Introduction

At first glance, phenomenology as a philosophical movement born in the 20th century seems to be essentially involved in pure epistemological questions, following thus the original impulse in this direction produced by Husserl’s tremendous body of work. Indeed, we could summarize the Husserlian project with a simple question: how is knowledge possible? It seems that there are many obstacles between the original theoretical relevance of phenomenology and any possible practical function it should play beyond academia and its scientific production. That is why different questions need to be asked: how is it possible to conceive phenomenology as a political theory? To what extent would the phenomenological method immanently imply a political attitude? In a manner of speaking, the question is not to find in which way political philosophy could be phenomenologically oriented, as if some eternal political problems were the objects of a dubious and useless science such as philosophy seen through an unhistorical perspective. The problem is more about thinking how and why phenomenology itself as a method is necessarily political. Phenomenology, following Husserl, must be seen as a protest against the false assumptions that allow us to presume that we know how to answer questions when in fact we do not even know what it means to ask such questions. Politics forms a specific domain for a philosophical inquiry regarding, for example, the constitution of organized societies, the exercise of power, the legality in rights and duties, the legitimacy of violence and conflicts, the conduct of government affairs and, last but not least, the meaning of war and destruction throughout history. In order to properly think the relation between phenomenology and political theory, we need only briefly expose what could be referred to as ‘political phenomenology’, namely a specific philosophical method assuming its own epistemology directed towards political issues.

To strengthen the programmatic focus of this overview, the first theoretical statement will be the following: the expression ‘political phenomenology’ simply means seeking a philosophical path through political issues that are historically involved in human existence. Any philosopher who thinks through his own social function as a political phenomenologist must aim to produce a critique of political knowledge, which is usually taken for granted. To know how political phenomenology could be relevant as a philosophical movement, we have to clarify first of all which works could be already conceived as historical expressions of political phenomenology. Because there are many such works, we will present only a few of them, united by the question of praxis in a situation...
and the seeking of a way to an absolute self-responsibility, either achieved or not by the authors. Indeed, the main issue according to both questions of praxis and self-responsibility stays a classical one for philosophy in general: do we necessarily need to find a consistency between philosophical works and their authors? Should a book of political theory be read independently from its author’s life and choices? Our hypothesis could be formulated as follows: we conceive political phenomenology as a resolution (Entschluss) to openly assume the socio-political dimensions entailed in practising philosophy. This requires the acceptance of specific political attitudes in relation to society in general, namely an indifference, the practical negation of any teleological system of thought, a responsibility described without any principle of order and grounded on a detachment from any kind of belief. Then one might be able to design rules (and not principles) for acting and thinking through how human existence is embroiled in political issues within the context of contemporary politics.

Political phenomenology as a method

The main question regarding political phenomenology lies in praxis. How could we describe any political phenomenon with the help of this singular way of doing philosophy? In short, political phenomenology should be conceived as a method of understanding in which way any practical a priori appears to be the foundation of thinking and acting, especially in its historical dimension. But the question of method does not mean that we need to find a universal theory that could be used as systematic structure of analysis for any kind of political phenomenon. What does matter is in fact the practical environment that conditions acting and thinking in relation to motivational relevancies that play a role in concrete individual and collective actions (Schütz 1975). Finding the proper method to understand the socio-political conditions of concrete human existence amounts to saying that the inherent historicity of any practical environment needs to be seen as a situation that provides the possibility of critique throughout a philosophical work (Arendt 1998). In other words, the political phenomenologist needs to perceive himself as historically situated in a meaningful whole in a manner to use his philosophical distance as a fruitful estrangement and then in order to remove himself from an accustomed place or set of associations. The philosophical work, especially the one produced by political phenomenology, is therefore aimed at finding ways to understand each dimension of the polis.

That is why the basic methodology for a political phenomenology consists of three steps, implemented in praxis and dependent on one another: historical, exegetical and experimental. This methodology could be defined as situational hermeneutics providing a critical content for political phenomenology conceived as a political theory.

