

HORIZONS OF CRITIQUE: FROM TRANSCENDENTAL TO CRITICAL AND POLITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

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Our political present is characterized by the rise of right-wing populism. Whether in North or South America, Europe or Asia, right-wing populist parties are on the rise everywhere, and with them, nationalism, racism, and sexism. This trend has not only led to a repoliticization of society, but also of academic philosophy. Phenomenology as a discipline has not remained unaffected by this repoliticization. In the U.S., a strong movement has emerged under the label of critical phenomenology paralleled by the recent rise of political phenomenology in Europe. Critical and political phenomenology share the aim of positioning phenomenology as a critical project able to question social relations of domination and power. As such, they relate to Husserl's transcendental phenomenology in different ways. In the following paper, I want to uncover this relation by fleshing out the varieties of critique that come with transcendental, critical and political phenomenology. My main aim thereby is to show the conceptual and methodological differences between these approaches as well as their intrinsic connections. Therefore, I will not so much focus on the concrete analysis of phenomena of domination and power, but rather on the following question: from which standpoint can these phenomena be criticized?

As a guideline, I will use the concept of horizon, which plays an essential role in phenomenology, to describe the process of sensemaking. Husserl defines "horizon" as the supporting background from which individual perceptual phenomena can emerge in order to show themselves *as* something. In this context, Husserl distinguishes different kinds of horizons, but ultimately, he argues that the world itself is the "universal horizon" (1970, 144). In Husserl, the term is mainly used in a purely analytical manner and has no further political implications. However, its critical potential can be unfolded by showing that social relations of power figure as horizons and thus subtly structure the field of the visible. In this sense, Linda Martín Alcoff states: "The concept of horizon helps to capture the background, framing assumptions we bring with us to perception and understanding, the congealed experiences that become premises by which we strive to make sense of the world" (2006, 95). I will take up this idea in the following and show how the concept of

horizon in transcendental, critical, and political phenomenology can become a means of critique to question scientific, social, and political phenomena. In particular I will show how the phenomenological method of demonstration can become a means of political critique under conditions of conflicting horizons.

I. TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGY AS CRITIQUE

Let me approach the critical claim of transcendental phenomenology by turning to its founding father, Edmund Husserl. Among Husserl's most groundbreaking doctrines is the intentionality of consciousness. Consciousness, according to Husserl, is always "consciousness of something" (1960, 41). Husserl thereby is not so much interested in specific experiences of particular things, but in the structures of consciousness underlying particular sorts of experiences. The object of transcendental analysis therefore is *consciousness in general*. In the following, I would like to point out the critical implications of this analysis on the basis of Husserl's investigation of the horizon intentionality of perceptual consciousness. Of course, this brings only a fraction of Husserl's rich analytical and methodological reflections into view. However, the focus on the transcendental analysis of horizon intentionality will allow us to draw a line of connection to critical and political phenomenology and to discover similarities and differences.

First, if we first turn to the act of perception, one of the central lessons of Husserl's phenomenology is that objects of consciousness are never given to us completely in our view, but always only in "adumbrations" (*Abschattungen*) (1983, 9). Consider the perception of a house; we never see the whole house from all sides, but always only the sides facing us. Nevertheless, according to Husserl, we envision the whole house in the act of perception. This is due to what Husserl calls the "internal horizon" of consciousness (1970, 162). With this concept Husserl designates a structure of anticipation which points us to the other sides of the perceived object. Part of the perception of the house, for instance, is that it has a backside and that while we are looking at the frontside, we keep this invisible backside present. Husserl calls this capacity "appresentation" (1960, 109). The actual object of consciousness—"the house"—then is only given to us by the fact that presentation and appresentation constantly complement each other.

Second, the internal horizon must be distinguished from the "external horizon" (1970, 162). With it, Husserl points out that in every perception we not only keep present what our perception is currently directed at, but also that which is in its environment—for example, the garage standing next to the house and the car in front of it. What is decisive here is that the things in the outer horizon are in a referential context. With the middle-class house belongs the garage, and in the garage belongs a car. This indicates that the objects of consciousness never appear isolated as individual things, but within contexts of significance. The organizing center of such a context of significance will be, in most cases, human engagement in the world. For instance, let us imagine that a sudden thundershower forces me to seek shelter. In this scenario, the house, the garage, and the car now would

show themselves in terms of how well they fulfill this shelter function. The outer horizon of perception thus demonstrates that something always shows itself *as* something in the world to consciousness. By means of this *as*-structure, the object of perception is always already situationally embedded.

