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MARILENA CHAUI'S READING OF MERLEAU-PONTY: FROM THE CRITIQUE OF HUMANISM TO THE PRAISE OF GREAT RATIONALISM[1]

Marilena Chaui is widely known both in Brazil and beyond as a Spinoza scholar. This more salient facet of her academic work, however, has always existed alongside another, earlier one, as a student and reader of the works of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. This process had its public beginning in 1967, when, at the University of São Paulo, she successfully defended a Master's thesis with the title *Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the Critique of Humanism*. In what might be termed Chaui's personal pantheon, Merleau-Ponty has always had a seat of honor next to Spinoza, and, as much of her textual production demonstrates, has exercised a comparably significant influence, as both an implicit and explicit determinant, on her way of reflecting on and broaching, to an equal extent, the philosophical tradition and the burning issues of the day.

Merleau-Ponty died suddenly and unexpectedly in 1961, at the height of his intellectual powers, while writing a new ontological treatise. The initial drafts and working notes of this treatise were jointly published three years later under the title *The Visible and the Invisible*. This is not worth remembering here for its anecdotal value alone, but to highlight a crucial aspect of Chaui's relationship with the French philosopher's work. When the young Master's candidate first grappled with his texts, they were not yet regarded as classics, let alone counted among those "eternal monuments" Martial Gueroult wrote of in his history of philosophy. On the contrary: at the time, Merleau-Ponty was a contemporary author, through which one might – and Chaui's thesis certainly did – tackle contemporary issues, as well as discuss and, if need be, criticize the philosophy and the social-sciences then in vogue: structuralism, Saussure, Foucault, Althusser, phenomenology, Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre, in addition to a protracted and, for the mid-1960s, unexpected confrontation between Wittgenstein's and Merleau-Ponty's meditations on language, aimed at determining convergences and divergences. In other words, it was through the prism of Merleau-Ponty's thought that the philosophical world of the day was laid open for Chaui's consideration.

Merleau-Ponty's texts are today regarded as undisputed classics. From the completed works to the unfinished drafts and lecture-course transcriptions, they are widely available in carefully produced editions, supported by a wealth of critical commentary. The situation

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was very different in the mid-1960s, when Chaui first read him. Not only were secondary sources almost entirely nonexistent, but the main corpus of his philosophical writings had yet to be consolidated, especially concerning the elaboration of a novel ontology. This grand edifice was constructed through a lively dialogue with other currents of thought as much as with the history of philosophy, particularly Cartesianism. The set comprising *The Visible and the Invisible* and the lectures presented at the Collège de France contains a certain amount of conceptual back-and-forth and nomenclature shifts, suggesting a Merleau-Ponty still *se faisant* (to employ an expression he once applied to Bergson), that is, still in the process of giving birth to the work that would gain him a definitive foothold among the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century.

These particular circumstances allow us to regard Chaui's thesis – in its broaching of a non-classic work by a living author (in the intellectual sense, naturally), in its openness to a debate with the issues of its time, and in its effort to formulate and develop its own theses – as a pioneering work (as far as could be established, it was the very first substantial study on Merleau-Ponty in Brazil) and a model for in-depth analyses of any "labor of thought", as she refers to works of this ilk. Indeed, the reading we find in the thesis reveals its perspicacity and coherence in apprehending the heart of the philosophy under study not only in the way it would unfold in subsequent texts authored by Chaui, but also in its ability to incorporate and assimilate unpublished Merleau-Ponty material that would appear over the following decades without disruption or the need for significant revisions, at most absorbing and utilizing an expanded nomenclature.

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Despite subjecting it to a thorough critical reformulation, Merleau-Ponty would never, as Chaui understood him, completely abandon the Bergsonian notion of a "fundamental intuition"; having duly noted as much, she thus feels justified in employing this notion to indicate the core of the philosophy in question, that which animates it and gives it meaning: "Merleau-Ponty's fundamental intuition consists in the affirmation that the representational life of consciousness does not come first, nor does it stand alone" [Chaui 1967: 240]. This also gives rise to what might be termed the "polemic intention", to borrow an expression from her doctoral dissertation, of the new ontology designed by Merleau-Ponty, fully revealed in a stern assertion from "The Philosopher and His Shadow": "constituting consciousness is the philosopher's professional impostor […] and not the Spinozist attribute of thought" [Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 180].

