

The community's two bodies: incorporation and incarnation in the political phenomenology of Marc Richir

Andrés Arce González

Bergische Universit
93aarce@gmail.com
DOI:10.22034/IYP.2021.245801

Abstract

This paper presents some elements of Marc Richir's political phenomenology. Drawing from the Husserlian distinction between Leib and Körper and from the ontology of the flesh sketched in the last works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Richir proposed a novel reading of the relation between phenomenology, the social, and the political. His project is built upon the distinction between incarnation and incorporation, two forms of embodiment that, while corresponding to the two ways of experiencing One's own body noted by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, concern not only the embodied subject but also the individuation of the social body. This approach can be read as a radically embodied inquiry into the social and the political that constitutes a phenomenological critique of identitarian essentialism and disembodied universalism. In the first section of the article, I explain the role played by intersubjectivity, subjectivity, and embodiment in Richir's understanding of the process of phenomenalization. The second section is dedicated to his elaborations on the joint sensemaking of the ipse and the community, articulated around the distinction between incarnation and incorporation. In the final section, I outline a possible application of the concepts developed by Richir to the contemporary debate around identity-based politics.

Keywords: Embodiment, Social Body, Identity, Asubjectivity, Francophone Phenomenology.



Introduction

In recent years, the question of embodiment has steadily gained importance in philosophical discussions. In the English-speaking world, this importance is noticeable mainly in the fields of phenomenology and neuroscience, where the influence of Merleau-Ponty's work on the development of the concept is conspicuous (Varela et al., 1991; Gallagher, 2005; Fuchs, 2018). The term "embodiment" can be used to translate both the French expressions "incorporation" and "incarnation." Nevertheless, this equivocal use may lead to the neglect of a critical nuance that exists in the work of some francophone phenomenologists as well as in the foundational works of Edmund Husserl: the distinction of *Körper* and *Leib*, which reappears in *Phenomenology of perception* as the distinction between *corps objectif* (objective body) and *corps propre* (One's own body).

During the final years of his life, Merleau-Ponty began to articulate his philosophy around the concept of the *chair* (flesh), one of the possible translations for the German term *Leib*. The *corps propre* became *corps de chair*, an *incarnate* flesh body that does not exist prior to the world but is continually born with it (co-né)- and within it. The body of flesh is neither a mere object-body among others nor a substance enclosed within itself that acts on a pre-given objective world, but a "field" always open to transformation and re-elaboration (Merleau-Ponty, 1992, p. 239), in a permanent relationship of mutual determination with the world. According to Belgian phenomenologist Marc Richir, it results from a process of incarnation, which must be distinguished from a process of incorporation. This turn's consequences are phenomenological, ontological, and political. The most evident political consequences concern the *alter ego* and community status. This is clearly expressed by Merleau-Ponty's introduction of the concept of "intercorporeity" as a radicalized version of Husserl's intersubjectivity. However, there is another possible political reading of the "ontology of flesh" that, although not explicitly developed by Merleau-Ponty, was built on his theories by Richir. In this article, I offer a glimpse into Richir's phenomenology of the political through his distinction of incarnation and incorporation, expressed mainly in his 1991 book *Du sublime en politique*. I aim to show how Richir's work, iterating the "commonplace in Hellenistic theories of the state, that the state is 'man writ large'" (Taubes, 2009, p. 62), opens new possibilities for the phenomenological thinking of

politics in general and for overcoming the problems of contemporary identity-based politics in particular.

The flesh and the problem of the incarnation

Although traditionally linked to theological discussions, the problem of incarnation became a pivotal question for phenomenology in the first half of the 20th century. While the introduction of the concept to phenomenological inquiries is usually attributed to Merleau-Ponty (who became aware of its philosophical relevance thanks to the influence of Gabriel Marcel), the first outlines of the question can already be identified in the work of Husserl. In the distinction between *Körper* and *Leib*, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the lived-body or "One's own body" found its primary theoretical basis. Following this distinction, the problem of incarnation, that is, the problem of the individuality and identity of the incarnate subject, became a significant issue for phenomenology. The reflections concerning the ontology of the flesh that followed Merleau-Ponty's seminal investigations consummated the institution of what we, following Natalie Depraz, could call the phenomenological sense of incarnation: "Incarnation, in its phenomenological sense, is a process that accounts for the coming of the flesh into itself, as an originary entanglement of the body and the mind that transforms the first of them from matter-body (*Körper*), not perceived as such and not reflected upon, into flesh-body that perceives itself as flesh, while the other one [the mind] stops being a disincarnate mind, retired in itself and unconscious of itself, and becomes an incarnated mind" (1995, p. 36).

