## Looking Through Each Other's Eyes: Political Polarization and the Intersubjective World

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### Abstract

This essay will examine political polarization through the lens of Bernhard Waldenfels’ conceptions of order and the alien from his book *Phenomenology of the Alien*. Individuals and institutions create order and make sense of the world through the building of boundaries and the rejection of what they see as different or alien. This bounding occurs all the time in everyday life and has manifested in particularly violent ways when it comes to politics. Current American political culture is marred by gridlock and an unwillingness to find common ground. A clear example of this in the United States is the debate over gun control. The discourse over who should own guns and how easy it should be to get one has raged for decades and is especially contentious because people’s lives are on the line, with there being as many as 503 mass shootings in the US just in 2024 alone.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yet very little progress has been made in an effort to curb this violence. The author believes this is partly because people cannot imagine a world that does not look like their own; a world that does not conform to their very specific worldviews and beliefs about guns.

Our current political polarization has made it virtually impossible for people of different political beliefs to engage with one another, even when they have the same goals, such as lowering the amount of gun violence in the nation. This inability to engage with the other has led to a shattering of people’s sense of both local and national community and a plunge in generalized social trust. A possible method to mitigate this shattering can be found in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s conception of intersubjectivity. For Merleau-Ponty, intersubjectivity is the idea that people’s individual perspectives blend and intertwine to create a shared social and cultural world.[[2]](#footnote-2) In this shared world we find common ground and connection with others around us. Using Merleau-Ponty’s books *The Visible and The Invisible*, as well as *Phenomenology of Perception*, I will explore the ways that approaching political discourse with intersubjectivity in mind may allow individuals to bridge the gap between parties and rebuild generalized social trust. I believe that through the exchange of shared perspectives with others, which can be achieved through conversation and intersubjective scientific rationality, individuals will not only be able to better understand the limits of their own point of view and political position but also be able to expand their understanding of the world as a unified whole, beyond the bounds of their singular worldview.

### The Inner Workings of Political Polarization

Before we can start trying to solve political polarization, we must first examine what it is and how it works. There are many different and specific forms of polarization. From elite polarization to mass polarization to perceived polarization, there are multiple names to describe the different ways in which people within groups move to opposite ideological extremes when in opposition.[[3]](#footnote-3) When discussing political polarization in this essay, I will be referring to all of them. It will refer not just to a rise in elite driven extreme party alignment and divisions on political issues, but a fundamental differing of lifestyles and a distrust of different political opinions. It is not just the perception of widespread political gridlock and animosity but the reality of it in our country. According to the Pew Research Center as of 2022, 72% of Republicans and 63% of Democrats see those in the other party as immoral, and 68% of Democrats and 78% of Republicans see the other party as causing harm to the country.[[4]](#footnote-4) Differences in political opinion and identity have divided our nation in such a way that people do not believe that those of the opposite party want what is best for the country.

A framework to analyze how this divide forms and reaches the point that we are at now can be found in Waldenfels’ ‘*Phenomenology of the Alien’.* According to Waldenfels, as we humans move through the world, there is a particular way we expect it to behave and a particular order we expect it to fall into. We create and maintain this order through the building of boundaries between what we consider our “own” and what we see as different, strange, and unfamiliar. We build our identities and make sense of the world around us by excluding what is alien to us. Institutions and states also do this on a larger scale by creating norms and laws that dictate what is proper behavior within particular groups or communities. Waldenfels says that “...every culture, society, environment, or form of life behaves within certain boundaries…”.[[5]](#footnote-5) This withdrawal from the abnormal creates marginal figures and ideas, things that become othered or are considered alien within a certain context. In this way, the self and the alien are co-constituting. You use what you or your community considers alien to find the boundaries of your world and who you are, and in doing so you also further solidify and manufacture the alien.

Waldenfels, however, makes sure to emphasize the difference between the other and the alien. The other is still fitted within the order of individuals and institutions. He uses the example of different types of wine. Red and white wines are certainly different from one another but ultimately, they all fall under the same category of wine. The other is found in things like your neighbors or differences between parent and child. The alien on the other hand, is something completely foreign and outside of the norm. Waldenfels lists things like “... another language and of another culture, the strangeness of the other sex or that of another state… ” as examples of the alien in everyday life.[[6]](#footnote-6) Through the lens of political polarization, the other represents, for example, those within the political party that have the same general goals and values as you, but have different ideas of how to achieve them. The alien would then represent those of the opposing party, who live different lives and believe in completely different values. When we encounter the alien in everyday life, it is so outside of what we perceive as ordinary we immediately attempt to make it fit within what is normal.