As previously said, the first step is historical. Political phenomenology is neither a pure speculative science, a utopian inquiry, nor a set of empirical descriptions: it simply helps to understand political life in general. The critique of positivism and scientific objectivism may be considered to have been reached by Husserl, among others, and for some aspects by earlier phenomenology with its adaptation of earlier Husserlian research in logic (Hua VI, Reinach 2007, Stein 2006, Walther 1922). But any author practising political phenomenology firstly needs to identify a textual material composed of works published about events and experiences during a considered historical period. The methodological question consists in keeping a phenomenological gesture (see ‘experimental step’ below) combined with an interest in political history. That is why we need both past political theories in philosophy and any sources from different fields of research (legal studies, sociology, psychology, etc.). All of these textual sources fall within a specific historical ground, for example the events of the 20th century, such as the Great War or the emancipation movements during the 1960s, but also the experiences, choices and constraints
they expressed. The unity of this diversity of knowledge, supposed to be drawn from an idea or an original principle, is rejected as being too speculative or at least as being the production of cultural world-views following the progressive death of theological principles (for a critique of secularization in politics see Löwith 1984). On the other hand, the Diltheyan principle ‘individual is ineffable’ does not guarantee the unity of the psychological expression for an author working in political phenomenology. The historical unity comes only from the produced totality of texts. That is why the first step of the work consists in reading every text in such a manner as to discover the fundamental constants hidden behind institutions, norms, values, legal statements, i.e. every expression of a political rationality that needed to be ignored to stay efficient in praxis.

Discovering past philosophical theories regarding this political rationality is useful to establish in which way every theoretician depends on his general situation as a worker. Texts are all selected as testimonies to the contingent situation stabilized in the past: writing is conceived as an absolutization of the individual memory. Reading is supposed to understand what is not immediately apparent, what seems to have been forgotten, even if the events and experiences that are investigated in order to be clarified happened recently. If oblivion is the vital engine of history, the ‘critical’ reading, in order to follow up this meaning developed originally by Nietzsche, expresses the general orientation of the work, namely a political direction. We need to focus the historical analysis on what justified the necessity of the expressions: on the one side, those of the past, the totality of texts; confronted, on the other side, with those of the present, the political direction of the author, considering his own situation lived as a reader, writer, student, teacher, professor, archivist, namely, as a worker.

Why were authors such as Heidegger, Patočka, Arendt (Arendt 1970) or Anders convinced that writing during and about certain political events was a good way to cope with them? In politically tense situations, why did so many authors choose to fight in writing and therefore become somehow detached observers of the mass political movement of their times? We can think, for example, of Sartre and his Critique of Dialectical Reason, resulting from a philosophical work in political phenomenology against colonialism and the 1960s political world crisis, formulating thus a critique of both capitalism and totalitarian Marxism. Even if the Sartrian dialectical method seems to follow an ideal and classical conception of a total and rational human existence (Sartre 1980), his project of writing, i.e. producing philosophy, is conceived as a critical testimony to political problems that then become historical. Therefore, the search for textual sources besides philosophical analysis allows us to ask different questions. For example, how any legal text such as a peace treaty is able to be a compelling force in the organization of a society? What is it in these kinds of political texts that deserves not to be forgotten in order to make philosophical use of them? The intertextuality between quotes, references and epigraphs, as structured in the various works produced by each source (from the reports of administrations and institutions to books of philosophy) will contribute to radicalize the philosophical meaning of the words. A drastic selection of the historical material allows us to extract the major themes while maintaining a sense of unity with its own limitations. This is the role of each historical point of view: when inserted into the same context, it validates the phenomenological analysis in ensuring a greater cohesion, such as in the case of Heidegger and Sartre about humanism (Heidegger 1949, Sartre 1970) or Anders and Schürmann about nihilism (Anders 2001, Schürmann 1982). Each historical example plays a crucial role in understanding: it demonstrates the validity of a rule described in its application in action, thus avoiding the theoretical a priori claiming that a wise political theory must be either prescriptive (from a subjective point of view) or descriptive (from an objective point of view). This theoretical a priori reveals itself in praxis by its lack of historicity and by its incorrect claim that a ‘scientific’ philosophy has to be somehow ‘neutral’ in regard to history and traditions. For instance, instead of trying to invent
methodological thought experiments such as ‘the original position’ (Rawls 1971), the political phenomenologist establishes his critique upon historical contents showing that every socio-political contract comes from conflictual positions and not from a formal social equality (see Patocka 1999).