This definition might seem somewhat elliptical to those unfamiliar with Merleau-Ponty's vocabulary and its influence on francophone phenomenology. We could simplify it by revisiting the concept of flesh (*chair*), a keystone of his philosophy. In his unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, the French philosopher often refers to Husserl's famous example in which the right hand touches the left hand and reveals the twofold way of experiencing One's own body: as an object among others (*Körper*) and as a phenomenal field with its own particular sensations and spatiality, the lived flesh-body (*Leib*). The reversibility of the poles of dichotomies, such as activity and passivity, subject and object, inner and outer, revealed by this analysis constitutes the kernel of Merleau-Ponty's conception of the flesh. In

the last sentence of the manuscript, he asserts that reversibility is “the ultimate truth” (Merleau-Ponty, 1992, p. 155). Besides this radical claim, the original contribution of Merleau-Ponty to what we could call phenomenology (or ontology)[1] of the flesh is the movement by which he extends the reversibility that characterizes the flesh body as one's own body to the totality of the world. As a result, the phenomenological flesh is no longer confined to the individual body. However, it becomes the flesh of the world: "Because our flesh lines and even envelops all the visible and tangible things with which nevertheless it is surrounded, the world and I are within one another [...] Each landscape of my life, because it is not a wandering troop of sensations or a system of ephemeral judgments but a segment of the durable flesh of the world, is qua visible, pregnant with many other visions besides my own" (Merleau-Ponty, 1992, p. 123). The crucial point of the transition from the flesh body to the flesh of the world is, as we will see, the embodied approach to intersubjectivity suggested by the idea that the phenomenological field is "pregnant with many other visions besides my own."

How is it that "our flesh lines and even envelops all the visible and tangible things with which nevertheless it is surrounded"? This is one of the main topics addressed in a 1994's article by Marc Richir in *Phénoménologie et politique*. The first part of the paper is dedicated to “refounding” phenomenology through a redefinition of the phenomenon. Richir revisits the Husserlian principle of perception by off-shadings (*Abschattungen*) to free it from the metaphysical conception of space that still permeated Husserl's understanding of intentionality. According to Richir, Husserl's conception of intentionality as the relation of a particular profile to the totality of possible profiles that we can grasp imagining an all-encompassing geometrical course around the object is solipsist and still dependent on the ideal of a "thinking which looks on from above" (*une pensée de survol*), i.e., a universal perspective of spatiality detached from embodied facticity. The cohesion of the *Abschattungen* is instead achieved by "the non-manifestation, but nevertheless, phenomenological operativity (*être-en-œuvre phénoménologique*)” of gazes of other concrete human beings that, even if absent from my actual perception, still play a role in its shaping as ontological possibilities in the Heideggerian sense (Richir, 1994, p. 13). The “I can” that characterizes the movement potentialities signaled by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty as the phenomenological basis of any knowledge of the phenomenon

beyond its actual manifestation is made possible by these absent but effective gazes of other flesh bodies.

In other words, it is not the faculty of imagining *myself* observing the thing from all possible points of view that relates the actual perceived profile to the perception of the thing itself, but my capacity of imagining other flesh bodies perceiving the thing, even from points in space that I could never reach. Every perception is, therefore, intersubjective or, as Richir states in a rereading of Patočka, asubjective. The unity of every phenomenon is built upon an unstable cohesion of presence (the actual perception) and absence (the non-manifested profiles of the phenomenon that I nevertheless know to exist). The non-manifested profiles constitute the phenomenon's phenomenality, its excess concerning the positively perceived. The phenomenon is always contingently individuated; its phenomenality is marked by its indeterminacy, just like the existence of the incarnate subject.

