

## FOR A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE CRISIS OF CONTEMPORARY MODERN SOCIETY<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This text is part of a project that aims for a phenomenology of the malaise of contemporary modern society. Our purpose here is to unfold two items of this research: individualism, the theme we began our research with, and the autonomization of the economy. We also wish to contribute to consolidate the thesis that the crisis we are experiencing is deeply cultural (in the anthropological sense of the term), and not only or predominantly economic or political in the strict sense of these terms; that the crisis calls into question the general sense of our relationship with the world and others (including non-humans), a sense in which the sensitive, affective and symbolic characters are inseparable. This is the reason for our final emphasis on the notions of perceptual level, body schema, and institution, discussed by Merleau-Ponty in his courses at the Collège de France in the 1950s, as elements to think deeply about our culture or way of life.

**Keywords:** Merleau-Ponty; social crisis; phenomenology; neocapitalism; life-world; contemporary malaise.

### PARA UMA FENOMENOLOGIA DA CRISE DA SOCIEDADE MODERNA CONTEMPORÂNEA

**Resumo:** Este texto é parte de um projeto que visa a uma fenomenologia do mal-estar da sociedade moderna contemporânea. Nosso propósito, aqui, é desdobrar dois itens dessa pesquisa: o individualismo, tema com o qual iniciamos nossa pesquisa, e a autonomização da economia. Também gostaríamos de contribuir para a consolidação da tese de que a crise que estamos vivendo é profundamente cultural (no sentido antropológico do termo), e não apenas ou predominantemente econômica ou política, no sentido restrito dos termos; que a crise coloca em questão o sentido geral de nossas relações com o mundo e os outros (inclusive os não humanos), no qual são indissociáveis seu caráter sensível, afetivo e simbólico. Por isso nosso destaque final às noções de nível perceptivo, esquema corporal e instituição, discutidas por Merleau-Ponty em seus cursos no Collège de France nos anos 50, como elementos para pensar a fundo nossa cultura ou forma de vida.

**Palavras-chave:** Merleau-Ponty; crise social; neocapitalismo; fenomenologia; mundo da vida; mal-estar contemporâneo.

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) - Process n. 2018/24315-4 - for its financial support for this research project.

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## Introduction

This text is part of a project that aims for a phenomenology of the malaise of modern contemporary society. Considering the breadth of the question and its multiple possible paths, and mainly the challenge of combining them into a joint vision of the contemporary world, the project was bound to have a markedly open and exploratory nature.

This project is carried out by means of two approaches: the first is more empirical or historical-sociological and refers to the state of life in modern contemporary societies, while the second is more fundamental or ontological and aims for a minimal or basic Anthropology, guided much more by the critique of the conditions that threaten or impoverish life in modern contemporary society than by a supposed essence of human life (Furlan, 2015; 2017).<sup>3</sup>

More than expect a synthesis between these two approaches (the more sociological one and the more ontological one), for us the most important thing is their non-separation, their tension or, to use Merleau-Ponty's terms freely and in a slightly different context, their dialectical instability, in the chemical sense of the term (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 124), like the need for a diplopia that keeps the two dimensions of view together (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 157).

We would also like to stress, as a justification for the project (Furlan, 2015), that we consider we are experiencing a social crisis on a planetary scale, unavoidable, in spite of the different ways of experiencing and facing it, and which calls into question our reasons to live, amidst a general malaise or what we might call a diffuse nihilism.

In other words, we would like to contribute to consolidate the thesis that the crisis we are experiencing is deeply cultural (in the anthropological sense of the term), and not only or predominantly economic or political, in the strict sense of these terms; that the crisis calls into question the general sense of our relationship with the world and others (including non-humans), a sense in which the sensitive, affective and symbolic characters are inseparable. In simpler terms, we cannot think about politics, the economy or our values as dissociated from the meaning of our affections or from the way we perceive the world and others, i.e., the way we meet and address them. In a definition that seems to us perfectly precise in its critique of the idea of natural signs, Merleau-Ponty (2012) says that "It is not merely the gesture that is contingent with regard to bodily organization, it is the very manner of meeting the situation and of living it" (p. 195)<sup>4</sup>. By simply generalizing this definition, we have what seems to us an essential principle for a definition of culture.

