

Merleau-Ponty, the Elusive Body and Carnal Sociology

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By way of formulating a point of departure for this paper I will draw up a heuristic distinction between the sociology of the body and carnal sociology. The former denotes the attempt by sociologists to combat the traditional neglect of 'the body' within their discipline by means of an analysis of the manner in which it is constituted as a meaningful object within specific discourses, and subject to a regime of practices whose function is to regulate and/or transform it in a specifiable manner. The sociology of the body addresses itself to epistemological, ethical and aesthetic technologies which variously discipline, adorn, punish, celebrate, etc. 'the body'. It is concerned with *what is done to the body*. Carnal sociology, in contrast to this, addresses the active role of the body in social life. It is concerned with *what the body does* and it stresses and examines the necessarily embodied bases of the praxical-symbolic constituents of the social formation.

If sociology is to take the body seriously, I contend, then it must embrace both of these perspectives and it must understand them to be twin aspects of a single problematic: the carnal sociology of the body. This is necessary because both perspectives, on their own, have the potential to dissociate and externalize the body and the social world, reifying both and, thereby, constituting a dualistic and reductionist approach to social analysis. The sociology of the body, for example, in examining what is done to the body, has the potential to externalize the 'doing' agent (e.g. self, society, symbolic order) from the body, to reify that agent and thus to position the body within an array of unhelpful dualisms (body and self, body and society, body and symbolic order). Carnal sociology counteracts this tendency by revealing that 'self', 'society' and 'symbolic order' are constituted through the work of the body (i.e. sentient and embodied praxis). On its own however, carnal sociology has the potential to position the body as a transcendent force which creates society etc. from without or from 'below' — thereby again reproducing dualism and, at the same time, being unnecessarily and unjustifiably reductive. The sociology of the body counteracts this tendency

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by revealing that the body is always-already engaged in a specific social situation by means of techniques or rule governed practices which are historically and geographically contingent. In addition, it argues that the body's relations with itself and with other bodies are always mediated by such practices.

Understood in this way, the carnal sociology of the body functions to restore to sociology the body that constantly eludes it, often even in the very attempts of sociologists to centralize the body in their work. The body eludes sociology every time it is dissociated from and juxtaposed to the social or one of its aspects; that is, every time sociologists 'forget' that the social is embodied and that the body is social.

Descartes and Merleau-Ponty

The chief obstacle to the formation of a carnal sociology of the body is the Cartesian ontology which many writers, from quite distinct perspectives, have identified as being inherent in and even foundational to much sociology (Coulter, 1979; Turner, 1984, 1992; Hirst and Wooley, 1982). Descartes (1969) argued for a (literally) substantial distinction between mind and body. The body, he maintained, belongs to the order of physical matter. Its chief characteristics are that it extends in to space, that it is divisible and that it obeys the laws of physical science. The mind, by contrast, is a thinking substance which is indivisible and which neither extends into space nor obeys the laws of physical determination (since it is not physical). The body is a material object; the mind is a thinking subject: it knows and it knows that it knows. Such a distinction effectively precludes the possibility of a carnal sociology of the body because it defines the body as (nothing but) a physical/organic mechanism and thus an object for biologists and not sociologists.

Cartesianism has, of course, been challenged in sociology. Foucault's (1972) archaeological challenge and Coulter's (1979) ethnomethodological challenge provide two good examples of this. These studies, however, have tended to concentrate upon a rethinking of mind or cognition. They have not 'rethought' the body. It is arguable that there must be a tacit rethinking of the body involved in these studies, if they really have overcome Cartesian dualism. If one exorcizes the ghost in the machine and then leaves the machine as a machine, in the strict Cartesian sense, then one is left with a world of pure physical determinations and no possibility of anything resembling thought, meaning, symbolism or social life. Nevertheless, an explicit rethinking of the body and thus the basis for a carnal sociology of the body has not been forthcoming in these studies.

Such a rethinking can be found in the work of the French existential-phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) however. Merleau-Ponty challenges the mechanistic, Cartesian view of the body. He argues for an understanding of the body as an effective agent and, thereby, as the very basis of

human subjectivity. Moreover, he understands embodied subjectivity to be intersubjective and he understands intersubjectivity to be an institutional and historical order. His 'body-subject' is always-already situated and decentred in relation to a historical world. On this basis I suggest that Merleau-Ponty's various writings could serve as a cogent point of departure for the carnal sociology of the body.

It is the purpose of the present paper to outline this possibility by introducing and discussing some of the key concepts from Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment. For the sake of brevity I have omitted any reference to shifts in Merleau-Ponty's position; such shifts, in my view, do not necessarily preclude a synthetic approach to Merleau-Ponty's oeuvre. The paper begins with a discussion of perception.

Perception, the Body-Subject and the Flesh

The key theme of Merleau-Ponty's two central works, *The Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible* is perception. Perception, for Merleau-Ponty, is an embodied experience. It is sensational. But it cannot be understood as a caused effect of a world of physical objects upon the body (understood itself as a physical object). Perception does not consist in one object having effects upon another for Merleau-Ponty. It consists in meaning; that is, in the fact that something is seen or heard etc. Physiological/causal approaches do not and cannot account for this.