It is this philosophical nucleus (intuition and intention) that Chaui seems to have identified in the working note that concludes *The Visible and the Invisible*, from which she extracts both the theme of and a structuring element for her thesis [Chaui 1967: 1-2]. His words – probably among the last he ever wrote, and which have long provided Chaui, from the writing of her thesis to her more recent studies, with a nexus of intelligibility for his philosophy – are as follows:

> My plan: I The visible; II Nature; III Logos. [This plan] must be presented without any compromise with *humanism*, nor moreover with *naturalism*, nor finally with *theology*. – Precisely what has to be done is to show that philosophy can no longer think according to this cleavage: God, man, creatures – which was Spinoza's division. [Merleau-Ponty 1968: 274]

What Merleau-Ponty aims to refute with the juxtaposition of such drastically different philosophical positions (theology, humanism, naturalism), Chaui explains, is their

"common presupposition," that is, their pretension to stipulate "an absolute origin, from a single root, for all beings and the whole truth." In that sense, the terms God, Man, and Nature are "homonyms, and interchangeable." As she puts it:

> From theology to humanism, and from the latter to naturalism, there is no essential transformation in the mode of philosophical investigation. In all of these positions, philosophy is amenable to the ease of a single entryway. Each of these terms is taken, in the face of a common longing, as the absolute explanatory principle, one that could be replaced, in that function, by the other. [Chaui 1967: 2]

Now, the agent of these substitutions, the one who chooses the "single entryway" through which all things are to be founded and understood, is none other than the philosopher's consciousness, which transposes its constitutive action to the domains into which it delves. This privileging of the subject provides the essence of what Chaui calls a "humanist atmosphere" [ibid.: 38], the prime object of the critique mobilized by the new Merleau-Pontian ontology closely studied in her thesis: behind the various classical views, whether they start from things, from man, or God, there is always the activity of a constitutive consciousness to be found, one that conceives a reality that, in the throes of an eminently modern dilemma, oscillates between "existence as consciousness" and "existence as thing" [ibid.: 3]. In a word, the critique is directed at that *dualism* that Chaui summarizes as "the Cartesian tradition" [Chaui 2002: 204], something with which Merleau-Ponty seemed obsessed, she thought, having unceasingly struggled with it from his first to his final texts, particularly in "Eye and Mind" and *The Visible and the Invisible*, a point at which any reference to the subject disappears definitively from his horizon [ibid.: 137].

It is against that dualism entrenched in our culture – against the Cartesian tradition – that a new conception of being is conceived of and developed, according to which the visible is neither fact nor thing, and the invisible is neither consciousness nor deity – neither is it naturalism, nor humanism, nor theology, in the vocabulary of the aforementioned working note. The complexity of this renewed ontology is displayed in the constellation of descriptions (not all of them compatible with one another) and the variety of terms (some quite unorthodox) of which Merleau-Ponty avails himself in works subsequent to *The Phenomenology of Perception*: intertwining; ambiguity; ontological promiscuity; chiasm; being in indivision; brute being. Whatever the case may be, throughout this process, the central concept remains, in Chaui's reading, that of *structure*.

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Merleau-Ponty, Chaui insists, was among the first to glimpse the theoretical possibilities raised by the notion of structure. This notion, borrowed from Gestalt psychology, had already been amply mobilized to confront dilemmas inherited from the preceding tradition in his first book, *The Structure of Behavior*, an expedient that would be resorted to with increasing frequency in later works – *The Phenomenology of Perception* among them – especially once the French philosopher decides on a closer study of Saussurean linguistics and literary language, as is the case in *The Prose of the World*. The reasons behind that attachment become clear in a passage from the essay "The Metaphysical in Man," excerpted and analyzed by Chaui [1967: 67]: should we wish to provide "an unprejudiced definition of Gestalt psychology's philosophical meaning," Merleau-Ponty argues, we would have to say that "by revealing 'structure' or 'form' as irreducible elements of being, it has again put into question the classical alternative between 'existence as thing' and 'existence

as consciousness,' has established a communication between and a mixture of, objective and subjective […]." [Merleau-Ponty 1964a: 86]