We will select two items from the current state of our research: individualism, the theme we began our research with; and the autonomization of the economy with capitalism. In this presentation, we will stress a more critical or negative approach to modern contemporary society. As we said in a previous study, "the malaise draws to itself the attention of life" (Furlan, 2017). In methodological terms, "it is a matter of understanding the common world not in its entirety, but more specifically in its negativity – i.e., a matter of identifying what 'goes wrong' in it" (Berlan, 2012, p. 38, own translation).

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<sup>3</sup>The same principle can be found in Canguilhem's (1943/1966/2002) thesis about medicine, whose knowledge rests on clinical experience, i.e., on the distinction that life makes between good and bad, between what is conducive or not to its realization, in sum, in the patient's complaints, suffering and death, and not in the knowledge of an objective physiology that might anticipate life's subjective manifestations. Thus, life is, on principle, normative (Canguilhem, 1943/1966/2002), a perspective also taken by Deleuze-Guattari by means of Espinoza's philosophy. Nor is it a matter of, conversely, guiding the critique by pre-established values. Thus, as Berlan (2012) highlights, "it is not good as an absolute which allows identifying the real bad, but it is rather the experienced bad that allows identifying what could seem, by comparison, better" (p. 61, own translation).

<sup>4</sup>In Brazilian version, Merleau-Ponty, 1994, p. 256.



## Individualism

We started our research with the theme of individualism as we consider that it represents one of the most conspicuous symptoms of the malaise experienced in modern contemporary societies.

Albeit diffuse, we believe we can highlight the malaise of individualism in our society by referring to two social phenomena that have reached the proportions of public health issues: loneliness and depression.

It is worth noting that the situation of loneliness may ultimately rest on an existential foundation of human life, perhaps of life in general. However, that is the point to be developed through the more ontological approach of our research, in which we emphasize the question of love. What we examine here is the historical and social situation of being oneself with others in modern contemporary societies. Current research that points to the existence of an epidemic of loneliness is gaining media attention, particularly in developed or modern countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom (El País, April 13, 2016). The British government even created, in early 2018, the role of minister of loneliness to address the problem, and the important aspect to note is that the situation of loneliness does not affect only or predominantly elderly people, but also the younger generations, in which the extensive and intensive use of new communication media is either part of the problem or a practice unable to solve it, which seems to indicate, firstly, the need for the presence of flesh-and-blood people in our lives; in other words, while new communication technologies have brought about the possibility of immediate contact or communication between distant people around the world, they do not seem capable of replacing the necessary physical presence of others in our lives.

The issue of depression is part of the same situation. In this case, there is a feeling of exhaustion or tiredness of being oneself in a world that is extremely competitive, a world that is open to individual meanings and possibilities, i.e., without the imposition of values except for the one that works as a categorical imperative, namely, that each individual has to permanently choose whom to be, and to show his personal value through his activities in society, constantly put to the test by others. To put it differently, depression can be seen as total paralysis in the face of life's demands or the refusal to experience such demands, like a "fatigue of being oneself", the phrase that Ehrenberg (2000) used as the title of his book on the emergence of depression in modern societies.<sup>5</sup> As Ehrenberg shows, if neurosis may be considered the mental disorder of modernity until the first half of the 20th century, depression is the disease of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, since the problem of the individual ceases to be his conflict with customs or social morality to become the absence of a determinant meaning of life, except for that of having to choose his own being in parallel with developing his singular performance in his social group or in society in general.

Modernity is known to have progressively increased individuals' freedom and value in their social group, which thus emerges as a society of individuals, if we consider specifically the concept of community proposed by the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies to designate the medieval or traditional society. Tönnies, alongside other sociologists in the turn of the 20th century, such as Simmel and Weber, sought to understand the replacement of old community ties by those ties found in the constitution of the capitalist market society, which were especially visible in life in big cities, in which anonymous and universal relationships mediated by money have come to predominate. Thus, the dissolution of community relationships represented, and still represents to a large extent, a challenge and a problem for social life, at the same time that the replacement of old community ties by the impersonal relationships of modern life in cities represented and represents new possibilities for life.

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<sup>5</sup> The phrase is a literal translation from the French « Fatigue d'être soi », from the book's original title, *La fatigue d'être soi : Dépression et société*; the English translation's title is *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*.