Merleau-Ponty finds no comfort in Cartesian or mentalistic alternatives to this understanding however. Such approaches follow physiological accounts in defining the body as an object but they posit the existence of distinct substance within the body, mind, to account for perception (as a meaningful experience). Perception, from this point of view, is a reflective thought or judgement which bestows meaning and significance upon the world. Descartes (1969: 110), for example, referring to the sight of persons who pass on the street below his window, suggests that what is actually visible to him is hats and coats, and that it is an act of mental judgement which transforms such stimuli into the perception of people. We see with our minds and not our eyes for Descartes.

Merleau-Ponty objects to this view on a number of grounds. In the first instance he notes that Descartes's account of how hats and coats are judged to be people actually presupposes the meaningful perception of hats and coats and thus begs rather than resolves the question of meaningful perception. This, of course, applies to whatever data the mind is said to judge. Furthermore, he notes that the ontological separation of mind and body, within Cartesian discourse, raises the question of how the mind is supposed to engage, during perception, with the physical world and with the body in which it is 'located'.¹ This is particularly problematic, given the radical differences that are identified in their constitution. Cartesianism and mentalism more generally have nothing but the

most enigmatic and unsatisfactory answers to this question. Thirdly, he notes that the Cartesian account defines perception as an inner representation of an outer world of given objects, thus reproducing subject/object dualism and the manifold philosophical problems which this dualism entails (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1968).

These and other problems cannot be resolved within a Cartesian or mentalistic framework according to Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1968). Thus perception must be radically rethought. It is in the context of this rethinking that Merleau-Ponty posits the fundamentals of his philosophy of embodiment. For our purposes it will suffice to condense this rethinking into three basic points.

In the first instance, Merleau-Ponty argues that perception is not an inner representation of an outer world. If one looks behind the eyes, he notes, one will find neither a substantive mind nor perceptual experience but rather 'shadows stuffed with organs' (1968: 138). There is no (inner) theatre of the mind where 'shows' from the outside are projected. Perception occurs in-the-world rather than the mind. It is an opening onto or rather an opening within Being. The visual perception of an object, such as a table, for example, forms between the table and the body of the perceiver according to Merleau-Ponty. There are not two tables, one in the world and one in the mind but rather one table which is seen.

To see, in this sense, is to be decentred in relation to the visible world. The perceptual field, which is constitutive of the perceiving subject, stretches out and around that subject for (literally) 'as far as the eye can see'. Furthermore, this implies that perceiver and perceived are relational beings. Perception does not involve the convergence or correspondence of two distinct orders of things (that of the perceiving subject and that of the perceived object). It involves one order, perception or the visible, which may be subdivided (by means of theoretical reflection) into two derived, interdependent and relational aspects (i.e. perceiver and perceived).

Merleau-Ponty's second move is to reject the notion that mind (qua perceptual consciousness) is a separate substance from the body. Perception, as I have already noted, is both (and inseparably) sensational and meaningful for Merleau-Ponty. It consists in a meaningful configuration of sensations. And these sensations belong to the body as a sentient being.

In this respect the body has two sides, for Merleau-Ponty: sentient and sensible. It sees and can be seen, hears and can be heard, touches and can be touched. These sides are not separate from each other, as are Descartes's mind and body. They are reversible aspects of one and the same being. The human body is a visible-seer, a tangible-toucher, an audible-listener, etc. Moreover, the body's visible-tangible presence is central to its perception for Merleau-Ponty. This point is based in his (1962) phenomenological analysis of perception, which

revealed the necessarily perspectival character of perception. One never perceives from nowhere, Merleau-Ponty notes. One always perceives from somewhere (e.g. above, to the side, at a distance, etc.) and it is one's visible, tangible presence which provides this somewhere. The perceptual field, in this respect, is constituted through the articulation of body and world.

These first two points allow Merleau-Ponty to radically redefine perception. The problematic of perception is no longer (as it was for Descartes) centred around the attempt to pull distinct substances together (mind/body, subject/world) or reconcile distinct realms ('inner' and 'outer'). Such distinctions, insofar as they are recognized as having any phenomenological validity, are redefined as relational, intertwined and reversible aspects of a single fabric. Merleau-Ponty (1968) uses the term *the flesh* to designate this fabric. And he refers to both *the flesh of the body*, which includes the reversibilities of sentience and sensible, and *the flesh of the world*, which includes the relational intertwining of seer and seen. The perceiving subject, from this point of view, forms part of the visible world. It constitutes a point within the visible world where that world becomes visible.

From this understanding we get the first step of a rethinking of embodiment. Merleau-Ponty accepts that the body has an object side (i.e. a sensible side, which can be seen and touched, etc.) but he adds to this that it has another side, a sentient or subject side which sees and touches, etc. and which thereby experiences its world meaningfully. The flesh of the body, to reiterate, consists in sensible-sentience. The body's being-in-the-world is at once mediated through physical presence and perceptual meaning. This is not to say that the body is characterized by the attributes of the classical (i.e. Cartesian or Kantian) subject. Far from it. But it indicates that the body is 'more than an object'. It is a sentient being whose primary relation to its environment should be understood in terms of this meaningful sentience. This notion of the sentient body is the first step in Merleau-Ponty's understanding of '*the body subject*'.²

The third point in Merleau-Ponty's rethinking of perception is that perception is based in behaviour; that is, in looking, listening and touching, etc. as acquired, cultural, habit-based forms of conduct. The perceiving body constitutes itself as such, he argues, by implementing acquired perceptual schemas. It does not passively receive messages from the world but actively interrogates the world, in terms of the cultural schemas which it has acquired. Gestalt images such as Wittgenstein's (1953, p. 194) duck/rabbit serve, in part, to illustrate this point. They illustrate that what we see depends upon the way that we look and the way that we organize our visual field. Another clear illustration of this, moreover, is our perception of written and spoken language. When reading or listening to linguistic utterances, in a language that we are trained in, we actively (though unwittingly) apply our acquired skills of reading and listening. We apply perceptual schemas that will make what we see or hear immediately meaningful to us.

