THE POWER OF HESITATION:
Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, and seeing differently

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THREE CASES


3) Example of my partner as teacher in French school.
1. RACIALIZING PERCEPTION

**RACIALIZATION:**

- Relies on perception
- *Naturalization* of race to visible bodily markers
- *Rationalization* of racist reaction
- Blindness of racism

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Gallimard, 1945):

- Perception as *habitual*: We learn to see.
- Perception as *intentionality*: We attend to objects not to the perceptual process itself.
1. RACIALIZING PERCEPTION


- Racializing perception as *more* and *less* than habitual perception.

- Racializing perception is structured by an “I cannot”.

I can

I cannot

I can see race

I cannot see otherwise
2. RACIALIZING AFFECT

- **Case 1**: School teacher’s repulsion in face of Muslim student wearing the *hijab* (bandana).

- Immediate reaction (pre-reflective) appears as “natural” reaction.

- Responsibility for racist reaction is projected onto the other (veiled Muslim girl).

- Exclusion of veiled Muslim female *subjectivity* or *agency*.

- Fanon: “*affective ankylosis*”
  - temporal rigidity, immobility, and numbness.
3. HESITATION

- Ontologically, hesitation and delay define the structure of time for Bergson:
  - *all is not given.*
  - reality as *becoming* and tendency.

- Phenomenologically, hesitation is felt when the course of habitual action is interrupted and we feel something instead:
  - *affect replaces and delays habit.*

3. HESITATION

- Hesitating affect vs. ankylosed affect

- What is AFFECT? (From Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*)

  Body’s “useless” effort, directed towards itself, in response to a situation

  - Shows that the *passivity* of the body is a kind of activity.
  - An effort to stave off habitual reaction by prefiguring it as bodily feeling.
  - *“Un effort impuissant”* from point of view of the teleology of action.
  - Interval that permits an *awareness of habitual schemas* (‘memory of the present’ or witness).

- Hesitating affect: a *slowing down* of perception?
3. HESITATION

- Can racializing habits be undone by hesitating?

- Hesitation as necessary but not sufficient.

- The need for indirect strategies to foster hesitation.

  
  - Disrupting racial habits by changing one’s “environment” (social, geographical, aesthetic, and political environments).

  - What I have shown: This needs to give rise to discomfort (hesitation).

- How to sustain hesitation? The role of past attachments and memory.
4. TWO KINDS OF HESITATION

- **OBJECTION:** Hesitation tracks social positionality and oppression.

- A comparison with the experience of hesitation described by Iris Marion Young in “Throwing Like a Girl” (*On Female Body Experience*, Oxford UP, 2005).

- Two kinds of hesitation with structural and phenomenological differences.

- Critique of the seamless and unhesitating norm of the bodily “I can”:
  - False dilemma that opposes unwavering habit to paralyzing hesitation.
  - Improvising and creative habit already hesitates, but this is not felt as a disruption.
5. CRITICAL AND ETHICAL PERCEPTION

Perception is an institution: There is a normative level according to which we see. The concept of “lateral passivity” from: Merleau-Ponty, L’Institution, la Passivité: Notes de cours au Collège de France, 1954-55 (Editions Belin, 2003).

What does it mean to say that we see with or according to others? TWO SENSES:

1) We already see with others. (Perceptual norms are instituted.)
   - Dependence on and appropriation of others
   - Exclusion of others

2) An attentive effort to see with others: Changing how we see, in response to “unassimilable” events, so as to do justice to others. HOW?
   - HESITATION
   - CRITICAL MEMORY
5. CRITICAL AND ETHICAL PERCEPTION

*How can hesitation be kept open and made productive?*

- Cases 2 (Haslanger) and 3 (my partner).

- Living with others must be understood as an enduring process.

- One's perceptual and affective fields are reoriented through attachments to others.

- This is *re-orientation* not only of the *present* but also change in the way the *past* is remembered.

  - Critical memory as an opening onto a *shared and intersubjective past*: Other memories are heard.

  - The past is not left behind but weighs on and influences the present *differently*.

*The need for ethical and anti-racist work at the pre-reflective level of habit: hence the value of hesitation.*