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Boltanski (2007, p. 63-73) stresses how the condition of disinterested spectators, i.e., disengaged from the community and with a mobility that allows frequenting different places and situations, is a condition for the emergence of an impartial observation and a moral stance conditioned by the absence of previous interests – interests that characterize precisely community connections (hence the separation between observation and action in modern public spaces, achieved precisely through disengagement from the community). In particular, the author highlights the importance of cafes for the constitution of public space, and he cites Habermas and the emergence of modern journalism. Thus, the distance between people brought about by the development of modern cities, or the impersonal character that marks their relationships in the city, is not purely negative as it can also broaden the horizons of social sensitivity among men (Furlan, 2015).

Thus, the challenge we inherited from modernity may perhaps be summarized in the equation between individual freedom and a new form of social connection or tie, without the determination of the individual by the group, as was the case in traditional societies or communities, and without social atomism, a term which refers to the situation of disintegration of the sense of community life, a sense that is reduced to family life and threatened even there in contemporary society, as if the impoverishment or compromise of social relations that may be caused by the family were not enough, according to Negri and Hardt (2012). In broader terms, the challenge is to give social life a meaning after the disintegration of the “body of the king”, a symbol of unity or organicity in medieval society, and to replace that arrangement by a democratic society founded on the idea of freedom and conflict of interests, as pointed out by Lefort throughout his works (Lefort, 1986).

Let us use an anthropological account by Viveiros de Castro (2008) to illustrate the question. Viveiros tells us that one of the most common traumas among Brazilian Indians is to be alone in the forest in the presence of a spirit that is non-human but pretends to be human and can capture one’s soul. Viveiros interprets that this experience can have a political meaning, which is associated with the principle of indigenous societies to guard against the constitution of the State, i.e., an Absolute, Anonymous and Universal power over individuals in the community. That is Viveiros’s version of the thesis of Pierre Clastres about Society against the State, which Viveiros also associates with the birth of the modern State. Viveiros also uses as an illustration the story of Romeo and Juliet, whose love is condemned by their families, and whose deaths announce the tragedy and failure of kinship politics and the victory of the Prince (State), who overrides families’ interests; a neutral, universal and impersonal State which overrides particular community interests, much like the above mentioned emergence of public space in modern cities as the possibility of a superior point of view, one that represents greater rationality, i.e., a disengaged and, therefore, more neutral, objective and universal point of view. Thus, love, according to Viveiros, ceases to be part of politics (of families or kinship) and is reduced to the private sphere of individuals’ lives, whereas the power that holds individuals together in society passes to the Prince (modern state).

Thus, the modern separation takes place: love connects individuals while the power and the State become the prince’s remit (...) individuals interiorize themselves and connect to each other by affective ties that are radically extra-political, while power migrates to the antipodes of kinship, i.e., the sphere of public affairs, which are immune to any passion that is not itself political (p. 240, own translation).

Indeed, by addressing the question of the State, Viveiros reformulates what we referred to as the challenge we inherited from modernity, i.e., the need for a new social connection (*socius*) that is not hierarchical or vertical, but democratic or horizontal and – as emphasized by Hardt and Negri (2012) – “loving” or related with good feelings or affections, rather than a social connection based on fear, centered on selfish individualism and on the need for the “king” to protect everyone (Hobbes). But what interests us most about this stimulating anthropological account and interpretation is the possibility of exchanging the term “State” for “market”, and seeing how it fits well the problem we are dealing with. Viveiros himself refers to us, by way of analogy, as “*cidadãos-caititus* [peccary-citizens], particularly lost in the forest of the capitalist economy” (p. 232, own translation). And the danger, as in his accounts about Brazilian Indians, lies in entering the forest alone and encountering the “supernatural”, the non-human spirit, and being looked



at by it before looking at it, because then there is a great risk of being captured. In the text, being looked at refers to ideology's interpellation in the Althusserian sense, i.e., there is a high chance of responding and thus falling into the other's trickery. Therefore, looking refers to a power relationship; the one who looks is, at least at the encounter's outset, in control of the situation, which he contemplates, while the one who suffers his look is caught off guard. The former can steal the latter's soul (his subjectivity), and alienate him as the former is not a human spirit. Viveiros does not use the term humanism, and therefore it is worth remembering that humanism is not the point here, for according to his work on Amerindian perspectivism, "Everything is a person, but everything cannot be a person simultaneously, for each other" (p. 234, own translation). The jaguar is a person, though one of a different kind from us, and if we accept its view about us, then we can lose our soul to it and be removed from our community.<sup>6</sup>

You will rarely hear about of a group of people encountering a spirit in the forest. That event is, in general, an encounter in which one is alone, when one's relational ties are stretched. Going to the forest in a sad, grieving, depressed or angry mood is very dangerous for that reason. Loneliness is a disease, or attracts diseases, misfortune (p. 236, own translation).

