

Merleau-Ponty's Concept of «Intersubjectivity»

A Notion Reflected Within the Modern Democratic Society

MARIJA M. BULATOVIC

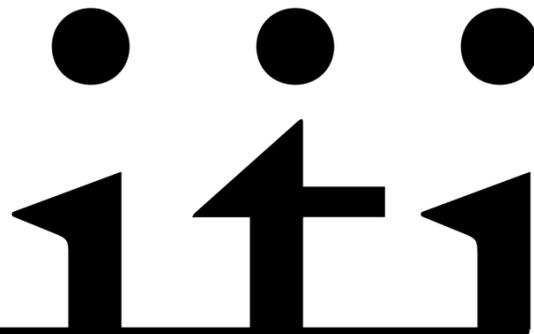
Zitiervorschlag

BULATOVIC, Merleau-Ponty's Concept of Intersubjectivity,
in: cognitio 2020/1.

URL: cognitio-zeitschrift.ch/2020-1/Bulatovic

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.3843045](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3843045)

ISSN: 2624-8417



Merleau-Ponty's Concept of «Intersubjectivity»

A Notion Reflected Within
the Modern Democratic Society

MARIJA M. BULATOVIC*

This paper aims to discuss the cultivation of democratic citizenship in terms of dignity, diversity and solidarity closely intertwined with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophical concept of intersubjectivity as a par excellence theory of the human being. 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.

Table of Contents

I. Introduction	1
II. Merleau-Ponty's notion of «intersubjectivity»	3
A. Intersubjective field of the self	3
III. Open ontology, open society? «Intersubjectivity» and democracy	4
A. Subjectivities-in-dialogue	4
B. Disposition of «as-ifness»	6
IV. Conclusions or how to internalize «the other»	7

I. Introduction

Commonly, the individual tends to think about the social context as a vast field of human activity. We search and strive for the whole picture of the world and its web of relations. Yet, on the other hand, one's own perspective remains partial, as it is restricted and limited. 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 interacting*.¹ Since the «I» is inevitably situated and engaged in the world, interaction with the other, with another «I», is unavoidable – one of the main ontological qualities hence becomes *intersubjectivity*.²

* PhD student and research assistant, Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade.

This paper was originally presented in a slightly altered form at the 29th World Congress of Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy held from 7–13 July 2019 in Lucerne, Switzerland.

¹ The word is hyphenated on purpose to emphasize the linguistic connection between the verb, which implies dynamic action, and a significant prefix which denotes mutuality and reciprocity.

² Since the term *intersubjectivity* is taken as a philosophical and theoretical concept in this essay, i.e. in a narrower sense, it will be emphasized by being put into italics. On the other hand, *inter-*

The milestone that brings together the field of phenomenology and the field of *intersubjectivity* is certainly *the concept of the subject*, i.e. subjectivity in its wide philosophical spectrum. However, the structure of modern subjectivity or modern self comprehends many layers, as follows: ontological, epistemological but also aesthetic and ethico-political. The latter two layers or aspects are particularly related to the *engagement* in the world – putting into the spotlight the active and dynamic role of the subjectivity. It is not enough simply to exist and to understand the world, the subject must also be able to act and create. The ability to act voluntarily and to create is the ontological nuance, which constitutes the difference between the proactive subject and a mere object. Perhaps in this very liaison between action and creation lies the hidden similarity between aesthetics and politics.

A. The incline of individualism

Unsurprisingly, there is a strong connection and reciprocity between the crises of social and economic structures, institutional context and the mere existential crisis of subjectivity.³ The subjectivity is found in the center of the complex societal web. As a reminder from history of philosophy, for example DESCARTES, LOCKE and KANT emphasize «the liberal accounts of the self» which are constantly challenged. As long as those liberal accounts are not severely endangered, it is possible to speak about democracy. In other words, political autonomy, dignity, diversity, responsibility and universal human rights, inter alia, become

means for building up the theory of modern democratic societies.⁴

The incline of individualism and individual rights in early modern period as signs of the rise of modern subjectivity, was mostly in line with the ideological structures and change of ideological and political course. A specific ideology «demanded» an appropriate individual: early modern society produced an independent individual concerning, above all, the economic aspect. It is no surprise that capitalistic ideology oriented to profit is mostly blamed for producing the self-profitable and even egoistic subjectivities. Much before the rise of capitalism, some interpreters, like Rousseau for example, considered the extreme love towards yourself (*amour-propre*) as well as the intersubjective competition as man's severe ills in society.