Third, the fact that we see objects as houses, garages, and cars, and that we have knowledge of which of these best protects us from a thunderstorm, points us to the idea that the inner and outer horizons are not always simply given, but often must be learned. Although significance must be learned individually, this learning itself draws on an epistemic horizon that Husserl calls the “life-horizon” or just the “world-horizon” (1970, 144, 138). Uncovering this horizon in its genesis is the task Husserl increasingly takes up in his genetic phenomenology, especially in the 1920s and 1930s (Bernet, Kern, Marbach 1993, 195). The focus here is on how both explicit knowledge of the world (*knowing-that*) and implicit knowledge of orientation (*knowing-how*) are sedimented in the horizon of the lifeworld and are passed on from generation to generation by means of cultural and social institutions. By tracing the genesis further and further, one sooner or later must encounter what Husserl calls “primal institution” (*Urstiftung*) (1960, 80). What is meant by this is the collective event in which an epistemic concept first becomes socially established. Husserl himself makes this clear with the example of a pair of scissors, whose “final sense” must be learned to see the scissors “as scissors” (1960, 111). This final sense is embedded in a collective, social, and technical history of this tool and its modes of use. The same is true for the example of the house. Its meaning is also embedded in a social and technical history of dwelling that can be uncovered at different levels.¹ Such institutional events are not a one-time act; rather, it is indispensable that primal institutions are renewed again and again by “re-institutions” or are even transformed by “new-institutions” as Husserl argues.²

The three moments of horizon intentionality presented here do not come into play one after another, but rather are at work simultaneously; internal, external and world-horizon are always already there at the same time. In their totality they constitute the intentionality of consciousness. Husserl’s transcendental analysis thereby shows that the internal horizon is responsible for the fact that we see “something” (*etwas*); the external horizon leads to the fact, that we see this something “as something” (*als etwas*); and the world-horizon provides us with an epistemic field of intelligibility of what can be seen as something in what contexts of reference. This preliminary analysis of the intentionality of consciousness as “consciousness of something” brings us to the question of what critical impulses can be gained from transcendental phenomenology.

Let us now turn to the question what horizon intentionality has to do with critique. To do this, we must first take a step back. The point of engagement of Husserl’s reflections is, as is well known, his concern with the “general positing” (*Generalthesis*) of the natural attitude. It consists in the fact that the world “as factually existent actuality”—or the “something as something-structure” as we can say now—is simply there (1970, 57). For Husserl, this attitude must be made transparent in its origin. Phenomenology therefore uses the method

¹ See Martin Heidegger (1993).

² See Thomas Bedorf (2020).

of *epoché*, i.e., the bracketing of all prejudices and self-evident facts which guide our natural beliefs (Husserl 1970, 60). As a result of the *epoché*, we arrive at a phenomenological attitude which is characterized by the fact that in it we assume the position of a “*disinterested onlooker*” (1960, 35; emphasis in original). In this position, there is ultimately nothing to be done but to watch mundane consciousness at work and describe its mode of operation systematically. This is of course no easy task, and it raises important methodological and analytical questions regarding how to conduct what Husserl calls reduction and eidetic variation.³

Phenomenology acquires a critical character in Husserl wherever it can enlighten mundane consciousness about itself. Since Husserl’s project of formulating a transcendental phenomenology is directed at consciousness in general, it unfolds its critical potential primarily where the mundane conception is guided by an obscured conception of our mind. An example of this is the so-called “computer model of the mind,” which assumes that our brain resembles a supercomputer that is fed with sensory data, which it then processes according to certain rules.⁴ This notion, mediated by our natural attitude, has for a long time been influential for the scientific worldview, especially in artificial intelligence research. The inadequacy of this model was pointed out early on by Hubert Dreyfus on the basis of the so-called “frame problem” (2014, 250). Simply put, the problem lies in the fact that artificial intelligences have great difficulties in specifying what information in their environment is relevant for their respective task. In other words, artificial intelligence systems are ill-equipped to identify in which horizon a phenomenon must be taken up. The critique can be extended into practice and gain more political weight in the process. Think of predictive policing for example where the racist effects of algorithmic AI have often been pointed out.⁵ These effects do not simply result from the fact that AI has been fed false data, but rather from the fact that AI is not able to understand the horizon of its data. For example, if the AI is more likely to send police to disadvantaged neighborhoods, that is because the data it uses reflects ongoing policing priorities that target predominantly such neighborhoods, and this horizon is not reflected by the AI. The matter becomes even more problematic when one pictures how a “horizonless” AI can prefigure human horizons. For example, the software “PredPol”—used by the Los Angeles Police Department, among others, works by giving officers maps of their jurisdictions with little red boxes indexing where crime is expected to occur during the day. Jackie Wang (2018), in her work *Carceral Capitalism*, critically questions the effect of this practice. She asks: “what is the attitude or mentality of the officers who are patrolling one of the boxes? How might the expectation of finding crime influence what the officers actually find?” (241). Wang here indicates that the AI can prefigure the intentionality of police officers by creating expectations that frame people and situations in a way that can escalate otherwise unnoticed irregularities into crimes. The example thereby makes clear how the transcendental analysis of consciousness can become a means of critique. It shows that an inadequate understanding of the horizon

³ See Maren Wehrle (2022) and Jaakko Belt (2022).

⁴ See Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi (2012, 5).