Moreover, further, the non-given that accounts for the phenomenality of the phenomenon is not grasped through the conscious acts and potentialities of an individual cogito but through an anonymous embodied subjectivity similar to the One described by Merleau-Ponty in his unfinished manuscript (1992, pp. 139-140). Following Richir's reading, the enveloping of the world by my own flesh and of my own flesh by the flesh of the world occurs due to the indeterminacy and contingency of every phenomenon. This complication of the present and the absent, the visible and the invisible, always in a dynamic relation of reversibility, constitutes the *Leibhaftigkeit* of every phenomenon, the flesh of the body and the flesh of the world.

The complexity of the problem of incarnation arises here. In Merleau-Ponty's words, "Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?" (1992, p. 138). While the dethronement of the *cosmotheoros* (the disembodied subject that contemplates the world utterly detached from it) contributes to a better understanding of many of the issues that stem from classical metaphysical dichotomies, it considerably increases the difficulty of apprehending the empirical ego. How is the ego individuated in a flesh world where everything is entangled (*Ineinander*)? How can we distinguish it from the "surface of separation between me and the other, which is also the place of our union" that composes the "inner

framework of intersubjectivity"?[2] These are the leading questions of any inquiry into phenomenological incarnation. Although an extensive exploration of these falls beyond the scope of this paper, we will partially address their political aspects in the remaining sections.

The flesh is, thus, the phenomenological element that allows us to think beyond the strict dichotomies of traditional metaphysics. It accounts for the integrity of body and mind in most of our everyday experiences (gestuality and body language being the most classic examples). Still, it also proposes a new way of understanding phenomenality itself and, through it, the world we inhabit. Depraz's description of incarnation as "the coming of the flesh into itself" can then be comprehended as an allusion to the blurry division between the body and the world in the ontology of the flesh and as an invitation to reflect upon the problem of phenomenological individuation. Since the notion of the "flesh of the world" is inextricably linked to the intersubjective dimension of the world, the question of the incarnation must be understood not only as an inquiry into the phenomenality of phenomena and the relations between the world and phenomenological body but also as a crucial point for the understanding of the political in general and of the embodied collectivity in particular. This last aspect will be treated in the following pages.

Incarnation and incorporation

According to Richir's reading, every phenomenalisation is always intersubjective (*toujours déjà*). Since the intersubjectivity that constitutes the phenomenon is not actual but the anonymous convergence of absent glances of other flesh bodies, he prefers to use the Patockian notion of "asubjectivity." This means that our way of perceiving and experiencing is always already collective. That intersubjectivity is not a problem that shows up after we have built the necessary conditions for experience and knowledge on the isolated subject's grasping of the object. However, it is a precondition for any sense-making. Henceforth, the institution of any possible object of experience is shaped by an "incarnated community" and thus by the political institution of the social.

The ontological significance of the concept of community in Richir's work can be drawn from here. In the words of Ádám Takács, Richir's concept of community refers "to an indefinite realm of

excessively shared worldly situations of experiencing, linked to our being-in-world, within which the individuation of sense precedes and ontologically conditions the individuation of objects and subjects" (2019, p.3). The individuation of objects and subjects is dependent on the sense-making that constitutes the phenomenological matrix of every individuated phenomenon. Although the question of what "sense" means in Richir's phenomenology is too complex to be addressed in this paper³ we can roughly present it as the ever-changing result of the encounter between two irreducible fields: the savage phenomenality and the symbolic institution. The savage phenomenological field accounts for the pre-reflexive ground that provides the affective *hylé* of every phenomenon, the "brut Being (*Être brut*)," at the basis of Merleau-Ponty's later ontology. The symbolic institution is defined by the Belgian philosopher as "the coherent set of symbolic systems (languages, practices, beliefs, representations, techniques, etc.) that frame or configure the being, the atmosphere, the beliefs and ways of thinking of humans without them (deliberately) "deciding" about it" (Richir, 2015, p. 247). These two fields are irreducibly indeterminate and indefinitely open to new elaborations, meaning neither the symbolic nor the phenomenological dimensions are structured by strict causality or rigid chains of unequivocal meaning. It is also important to highlight that, even if the two fields are analytically distinguished in theory, they are always intertwined in our actual experience: there is neither a purely phenomenological nor a purely symbolic experience; there is thought in every phenomenon and phenomenality in every thought. Richir says this is the enigmatic formula of incarnation, being-in-the-world, and phenomenology.