However, the culture of the self, inevitably altered by the patterns commonly inherent to capitalistic society, usually denoted as a self-centered society, does not have to produce as well as self-centered subjectivity, i.e. a product of respective societal relations. What it produces is a subjectivity which is always in progress, in a dynamic process, metaphorically seen as a bridge, a form of communication with others.⁵ The aforementioned «liberal accounts of the self» constitute a paradigm, which needs to be rethought profoundly.

Therefore, the phenomenological standpoint, close anatomy of the subject, its mind and freedom, in reflecting the key term of *intersubjectivity* within the context of democratic practices forms a plausible interpretative triangle. A concept of *intersubjectivity* elaborated in the light of the philosophy of MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY (*l'intersubjectivité*), as a strong phenomenological anchor-hold,

subjectivity given with the first capital letters would imply a further philosophical elaboration of the term and superior status among other terms which was not envisaged for this essay and therefore it will not be used.

³ See LEGAULT GEORGE A., Devenir responsable dans une société démocratique avancée, in: Pédagogie collégiale 1999/13(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.

⁴ MARRATO SCOTT L., The Intercorporeal Self: Merleau-Ponty on Subjectivity, New York 2012, p. 1.

⁵ See COBBAUT JEAN-PHILLIPPE, Identité plurielle, intersubjectivité et apprentissage dans les institutions contemporaines, in: Revue d'éthique et de théologie morale 2012/271(HS), pp. 93–110.

will be helpful in this essay to explain the hypothesis of *intersubjectivity* being one of the key practices within modern democratic societies.

Firstly, in order to understand the concept of *intersubjectivity* as a milestone in the field of democracy, we need to briefly analyze MERLEAU-PONTY's notion of *intersubjectivity* – tied to the view of the human being historically and socially situated in the world. This notion is carefully elaborated in the studies *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964).⁶

II. Merleau-Ponty's notion of «intersubjectivity»

To understand MERLEAU-PONTY's notion of *intersubjectivity*, it is necessary to present his theory of body and subjectivity in a nutshell. Since, as we may see, it is not possible to understand subjectivity without the notion of *intersubjectivity* and vice versa. The French philosopher 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. 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. Simply put, the spirit needs its embodiment as well as the body needs its spiritual dimension.

The body for MERLEAU-PONTY has a key *ontological* and, more importantly, *epistemic value*. An individual exists and discovers the world «through» the body. Questioning the problem of other minds, MERLEAU-PONTY paraphrases EDMUND HUSSERL in saying that there is no subjectivity which has not previously been *intersubjectivity* – and vice versa. *Intersubjectivity* is declared via subjectivity and it exists only in this inevitable declaration to the world.

⁶ Both studies were originally published in french.

The chiasmic intertwining relation between the body as *res extensa* and the mind as *res cogitans* reflects similarly to *the community of Egos* existing and interacting (CSORDAS cites HUSSERL).⁷ 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.*⁸

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 profound and most fruitful interpretations of subjectivity as an «open-ended process of emergence».⁹

A. Intersubjective field of the self

Albeit implicitly, MERLEAU-PONTY introduces the category of *intersubjectivity* in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (*Phénoménologie de la perception*, 1945). Here, the author defines it as a «revealed subjectivity» to itself and to others.¹⁰ Affirming the existence of a relation, to the others and to the self, subjectivity opens up. *Intersubjectivity* as a «transmodal openness that immediately allows it to understand and imitate others» (ZAHAVI cites MERLEAU-PONTY)¹¹ is to be reflected primarily as an ontological implication and then as an ethico-political one.

Nevertheless, *intersubjectivity* as intercorporeality is implicitly elaborated to define the mode of existence that is neither a commu-

⁷ CSORDAS THOMAS, Intersubjectivity and Intercorporeality, in: *Subjectivity* 2008, p. 110, p. 117.