This third point reinforces the previous two. It suggests that perception is constituted through an active relation of the body to its world. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1965) views the concept of behaviour or conduct, referred to in the account, as a further means for moving beyond mind/body dualism. Theorists create the problem of mind/body dualism, he argues, through their tendency to abstract human meanings and ideas from their situation in embodied and engaged action. The concept 'behaviour', providing that it is understood as 'meaningful behaviour', allows us to avoid this abstraction. In 'behaviour' mindedness and embodiment are aspects of a single structure. The active body embodies meanings and ideas.

It is not only mind/body dualism that is overcome by the concept of 'behaviour' furthermore. The concept equally challenges any dualism of body and culture. Effectively, it defines the body as an active body, which is always-already engaged with its environment, and it suggests that the form of that engagement is derived from a stock of cultural skills and techniques (in this case perceptual schemas in particular) which the body takes up and uses. The perceiving body, in other words, is shown to be an agent of cultural praxes and, conversely, cultural praxes are argued to be the work of an active body-subject. Body/culture dualism collapses with mind/body dualism.

I will return to this issue later in the paper. For the present, suffice it to add two further points. Firstly, Merleau-Ponty argues that the primary function of perception is not contemplation but practical involvement. Perception is instrumental in relation to our on-going projects and is not usually a project in itself. This is reflected, moreover, in our experience of perception: e.g. a footballer surveying a pitch will not 'see' grass and bodies but rather 'openings' and 'opportunities'. Her visual field will be structured through her practical involvements. Secondly, as such, perception is integrated with and inseparable from our other bodily modes of practical engagement (see below). Action and perception intertwine and mutually inform each other in the context of a single project: e.g. the footballer is moved into action by the opening that she sees (without any reflective process taking place).

On Being a Body

It is important to stress at this point that Merleau-Ponty's account should not be read as an account of our experience *of* embodiment. Embodiment is not experienced in this account. It is the very basis of experience. We experience by way of our (sentient) embodiment. Our body is our way of being-in-the-world, of experiencing and belonging to the world. It is our point of view on the world:

But I am not in front of my body, I am in it or rather I am it. [. . .] If we can still speak of interpretation in relation to the perception of

one's own body, we shall have to say that it interprets itself. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 150)

A useful illustration of this point is to be found in Merleau-Ponty's (1962: 93) discussion of pain and the language of pain. To say that one's foot hurts, he argues, is a qualitatively different form of statement to saying that a dentist's drill or some such thing hurts. In the first case, where a body part is referred to, what is being identified is not a cause of pain but rather a 'pain infested space.' In the second statement, by contrast, it is a cause of pain that is being identified. The 'grammar' of the language of body experiences, in other words, identifies the body as a site rather than an object of experience.

This is not to say that we do not and cannot achieve an experience of our bodies. Merleau-Ponty is clear that we can and do. He notes, for example, that our interaction with others affords us an outside perspective on ourselves, such that we can become objects for ourselves and can experience ourselves (qua embodied beings) *as* something or other: e.g. tall, small, fat, etc. (1962: 434). Moreover, drawing upon Lacan's (1989) concept of the 'mirror stage', he argues that early childhood involves a process of separation or alienation, in which the child must experience itself, as a (specular) body, from without (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). These are very important processes for Merleau-Ponty. They play a major role in identity formation. Nevertheless, they do not imply a separation of body and subject. They involve the body-subject turning back upon itself to experience itself: a carnal reflexivity.

The Body as Speech

Perception is the most fundamental and primordial aspect of human subjectivity for Merleau-Ponty. And, as such, he maintains, we are not witness to or responsible for its birth. Its birth is our birth. By perceiving we come into being as body-subjects. Perceptual experience is, in the first instance, mute and anonymous for Merleau-Ponty however. It does not involve awareness of perception or of oneself as a perceiver. Moreover, it does not involve objective, reflective or reflexive thought. The subject of perception is not a thinking subject, an 'I', in the usual sense. Language is necessary for such possibilities to be realized.

Language is a key issue in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. And he approaches it from many different angles, both sociological and psychological, as well as philosophical. Moreover, he changed his views on language considerably over the course of his philosophical development (Edie, 1987). For present purposes it will suffice to make a few brief points regarding this extensive and complex corpus.

In the first instance it should be noted that language is not external to thought, for Merleau-Ponty, if by 'thought' we mean reflective, reflexive and

objective thought. Language is the very means by which human beings think and by which they become aware of their thoughts he argues (1962, 1968). Moreover, it is the *only* means by which this is achieved. This does not imply that language determines thought (or vice versa). On the contrary. In order for relations of determinacy to hold between thought and language they would have to exist independently and this is precisely what Merleau-Ponty is denying. Thought and language, he maintains, are two sides of the same coin.

One implication of this view is that the existence of the thinking subject is logically tied to the existence of language and thus, if language is understood as a public institution, to the existence of a social world. In order to constitute itself as a thinking subject, the body-subject must take up the public resources of language and speak. Furthermore, another implication of this is that there could be no thought which, in principle, could not be made public. Like the perceptual world, the world of reflective thought is not centred 'in' the subject but in the world to which she belongs. This is not to deny the possibility that subjects will keep thoughts to themselves, of course. Nevertheless, it does suggest that all thoughts could be made public in principle.