⁵ See Ruha Benjamin (2019).

intentionality of consciousness in AI-modelling can lead to dysfunctional and discriminatory practices.

II. CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY AS CRITIQUE

A prominent criticism that has been repeatedly levelled at Husserl is that his transcendental phenomenology focuses entirely on transcendental subjectivity and thus loses sight of the issue of intersubjectivity. Dan Zahavi (1997) pointed out that this criticism is not justified, insofar as transcendental subjectivity always already includes transcendental intersubjectivity. This is made clear in the case of horizon intentionality. Objects refer, with their averted profiles, referential contexts, and with their epistemic foundations, already to other subjects who co-constitute them. Therefore, “intersubjectivity,” Zahavi argues, “must belong *a priori* to the structure of constituting subjectivity” (306). The crucial problem of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology is therefore not, in my view, the reduction to transcendental subjectivity, but rather the methodological restrictions that come along with it. As mentioned in the previous section, the transcendental analysis is only interested in consciousness *in general*, but not in *concrete* consciousness. As a result of this, it is in danger of losing sight of the conditions of its own philosophizing.

Sara Ahmed (2006) makes clear why this is problematic in her study *Queer Phenomenology*. She here asks, what makes Husserl’s phenomenological attitude possible in the first place? What are the conditions that allow Husserl to think about the horizon structure of the perception in his study room? According to Ahmed, there is first the fact that he has a study in which he can turn to philosophical reflection free from distractions (31). Furthermore, the fact that his desk is ready and clear for writing depends on the fact that others kept this desk clear. What makes him independent from the burdens of reproductive labor is the gendered division of labor in his time (30). Accordingly, for Ahmed, in the background of Husserl’s phenomenological setting lies the bourgeois home with its gender arrangement. His situation thus differs significantly from that of female thinkers. Regarding this, Ahmed refers to the biographical descriptions of Adrienne Rich, who explains how her children tend to pull her away from her desk and keep her from concentrating on her work (2006, 32). One might want to object that the historical structures of the gender division of labor have nothing to do with transcendental subjectivity, since the general structure of horizon intentionality in Husserl’s consciousness is no different from that of his wife Malvine or Adrienne Rich. And this is true. But the suspicion goes in another direction; because Husserl does not recognize that the adoption of the phenomenological attitude is made possible by his situatedness as a bourgeois male, he is not motivated to consider consciousness as situated consciousness rather than consciousness in general. Ahmed thus points to the situatedness of the consciousness that asks transcendental questions. Therefore, her critique does not refer to a deterministic correlation but to a social relation between the situatedness of subjects, in this case Husserl, and the kind of philosophical questions they ask.

What at first glance may only appear as an empirical critique, at second glance points to a systematic problem of the phenomenological method. To make this clear, let us turn once again to the *epoché*. We had seen above that to engage in phenomenological attitude for Husserl is to make oneself a “*disinterested onlooker*” of one’s own consciousness (1960, 35; emphasis in original). What Husserl overlooks here is the fact that the spectator is not looking from nowhere, but from a particular place. This, however, creates a problem: the spectator is never able to fully survey consciousness since the place from which he looks cannot itself come into view in the process. The blind spot that comes along with the adoption of the phenomenological attitude is what we can call the “horizon of givenness.” It represents the background of all that the phenomenologist takes for granted in adopting his specific attitude. With regard to the difficulty of getting this background into view, already Merleau-Ponty already speaks of the “impossibility of a complete reduction” (2002, xv).

The crucial point of critical phenomenology seems to me that it tries to uncover the horizon of givenness. A point of departure for this endeavor is the phenomenon of double consciousness. William Du Bois (2007) used this term to draw attention to the specific experiences of Black people in a racist, white majority society in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*. He describes it as follows: “it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (8). With double-consciousness, Du Bois addresses the phenomenon that oppressed social groups tend to observe themselves simultaneously from their own perspective as well as from the perspective of others. They see themselves from two perspectives at the same time. This double observer position comes with unease since it leads to a troubled and split consciousness that is hyperaware of itself. Nevertheless, precisely because of its splitting it holds the potential that the respective hidden horizons of givenness mutually illuminate each other. DuBois’ concept of double-consciousness has subsequently been taken up by engaged theorists such as Frantz Fanon (1967), Jean-Paul Sartre (1976), Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Lewis Gordon (2000), and Marianna Ortega (2016). Even though the concept is employed by the respective authors in quite different ways, I think that two more general consequences can be derived from it.

First, if the nature of double consciousness comes along with a double observer position, then it holds the potential that these two positions mutually illuminate their respective background. Second, the notion of a disinterested spectator must be questioned and complicated. The position designated by Husserl must be understood as stemming from a particular interest, namely the interest in the universal which makes his object consciousness in general. Critical phenomenology, by contrast, is not interested in consciousness in general, but in situated consciousness. Accordingly, it is not the transcendental structure of consciousness that becomes the object here, but rather the social structures that situate consciousness. Central to the work of critical phenomenology therefore is the examination

of power-structures such as white supremacy,⁶ heteropatriarchy,⁷ or compulsory able-bodiedness,⁸ which constitute an unquestioned horizon of givenness for mundane consciousness.

