTEXTE DE LA SOCIÉTÉ DÉMOCRATIQUE MODERNE**

### **Résumé**

Cet article se veut discuter de la culture démocratique citoyenne en termes de dignité et de diversité. Cette idée est étroitement liée au concept philosophique d'intersubjectivité de Maurice Merleau-Ponty en tant que théorie de l'être humain et une des pratiques démocratiques essentielles. En premier lieu, l'auteur présente des réflexions introductives sur le concept d'intersubjectivité de Merleau-Ponty, la notion soigneusement élaborée dans *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945) et dans *Le visible et l'invisible* (1964) et liée à la vision de l'être humain socialement et historiquement situé et engagé dans le monde. Dans un deuxième temps, l'auteur situe la notion d'intersubjectivité de Merleau-Ponty dans le contexte des sociétés démocratiques modernes, et discute de la notion de diversité comme juxtaposition ou disposition du «si-si» – à savoir de la capacité d'intégrer l'autre et devenir plus sensible, reliant la justice démocratique et la liberté subjective. En outre, l'auteur souligne que la philosophie politique nécessite un changement de paradigme de la subjectivité à la dimension intersubjective de la subjectivité afin de parvenir à la décence et à la dignité des institutions et des relations humaines.

**Mots-clés:** Merleau-Ponty, intersubjectivité, juxtaposition, société démocratique, humanisme