⁸ MERLEAU-PONTY MAURICE, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, London/New York 2005, p. 525.

⁹ MARRATO (Fn. 4), p. 2.

¹⁰ MERLEAU-PONTY (Fn. 8), p. 421.

¹¹ ZAHAVI DAN, *Beyond Empathy: Phenomenological Approaches to Intersubjectivity*, in: Thompson Evan (ed.), *Between Ourselves: Second-Person in the Study of Consciousness*, Thorverton/Charlottesville 2001, p. 164.

nity of autonomous cogitos, nor «participants in the same shared subjective substance».¹² The ontological implication of *intersubjectivity* is developed further in MERLEAU-PONTY's study *The Visible and the Invisible* (*Le visible et l'invisible*; 1964). Here, it is deeply connected to the notions of «chiasm»,¹³ «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.¹⁴

The «flesh of the world» is an element of ontology, an emblem of the being that MERLEAU-PONTY proposes to stand equal to the flesh of the subject, which is visible. However, this ontological element referring to the incarnation of the body-subject denotes an *opening up* of the being towards itself, 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 field/world.¹⁵

III. Open ontology, open society? «Intersubjectivity» and democracy

The question stands: how can this aforementioned ontological openness influence the community and what is the quality of such process? The other person, at least in perception, is never a mere object for us. However, speaking in terms of practices, as strategies of achieving regulations in modern democratic societies, it is certainly necessary to strengthen and emphasize the importance of this openness of the point of view of others in a specific social environment and institutional framework, worldwide.

A. Subjectivities-in-dialogue

Political implications in MERLEAU-PONTY's writings can be found especially in *Humanism and Terror* and *Adventures of Dialectics*. However, even his non-political texts include 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,¹⁶ This «anticipation of the other» is a crucial element within *the context of democratic society*. It should include citizen participation, equality, political tolerance, transparency, respect for human rights, rule of law, multi-party systems and a well-developed culture of social dialogue. The aforementioned notions should serve as pillars and key principles of modern democratic rule, understood as a form of power exercised by adult citizens through their freely selected representatives.

This essay's hypothesis is in correlation with the Merleau-Pontian premise as follows: «For-Themselves – me for myself and the other for himself – must stand out against a background of For Others – I think and act for the other and the other thinks and acts for me». ¹⁷ This complex statement highlights the importance of common understanding between people, myself and the other, and should serve as

¹² CSORDAS (Fn. 7), p. 113.

¹³ A metaphoric cross-shaped configuration MERLEAU-PONTY uses to illustrate his dialectical point of view of the self and the world.

¹⁴ MERLEAU-PONTY MAURICE, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Evanston 1968, p. 167.

¹⁵ MERLEAU-PONTY (Fn. 8), p. 521.

¹⁶ ZAHAVI (Fn. 11), p. 163.

¹⁷ MERLEAU-PONTY (Fn. 8), p. 521.

a roadmap for nurturing a democratic society. 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 his or her skin – to obtain the disposition of «as-ifness». Not surprisingly, within the context of moral and social philosophy, this question envisages the close connection to the concept of «empathy», law, justice and emotions as disgust and shame for example. Following the analysis of American social philosopher MARTHA NUSSBAUM,¹⁸ for example, disgust and shame are emotions deeply connected to what is considered to be immoral social behavior. Disgust can be seen as a technique of distancing yourself from an act or a person who commits an act what we may consider gruesome for example. Feeling disgust might signify «otherizing» the other, i.e. making the other more distanced and incomprehensible, which is the opposite from the disposition of «as-ifness».¹⁹ Shame is, however, on the other side of the emotional axis. Feeling shame, the subject integrates the other in a much more intimate way taking into the account other person's act, feeling or speech. For example, we can feel shame due to other people's criticism or even due to certain acts we have not even participated in personally. Disgust and shame are also indicators of social behavior which demand the necessity of empathy for social justice, profoundly related to legal theories.²⁰ However, empathy carries a germ of psychological aspects which is not the subject of this essay. Therefore, the concept of *intersubjectivity*, as a philosophical term, seems rather appropriate

and less relative within the context of law and judgment. Some 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, opinions and decisions.²¹

Analogously to the phenomenon of perception, politics is also a field of conflicting perspectives that are difficult to reconcile. 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 considered as their own.