Let us turn to the example of white supremacy to make this clearer. When Ahmed notes that “whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it” (2007, 157), she stresses that for white people their whiteness is a horizon of givenness which normally does not come into view, because it is the place from which they see the world. In a similar vein, Alcoff stresses that racism often tends to be immune for critical review, since it prefigures what can come into view: “if race is a structure of contemporary perception, then it [...] makes up a part of what appears to me as the natural setting of all my thoughts. It is the field, rather than that which stands out” (Alcoff 2006, 188). One effect of this is that whiteness and racism are often grasped as phenomena that only concern others. White people, George Yancy (2014) argues, often think that they are not racist, when they explicitly condone racism or do not use the N-word. Yancy calls such strategies “white talk” (46). They serve to separate “white racists” who believe in white supremacy from “good whites” (45) who are concerned about racial equality. Even if such an anti-racist position surely is better than blatant racism, it fails to bring into view the complexities of racism. Moreover, it tends to prevent white people from thinking about how racism functions as a subtle system of oppression. Following this line of thought in Ahmed, Alcoff, and Yancy we can say that white supremacy for a white situated consciousness acts as a horizon of givenness.

If white supremacy functions as an inaccessible horizon of reality for white subjects, this relationship of domination usually resists self-reflection. Its uncovering therefore requires confrontation with other perspectives that allow this horizon to come into view. For Alcoff, this means that white people also need to achieve a double consciousness that allows them to dissociate them from their horizon of givenness (2014, 272). While marginalized subjects often already bring such a consciousness with them due to their situatedness, white people have to cultivate such a consciousness. This requires “fearless listening” to marginalized subjects; in other words, it demands that white people take marginalized experiences seriously, and that they become willing to question their certainties (Yancy 2014, 46). Focusing on the racialized experiences of marginalized subjects thus shows that white supremacy does not only function on the level of conscious prejudice, but already on the level of perception and bodily orientation.⁹ White supremacy is constituted by a field of visibility in which Black people come into view for the white gaze only as “problematic people” from whom danger and violence emanate (Gordon 2000, 69). Yancy tries to make clear how such a perception is already inscribed in the body schema of whites by way of the so called “elevator scenario” (2014, 54). Here, Yancy describes the experiences of a Black man who enters an elevator in which there is already a white woman who—barely noticeably—reacts to his appearance by gripping her handbag slightly tighter. In this micro-

⁶ See George Yancy (2016) and Helen Ngo (2017).

⁷ See Gayle Salamon (2010) and Johanna Oksala (2016).

⁸ See Robert McRuer (2006) and Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (2011).

⁹ See Ngo (2017).

gesture, which needs not even to occur to the woman herself as a racializing gesture, one can see how racism and prejudice are deeply inscribed in the body schema of white people. To bring such deeply embedded forms of racist comportment into view, white people need to engage with the experiences of racialized people. When such an engagement of experience succeeds, a white double consciousness can emerge that brings its own horizon of givenness into view. Gail Weiss captures the critical effect of such awareness in the following words: “By rendering the horizon visible . . . one also transforms the horizon itself, making it the critical figure rather than the uncritical ground of one’s discourse” (2008, 107). For Weiss, critical phenomenology ultimately amounts to a “politics of the horizon” (112). Its task is to bring into view unquestioned horizons of givenness through the intersubjective widening of horizons so that individuals can enter into a critical relationship to their own situatedness, especially where it is interwoven with social relations of domination and power. This closely echoes Lisa Guenther’s recent account of the senses of critique implied in critical phenomenology. For Guenther, phenomenological critique first and foremost deals with the exposure of “quasi-transcendental structures” in order to bring power structures to light (2021, 10, 13). By making them visible, these structures no longer have the character of unquestionable givens and can become the object of critical political action.

III. POLITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY AS CRITIQUE

If critical phenomenology can be understood to stand for a shift from consciousness in general to situated consciousness, then one might suppose that political phenomenology comes along with a turn to political consciousness. But what could that mean? Transcendental as well as critical phenomenology, as I have argued, are already political in the sense that their insights can challenge distorted scientific world views (such as in the case of AI) as well as social structures of domination (such as in the case of white supremacy). Accordingly, politicizing phenomenology seems to be merely a question of a critical application of phenomenological concepts. Even if this is partly true, however, it is not the whole story. The genuine object of political phenomenology, I want to argue here, is irreconcilable conflict. This brings into view the fact that we are not only situated subjects, but that we can relate to our own situatedness by taking a political stance; and furthermore, that taking such a stance often demands we pick a side in insurmountable political confrontations.