The other side of this state of affairs, according to Merleau-Ponty's view, is that language allows us to establish objective situations, which are relatively stable for a given culture. As speech brings the thinking subject into being, it equally establishes a thought-about-world of stable, meaningful objects.

It will be apparent from both of these points that Merleau-Ponty is very much concerned with the public character of language. Much of his discussion of this is derived from his highly idiosyncratic or 'staggeringly inaccurate' (Schmidt, 1985: 11) reading of Saussure (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 39–97; 1971: 83–98; 1974; 1988: 48–58). He takes from Saussure, the notion that language is a social-historical institution. Continuous with this stress upon the institutional character of language, however, is a stress upon its corporeal character and base. If we are to avoid the reification and objectification of 'language', Merleau-Ponty observes, then we must recognize that, as such, it does not exist. What exists are concrete historical languages. And these languages, in turn, are reproduced and modified through situated communicative praxes, which, in turn, are embodied praxes.

Languages, qua social institutions, consist in shared rules and resources but the existence of those rules and resources is dependent upon bodies which take them up and use them: bodies which can emit and perceive culturally coded, sense-perceptible, embodied signs. Linguistic communication consists in an intertwining of sensible-sentient bodies (speaker and listener, writer and reader), an intercorporeality. Moreover, according to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language, the sense of communicative praxes is always tied to context and thus, at the very least, to the situation of the speaker, qua embodied being. This is most obviously shown with reference to such indexical phrases as 'behind me' or 'over

there'. Such phrases would make no sense in the absence of a situated body-subject. They rely, for their sense, upon the body being positioned in space.

Bodies both speak and are spoken to in this schema. They transmit and receive. They occupy a double position. This is not their only relation to language however. In addition to this they can be spoken about; objectified. And this objectification, in turn, can be effected either by self or by other.

This duality of speaking and being spoken about, of being both subject and objectified, is central to what I referred to earlier as the carnal sociology of the body. There are two reasons for this. In the first instance, it enables us to understand bodies as both active and acted upon, as speaking and spoken about. This point is important because of the controversy over 'discursive' and 'fleshy' positions in the sociology of the body; that is, between positions which analyze the body as a discursive object and those which argue for an understanding of the body as a 'real', flesh and bone being. Many writers (e.g. Turner, 1984; Shilling, 1993) seem to suggest that these two conceptions are mutually exclusive — and that we must choose between them — but the work of Merleau-Ponty suggests that this is not the case. Discourse itself is a fleshy process for Merleau-Ponty. It is produced through the work of the body. Moreover, one of the chief characteristics of the body, qua active body, is that it speaks and listens, and reads and writes. There is and can be no choice between discourse and fleshiness then. They belong to each other as do legs and walking.

The second key point concerns the fact that Merleau-Ponty suggests both that the body can objectify itself and thus achieve a perspective on itself, and that it achieves this view by means of language; or rather, to rejoin my earlier point, by means of language, mirrors and others. The implication of this view is that embodied agency can be understood as reflexive agency and that, because this reflexivity is achieved by way of the medium of language (or other social factors), it is open to analysis. Again then, we do not need to choose between studying the 'real' body and representations of the body. We can study the body as a being which constructs representations of itself — or of other bodies.

Embodied Conduct

This discussion of language, reflexivity and reflective thought suggests that Merleau-Ponty's understanding of human beings is 'affect flat'. This is not the case however. Whilst he has been criticized, quite rightly, for failing to systematically address the question of human emotion (Whiteside, 1988: 84), Merleau-Ponty is very keen to stress the emotional 'atmosphere' of our relation to our world. He is clear that we apprehend and engage with objects and with others in a mooded way: 'with love', 'with anger' or 'in rage', etc. Moreover, he is clear that we must always assume some affective position or another. Like Heidegger (1962), he

discounts the possibility that affect is something which only sometimes impinges upon our being. Even an apparently emotionally neutral position (if this were possible) is an emotional positional according to this view.

Merleau-Ponty's various references to affect and emotion, which are dispersed widely across his philosophical corpus, touch upon a very similar range of concerns to those addressed in his philosophy of language. He is clear, for example, that the relation of affect to its expression is not one of externality. Emotions are not 'inner realities' which are represented externally, he maintains. The expression of an emotion, qua emotional behaviour, is that emotion. And thus our feelings, like our thoughts, are (potentially) publicly available:

If I try to study love or hate purely from inner observation, I will find very little to describe: a few pangs, a few heart throbs — in short, trite agitations which do not reveal the essence of love or hate. [. . .] We must reject the prejudice which makes 'inner realities' out of love, hate or anger, leaving them accessible to one single witness: the person who feels them. Anger, shame, hate and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another's consciousness: *they are types of behaviour or forms of conduct which are visible from the outside*. They exist on this face or in those gestures, not hidden behind them. Psychology did not begin to develop until the day it gave up the distinction between body and mind. . . . (Merleau-Ponty, 1971: 52–3, my emphasis)

This view of the emotions, as styles of conduct — which bears much similarity to the work of Wittgenstein (1953), Ryle (1973) and Coulter (1979, 1989)³ — effectively blocks any notion that the subject has privileged access to their emotional 'states'. Indeed it suggests that it is possible for them to be relatively unaware of their emotional 'state'. It may only be after an event, when one reflects upon one's conduct and involvement, that one is able to ascribe feelings to oneself, Merleau-Ponty maintains (1962: 377–80). At the time one may be too busy doing one's feelings to be reflectively aware of them. This is not to say that 'pangs' and 'heartbeats' are not important in relation to affect and the self-identification of affective 'states.' They are in some cases. Although, as with linguistic utterances, their significance or meaning is discerned in relation to their context. An increased heartbeat, for example, may indicate love, fear or the onset of a heart attack and only context will allow us to discern which attribution is correct in specific cases.