The sense-making at the source of every individuated phenomenon is then partly shaped by sociality. As Takács points out, the community has an ontological relevance that precedes and shapes the phenomenalisation of empirical objects. The individuation of sense appears to us always already framed by the symbolic institutions of our incarnated sociality (our culture in the broadest meaning of the word) in a coherent but contingent way. It is "excessively shared" insofar as there is always "something of the social that emerges in phenomenality" (Richir, 1991, p. 64), something which is not always present to the phenomenological subjects but that operatively founds their intentional disclosure of the world. Nevertheless, this social

institution (*Stiftung*) of sense-making implies an ever-present danger of obliterating the indeterminacy and multiplicity of the phenomenon through its identification with the manifest. This tendency to comprehend the phenomenal dimension correlates to the dogmatic understanding of the symbolic dimension. Richir exemplifies it by extending the two ways of experiencing One's own body to the apperception of other bodies and then to grasping phenomena in general. Richir understands the classical Husserlian distinction of *Leib* and *Körper* as the crystallization of two different ways of making sense of phenomena. The first one is the result of the fortunate encounter (*rencontre*) of the phenomenological and symbolic fields, in which both remain open to their own contingency and mutability of sense. This does not mean that the phenomenon is perceived as a tohubohu of infinite shapeless possibilities but that its individuation keeps the consciousness of its own indeterminacy open by its horizons of absence. This is the process that Richir names "incarnation." As for the phenomenalisation of *Körper*, he presents it as the result of an opposite process, i.e., an unfortunate encounter (*malencontre*) between the symbolic and the phenomenological fields, in which the phenomenal is identified with the manifest and the symbolic is reduced to a mechanical linking of rigid and saturated signifiers. This is what Richir calls "incorporation." The understanding of the human body (either mine or the other's) as an object, the reduction of the phenomenon to its positively observable profiles, and the closure that degrades the symbolic field into a blind system of linear determinations are all the product of the same "failure of incarnation within incorporation" (Richir, 1991, p.115).

Cartesian dualism is one of the most historically significant and philosophically influential forms of incorporation. The conception according to which the body, like all matter, is an inanimate mass that has to be governed by an immaterial, reasonable, self-transparent, free will has indeed been a ubiquitous leitmotiv of modern Western speculation. This strict distinction between the mental and the physical, the source of many persisting philosophical aporias, results from a misunderstanding of the flesh body. The outcome of phenomenological disincarnation, it had (and still has) several political implications as well, such as the reckless exploitation of "natural resources" or the idea of the soul being the master of the body, considered by Richir to be the basis of modern techniques and

discourses about dominion and disciplining of the bodies of others. Nevertheless, the simplistic inversion of the hierarchical relation of mind and body also encounters the same dead ends and perpetuates similar phenomenological reductionisms. Neither the Pythagorean idea of the body as a prison for the soul nor the conviction of the soul being the prison of the body, expressed in the graffiti that Franco "Bifo" Berardi saw in Bologna in 1977 (Berardi, 2009, p.150) manage to overcome the limits that disincarnated dualism sets to philosophical and political praxis, as the contemporary paradigm of domination through affectivity, sexuality, and desire studied by the Italian philosopher shows.

In Richir's terms, the rigid, metaphysical concept of humans derived from Cartesian incorporation is called the anthropological-political institution. It refers not only to the philosophical construction of dualism that we just presented but also to the ideological projection of a universal essence common to all humankind that constitutes the core of most of the political discourses that stemmed from the Enlightenment. The ideological and imperialistic uses of this discourse have mainly been discussed by several authors (Mbembe, 2016; Dussel, 1994; Schmitt, 2006). Besides the aporias we already referred to, its philosophical implications account for an artificial separation of the theoretical and the political or, one may also say, of the theoretical and the practical. Richir notes the consequences of this disjunction in the context of phenomenology when he asserts that "what was missing from phenomenology in order for it to be open to the political was this *epoché* of a *metaphysically predetermined ipse*" (1991, p. 42). The notion of a universal essence or nature of humanity, untouched by time and by the multiplicity of socially institutionalized horizons of sense, entails the split between reified humans and the world that surrounds them, obscuring our understanding of the interplay that constitutes the phenomenality of politics and the political institution of the sense of phenomena. In this sense, although it was projected as the basis of an ongoing process of liberation and conquest of autonomy, the anthropological-political institution turned out to be a new form of metaphysical disincarnation with its own rigid, objectifying conceptualization and the latent risk of its own form of totalitarian despotism.