To better understand this, we can turn to Hannah Arendt’s political phenomenology. Arendt starts out her analysis with what she calls the experience of the “human condition of plurality” (1998, 7). Plurality here means not only that we as human beings are all unique and therefore different, but also that we have diverging political opinions about how the world we share should be arranged. Liberals, republicans, socialists, or feminists cling on to what Ludwig Wittgenstein would have called different “forms of life”, which means that they have different background assumptions about matters such as the nation state, cross-

border migration, the nuclear family, or the protection of the climate and nature (1958, 8). If we grasp such background assumptions as horizons of perception and understanding by which we make sense of the world, the experience of political plurality comes along with the experience of conflicting horizons. The reasons for such conflicts are manifold and rooted in the fact that there are no ultimate answers to political questions regarding the just, the good, and the pragmatic, but always only a number of possible options between which we have to choose. The very essence of the political therefore is characterized by the fact that a decision must be made under conditions of conflicting horizons. To clarify what this means, let me present three irresolvable forms of democratic conflict.

(1) *The conflict over the people*: Since ancient times the democratic community is based on the claim of the equality of its citizens. The question of who counts as a citizen, as Arendt points out, has always been contested (1998, 199). As is well known, in the Greek *polis*, slaves and women were not counted as full citizens; or differently, in the period of the Enlightenment, Black people and women did not share the same rights as upper class white men. Teleological approaches now understand such kinds of exclusions as historically conditioned deficits that can be overcome as the democratic claim to equality continues to unfold. According to such a view, the history of democracy amounts to an advancing inclusion where formerly excluded individuals are bestowed a civic status. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the success of the Civil Rights Movement seem to support such a claim, initially. Against such a view however, radical democratic thinkers such as Claude Lefort (1988) and Jacques Rancière (1999) point out that the dispute over equality is irresolvable and cannot be put to rest. Even if we imagine a fully emancipated society, exclusions will persist because the question of who should be authorized to participate in the decision-making democratic community can only be answered by drawing contingent internal and external boundaries. We can see what this means in concrete terms by looking at the right to vote; internal boundaries, for example, must draw distinctions based on the age and maturity levels at which individuals are considered capable of participating in elections. Further, one must decide whether or not such rights can be withdrawn.¹⁰ The same holds true for external boundaries: under ideal conditions, all those individuals who are affected by a political decision would have to be included in the democratic decision-making process. However, since the effects of political decisions often reach far beyond local and national communities, this principle is not feasible for collective self-determination (Benhabib 2004, 2). In effect, boundaries that differentiate who belongs to a political community and who does not must be drawn. In either case, no matter what position we take, the constitution of the political community comes along with an exclusion. This does not mean, however, that such exclusions should simply be accepted, but rather that the question of who belongs to the people and how democratic equality should be fashioned necessarily remains a controversial question.

(2) *The conflict over the constitution*: A second irreconcilable democratic conflict concerns the question of how the democratic community should be constituted. The main task of any constitution, Arendt argues in *On Revolution*, is to found a “political space” in which

¹⁰ In the case of mental illness for example. See Arash Abizadeh (2012).

“public freedom” can unfold (1990, 126). Here we enter the field of classical political constitutionalism. In it, liberalism, deliberativism, and republicanism present us with quite different conceptions of how political participation and political power can be distributed. The ongoing virulence of such questions can be seen in two lively debates that took place in recent decades. First, the debate on empowered participatory governance in which the legitimacy and efficacy of current representative democracy is questioned in favor of democratic experiments that emphasize the potential of modes of direct local participation¹¹; second, the debate over judicial review, which centers on the question of the division of political power between the legislative and the judicial branch. While critics of judicial review argue that constitutional courts come with a limitation and distortion of popular sovereignty, proponents argue that it gives political minorities the opportunity to politically contest majority decisions in which they have not been sufficiently taken into account.¹² Regardless of which side one takes in these disputes (Arendt certainly supports direct participation and judicial review), what is crucial here is that constitutional issues are not settled once and for all with the founding of democratic communities but continually persist, since there are various legitimate ways in which political freedom can be institutionalized. Political freedom, like political equality, is therefore necessarily a contested concept.

(3) *The conflict over public affairs*: The democratic community is further characterized by the existence of deep disagreements. In his seminal article, Richard Fogelin (1985) describes deep disagreements of opinion as conflicts resulting from different interpretations and considerations of democratic norms. For him, exemplary cases of this include the disputes over pregnancy termination and affirmative action measures. What characterizes these conflicts is that they are not irrational, but rational in the sense that both sides can claim fundamental rights to formulate their position. Deep disagreements stem from the fact that these rights can clash, necessitating a careful weighing and balancing of them. The result of this process is closely linked to the interpretation of democratic norms. This can be clearly seen in the call for “freedom.” The agreement over the democratic value of freedom in practice does not mean that there is agreement on political issues. Representatives of libertarianism, liberalism, communitarianism, or socialism will interpret this value quite differently—Isaiah Berlin (1969) as negative, Philip Pettit (2012) as non-dominating, Arendt (1990) as positive, or Axel Honneth (2014) as social freedom—and consequently represent divergent ideas of what it means to realize freedom. Deep disagreements of opinion make it clear that behind the seemingly universal validity of democratic norms there are always processes of interpretation and evaluation, the results of which depend on what idea of a good life political groups cherish. Consequently, such conflicts cannot be resolved once and for all in a democratic community, but they can only ever be dealt with in the course of ongoing conflicts.