**Interpreting the nature of political life**

The second methodological step is *exegetical*: after a first reading and selection of historical material, our methodology is founded on one hermeneutic rule, namely, that we need to search for ‘the meaning against meaning’. In other words, the interpretation must be contrasted with the conventional history of texts and events. This depends not only on the chronological historical time, but also on the different strengths of tradition and political attitudes inside the production of critical knowledge. Interpreting here means going against what seems to be known from the texts and their authors or what seems taken for granted concerning political events such as the two world wars or the revolutions of the past centuries. Inside any historical selection of sources, there are always many levels of attack. Among them, we can find dominant forms of knowledge, especially in philosophy. As previously evoked, the choice is not limited to the traditional way of a theoretical historicism or to a mostly ahistorical analytic approach. As a minor literature or a situated philosophy, political phenomenology has to deal with the life-world and its socio-political structures. Its raw material is constituted first by subjugated knowledge:

> Subjugated knowledge are, then, blocks of historical knowledge that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked, and the critique was able to reveal their existence by using, obviously enough, the tools of scholarship.

*(Foucault 1976, 7)*

In the sense that, for Foucault, the genealogical method is grounded on subjugated knowledge and disqualified knowledge, subjected to axiologies, we can say that *political phenomenology is a public disclosure of subjugated knowledge confronted with overqualified knowledge*. This last kind of knowledge proceeds both from the technical specification of scientific language and its application in theories of communication. Linguistic communication could thus be the scientific field to study in order to produce reasonable conditions for a political agreement. But overqualified knowledge is precisely the opposite, because it is masked in discourse strategies for which a *tactical* thought is needed. This exegetical step with its heuristic conflict produced between different forms of political knowledge is itself a practical negation of systematic teleologies. Understanding sources consists in developing a critical sharpness against any belief produced by historical institutions of knowledge.

Indeed, we postulate that there is *never an immediate understanding* and that we cannot only use an established hierarchy of works, subjects, themes, to deal with human concrete existence and its political frameworks. This exegetical step corresponds to a desire to provide at least a *taxonomy of sources*, which could be useful for other researchers and authors. The expressed thought is put in order, arranged to form a transversal *reconstruction of the thinkable* produced in the selection of texts and quotes related to a historical delimitation. In addition, any research in political phenomenology should deal most of the time with texts written in many languages: this implies an important role entrusted to the translation. Thinking between different languages equates to acting between borders and boundaries, always trying to reconsider the language in use like a foreigner discovering it would do. Marcuse, for his part, became famous not only for
his critique of the power exercise involved in sexuality and post-industrial societies, but also for his pleadings against the uni-dimensional language invading academic philosophy and therefore restraining any subversive and insurrectional function attributed to the critique (Marcuse 1966). The key role devoted to some expressions may account for the rule of ‘meaning against meaning’: we argue against the use of ritual concepts – the Lingua Tertii Imperii described by Viktor Klemperer or the ‘jargon’ analysed by authors such as Theodor Adorno – just as well as we need to avoid any lack of conceptual clarity (Adorno 1973, Klemperer 1975). The overall goal is to detect what is operating in the expressions, the political thought hidden in the speech that is implied between the lines. Some authors in political phenomenology expressed a feeling of guilt about their writing, because they knew that action always begins where the text stops (see for example Anders 1966).