According to Richir, the institution of the anthropological-political paradigm is the continuation of the theological-political paradigm "by

other means, insofar as it is the perpetuation of the unfortunate encounter that abruptly turns incarnation into incorporation" (1991, p. 119). Elaborating on the work of Ernst Kantorowicz and Claude Lefort, Richir introduces a comparison between the king's two bodies and the two bodies of men (*Körper* and *Leib*) in order to extend his concepts of incarnation and incorporation to the individuation of the *social body*. What, following Lefort, he calls "monarchical incarnation" refers to the symbolic and political unification of the social body through the identification with its king. This process, which relies both on the explicit doctrine of divine right and the "unconscious mediation between the divine and the human" (Lefort, 1986, p. 287) embodied by the king as a supreme individual, can be understood as a form of incarnation when the monarch appears as the figure that makes the concord among humans and the cohesion of political institutions possible, as shown in the famous stories of wise kings. In contrast, the theological-political institution becomes an instance of incorporation when it is embodied by a tyrannical king, following a "despotic affirmation of the head above the bodies" (Richir, 1994, p. 2)[3] that presents itself as unavoidable through a dogmatic affirmation of the identity of the royal and the divine. In this case, the absolute, coercive power of the king descends from the head to the parts of the body (*corporations*) following a pseudo-necessity whose contingency was first revealed by the French Revolution. However, the restructuring of the social body initiated by the revolution failed in establishing the conditions of possibility for an incarnated community insofar as they installed a new rigid system of symbolic institutions based on ideological, reified conceptions of humanity, freedom, people, or democracy. Richir considers the instrumental use of such essentialist notions a blatant sign of demagoguery since the people (*demos*) and democracy can only be incarnated by acknowledging their irreducible indetermination.

Notwithstanding, even if the historical outcome of the French Revolution was a re-establishment of the disincarnated embodiment that stems from phenomenological and political forms of incorporation, Richir claims that the revolution itself remains the indispensable horizon for any modern reflection upon the political. This is because it is the event that indicates the radical contingency of every political institution, the lack of foundation that opens the possibility of indefinite ways of individuation for the incarnated

community. The irreducibly indeterminate but infinitely determinable character of the socio-political institution is revealed by the moments of total indeterminacy of revolutions, in the same way as the contingency and indeterminacy of the phenomenon is revealed by the experience of the Kantian sublime.[4] It is nevertheless crucial not to play into what Richir calls "the transcendental illusion of politics," i.e., the belief that the symbolic institution can be shaped entirely by the will of humans through a supposedly complete command over the political. It is important to recall that we not only actively constitute the social institution of sense but are also passively constituted by it. This means that there will always be an essential part of the phenomenological and symbolic fields that escape our consciousness and our power of transformation. There is neither a mechanical chain of rigid determinations nor a total freedom of voluntary sense-making, but a relation of reversibility and intertwining between the phenomenological and the symbolic, where we have individuated ourselves and where we find a *Spielraum* for interpretative and transformative action.

Essentialism and incorporation: Towards a phenomenological critique of identity-based politics

As shown above, Richir considers that the subject and the phenomena are polifacetic, ever-changing crystallizations of sense individuated through the encounter between the savage phenomenological field and the symbolic institution. The ipseity (Richir prefers to use this term instead of "individuality") of the subject and his understanding of the world are thus embedded in the horizon of sense open by the incarnate community that constitutes the asubjective cohesion of every phenomenalisation. On this basis, following both the Husserlian distinction between *Leib* and *Körper* and the Richirian distinction between incorporation and incarnation, we can begin to sketch a phenomenological-political approach to the problem of identity.