In our political present, the three areas of democratic conflict presented here are increasingly at risk of being neglected in the course of what Jacques Rancière has called

¹¹ See Archon Fung and Eric O. Wright (2003).

¹² See Richard Bellamy (2007) on the one hand, and Cristine Lafont (2020) on the other.

post-democracy (Rancière 1999, 95). What is meant by this is that in the present day there has been an erosion of citizens' opportunities for democratic participation and action, even though central institutions of parliamentary democracy are formally intact. One of the reasons for this erosion is the increasing influence of so-called non-majoritarian institutions. They ensure that political decisions are increasingly being outsourced by political parties to expert committees, constitutional courts, or central banks. This has the advantage of being able to surround their respective policies with the aura of science (in the form of expert committees), justice (in the form of constitutional courts) or necessity (in the form of central banks). Politicians, based on this, can then present their decisions as inevitable, necessary solutions. As a result, that which makes politics political, namely the conflict about how we want to live together, has increasingly disappeared from the democratic public. Against such approaches, post-foundationalist positions such as political phenomenology attempt to make clear that the democratic community does not rest on ultimate reasons, but on political decisions that we make in the course of conflicts about the people, the constitution, and public affairs.¹³ Accordingly, the critical thrust of political phenomenology is to keep the field of democratic conflict open and to shield it from closure.

It may seem now that critical and political phenomenology pursue the same goal. Both are concerned with the multiplicity and openness of horizons. While critical phenomenology tries to counter the solipsism of white supremacy by bringing marginalized perspectives to the fore, for example, political phenomenology is concerned with pointing out the multiplicity of possible political projects in the face of political foundationalism. Both approaches thus seem to be concerned with a broadening of our horizons. A decisive difference, however, lies in the task assigned to this broadening. While critical phenomenology serves to produce "genuinely shared horizons," as Weiss puts it, the ultimate goal of political phenomenology in contrast is to uncover conflicting horizons (2008, 112). It rests on the insight that not all horizons of different life forms can be reconciled with each other in what Hans Georg Gadamer would have termed a "fusion of horizons" (2004, 305). Many horizons are bound to specific positionings and are therefore mutually exclusive. While the broadening thus serves in one case to expand our sense of the world by integrating other perspectives, in the other case, it serves to expose counter-perspectives and thus to prepare a field for political choices. Of course, the two projects need not necessarily contradict each other. Often, broadening our social horizon to include new horizons is a condition for perceiving lines of conflict in the first place. Nevertheless, the goal of political phenomenology is not to generate shared horizons, but rather to contrast conflicting political horizons.

IV. PHENOMENOLOGICAL DEMONSTRATION AS A POLITICAL STYLE OF CRITIQUE

If at the core of the human condition of plurality there is the experience of irresolvable conflict, the question arises as to how we can deal with such conflicts. In this section, I want to argue that phenomenology offers a genuine political style of critique for this. To

¹³ See Matthias Flatscher (forthcoming).

make this clear, let's first look at two classic ways of dealing with conflict as they can be found in political liberalism and in political populism. Political liberalism seeks to resolve political conflicts by means of compromise. Richard Bellamy distinguishes three strategies in this regard. In negotiation, the parties can try to move toward each other by means of mutual concessions, they can try to retreat to a lowest common denominator by means of compensation, or they can make possible the simultaneous implementation of competing claims by means of division (1999, ch. 4). Each of these three strategies is based on the combination of a bundle of political regulatory matters in a manner that results in an outcome acceptable to both parties, although this would not apply to the regulation of the respective individual matters. Political populism, on the other hand, no longer seeks to balance political conflicts, but to intensify them antagonistically until a decision can be reached in favor of one of the disputants. In order to bring about such a decision, Chantal Mouffe believes that politics must be conducted in the mode of a "war of position" (2015, 114). Following Antonio Gramsci, this refers, in contrast to a "war of movement," to a form of struggle that does not focus on one decisive battle, but on a multitude of scattered local confrontations through which cultural hegemony is to be achieved. Whereas political liberalism resorts to compromise, to make political cooperation across divides possible, political populism tries to escalate conflicts to ultimately overpower its political opponent. An alternative political style that aims neither at compromise nor hegemony, I want to argue, can be found if we turn to phenomenology.