In defining affect in terms of forms of conduct or behaviour, Merleau-Ponty allows for the possibility of cultural and historical variation in forms of affect. This is a possibility which he takes up in *The Phenomenology of Perception*. 'Feelings

and passionate conduct', he argues in this text, 'are invented like words' (1962: 189). Moreover, he points to cultural differences in affect: "The angry Japanese smiles, the Westerner goes red and stamps his foot. . . ." (1962: 189). In accordance with his approach however, he is keen to stress that these differences are not simply differences in gesture. These differences, for Merleau-Ponty, are differences in the way in which emotion is lived. We do not have different ways of expressing anger or love. We have different ways of being angry and in love. Moreover, what this amounts to, in turn, is that we have different ways of taking up a relationship to our environment. Differences in affective styles amount to existential differences

The sociological significance of this understanding of affect is two-fold. In the first instance it allows us to view embodied social agency as affective agency and thus to view affect as a key constituent of the social formation — in addition to language and other forms of practical action. Affect can be viewed, for example, as a key productive factor in the constitution of (some) social relations. In the second instance, it allows us to study affect sociologically. Affects are not regarded as 'inner' processes that are inaccessible to the sociologist, but as effective ways of being-in-the-world, culturally styled forms of conduct which can be studied as such.

The Practical Body

Merleau-Ponty's understanding of perception, language and affect, functions to challenge the primacy often afforded to the thinking, rational subject in traditional philosophical and theoretical texts. He maintains that the 'I think' is dependent upon the competence of the body-subject to use the shared institutional resources of language, that it is subtended by a world of perception (and is not therefore primordial) and that it is always situated in relation to an affective 'atmosphere' or feeling. This challenge is consolidated by Merleau-Ponty, through his affirmation of the primacy of practical over theoretical or abstract ways of being-in-the-world. Our principle relation to our world is not a matter of 'I think', he maintains, but rather 'I can' (1962: 173). The 'I' is misleading in this phrase because it suggests precisely the reflective and reflexive subject that Merleau-Ponty is arguing against but the 'can' clearly conveys his understanding that our primary relation to our environment consists in practical competence. The body-subject, again, plays a key role in this claim.

What the claim entails, in the first instance, is that we do not relate to our bodies as we do to an external object; that we do not reflect upon the 'hows', 'whats' and 'wheres' of our body movement. If a friend waves to me in street, for example, I wave back without reflection or effort; that is, without first thinking that I should or planning to, without having to wonder where my hand is or how

I should move it, etc. I 'know' where my hand is, 'without thinking about it' and the coordination of all movements involved in the wave is achieved without the interference of reflective thought. Moreover, the wave is the bearer or manifestation of the intention to wave. This intention is not effected prior to the act.

This power of bodily coordination, whose scientific name is proprioception (Sacks, 1982, 1991), should not be thought of as a strictly intra-bodily power according to Merleau-Ponty. This is the second part of the claim. It is the coordination of a body in-the-world. The body possesses a synthetic and coordinating power in relation to itself, he argues, by means of its action in the world. It 'knows' itself by way of its active relation to its world. Moreover, in this sense, the body-subject equally 'knows' the world, in a practical way, irrespective of reflection or intellection. My fingers 'know' the space and layout of the word-processor keyboard, 'I can' type, for example, irrespective of the fact that I am unable to give a linguistic and reflective account of this layout (without looking).

A further point to note here is that our 'corporeal schema' can be modified to include the equipment that we use. When we drive a car, for example, we not only 'know' its internal functional space, we tacitly incorporate its potential for motility, its size and acceleration potential, into our judgements. Parking, pulling out, overtaking, etc., all entail that we think not about the car but 'from the point of view of the car. Moreover, no aspect of this thought is reflective, reflexive or discursive (at least it need not be). It is practical, embodied know-how and mastery.

This practical or *existential understanding* is primordial for Merleau-Ponty. It constitutes a world of meaningful objects which are prior to and independent of reflective and reflexive thought; a world which, to use Heidegger's (1962) terminology, is 'ready-to-hand.' It is a world which will only usually become thematized in discursive/reflective consciousness, if it becomes 'unready-to hand.' The driver will only 'think' about the acceleration pedal, for example, if it ceases to perform its function or feels wrong in some way. Moreover, as such, this level provides for the possibility of reflective projects. Our driver, for example, is able to think about her destination and the other cars on the road because she does not have to think, thematically, about the details of driving.

This existential understanding is derived from a cultural stock according to Merleau-Ponty. Like our perceptual, linguistic and affective forms of conduct, it is acquired by means of training. Merleau-Ponty is quite precise in what he means by training however. We do not acquire existential understanding, primarily, by intellection, he notes. One does not learn 'how' by reading and grasping intellectual principles. One learns by doing, by repetition. Equally however, this notion of repetition is not to be understood in narrow mechanistic terms:

Any mechanistic theory runs up against the fact that the learning process is systematic; the subject does not weld together individual

movements and individual stimuli but acquires the power to respond with a certain type of solution to situation of a general form. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 142)

What is acquired, Merleau-Ponty continues, is a 'motor significance'; that is, a genuine form of understanding. One learns to drive, for example, as one might learn to apply a mathematical formula. In each case the body-subject acquires a relatively flexible power of action and reaction, a modality of understanding.