The openness of the society implies *the openness of civic space* – the public sphere where individuals can communicate, organize themselves and their life circumstances, and participate in the social realm without any obstacles. This question seems to be very important in today's society of radically polarized public spheres, regarding socially substantial issues such as welfare, health and safety, social and economic growth and sustainability, democratic practices, capacity building, media and personal freedom. The world crises we have experienced have shown that people's welfare depends on the strongly built economic system on the foundations of equally strong democratic politics, which entails stable employment policy and social care. Social dialogue between different entities, governmental structures and hierarchies appears as the proper instrument for overcoming the crisis and finding a feasible solution on a macro, but also micro level.

Open society, in this essay synonymous to a modern democratic society, denotes not only a web of individuals and their mutual micro-interactions as different *subjectivities-in-dialogue*, but also integrates this intersubjec-

¹⁸ See NUSSBAUM MARTHA, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law*, Princeton 2004.

¹⁹ Not always, but feeling disgusted often signalizes the «rejection», disapproval, i.e. the *negation* of other person's act, speech or feeling.

²⁰ NUSSBAUM, for example, believes that learning empathy can be achieved by reading non-legal texts such as literature. Literature presents us not only a wide specter of different case studies but also teaches us how to read and analyze the study itself.

²¹ COLEMAN STEPHEN, *The Illusiveness of Political Truth: From the Conceit of Objectivity to the Intersubjective Judgement*, in: *European Journal of Communication* 2018/33(2), p. 157–171.

tive dimension of subjectivities inside the institutional framework as a general, common signification. This statement infers specific quality of existence bearing a «double anonymity». Bearing the double anonymity means that subject needs to annihilate its supreme individuality taking the position of *the other*, the mask of the collective. On the other hand, within itself the subject needs to annihilate the other(s) in terms of absolute generality. At the same time, the subject is an absolute individual and a carrier of an absolute universality. Apprehending the others as we understand ourselves is practically a mere fantasy of which we need to be aware. We can fully understand the other from the margins of our being which means that at the same time we need to take two positions: our own, the position «I» and the position outside ourselves, the «Non-I». Being aware of this paradoxical position is actually an advantage and incentive to grow intersubjectivity in a proper way.

B. Disposition of «as-ifness»

Nurturing *intersubjectivity* as a communicative practice and, even more so, as a social practice – deeply and inseparably intertwining subjectivity and the world taken as web of individuals and legal institutional forms – seems to involve as much democratic work as possible. For example, the early essential form of communication in Platonian writings is – a dialogue. Socratic dialogue could be considered an archaic, proto-form of the notion of *intersubjectivity*, since it implies *sharing the logos*, the common substance by speaking. Even if we look back to the roots of social dialogue, from SOCRATES and Greek agora times until today's political, economic and business forums, social dialogue has become the most important instrument for decision-making and achieving set objectives.

To nurture the principles which we have denoted as democratic – equality, political tolerance, transparency, human rights, rule of law, social justice – individuals, through practices of mediation, «open» themselves to others and vice versa. In this «openness»

they tend to absorb the position of «as-ifness», i.e. of what it is like to be the other who makes decisions. In this sense, *intersubjectivity* takes the meaning of a *quale*²² – *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*, intrinsic to subjectivity, is a strong hallmark of the humanist tradition. However, if *intersubjectivity* were defined as a practice or methodology for developing a democratic society, the detailed strategies of achieving the very position of «as-ifness» ought to be reconsidered. Certain possible strategies as mere intuition or pure empathy would certainly not satisfy the objective, i.e. the creation of the society where individuals have equal right to regulate their lives but also to participate in the social sphere. Intuition can be misleading and empathy radically subjective. *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, or at least a similar, social structure.