Husserl distinguishes the phenomenological method from competing approaches such as Immanuel Kant's transcendental philosophy, among others, by the nature of its argumentation. For Husserl, phenomenology does not proceed by means of "deduction" but by means of "demonstration" (*Aufweisung*) (2019, 203 [own translation]).¹⁴⁴ In this sense, Husserl in *Ideas I* repeatedly writes of having proceeded in his analysis by "direct demonstration" or by "intuitive demonstrations" (Husserl 1983, 64, 202). I understand Husserl's claim to be that phenomenology presents its findings in the course of reduction not in the mode of proof (*Beweis*), but in the mode of demonstration (*Aufweis*). This is also indicated by Heidegger who characterizes the phenomenological method in *Being and Time* as bringing to light that which "indicates" itself through the phenomena by means of "pointing out" (1996, 26, 154). Similarly to Husserl, Heidegger describes phenomenology not as a method based on syllogistics; rather, it aims to put a phenomenon in the right light thereby "letting something be seen" (29). Accordingly, the aim of phenomenological argumentation is not so much understanding (*Verstehen*) but moreover insight (*Einsehen*). In a similar vein, Jean-Luc Marion in *Being Given* starts out to describe the phenomenological method by pointing out that it is not "a question of proving", but "a question of showing" (2002, 7). In contrast to metaphysics, where proving means to trace something back to its origin, phenomenology is a "counter-method" that seeks to let "appearances appear in such a way that they accomplish their own apparition" (7). Like Husserl and Heidegger, Marion contrasts phenomenology to metaphysics by way of the argumentation that it

¹⁴ Fred Kersten (Husserl 1983) translates the German "Aufweisen" as "demonstrably showing" whereas Sebastian Luft and Thane Naberhaus (Husserl 2019) translate it as "authentication." I follow Kersten here since his translation better captures the expressive moment.

brings into play. I cannot follow the implications of this demonstrative method in Husserl, Heidegger, and Marion here in detail, but I would like to suggest that what they all share is the reference to an *aesthetic* rationality that can be distinguished from that of an *analytical* rationality.

Aesthetic rationality can be distinguished from analytical rationality in at least three respects. Firstly, in terms of the logic of articulation in which they address social problems. Whereas the former resorts to the means of argumentative proof, the latter proceeds with the means of figurative demonstration. Secondly, both differ with regard to the mode of cognition. Intellectual comprehension operates linearly; arguments and conclusions form a chain of reasoning. Aesthetic dramatization, on the other hand, operates figuratively. Its element is the surface; insights are achieved through compositional arrangements of individual elements into a whole. Finally, the mode of action can be distinguished. While analytical reconstruction yields to insights which lead us to think differently about political issues, aesthetic displaying leads to a “distribution of the sensible” as Rancière calls it (2010, 36). The result is that we *see* things differently. Its effects are thus not mental, but perceptual. In sum, analytical and aesthetic rationality differ in terms of their modes of articulation, cognition, and effect.

If we understand phenomenological demonstration in terms of aesthetic rationality, it can itself be understood as a specific mode of critique. Where phenomena can be seen against the background of diverging horizons, phenomenological critique can try to make these horizons accessible to others, thereby provoking what Wittgenstein called a “change of aspect” in perception (1958, 196). What is meant by this is illustrated by the famous image of the duck-rabbit. Depending on one’s perspective, the picture appears either as a duck or as a rabbit (194). In order to bring those who see only the duck to see the rabbit, or the other way around, one will have to demonstrate to them how to look at the figure. According to Wittgenstein, we use expressions for this like: “Look like this, these are the ears!” or “Look, this is the beak!” This shows that phenomenological demonstration does not use first and foremost good reasons, but hints, comparisons, associations, questions. To take another example from Linda Zerilli: if we praise a painting for, say, the luxurious quality of its colors, the gracefulness of the figures depicted, or its overall composition, then none of these reasons can compel others to find the painting in question beautiful as well (2016, 78). Nevertheless, in the best case, our descriptions can open up a new, unexpected perspective for the other and thereby cause a change of aspect in her perception.

Phenomenological demonstration for Wittgenstein is not limited to the narrow field of art; rather, it stands for an alternative mode of argumentation we can also find in courts, for example. My contention is that phenomenological demonstration is also key for the political understood as a field of conflict.¹⁵ An example for this might be the conflicting pandemic politics where we had two parties. The first one advanced strict public measures (obligations to wear masks, restrictions of public movement and gathering), the second one defended looser measures. What is important is that both parties could refer to the fundamental values of the constitution. This is because the constitution guarantees both

¹⁵ See Steffen Herrmann (2020).

the protection of health as well as the freedom of the person. Any form of pandemic politics must therefore weigh up these two fundamental rights and take a position on the question to what extent the restriction of one fundamental right can be justified at the expense of the other. It seems crucial to me that the question of how far the protection of life and health should extend largely depends on the horizon against which political freedom is understood. Two horizons of freedom here are commonly opposed to each other: the liberal concept of freedom which understands freedom as negative freedom and therefore considers all forms of external restriction as threats to freedom, and the socialist concept of freedom, which understands freedom as social freedom that can be realized only in acting together. The constraint of freedom of assembly or freedom of movement in course of pandemic politics appears differently against both horizons. While in the first case it appears as a violation of negative freedom and thus as a restriction, in the second case, it appears as a collective social effort and thus as an expression of social freedom. In other words, pandemic politics, depending on which concept of freedom is taken as its horizon can be understood either as a restriction or as a realization of freedom. To the extent that both conceptions of freedom can be justified, we are dealing here with a genuine political conflict. The conflict over the appropriate politics must therefore be understood as a conflict in which the respective parties try to present their policies against the background of a specific horizon of freedom and, in the process, demonstrate to their political opponents that this is the appropriate horizon within which we should politically judge and act.