Thus, for Brazilian indians, the best defense against the "supernatural" is the tie of kinship that unites them; loneliness is a great risk, which is why the encounter with the "supernatural" also happens when one is alone in the forest. When the indian, frightened by this bad encounter, returns to the community, it is as though he had almost lost his own soul to that non-human other, and this "almost", for Viveiros, means at the same time the always imminent risk of the State and its negation, its prevention.

But it is the *socius* of the forest of capitalist market that we want to deal with. After all, it is the capitalist market that commands the State, because this supreme and impersonal point of view (the State, the political power) does not reside exactly in the figure of the prince, but in the impersonal logic of capital that dominates him and pervades the social fabric of our relationships; logic of capital that, in order to reproduce itself, needs the spirit of people to form the spirit of capitalism. A situation that reminds us of the movie Matrix (Wachowski), also recalled by Vioulac (2018), highlighted, above all, in the era of capital with the new information and communication technologies.

In the light of this anthropological account, it is best for us to enter the forest forewarned, and to look at the beast before it looks at us, otherwise we are captured and may lose our soul.

Of course, when it comes to ideology, the example of the encounter with the beast in the forest is just the catalyst or the occasion for the expression of a meaning that is somehow present in everyday social life.

### **The Autonomization of the Economy and its Consequences**

The autonomization of the economy is a theme that has stood out since the beginning of our research, marked by the notoriety of the works of Karl Polanyi (1944/1983), mainly through the works of Louis Dumont (1985) and Boltanski and Chiapello (2011; Furlan, 2015). We refer to the separation and detachment, unprecedented in human history, of the economic activity from the other forms of social activities, such as politics, morals and religion. Of course, if a simple object can reveal a world, as Sartre (1976, p. 657) says, then an important social dimension such as economic activity, which comprises the production, circulation and consumption of goods, cannot be understood as isolated from other social practices and values, such as politics, knowledge and morals. That is not the point we address here; we address the conception of economic activity or the way it is understood by society, and that conception

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<sup>6</sup> A parallel with Vioulac's work on Marx's critique of capitalism seems quite pertinent to this anthropological account by Viveiros. The jaguar, in this case, is capital, a kind of person, though not human, who steals the subjective power of work for its own reproduction. On this point in particular, see Vioulac, 2013, p. 257.



would be the modern novelty that arises with capitalism, unprecedented in human history (Polanyi's works on the capitalist economy intersect with the approach of ethnological studies on economics in non-modern societies). Before capitalism, the economy had always expressed non-economic social values that defined the meaning of its activity, whereas with capitalism the meaning of economic activity is defined in strictly economic terms, of which the main one is profit.

Thus, according to the logic of reproduction and expansion of capital, capitalism is amoral, as highlighted by Boltanski and Chiapello (2011), but in order to function it needs to encourage the participation of its main agents. Hence the combination between the logic of capital and social values, thus forming the spirit that animates the capitalist society in each of its stages in Western history.

Boltanski and Chiapello (2011) emphasize how much the current stage of capitalism expresses what these authors call the “artist critique”, a reference to the lifestyle of artists in the 19th century which they use to describe the engagement of all aspects of life in economic production, thus blurring the separation between public life (work) and private life (home, family, leisure), or free time and work, creativity and routine etc., yet highlighting “the insufficiency or incompatibility of the commercialization of life in relation to the aspirations for authenticity inherent in the model of artist life” (p. 712; Furlan, 2017).

On the other hand, as we have argued based on Hanna Arendt (2000) and Bernard Stiegler (2010, 2012; Furlan, 2016a), the investment of capitalism in all aspects of life, guided by the interest in expanding consumer goods for the reproduction and expansion of capital, would result in the emptying of desire – which, as Stiegler emphasizes, implies elaboration, care and time for the construction of a world –, to give way to the discharge of instincts only. Stiegler (2012, p. 9) thus opposes, in a very pessimistic way, the idea of a “spirit of capitalism” proposed by Boltanski and Chiapello (both inspired by Weber), by saying that the current capitalism has no spirit whatsoever.

These are themes we have addressed in previous studies (Furlan, 2016a, 2017). We will now highlight two new questions we have advanced in the project: one regarding the dimension of the economic problem, and the other, to close the present study, regarding what seems to us to be the issue that underlies the crisis of contemporary modern Western society.