However, without a juridical framework and strategies of regulation – the legislation norms – the individual sense of responsibility and sensibility would have mere moral implications and would depend exclusively on personal traits, which is the domain of pure subjectivity. However, not every dispute or intersection of perspectives needs to be, or can be, solved in court or within a legal framework. We may notice that law as a strategy of regulation of the «living-together» *modus* introduces the legal model as supposedly mandatory but also stands as an implementation of intersubjective strategies mainly as a preventive practice. Nurturing the intersubjective aspect of our individuality

²² In philosophy, the Latin term *quale* (pl. *qualia*) refers to phenomenal (mental) aspects of the conscious closely related to perception and experience. In this essay, the term *quale* is used in a wider sense denoting distinctive quality.

is a thorough way of self-discipline depending on at least three factors:

- individual traits and character, which always make our identity unique;
- education in a wide sense of raising social awareness and providing meta-cognitive insights; and
- social participation that mostly implies sharing common interests, cultivating also the sense of commonness that, through mediation and dialogue, leads to deeper understanding and coordination in the public realm.

If we as individuals are not able to understand the *intensity* of the specific existence, at least we can learn how to decentre and meta-cognitively become aware of the *quality* of the existence of the other. Legislation norms arrange our *idiorythmy*²³ with the «living-together» modus not only externally but also internally, «forcing» us to pay attention to the other and widening our intersubjective field.

IV. Conclusions or how to internalize «the other»

In the above interpretation, an attempt has been made to show that the philosophical concept of subjectivity cannot constitute itself without the notion of *intersubjectivity* as a communicable form of existence that allows us to *live together* – to co-exist, to have mutual respect for different positions, to communicate and cooperate.

²³ *Idiorythm*, in simple terms, denotes a specific rhythm everyone has in regulating his or her own life as a member of society. The term was also widely elaborated by French semiotician and theorist ROLAND BARTHES in his lecture “Comment vivre ensemble?” (1977) where Barthes tries to give an answer to the question what is the ideal «distance» between two individuals to live an «acceptable» social life. The answer is rather utopian: *idiorythmy* as a system where everyone can find, impose and preserve his or her own rhythm of life is seen as a fantasy of living.

This MERLEAU-PONTIAN interpretation of *intersubjectivity* is very fruitful in understanding the foundations of an open society and its principles. In conclusion, to systematize this brief reflection, this essay emphasizes three main points which are extracted as relevant in this exploration of *intersubjectivity* within the social, political and juridical context:

- the paradigm of subjectivity, taken in its modern sense as mentioned and in its socio-political framework, needs to interpret subjectivity as *parole*,²⁴ a «subjectivity-in-action» – to focus on *the intersubjective dimension of subjectivity* since only through the intersubjective dimension, the subjectivity finds its proper measure of activism;
- nurturing the value of *intersubjectivity*, we nurture *the sense of commonness*, of mutual reconnaissance, respect, loyalty, solidarity which entails 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,
- emphasizing the relation between individuals but also between larger units, groups and structures such as institutions and organizations, we can 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, within social, political and juridical contexts, and within an ever more important humanist frame, underlines a vital component, the core of any society – a strong liaison between *subjective freedom*

²⁴ The term *parole*, albeit it has different meanings including the legal one, is here understood mainly linguistically, as DE SAUSSURE coined it: the concrete use of language as an abstract system by any individual.

within the intersubjective field, *democratic justice* and *respectability of institutions*.

Apparently as often confirmed in practice, *intersubjectivity* as the real care for yourself but, at the same time, the care for the other as if they were you, is essentially important in times of global worldwide crises as we have been recently experiencing, being all equally endangered. The challenging times require the challenging restructuration which takes into the account the common interest of all and proper mitigation measures. The economic and health crisis impacts result in indicating that proper response and measures imposed depend entirely on the productive dialogue and consecutive agreement between decision-making bodies. In order to achieve the constructive dialogue, it is necessary to hear many voices of the polyphonic intersubjective enclave. It is no surprise that, for example, regular listening, as suggested by some authors, is a crucial feature in policy making. Nurturing *intersubjectivity* at the same time implies nurturing a very old and essential democratic practice, as preliminary findings have shown, is dating from SOCRATES. Understanding the other, in a way similar to the one we understand ourselves, is an essential step towards an open democratic society and, moreover, towards a just and decent society where we do not feel shame or disgust either towards the institutions or towards mutual social relations.