If, as Richir wrote, what hindered the development of a phenomenological exploration of the political was the unquestioned assumption of a metaphysically constituted ego, the dethronement of such a notion must be a central task for any project of political phenomenology. In this sense, the radical questioning of the anthropological-political institution in its Cartesian dualist form and its essentialist ideological form inaugurated by the Belgian

philosopher opens the way to a novel and necessary reading of political issues. If one intends to pursue this phenomenological path, one should consider the critique of the old and new forms of rigid incorporation as a keystone of their endeavor. This brings us to the urgency of a phenomenological critique of "identity." Already noted by Richir himself as a form of disincarnation, mainly thriving in contemporary democracies, it has evolved to be one of the main axes of several ideological discourses of our age. The indeterminacy that should characterize the *demos* and their democracy is degenerated into a conglomerate of identitarian factions cloistered within themselves, in which the individualization and the communitarian horizon of sense-making seem to be mechanistically determined. The challenge that this process bears to any perspective of authentic democracy, that is, of a phenomenologically and politically incarnated community, was highlighted by Richir in 1994 when he wrote that "it is thus, today, in what it is still agreed to call "democracy," that identifying and determining incorporations proliferate more than ever, and the question of communitary incarnation becomes all the more crucial" (1994, p. 26). Suppose openness to indetermination and recognition of its own contingency are the pillars of any democratic incarnated community. In that case, these forms of identifying incorporation are relevant in a simultaneously phenomenological and political sense since they determine both phenomena' sense-making and political praxis dynamics from a rigid, mechanistic perspective. A few elements for their critique shall occupy the last pages of this paper.

What is an identifying and determining incorporation? It refers to the process of individuation resulting in a form of subjectivity that relies on an ensemble of specific properties, which supposedly constitute its essence and delimit its opening to sense. These properties can be linked to physiological determinism or symbolic essentialism. Still, in both cases, they are meant to provide a fixed characterization of the ipse and its being in the world. From a strictly phenomenological point of view, such a form of incorporation obliterates the grasping of phenomenality since, in a certain way, the horizon of sense is always already decided by the subject's identity. From a classically political point of view (understanding politics as what concerns the organization of the *polis*), it hinders the construction of a shared space insofar as it encloses individuals in hermetic, inward-oriented groups motivated solely by particular

interests. The militant revindication of rigid conceptions of particularities finds its most vehement expressions in xenophobic movements such as European Identitarianism. Still, it is also present in left-leaning organizations based on identity politics.

Nevertheless, it would be mistaken to think that identifying incorporations can only be based on revindications of particularity. As we suggested in the preceding section, the essentialist universalism defended by some humanist discourses can also fall into the same determinism and, ironically enough, even more, violent xenophobia since the unilateral postulation of a supposedly universal core of humanity turns all the human beings that do not fit in it into "inhumane" or even "enemies of humanity." From a phenomenological-political point of view, both the particularist and the universalist forms follow the same process of essentialist incorporation. Any project of communitary incarnation should therefore challenge them.

It is crucial to clarify that rejecting identity-based politics and rigid forms of identifying incarnation does not imply refusing the political and phenomenological relevancy of the physical and symbolic factors composing empirical identities. Overlooking the role played by factors such as ethnicity, gender, or religion in every subject's understanding of themselves, their bodies, and the world would fall into an undeniable case of metaphysical disincarnation. In a certain way, it would be a form of the abstract, universalist form of incorporation defined by Richir as the anthropological-political institution. What the project of an incarnated community strives for is instead a recognition of particularities that, while acknowledging their constitutive role in every political praxis and everyday theoretical sense-making, also uncovers their historical and phenomenological contingency, thereby avoiding any essentialist stagnation and repudiating any ideological or commercial instrumentalization. Identity is understood more as an ideologically imposed elucidation of the embodied subject and its possibilities than as an insurmountable determinism of subjectivity. In other words, an incarnated perspective considers the elements associated with identity as radically contingent, as partial determinations that, while effective, do not close down the possibilities of other forms of experience and sense-making that go beyond the horizon assigned to a particular identity. In this sense, it is closer to the perspective deployed by Fanon in *"Black Skin, white masks"* than to the idealistic conception of a transcendental subject

completely detached from material, socio-political and historical determinations.