It is thus unsurprising that Chaui has given such importance to the theme of structure. In her Master's thesis, the concept works as a linchpin for a series of critiques: in the sphere of language, aimed at Wittgenstein, charged with restoring dualisms to the philosophical tradition; in the sphere of knowledge, aimed at Althusser and his distinction between the "object of knowledge" and the "real object"; and, in regards to the history of philosophy, allowing her to adopt a position contrary to that of Gueroult, renowned for his structural reading of philosophical texts, and emblematic of that *kosmostheoros* Merleau-Ponty so strongly criticized. It is, above all, about the innovative understanding of *being* sought by the author of *The Visible and the Invisible;* however, the concept of structure evinces its crucial character. In his words, a paraphrase of which would serve as the epigraph to Chaui's pivotal "The Notion of Structure in Merleau-Ponty" [Chaui 2002: 197]: "Within structuralist thinking, one can discover a new way to see being." [Merleau-Ponty 1962: 154]

Merleau-Ponty was always less interested in the *Gestalt* in its sense of a fixed form, one that would even accrue positive associations once the notion of "good form" became common currency, than in the *Gestaltung*, that is, "the notion of *Prägnanz* (*pregnans futuri*), the latency of form," "germination or eclosion, fecundity itself"; as it is "intrinsic self-regulation and unrestricted self-irradiation, the pregnant form is equivalent to *causa sui* in a world it has desubstantialized" [Chaui 2002: 119]. The new sense of being that the notion of structure posits is "being in indivision," taken to mean that "qualitatively distinguished structures are *dimensions* of the same being"; consequently, it stands outside the "tradition of that which is posited or constituted by intellectual operations," allowing us to arrive at "that primordial *there is*, older than our cognitive operations, which are dependent on it and yet, having forgotten its existence, imagine they themselves constitute it" [ibid.: 232-233].

Given the prominence of the notion of structure in how she reads Merleau-Ponty, one can understand Chaui's often-voiced aversion to the theoretical movement that, from its inception in the 1950s, has operated under the general name of "structuralism." There is a ruthlessness to her conclusive remarks on the matter: "The contribution made by the notion of structure, namely the possibility of a desubstantialization of being or an apprehension of realities as totalities of pure internal differentiation, has failed. To that failure, a name was given: structuralism." [ibid.: 51]

Interestingly, once a reaction to this emerged in the 1970s with the philosophies of difference (a wave occasionally qualified as "post-structuralist"), they, despite having Merleau-Ponty as a significant predecessor, ultimately followed a somewhat different path. Indeed, as Chaui herself observes [ibid.: 141], while an emphasis on corporeity provided the author of *The Phenomenology of Perception* with a means to disrupt the privileging of consciousness as the sole seat of reflection, he seemed to have no affinity for that "corporeal frenzy" common to the French thinkers of his time.

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We will continue to operate with the theme of structure, here, as a means of accessing the final stage of Chaui's reading of Merleau-Ponty. At a certain moment in her aforementioned study on structure, she observes that, unlike those who regard necessity and contingency as opposites, within politics and history, in particular, Merleau-Ponty's writing firmly expressed

> …the understanding that structure *is itself* an event and, in it, necessity (totality, self-organized and self-regulated by immanent principles) is reassumed by contingency (the symbolic actions of historical subjects), given that the human world is a symbolic one and, thus, indeterminate, open to the possible, and that human action, when free, is itself the power to transcend a factually given situation in favor of another, which in turn endows it with new signification. [Chaui 2002: 256]

From this perspective, it is unsurprising that, once he became aware of how the concept was being used, Merleau-Ponty would "employ the term 'structure' less and less, until its eventual, definitive replacement with the term *dimension*." Unlike the former notion, increasingly associated with closeness or completion, the latter "points to openness, incompleteness, indeterminacy" [ibid.: 121].

Curiously, it is noticeable that what Chaui has in view in the studies on Merleau-Ponty that she would produce in the second half of the 1970s is something akin to what the French philosopher had begun searching for with the idea of institution in his 1954–1955 lectures at the Collège de France. A notable aspect of her reading – conducted, so to speak, in the heat of the moment (*The Visible and the Invisible* was originally published in 1964; her thesis was defended in 1967) – is how well it stands up when confronted with the later, posthumous publications that would greatly enrich the Merleau-Pontian corpus over the decades. The precision of her early study was especially evident in how well she identified the fundamental intuition underlying the philosophy in question, and with it the need for the concept of institution to be given centrality – a position she would only develop much later, in a course presented in 2002.

Indeed, when one reads the article "From Constitution to Institution" in light of her previous textual production, one finds in its main arguments something like an updated version of the investigation conducted in her thesis, motivated, we believe, by the joint operation of two vectors over time: Merleau-Ponty's posthumous publications and the intrinsic development of Chaui's reading.