The interpretation of each source is organized around specific hermeneutical rules: the objective is not to produce a fusion of textual horizons concerning a political object of study, but to understand each dimension of them (of mainly social, political and existential relevance). Recognizing the linguistic dimension of thought allows us to systematically avoid confusion between the authors and their various perspectives. In this way, we can take into account the event dimension of language. Another risk to avoid consists in choosing a deterministic approach a posteriori that presupposes a destinal character attributed to the biographical expressions of authors. To prevent the interpretation from this risk of purely conjectural assumptions, the main interest is also focused on the texts and not on an original idea that would have to act as a major influence over a whole political period. The critical translation of a specific conceptual terminology, which essentially depends on the linguistic dimension of the original language, aims to emphasize the historicity of texts and to reconstruct the context of their elaboration, namely the experience of any political event or transformation.

This hermeneutical distance reflects the result of interpreting as a revitalization, constantly repeated until all possibilities of the sources have been exhausted. Then this textual material will function like a critical basis in order to be able to break any naïve attitude regarding every practical a priori, especially the political and social ones. This means that this critical position grounded on interpretation is an act in favour of becoming free from any association of ideas acting itself as a compelling unknown force on the socio-political judgement related to the present experimented life-world.

**Political attitude as a phenomenological experience**

Finally, the third methodological step is experimental: once the historical and the exegetical steps have been fulfilled, political phenomenology aims to develop the concepts of violence and conflict with its different figures or modalities of being-in-the-world. In other words, theses and arguments cannot obtain their full validity only from a doxography, even with a good comparison between points of view: philosophical consistency must come from both past and current experiences too, united by an assumed political attitude. This last objective leads not to produce a philosophy only attached to trivial events, but rather to find transversal perspectives, historical backgrounds, without convening new metaphysical entities. The aim is to avoid invoking new beliefs instead of the described idealities. If we always postulate a consequence between philosophical theory and practice, the last question would be: why did authors such as Sartre or Anders refuse to be politically compromised by their own work? Or why did one other author choose to accept working in the name of a totalitarian regime that provided social acknowledgement (Heidegger 2014)? Our task is to determine to what extent we have inherited a situation in which the possibility to be politically compromised still remains. Some other
phenomenological experiences in political writings can already show us original and targeted critiques: Jesse Glenn Gray, for example, who testified about Second World War situations (Gray 1959), Frantz Fanon who exposed the foundations of political violence in racism and colonialism (Fanon 2002) or Patočka who showed how the First World War has to be seen as a major philosophical event (Patočka 1999). What they all have in common is that their mode of thinking is thus made dependent on their modes of living. Like Schürmann, they all intended to work as philosophers in order to live and not to live in order to be historicists or positivists inside a determinate hierarchy of knowledge (Schürmann 1982, §43).

As a method, political phenomenology is a path leading from a way to live to a way to think properly. Its own condition consists in a detachment (Abgeschiedenheit) from any kind of beliefs, enhanced with historical works and provided by exegetical work. In this way, political phenomenology, as a practical experience, must be seen as a thought including its own acting: a responsibility as an estrangement towards order principles. It opens the possibility to think critically, which means ‘absence of rule, but not absence of rules’ (Schürmann 1982, 344). That is why we need to understand what it means to think and act politically through experiences of starting new insurrections of knowledge. Reframed in their dynamic relationship, the three programmatic steps for a political phenomenology – historical, exegetical, experimental – inspired by past philosophical experiences find their justification particularly in regard to problems outside of texts, precisely in our threatened life-world.

Notes

1 See, for example, as an attempt to expand the phenomenological concept of horizon to the discovery of a political world between doxa and episteme, Held 2012.
2 See, for example, with a strong focus on the meaning of political life and existence, Dodd 2012.
3 For a wider perspective on this peculiar question, see Jolly 2019.

References