The role played by the embodiment in the structure of experience and in the constitution of the political world can thus be approached in at least two forms, one corresponding to what Richir named "incarnation" and the other to what he named "incorporation." Making this distinction seems, as Richir wrote, especially urgent in the current political landscape, in which rigid forms of incorporation are fostered by demagogue politicians and capitalized by marketing strategists, blocking any possibility of constructing common spaces for encounter and dialogue indispensable to a genuine, incarnated democracy. The importance of embodiment for the political must be revindicated but in a radically anti-essentialist way. As the Brazilian philosopher Vladimir Safatle puts it, "we don't need politics without a body, since there is no such thing as politics without a body. What we really need is the possibility of incarnation forms that are radically non-identitarian" (2015, p. 70). Richir's work on the concept of "incarnation" seems to offer such a possibility, as it proposes an understanding of politics centered on the body that strongly rejects imaginary forms of incorporation and the multiple strains of ontic dogmatism or cultural essentialism that stem from them. The phenomenological perspective on the political that could be built upon the Belgian philosopher's work would, in some aspects, resemble the elaborations on culture and identity provided by Latinamerican authors such as Bolivar Echeverría (2000) and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2018). Both the baroque ethos analyzed by Echeverría and the ch'ixi approach to culture and identity that Rivera Cusicanqui draws from the Aymara tradition is characterized by a nonfixed conception of sociality and subjectivity, composing a *Lebenswelt* (Echeverría uses the Husserlian term) conscious of its own contingency and open to the permanent influence of alterity in its sense of self. The radical indeterminacy of the ipse and the incarnate community that in Richir's work might appear too abstract finds in the conceptualizations of these authors a social and historical concretion.

The inquiry into the possibility of communitarian incarnation implies a calling into question our notions of ipseity from a phenomenological perspective. The correlated phenomenalisation of the embodied subject and the sense-making of the world, presented in the work of Richir as the joint individuation of the ipse and the social

body through the symbolic institution, opens possibilities for the overcoming of both the universalist program of disembodied politics and the identitarian essentialism based upon rigid forms of incorporation. The indeterminacy, contingency, and reversibility that constitute the incarnated subject and the utopian incarnated community enable the configuration of a radically anti-identitarian relation to embodiment and communitary sense-making. The word "utopian" here does not mean "illusory" but refers to the ultimately unattainable goal of instituting a political body free of any form of rigid incarnation and completely conscious of its own contingency. This unattainability, Richir writes, should not inspire discouragement but constitute the source of a permanent movement of critique and recreation of the social body. The fact that the incarnated community is ultimately unattainable should serve as an antidote to demagogic reifications that intend to turn the horizon of political praxis into an ideological object, perpetuating "the unfortunate encounter that abruptly turns incarnation into incorporation." Thus, we could conclude our considerations by drawing a line of convergence between the endless striving towards an incarnated form of community and the "prayer" with which Frantz Fanon ends *Black skins, white masks*: "O my body, make of me always a man who questions!" (1986, p. 232).

Conclusion

The field that Merleau-Ponty opened to phenomenology in his latest works offers a new understanding of the relationship between the body and the world. The intertwining of the flesh body and the flesh of the world implies a new way of making sense of the relation between the embodied subject, the phenomena, and the social milieu constituted by multiple other embodied subjects sharing a horizon of sense and experience. The embodied subject is not *in front* of the world but *inside* it, interwoven. World and embodied subjectivity are born together (co-nées) in an evergoing sense-making process. The further elaborations of Merleau-Ponty's work undertaken by Marc Richir distinguish two possible ways of relating to this joint individuation of sense: incarnation and incorporation. While the first One refers to a form of phenomenalisation that remains open to its own indeterminacy and conscious of its own contingency, the last one names the symbolical dogmatism that stems from a rigid, reductionist

grasping of the body and the phenomena. In both cases, the role played by sociality in every phenomenalisation through the symbolic institution is fundamental. It accounts for the socially instituted symbolic framing of the "savage" phenomenological field. It acknowledges the reciprocity between the political implications present in phenomenalisation and the phenomenological content at the basis of every political praxis.