In order to flesh out the significance of this position it is necessary to further consider Merleau-Ponty's critique of dualism and mentalism. According to dualistic/mentalistic positions, 'understanding' is an attribute or capacity of the mind (as distinct from the body). Merleau-Ponty rejects this view. We say that we have understood, he argues, when we are able to do certain things: e.g. apply a formula or complete a series. These meaningful and embodied actions may be accompanied by vague sensations or a 'click of comprehension' but it is action which is critical in relation to 'understanding'. To understand, in this sense, consists in competent bodily action, whether that be the action of applying a learned mathematical formula or of driving a car. It is an attribute of meaningful and embodied behaviour and not of a disembodied consciousness.

This view bears much resemblance to the philosophical psychology of Ryle (1973) and Wittgenstein (1953). They too were concerned to rethink mental predicates in terms of the properties of action or conduct. Where Merleau-Ponty differs from these writers however, is that he considers the implications of the view for our understanding of the body. To say that 'understanding' and other mental predicates refer to embodied forms of behaviour, Merleau-Ponty argues, does not only involve a dereification of the mind or an exorcism of the 'ghost in the machine' (as Ryle and Wittgenstein maintain). It involves a rethinking of the machine myth also. It allows us to understand 'the body' as an intelligent, understanding being. This view is rejoined in Merleau-Ponty's (1962, 1965) many critical discussions of behaviourist and empiricist conceptions of the body. Against these conceptions he consistently maintains that the body acts meaningfully, with skill, competence and purpose.

The implications of this perspective on practical agency and its relation to embodiment are manifold. Many sociological comparisons and applications suggest themselves. I have discussed some of these comparisons and applications elsewhere: in particular I have discussed Merleau-Ponty's position in relation to Foucault's understanding of disciplined and inscribed bodies (Crossley, 1993a, b, 1994), Mauss' concept of 'body techniques' (Crossley, 1993a, 1995) and Goffman's understanding of behaviour in public places (Crossley, 1995). For present purposes it must suffice to draw out two particular points of sociological significance. In the first instance, the implication of Merleau-Ponty's view is that a sociological analysis of regimes of embodied action or of body repertoires, should be

understood as a sociology of meaning and understanding. To analyze the way in which a body moves and the techniques which it draws upon is to analyze the way in which its environment is made both functional and meaningful for it. Practical action should be understood as a way of taking up a meaningful position in the world. Secondly, and following on from this, Merleau-Ponty's position provides a corrective to the strong bias towards linguistic constitution in contemporary sociological understandings of meaning. What Merleau-Ponty effectively argues, without undermining the case for linguistic constitution, is that the world of shared meanings is effectively constituted, not only by speech acts, but by other forms of bodily action and comportment. My desk and chair, to use the usual example, not only exist as meaningful phenomena in the social world by virtue of their having been named. Indeed they are seldom referred to by their name or anything like it. They exist as meaningful aspects of the social world by virtue of the fact that I sit at them and write, that *I (qua practical body-subject) use them in a meaningful way*. It may only be when I *misuse* them that I am reminded, linguistically, that they are furniture and that I should be *using them* in a different way.

Habitus and Choice

Through his notion of learnt practical skills and existential understanding, as well as his account of the body-subject's acquired perceptual and linguistic schemas, and affective modes of conduct, Merleau-Ponty seemingly posits a carnal version of what Bourdieu (1984, 1992, 1992a) refers to as *the habitus*. He does not use this term but it captures well this aspect of his understanding of human being-in-the-world. The body-subject, he maintains, develops, by means of its belongingness to and involvement in the social world, certain stabilized ways of being and doing, acting and reacting. These ways can be changed by the body-subject. It is not determined by them. But, Merleau-Ponty argues, it is not likely that the subject will change many of her more fundamental ways of being, precisely because they are her ways of being in and making sense of the world.

The habitus, in this sense, is the basis of choice. It is a structure of preferences and a means by which situations are made meaningful. It subtends choice. But, as such, its 'ways' are not chosen themselves. This is not to say that one cannot choose one's ways of being but it does qualify that notion. If one is to make choices of this kind, Merleau-Ponty argues, then one must be able to distance oneself from one's ways of being, but this can only be achieved by taking up another set of ways of being. One can never stand or think in a cultural vacuum (1962: 434–56).

A more sophisticated discussion of this issue is to be found in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1962: 434–56). For present purposes it must suffice to

discuss the major qualification which Merleau-Ponty makes to the question of the choices of the body-subject: namely, its relations to others. This will reveal further significant issues for a carnal sociology of the body.

Intercorporeality

The starting point for considering this issue is the problem of 'the other', as posited in the work of Husserl (1987).⁴ This problem, loosely put, concerns how it is possible for one mind to know another. This is a problem because Husserl tends to view consciousness as a private inner state and thus to exclude a solution by definition. The result of this is a paradoxical picture of the human world as a community of solipsists.

In the *Working Notes* to his unfinished and posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty (1968: 269) suggests that this problem should not so much be solved as transformed. And, indeed, his own work, which constantly returns to the question of the other, provides such a transformation.