With regard to the dimension of the economic problem, we will highlight the importance of two complementary works, namely Ladislau Dowbor's (2019)<sup>7</sup> book titled *The Age of Unproductive Capital*, and Thomas Piketty's (2020)<sup>8</sup> book, *Capital and ideology*; the latter will provide a path for the closing of this study.

For the purposes of our research, Dowbor (2019) brings up some hidden characters who definitely change the state of the question in any discussion on politics and economy in today's world. Such hiding points us to the role of mainstream media in contemporary society (Furlan, 2016a, 2017) or to the field of conditions of news production in the world. There are independent media, and the data in Dowbor's book are an example of that, but those media are exceptions to the rule, which is disinformation or the lack of information essential for understanding the contemporary world and discussing it in political

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<sup>7</sup> In Brazilian version, Dowbor, 2017, *A era do capital improdutivo*, A nova arquitetura do poder, sob dominação financeira, sequestro da democracia e destruição do planeta.

<sup>8</sup> in the original French work, Piketty, 2019, *Capital et idéologie*.



terms.<sup>9</sup> For example, how many people know that “something equivalent to about a quarter to a third of the world’s GDP is hidden in tax havens”? (Dowbor, 2019, p. 102).<sup>10</sup> What is striking is not the fact itself, more or less known and sporadically revealed by alternative media research, but the fact’s dimension.

But the most impressive data in Dowbor’s book refer to the size of business corporations. Such data take political and economic discussions about the contemporary world to another level.

We know that the political power of national states has become, in part, a hostage to capital, which has become deterritorialized with the globalization of the economy. As Dowbor (2019) says, in a thesis of major consequences for a phenomenology of the contemporary life-world, in the same vein as *The Consequences of Modernity*, by Anthony Giddens (1991), regarding the decoupling of space and time in modernity: “money is intangible – today only magnetic signals – and that connectivity is planetary, so the territory ceases to exist as a limit to action. To use their expression, ‘space is dead’” (p. 32).<sup>11</sup> But how many people know that a business corporation like Black Rock has a revenue that is close to the US GDP, of fourteen and seventeen trillion dollars, respectively? (Dowbor, 2019, p. 27).<sup>12</sup> That twenty-eight financial institutions in the world operate, each of them, with average assets of around 1.8 trillion dollars, more than Brazil’s GDP of about 1.6 trillion dollars? (p. 29). As said earlier, such data seem to us to take the discussion of current capitalism to another level; by no means can they be absent from these discussions. The very subtitle of Dowbor’s work (2017) draws attention to this, especially in the Brazilian edition: *The Age of Unproductive Capital: New Architectures of Power, under Financial Domination, Hijacking of Democracy and Destruction of the Planet* (the English edition is more succinct: *The Age of Unproductive Capital: New Architectures of Power*). The book begins with the ecological question due to the exponential increase in capitalist production in recent decades. Here, we call attention to the political and economic question, led by financial capital.

In the previous stage of our research, we highlighted that the degree of wealth concentration has reached alarming levels, even for the IMF (Furlan, 2017). Continuing this discussion, we consider that Piketty’s book (2020), *Capital and Ideology*, has the merit of placing on a large scale the history of social inequality in human history, based, in particular, on economic data available on WID.world, which brings together contributions by more than 100 researchers in more than 80 countries in all continents about “the historical study of income and wealth inequality, both between and within countries” (p. vii)<sup>13</sup>, which provides a broader view of the question, beyond the heat of present events and their immediate range of vision. The result seems to us very positive, both in that it shows the perpetuation of great social inequality

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<sup>9</sup> It is not just a lack of information, but also of preparation of individuals for interpreting the contemporary world, for which formal education and the information media are responsible in modern society. Neither of them fulfills this role in the contemporary world. As we have said elsewhere (Furlan, 2016a), a simple fact is part of a history and a current reality context. Two conditions are necessary for its understanding. “The first condition is what we can call the transparency of the fact, in that it presents, if not all, at least the main elements or information for its understanding. The second condition is what we can call the cognitive resources for its understanding. The first condition may, in theory, be realized in the present, given the democratic conditions of dissemination and discussion of facts. And here, we cannot ignore the promiscuous relationships between the political interests of economically powerful groups and mainstream media (...). The second condition requires efforts to prepare individuals, a task in which, in Western society, formal education notoriously participates. In other words, considering the autonomy-oriented character of modern society, which implies democratic reflexivity, a citizen must be able to think about the society he lives in, which implies providing him with a civilizational preparation and not just professional training. Or, more precisely, professional training must be connected to cultural reflection, which the arts, humanities and philosophy are notoriously concerned with. In particular, we know that this does not occur in Brazil, even in its main universities (cf. Silva, 1999)” (p.95, modified citation, own translation).