V. KEEPING CONFLICTS ALIVE

Transcendental, critical, and political phenomenology certainly encompass more facets than I have been able to present here. The main focus of this paper was to distinguish different modes of critique that come with different conceptions of horizon intentionality in different varieties of phenomenology. As we have seen, three modes of critique can be distinguished. (1) The task of transcendental phenomenology is to uncover the basic structures of consciousness. One of these basic structures is horizon intentionality. Subsequently, transcendental phenomenology develops its critical potential wherever naïve presumptions about what kind of living beings we are at play. (2) Critical phenomenology, as we have seen, is no longer interested in consciousness in general, but rather in situated consciousness. Its critical task is to uncover the situatedness of consciousness and to make its unquestioned horizon of givenness transparent in order to expose structures of social domination as they can be found in experiences of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy or compulsory able-bodiedness. (3) Political phenomenology is interested in what can be called political consciousness. The critical task of political phenomenology is to uncover and keep open irreconcilable political conflicts between mutually exclusive horizons, and to show how political action is possible under conditions of political plurality. The phenomenological method of demonstration thereby proved to be a guide for a new style of political critique, insofar as it no longer draws an analytical, but on aesthetic rationality.

What this analysis makes clear is that all three forms of phenomenological critique can lead to a politicization, and that to this extent political phenomenology could also be used as an overarching term for the political use of phenomenological concepts. Nevertheless, even in this case, it may be worthwhile to distinguish between a broad and a narrow concept of political phenomenology. A broad concept of political phenomenology would then stand for the politicization of social phenomena via phenomenological critique, while a narrow concept would be reserved for those disputes over irresolvable disagreements about the people, the constitution, and the public affairs that together constitute the democratic field. The question of a phenomenological political style seems to be independent from such questions of adequate framing, insofar as the practices of demonstration can be useful not only in genuinely political conflicts, but also wherever social power relations or scientific assumptions are to be criticized.

The classification presented here is heuristic in nature and should not blind us to the fact that there is overlap between the three phenomenological approaches. First, this is the case with respect to the relation between transcendental and critical phenomenology. Recently, disputes have arisen over the question whether Husserl is to be classified as a classical or a critical phenomenologist. While most of the contributions in the volume *50 Concept for a Critical Phenomenology*¹⁶ read Husserl exclusively as a transcendental and therefore classical phenomenologist, the contributions in the volume *Phenomenology as Critique*¹⁷ point out that we can also find in Husserl a lot of methodological instruments for a critical phenomenology. To this debate I only want to add that Husserl's work of course not only comprises the transcendental account presented here, but also other types of investigations which address situated consciousness (e.g., his analysis on home- and alien-world, on intersubjectivity or on birth and death). The dispute over how to classify Husserl's thought seems to me closely related to the question on which of these analyses one draws. In a recent study Neal DeRoo (2022) has argued that both modes of analysis are internally linked, and that transcendental phenomenology necessarily leads to what I have here called so far critical phenomenology. I agree with this analysis but would still add that this does not make Husserl a critical phenomenologist in a narrow sense. This is not so much due to the fact that his analyses do not have enough means for the analysis of situated subjectivity, but because Husserl was not interested in questions of power.

Secondly, there is also overlap between critical and political phenomenology at least in two ways. On the one hand, relations of social domination often must themselves be understood as the effect of political choices. Social and economic regulatory policies undoubtedly help white supremacy and heteropatriarchy thrive. Social domination thus always proves to be embedded in structures and institutions that are created and maintained by political means. Conversely, social relations of domination usually also extend into political conflicts. This is the case when a political group tries to win over a conflict with the help of social stigmatization. For example, conservatives often understand queer activists' claims and demands not as part of a political project that is in political

¹⁶ See Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon (2020).

¹⁷ See Andreea Smaranda Aldea, David Carr, and Sara Heinämaa (2022).

competition with their own idea of heterosexuality; rather, the protagonists who raise such a demand are branded as a public danger whose “perversions” and “abnormalities” threaten to disintegrate society. Stigmatization here serves as a means to depoliticize political conflicts by making it seem like there is not a real political choice at play. The main task for political phenomenology here is to preserve the genuinely political character of such conflicts by exposing them as conflicts between diverging forms of life. Once the ground for democratic conflict has been prepared in such a way, the method of phenomenological demonstration—as I hope to have shown—offers a promising political means of convincing others of one’s own way of life.

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