The first step of this transformation lies in what I have already said with respect to perception. Perception for Merleau-Ponty, I noted, is not an inner representation of an outer world but an 'openness to Being': if I see a table then there are not two tables, one in the world and one in my head, but one table which is seen. This is relevant to the question of the other because it suggests that perceiving subjects are not locked in their own private worlds but are in-the-world, a world (in the singular) which is shared by all. Thus, to continue my example, if the other looks at the table that I am looking at then there are not three tables (or two) but still the same one table that we both open onto. We share in a vision or visual space — which is not to say that we see the same thing.⁵ Against the notion of multiple subjective realities then, we have a notion of an '*intermundane space*' (1968: 269) in relation to which all perceptual subjects are decentred. My visual field is not strictly mine. It crosses and intertwines with that of others.

Add to this that we belong to the visible world (we are sentient *and sensible*) and that we see each other, and we have a notion of '*intercorporeality*' (1964: 19; 1968: 143) or '*carnal intersubjectivity*' (1964: 173). This notion of intercorporeality denotes a primordial carnal bond between human beings. It suggests that subjects are joined by their belongingness to a common world. Furthermore, it denotes that they 'open' onto each other. To see the other is not to have an inner representation of her. It is not to have her as an object of thought — although this is possible (Crossley, 1993, 1994, 1995a). It is to be-with-her.

It is essential to this notion that we are, as Merleau-Ponty argues, our bodies, and that our thoughts, feelings, intentions, understanding, etc., assume an embodied and therefore visible form: i.e. in speech and other cultured actions.

This allows for a genuine human interworld by defining subjectivity as publicly available. Thoughts, feelings and intentions, even when hidden in practice, do not belong to an inner realm which is only accessible to a solitary subject. They manifest in conduct in intermundane space and are therefore perceptible to all.

It is perhaps obvious that language will be central to this understanding of the human interworld. Language is a key institution for the establishment of a world of shared and relatively stable meanings. Moreover, language, qua dialogue, provides a further example of the manner in which common social spaces form between subjects:

In the experience of dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are interwoven in a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of discussion, and they are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator [. . .] the objection which my interlocutor raises to what I say draws from me thought that I had no ideas I possessed. [. . .] It is only retrospectively, when I have withdrawn from the dialogue and am recalling it that I am able to reintegrate it into my life and make of it an episode in my private history. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 354)

The ‘private history’ referred to in this passage as a product of recollection and reflection on events is never denied by Merleau-Ponty, neither is the privatization of thought/feeling and the construction of private lives, which is provided for within the modern intersubjective fabric. In the first instance however, he maintains, we are sentient-sensible body-subjects whose subjectivity assumes embodied and public forms and, to this extent, *all subjectivity is intersubjective*.

This concern with intersubjectivity does not, as the above quoted passage might imply, amount to a view of social relations as harmonious in Merleau-Ponty’s work. His view of dialogue, as expressed in that passage, could and should be criticized for its failure to recognize the role of power in conversational exchanges — as discussed by Bourdieu (1992a) amongst others. But this neglect of questions of power and conflict is not endemic to Merleau-Ponty’s work as a whole. Indeed he is very sensitive to the politics of intersubjective or intercorporeal being. I have discussed this with respect to the issue of perception and the gaze elsewhere (Crossley, 1993, 1994). For the present it will suffice to very briefly consider Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of *body-power* and its historical context.

Concrete Intersubjectivity and Body-Power

A great deal of Merleau-Ponty’s work was devoted to questions of history and politics. Moreover, his approach to these issues is directly related to his view of

embodied subjectivity. The key to understanding the link is intersubjectivity or more specifically *concrete intersubjectivity* (1969: 35; 1971: 129).

The term 'concrete intersubjectivity' draws attention to two aspects of intersubjective life. Firstly, it indicates that intersubjective life is conducted in specific conditions, through specifiable social practices and relations. Secondly, it draws attention to the intertwining of the physical world in human practices and relations: e.g. in the form of raw materials, technologies, landscapes, buildings, cultural artefacts, etc. It is important to stress here moreover, that 'the physical world' is not juxtaposed to an ideational world in this view. Merleau-Ponty refuses to separate the ideational and the material. All ideas and meanings are necessarily embodied (in books, rituals, speech, buildings, etc.), he maintains, and all matter embodies meaning and derives its place in the human world by virtue of that meaning (1971, ch. 9). In this sense then he calls our attention, as sociologists of the body, to *the embodiment of culture*, and he extends his argument against the abstraction of meaning and matter.

When discussing this issue, Merleau-Ponty tends to shift his attention to the social macro-cosm. This shift in focus does not entail an ontological shift however. He is still concerned with sentient, meaningful and embodied human conduct or *praxis*. Thus he understands 'the economy', for example, as an arena of shared human meaning and interaction. The economy is not above or outside the body-subject, nor inside the subject as an object of thought, he maintains. Body-subjects inhabit and constitute it by means of their actions and interactions: in their work, consumption, saving and spending, etc.

This does not mean that the economy (or any institution) is a site of active consensus or equality for Merleau-Ponty however. In the first instance, whilst he stresses the role of active creativity in human life, it is clear that for him, the praxiological constituents of the economy (and other institutions) are, for the most part, ingrained and routinized in our habitus. We don't agree to them so much as inherit them and pragmatically adopt them in our effort to cope with the exigencies of our situation. In addition to this however, the economy and other such structures are sustained, for Merleau-Ponty, by means of power and institutionalized violence. Indeed he maintains that the social is a contingent order and that, as such, it is largely sustained by means of power and violence.