Firstly, a significant shift is occasioned by the reassessment of structure, thereafter understood as a notion that "from Merleau-Ponty's first works, prefigures and prepares that of institution" [Chaui 2012: 171]. In other words, a new nexus of intelligibility for the philosopher's ontological project is established, with the great promise formerly attributed to the notion of structure now being transferred to that of institution: "in the concept of institution," states Merleau-Ponty, in the context of the lecture series originally titled *L'Institution*, "we are seeking a solution to the difficulties found in the philosophy of consciousness" [Merleau-Ponty 2010: 76]. Secondly, this thematic repositioning entailed a renewed understanding of the problem at the heart of humanism. After all, given the simultaneous imbrication and reversibility of nature and history, if human beings are seen as instituting beings, there ought to be room for a virtuous humanism akin to that of Machiavelli: the *virtù* of those who, faced with "ineluctable necessity" amid "contingent circumstances," will confront "the problem of man's relation to man, and of the constitution between them of a common situation and history" [Chaui 2021: 69]. This virtuous form of humanism is all the more important as, in addition to indicating a locus for free action within a "new conception of historicity" [Chaui 2012: 162] and providing an inroad into a careful consideration of politics in Merleau-Ponty [cf. Chaui 2002: 257ff.; 2009; 2021], it points to a profoundly altered understanding of the place occupied by the subject.

If the problem of humanism, a category then subjected to intense criticism, had been mainly framed, in her thesis, in relation to Heidegger's notion of "the age of the world picture" and an understanding of the Cartesian *ego* as a mark of the ascent of the subject, she would slowly come to revise said framing and to abandon definitively the Heideggerian schema. In an important text [Chaui 2011] developed in tandem with her reassessment of Merleau-Ponty, she argues that Descartes and so-called Great Rationalism have very little – perhaps nothing – to do with the notions of a subject of knowledge or that of a constitutive subject, inventions attributable to Kant and German Idealism. The question of humanism thus tends to cede space to a staunch critique of "constitutive consciousness," that philosophical imposture to which Husserl himself had succumbed, and the central ontological question returns to the unavoidable passage "from constitution to institution." This means, more precisely, that the Cartesian tradition is the bearer of a dualism that has less to do with Kantianism than with a positive infinity, that innocent, praiseworthy notion that, according to Merleau-Ponty, exemplifies the incredible capacity of the classics to elevate ontological consciousness to its highest degree while preserving contradictions and ambiguities, rather than reducing them to either pole of the duality. It is in this regard, he argued, that Great Rationalism should by no means be held to be a thing of the past. That being the case, that he began to insistently measure his work against Cartesianism precisely at the point in which he abandoned the notion of the subject should not surprise us in the least.

Our trajectory can thus come to a close where it began: with the startling relation Chaui constructs between Spinoza and Merleau-Ponty, developed in such a way that our understanding of one deepens as we grow to better understand the other in an intense and productive back-and-forth – one of the chief signs of which is her appropriation of the Merleau-Pontian term "nervure" for the title of a work wholly dedicated to Spinozism, arguably her magnum opus. What takes place, ultimately, is a repositioning of seventeenth-century Great Rationalism as *the* decisive moment in the history of philosophy – one that retains its inspirational character to this day.

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Marilena Chaui's Reading of Merleau-Ponty: From the Critique of Humanism to the Praise of Great Rationalism

The intellectual trajectory of Marilena Chaui began with a Master's thesis on the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. Successfully defended in 1967, it was Brazil's very first academic study on the French philosopher, and thus vastly influential on the reception of his unique phenomenology in the country. Our aim is to circumscribe the essence of her reflections on Merleau-Ponty, among which one finds a highly original emphasis on the relationship between his thought and so-called Great Rationalism, the latter being cast in an ambivalent role as both a tradition to be overcome and a source of inspiration for a new ontology.

Омеро Сантьяго

Інтерпретація Мерло-Понті Маріленою Чауї: від критики гуманізму до похвали великому раціоналізму

Інтелектуальний шлях Марілени Чауї розпочався з магістерської дисертації про філософію Мерло-Понті. Успішно захищена в 1967 році, вона стала першим академічним дослідженням про цього французького філософа в Бразилії, а тому справила значний вплив на рецепцію його унікальної феноменології в країні. Нашою метою є окреслити суть її роздумів про Мерло-Понті, серед яких можна виокремити дуже оригінальний акцент на зв'язку між його думкою і так званим Великим раціоналізмом, де останньому відводиться амбівалентна роль як традиції, яку треба подолати, так і джерела натхнення для нової онтології.

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