<sup>10</sup> In Brazilian version, Dowbor, 2017, p. 148.

<sup>11</sup> In Brazilian version, Dowbor, 2017, p. 51.

<sup>12</sup> In Brazilian version, Dowbor, 2017, p. 55.

<sup>13</sup> In the original French work, Piketty, 2019, p. 27.



throughout history, and in that it shows significant advances in the general – though unequal – increase in life expectancy and access to formal education in the last decades, even if we have to remember that such achievements represent the expansion and dominance of the way of life of modern Western society around the world. After all, we know, as Piketty himself reports throughout his book, how many deaths and even extinctions of other cultures or ways of life this expansion of capitalist modernity has caused. Thus, the following critical considerations on the book do not aim to deny the importance of his work, but to contribute to an in-depth discussion that seems to us necessary about the dimension that is absent from the approach that guides his endeavor.

Let us begin with the critique we consider less important or fundamental, namely, the presence of a certain idealism in some passages in the book which advocate viewing the history of human societies as a struggle between reasons and justifications about social order and inequalities.<sup>14</sup> For example,

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles > wrote Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Their assertion remains pertinent, but now that this book is done, I am tempted to reformulate it as follows: the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of the struggle of ideologies and the quest for justice. In other words, ideas and ideologies count in history (p. 1035).<sup>15</sup>

They certainly do, but they do not show what seems to us most important, as we will see next. And he proceeds: “Different than class-conflict, the battle of ideology rests on a sharing of understandings and experiences, the respect of others, of deliberation and of democracy. No one will ever possess the absolute truth about just ownership, just borders, just democracy, just taxes and education”, to finally say: “The history of human societies can be seen as a quest for justice. Progress is possible only through detailed comparison of personal and historical experiences and the widest possible deliberation” (p. 1036).<sup>16</sup> And thus, those who seem to have less power in the sphere of business and political decision-making are called upon to face their responsibility:

I am convinced that some of today’s democratic disarray stems from the fact that, insofar as the civic and political sphere is concerned, economics has cut itself free from the other social sciences. This ‘autonomization’ of economics is partly a result of the technical nature and increasing complexity of the economic sphere. But it is also the result of a recurrent temptation on the part of professional economists, whether in the university or the marketplace, to claim a monopoly of expertise and analytic capacity they do not possess (...). Another consequence of the excessive autonomization of economics is that historians, sociologists, political scientists and philosophers too often abandon the study of economic questions to economists (p. 1039-1040).<sup>17</sup>

It would have sufficed to say that economists are usually representatives of capital in society and are thus “handpicked” by governments to head their main ministry or department, i.e., that of finance, considering that there is no shortage of their opposers and of critics of the economic system (such as Piketty himself). Piketty himself presents in his book an example that, as the saying goes, is worth more than a thousand words, so the book’s problem is, once again, one of degree or of scale adjustment. It is his analysis of the LuxLeaks (Luxembourg Leaks) scandal, which gained prominence due to the amount of tax evasion practiced by the government of Luxembourg in the period from 2000 to 2012 under Jean-Claude Juncker, Prime Minister of Luxembourg from 1995 to 2013, yet elected and retained by the European Parliament as President of the European Commission from 2014 to 2019, despite the outbreak of the scandal in November 2014, shortly after his election.

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<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the merit of the book by Alliez and Lazzarato (2016), *Guerres et Capital*, resides, in our view, in the fact that it highlights the semantics of war to describe the functioning of capitalism. Unfortunately, this approach seems more in line with reality.

<sup>15</sup> In the original French work, Piketty, 2019, p. 1191.

<sup>16</sup> In the original French work, Piketty, 2019, p. 1192.

<sup>17</sup> In the original French work, Piketty, 2019, p. 1197.