Merleau-Ponty's understanding of these issues is based in a dialogue with a great many key social and political thinkers: e.g. Marx, Weber, Machiavelli, Hegel, Lévi-Strauss, Sartre, Lukács, Lenin and Trotsky. And his discussion of these thinkers and their ideas is often very subtle and sophisticated. For our purposes it will suffice to discuss one key idea, concerning power; an idea which is seemingly very much his own:

But consciousness can do nothing without its body and can only act upon others by acting upon their bodies. It can only reduce them to

slavery by making nature an appendix of its body, by appropriating nature to itself and establishing in nature its instruments of power. (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 102)

This point is important because it suggests that power is praxiologically constituted, that this involves one body acting upon another (or perhaps acting upon the actions of the other — since the other is never a passive object), and thus that the body-subject is to be understood as both active and acted upon. I have discussed this notion in more detail elsewhere, in relation to Foucault (Crossley, 1993). And I would suggest that Merleau-Ponty's position on this issue needs to be supplemented through a dialogue with the work of Foucault. He does not say enough on this issue for his account to stand on its own. What is important to note here however, is that the body-subject is seen once again to occupy a dual (but non-contradictory and non-dualist) position. The body acts and by its actions it constructs a world of social, intersubjective relations. In the context of these relations however, *it is acted upon*. To be a body is to be both a locus of action and a target of power. Moreover, it is only because one is a body that one can occupy this double position. One could neither act nor be acted upon if one was not an embodied being.

The Carnal Sociology of the Body

The body acts and is acted towards and upon by other bodies. It writes and is written to and about by other bodies. It speaks and is spoken to and about by other bodies. It sees and is seen. Clearly Merleau-Ponty is not the only writer to identify this intercorporeal reversibility. I have argued elsewhere, for example, that Foucault can be shown to have a similar view and I have compared his work directly with that of Merleau-Ponty (Crossley, 1993, 1993a, b, 1994). Moreover, I have shown that there are a similar range of concerns in the work of Goffman, at least in his *Relations in Public* (Crossley, 1995). The implication of this is that Merleau-Ponty is by no means the only major figure who we might consult in our project of organizing a carnal sociology of the body. Notwithstanding this however, it is Merleau-Ponty's work which provides for the paradigm shift that a carnal sociology of the body entails. It is Merleau-Ponty who provides the basic conceptual tools which we require to incorporate the body, more fully, into sociological theory and analysis.

Merleau-Ponty, as I have shown, moves us beyond a narrow (Cartesian) understanding of the body as an object. He allows us to understand that human agent-subjects are bodies and that bodies are sensible-sentient, communicative, practical and intelligent beings. Moreover, part and parcel of this redefinition is a definition of subjectivity as an intersubjective and social phenomenon. Subjectivity is not an inner realm, set back from the world, for Merleau-Ponty. It is a

sentient engagement with and openness to the world, which assumes an embodied and cultural form, which draws upon a common social habitus and which is (at least in principle) publicly available: i.e. which manifests as embodied conduct in intermundane spaces.

The centrality afforded to intersubjectivity in this understanding of subjectivity, moreover, is mirrored in Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the social world. The social cannot be thought of as an object, over and above social subjects or as an object of thought, he argues. It is a concrete intersubjective structure, reproduced through embodied action; it consists in sites of shared meaning and mutual (if conflictual) interaction, where bodies act and are acted upon. Where they are agents and targets of power.

This movement from subjectivity to politics is central to Merleau-Ponty. For him all subjectivity is intersubjective, all intersubjectivity is concrete intersubjectivity, concrete intersubjectivity constitutes the social, and the social is a site of struggle and power. And the body-subject is at the heart of this intertwining, not as a transcendental origin but as a principle of action. The body is active in the quietest whisper, the most subtle enunciation and in the most aggressive and destructive of activities. This is Merleau-Ponty's message and it is, effectively, the starting point for a carnal sociology of the body.

Clearly there is much to do if this potential is to be developed. There are issues in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment which have not been discussed in this paper which should be considered: the sexual body and body injury number amongst these. In addition there are issues that Merleau-Ponty ignores which should be studied. Bodily differences and their construction are particularly important examples of this. This paper was never intended to be comprehensive however. I have identified a starting point, some key concepts, but the work is still to be done. This is the prolegomenon to the carnal sociology of the body, not its conclusion.

Notes

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1. There is obviously something of a paradox involved in referring to the location of a supposedly non-spatial phenomenon.

2. The term 'body-subject' is commonly used in Merleau-Ponty exegesis, to refer to the body which Merleau-Ponty discusses in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, and elsewhere. To my knowledge, Merleau-Ponty only ever used the term once. He refers to the body-subject in *The Concept of Nature 1*, which is in *Themes From the Lectures at the College de France* (1988a: 149).

3. These writers argue that the language of mind does not necessarily refer to inner states but to publicly available and verifiable forms of conduct. Coulter in particular develops the ideas in a sociological fashion. See chapter seven of his *The Social Construction of Mind* for a discussion of affect.

4. It is not only Husserl's 'problem' with the subject that informs Merleau-Ponty. Hegel's master/slave dialectic is clearly important also. I limited my discussion to the Husserlian problem for the sake of brevity and clarity.

5. Clearly people may open onto the same visual space, without seeing the same thing. A clear, if extreme, example of this can be gleaned from the perception of gestalt images such as the duck/rabbit.

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