This conceptual basis allows us to approach the constitution of the political world from a phenomenological perspective that articulates the phenomenalisation of the embodied ipse and the sense-making of the world. The distinction between incarnation and incorporation sketches new possible ways of discussing the question of identity and cultural essentialism without recurring to the disembodied notions of abstract universalism. The unending movement of questioning that motivates this critique is oriented by the utopian horizon of the incarnated community, which, irreducibly indeterminate, cannot become a defined object of ideology without stagnating into a new form of metaphysical incorporation. The recognition of the importance of the body in politics and of the influence of politics in our relation to the body can undoubtedly be fruitful for phenomenology, just as the emphasis given to indetermination by specific phenomenological approaches can contribute to the radically anti-identitarian and anti-essentialist praxis that seems urgent in today's political landscape. The project of a political phenomenology delineated in the work of Marc Richir could hence lay the groundwork for a third way that avoids both disincarnated abstract universalism and essentialist, self-contained identitarianism.

Endnotes

1. In one of his 1953 courses published under *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression*, Merleau-Ponty declared that he did not make any difference between phenomenology and ontology. This position is position, among many others that show Merleau-Ponty's approach to ontology, is quoted by Emmanuel de Saint Aubert in *Vers une ontologie indirecte: Sources et enjeux critiques de l'appel à l'ontologie chez Merleau-Ponty*, Vrin, Paris, France, 2006.
2. Merleau-Ponty, 1992, p. 234. An interesting inquiry into this problem based on the works of Marc Richir can be found in Itsván Fazakas, *Le clignotement du soi: Genèse et institutions de l'ipséité*, Mémoires des Annales de Phénoménologie, N. XII, Dixmont, France, 2020.
3. A systematic exploration of this question can be found in Alexander Schnell, *Le sens se faisant: Marc Richir et la refondation de la phénoménologie*, Ousia, Brussels, Belgium, 2011.
4. The importance of the Kantian sublime for grasping phenomena' phenomenality is central to Richir's thought. A concise synthesis of this approach is presented in the introduction to *Phénomènes, temps, êtres : phénoménologie et ontologie*, Jérôme Millon, Grenoble, France, 1987.

References

- Berardi, F. (2009). *The soul at work: from alienation to autonomy*. Pasadena: Semiotext(e).
- Depraz, Natalie. (1995). *Transcendance et incarnation: Le statut de l'intersubjectivité comme altérité à soi chez Husserl*. Paris, France: Vrin .
- Dussel, Enrique. (1994). *1492 El encubrimiento del otro : Hacia el origen del "mito de la Modernidad"*. La Paz, Bolivia: Plural.
- Echeverría, Bolívar. (2000). *Modernidad de lo Barroco*. Mexico City, Mexico: Siglo XXI.
- Fanon, F. (1986). *Black Skin, White Masks*. London, Uk: Pluto Press.
- Fuchs, T. (2018). *Ecology of the Brain: The Phenomenology and Biology of the Embodied Mind*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Gallagher, S. (2005). *How the body shapes the mind*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lefort, C. (1986). *Essais sur la politique*. Paris, France: Seuil
- Mbembe, A. (2016). *Politiques de l'inimitié*. Paris, France: La Découverte.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (1992). *The visible and the invisible*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Richir, M. (1991). *Du sublime en politique*. Paris, France: Payot.
- Richir, Marc. (1994) "Phénoménologie et politique". *Les cahiers de Philosophie*, vol. n. 18, 9-39.
- Richir, M. (2015). *L'écart et le rien: conversations avec Sacha Carlsen*. Grenoble, France: Jérôme Millon.
- Rivera Cusicanqui, Silvia. (2018). *Un mundo ch'ixi es posible: Ensayos desde un presente en crisis*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Tinta Limón.
- de Saint Aubert, Emmanuel. (2006) *Vers une ontologie indirecte: Sources et enjeux critiques de l'appel à l'ontologie chez Merleau-Ponty*. Paris, France: Vrin.
- Schmitt, C. (2006). *The Nomos of the Earth*. New York: Telos Press.
- Takács, Á. (2019). *Incarnation and Institution: The Phenomenology of the Political in Marc Richir*. Phenomenology and the Political Conference, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 9th of May, Hong Kong.
- Safatle, Vladimir. (2019). *O circuito dos afetos : corpos políticos, desamparo e o fim do indivíduo*. Belo Horizonte, Brazil: Autêntica.

Taubes, J. (2009). *Occidental Eschatology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Varela, Francisco J., Thompson, Evan & Rosch, Eleanor. (1991). *The embodied mind: cognitive science and human experience*. Cambridge: MIT Press.