The author seeks to balance this emphasis on ideological debate by constantly pointing to a certain – sometimes striking – hypocrisy in the statements of the dominant classes to justify the social order, and, mainly, by highlighting the continuous presence of violence in history to maintain social inequalities. It is also very positive, in our view, that along the same vein the author emphasizes the complexity of concrete social institutions, especially legal and fiscal ones, through which social order materializes, is reproduced or changes. In general, as we know, this is the terrain of political struggles in representative democracies, whose profound crisis indicates, however, the mismatch between the political discourses and practices that regulate and govern social life. Anyway, as often emphasized by Piketty<sup>18</sup>, it is this terrain we must focus on, in which political ideas are put into practice or betrayed, and his book clearly intends to be a well-founded contribution to the critical discussion of economic and social problems in the struggles that take place at this concrete level of legal and fiscal intuitions. In this respect, the book seems to us consistent with its proposition.

That being said, let us proceed to the dimension which we believe is absent from question brought up by Piketty, and which is aroused by his idealistic bias. It is the question of culture in the anthropological sense of the term, i.e., as a form of organization of a life-world, in which ideology participates, though without a prerogative. We will limit ourselves, here, to pointing some paths to address the question.

Let us begin with the emphasis that modern political thought places on this reflection – that the way society is organized should not start from a discussion on moral ideas, but on the affections that form the human nature. As Rosanvallon (1989) summarizes the spirit of the time about the question:

To speak of man is, indeed, to speak about his passions, and to speak about them scientifically, thus refusing to found society on some external and normative moral order. It is not a matter of teaching man what he should do; we must first understand what man is. This “program” is on the agenda since Machiavelli (p. 13, own translation).

And finally, “Since the 17th century, the idea takes root that it is based on man’s passions, and not despite them, that we should think about the institution and functioning of society” (p. 14).

Though it points in the right direction, we now know about its limits, because it rests on a fixed conception of the human nature and of man as a naturally autonomous individual, when we know that affections and passions are also instituted. As announced earlier with Merleau-Ponty about natural signs, everything takes place from that level of formation of a world in bodily experience. Here, the key notions, which were initially developed by Merleau-Ponty (2012) are: perceptive level, i.e., the body’s first positioning in the formation of perceptive space by means of motricity; and body schema, i.e., the body’s situation as a possibility of action in the world. Both notions were later extended by Merleau-Ponty (2010) for the constitution of perception at the level of society and of relations with others, i.e., for the constitution of the very way in which society organizes itself and which we carry in our bodies (just like the body schema carries our relations with things in space), situating us and preparing us for action in society. In sum, it is these body schemas, formed in the relations with others and things, and which open a certain field of perception and action in the world, that we consider to be the fundamental formation of a culture or form of life. In a comment on Proust, Merleau-Ponty (2010, p. 248ss)<sup>19</sup> adds time itself to the body schema, which thus completes the formation of our situation in the natural and social world. All this stands, therefore, as formed and rooted in the body for perceiving the world and others, and as a

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<sup>18</sup> “It means, too, that we must carefully study in detail the institutional arrangements and legal, fiscal, and educational systems of other countries, for it is these details that determine whether cooperation succeeds or fails and whether equality increases or decreases. Good will is not enough without solid conceptual and institutional underpinnings”, Piketty, 2020, p. 20. In the original French work, Piketty, 2019, p. 26.

<sup>19</sup> In the original French work, Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 275ss.



possibility of action within it. And everything that is incarnated (formed and rooted in one's own body), says Merleau-Ponty throughout his works, acquires a certain weight of inertia that, even when changed or overtaken, can resume its activity, particularly if there is some difficulty in the new pattern of perception of the world and of relations with others. It is the formation of this perceptive field, which we might also call transcendental, that will open and favor certain possibilities of sense, while excluding others. For example, it is the institution of the separation (Taylor, 1997, p. 213) or disengagement of the subject from the world or the community that will allow the subject to treat the world as an objective nature, to explore it technically and, occasionally, to treat other men as a means to achieve an end (capitalism); or, to the contrary, as said earlier, the institution of that separation may allow us to expand our sensitivity to recognize the importance of the other in general. Of course, ideological conflicts and struggles within the field, which is but a certain form of life, can indicate the need for change in its organizing principle or cause it to change over time. But nothing relevant takes place without change or deviation in this organizing principle. Or, as Merleau-Ponty addresses the question of psychoanalytical healing, everything takes place in change in the level of perception, which is essentially affective and organizes what will be perceived. Hence the ineffectiveness of ideas for this transformation if existence itself has not yet incarnated them.

Merleau-Ponty (2010) engages the discussion on the notion of institution in his courses at the Collège de France to define it as

those events in an experience which endow the experience with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense, will form a thinkable sequel or history – or again events which deposit a sense in me, not just as something surviving or as a residue, but as the call to follow, the demand of a future. (p. 77)<sup>20</sup>.

Therefore, and more precisely, “Institution ... is not the positing of a concept, but of a being, or openness of a field. I.e., 1) institution gives to the future what it does not have; 2) the future will receive from it only what it will bring” (p. 103).<sup>21</sup>

Merleau-Ponty cites Oedipus as an institution, which is an introduction to love as a way of directing sexuality in relations with others in our society (p. 25).<sup>22</sup> Knowledge can also be an institution, as was geometry in an early stage of civilization, and as is physics in modernity. Capitalism is no doubt an institution that commenced another level of social perception and engagement. And in this way we can address this monumental institution which is our modernity. But events in individual life can also play the role of institution at a certain level of perception of relations with the world and others, such as the cases of Freud (Dora and madam B.) analyzed by Merleau-Ponty (2010, p. 177ss).<sup>23</sup> Therefore, institution can be seen in different dimensions of magnitude, from the more general to the more particular, and such dimensions relate with each other as praxical structures of perception. *This relationship is the fabric and the drama of social and individual life.*

Now, libido is the term that Merleau-Ponty took from psychoanalysis to designate the force that is present in this game of institution of the world. His early works already refer to libido as the erotic infrastructure of our relations with the world and others (Merleau-Ponty, 1942/2002, p. 192), “the subject's general power of adhering to different milieus, of determining himself through different experiences, and of acquiring structures of behavior” (2012, p. 161).<sup>24</sup> His courses at the Collège de France about the concept of Nature

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20 In the original French work, Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 124.

21 In the original French work, Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 101.

22 In the original French work, Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 47.

23 In the original French work, Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 218ss.

24 In the original French work, Merleau-Ponty, 1994, p. 219.

resume the notion from a more ontological perspective, which even includes a return to the history of the human body along with the history of animals (Merleau-Ponty, 2000a). It is this return to our primordial nature that will show both the estesiological body and perception as a form of desire (Merleau-Ponty, 2000a, p. 340), the search for others that begins the formation of a world (p.362). That is why libido is associated rather with the formation of a state of world, of connection (Eros) with others (humans and non-humans) and nature, than with its discharge (Merleau-Ponty, 2000a, p. 445-446). That is Eros' political project, open and uncertain though, due to the very structure of the id (a term from psychoanalysis used to designate the most archaic element in our ipseity), a structure in which the relation with others participates and which, faced with the task of libidinal realization (an inexhaustible task and source of all expression), carries in itself the possibility of aggression to others and to oneself (Merleau-Ponty, 1959-1961/1996, p. 150)<sup>25</sup>. That is also the deepest source of political violence.<sup>26</sup> If we wanted to paraphrase Piketty, we might say that history is thus not the quest for justice, but rather the quest for the erotic realization of existence, of which love seems to us to be the most demanding and elevated institution. It is the hardest task, inscribed in each person's social and personal life.

The discussion of the relationship of sense between the erotic phenomenon and love is too wide for the limits of this article. But we wanted, through this brief reflection about Merleau-Ponty's approach to the institution of the world at the corporeal level of our relations with others, to point out that the question of the current crisis of modern contemporary society is more radical than discussions around the elements that form it, discussions which are no doubt unavoidable, but which should lead to the problematization of and change in the organizing principle of our lives. In other words, if institution, as Merleau-Ponty (2010) says, is what makes a historicity possible, then the current crisis seems to us to point to the need for a change in course, or to the end of the line for the current course. As we have said elsewhere, based on Merleau-Ponty<sup>27</sup>, "any social institution ceases to live when it is no longer capable of a poetry that attracts men's freedom, when it is thus no longer capable or realizing its desire for connection" (Furlan, 2016b). This is the situation. This is why the crisis is deep and nihilism seems total.

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<sup>25</sup> « Aggression has roots in sexuality, and the other I in me – aggression is explained through the archeology of the id (as a matrix of relations with the other) and not through visible relations of the Is. And before being a relation to the other, aggression is a relation with myself (...). Therefore, no social adjustment that does not proceed of total reformulation" (Merleau-Ponty, 1959-1961/1996, p. 150, own translation). That does not mean that everything is sexual, but that "nothing is asexual" (p. 150).

<sup>26</sup> On this point, cf. Tréguier, 1996, pp. 160-163.

<sup>27</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2000b, p. 45.



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