According to Waldenfels, the alien calls to us, what he refers to as pathos, provoking an intellectual response. Usually, this response takes the form of sense making, where the individual tries to intellectualize or comprehend what they are experiencing. This can manifest as either a normalization of the alien, a folding of the strange into our order, or a rejection of it. He describes this rejection by saying, “But, inevitably, alienness leads to hostility, which only escalates, with each involved party becoming more and more committed to their belief that they alone have right on their side”.[[7]](#footnote-7) Today’s current political polarization represents a violent rejection of what people perceive as alien. People look at the opposing party and rather than seeing an other, a group of people who live in the same nation and who want it to be just as safe and prosperous as they do, they instead see an alien, a group of people they loathe who are a threat to their order and way of life.[[8]](#footnote-8) Today, neighbors, co-workers, and even family members are being pushed outside of the realm of the other, into the realm of the alien if they express differing political beliefs.[[9]](#footnote-9) [[10]](#footnote-10)

### Effects of Political Polarization on Generalized Social Trust

A clear example of political polarization and its effects on our society is the debate over gun control in the United States. Opinions of gun ownership and whether guns increase or decrease public safety has divided our nation. The Pew Research Center reported in 2023 that 49% of the US population think that guns “increases safety by allowing law-abiding citizens to protect themselves” and the same amount of population disagree, saying that guns “ reduces safety by giving too many people access to firearms and increasing misuse”.[[11]](#footnote-11) And a 2024 survey, found that the country is about equally divided over “...whether it’s more important to protect gun rights or control gun ownership”.[[12]](#footnote-12) Our country is quite literally split down the middle over what to do about guns and gun violence. This is because people’s opinions on gun control are not based on statistics or public safety but instead on their worldview and cultural/political identity.[[13]](#footnote-13) According to a paper published in 2006, people have ordered their world in a particular way and what guns represent fall into a particular place in that order. Those who are against gun control see guns as symbolizing “honor, human mastery over nature, and individual self-sufficiency”, while those who support gun control see guns as representing “the perpetuation of illicit social hierarchies, the elevation of force over reason, and the expression of collective indifference to the well-being of strangers”.[[14]](#footnote-14) This has only been further corroborated by many other studies since then. Two texts in particular, one from 2015 and another from 2023 both found that the debate over gun control, rather than being fueled by experience with gun violence or community safety, is in most cases influenced by an individual’s cultural and ideological values.[[15]](#footnote-15) [[16]](#footnote-16) A third paper from 2019 indicated that “...perceived risk of crime is unrelated to protective gun ownership or active gun use”.[[17]](#footnote-17) Debates over gun control and ownership, rather than being a disagreement over safety or statistics like many people believe, are rather debates over particular values and ways of seeing the world.

Anyone who disagrees with an individual's view on guns is presumed to be someone who sees the world in a fundamentally different way. This is why statistics does not sway the debate. No amount of data will change the way people experience the world and the culture around them. Today, vast differences in worldview and experiences have led to widespread political polarization, as well as a distrust and dislike of the opposition. All of this, in turn, has led to a reduction in generalized social trust.[[18]](#footnote-18) Generalized social trust is “...the belief that most people can be trusted, even if you do not know them personally, and even if they are not like you socially”.[[19]](#footnote-19) High generalized social trust encourages people to see the strangers they encounter in day to day life as being generally trustworthy and working within the same social order. Political polarization has a detrimental effect on this trust, as it disrupts the assumption that we are all part of the same order and “such perceptions induce feelings of distance and estrangement from fellow citizens and society in general”.[[20]](#footnote-20) This estrangement and alienation from one's community makes it easier for people to see any form of difference as a threat to their particular way of life. Strangers can no longer be trusted and those that you do know, but are different from you in some way, become suspect as well.

A personal example of the reduction in generalized social trust can be found in an anecdote shared with the author from a friend. This friend, Maggie, got into an argument with her parents over gun control. Her father’s friend owns a variety of hunting rifles and brought them on to their property to shoot them in the woods by their house. Maggie expressed her discomfort with this, feeling it was unsafe for him to be there. She did not trust this family friend to act properly around her two younger siblings and feared they would be hurt. Her and her parents got into an argument over it, with them saying that she was overreacting and that nothing dangerous would happen, while she insisted that it wasn’t safe for the guns to be on the property. Despite being family and having many shared experiences, they could not understand each other's point of view. Maggie did not trust this family friend and her parents did not trust Maggie's judgment. Neither were able to come to an agreement, so Maggie left the house and stayed somewhere else until the family friend and his guns had left. Under our current climate of political polarization, even families and those with which we have an abundance of common ground, become alien to us. We cannot trust that they act under the same order and so we reject them, severing connections.

### Intersubjectivity: Finding Common Ground Between Parties

How do we bridge these seemingly insurmountable gaps? How can we rebuild trust between families and political opponents alike? Political polarization not only destroys trust, but also our ability to even relate to each other, making the rebuilding of that trust all the more difficult. One possible solution to the estrangement caused by political polarization is intersubjectivity. While Waldenfels does talk about the concept, he was inspired in part by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who explores the concept with far more depth, so that’s where we are going to focus our attention. To truly understand Merleau-Ponty’s intersubjectivity and how perspectives can intertwine, we must first understand intercorporeality, which is the intertwinement between consciousness and the body. In his book *The Visible and The Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty describes how the body is not made of an amalgamation of individual perceptions and feelings, each competing to be primary, but instead is a network that makes a singular whole.[[21]](#footnote-21) When touching your own hand, you are both touching and being touched, they are not separate perceptions but one. This oneness is possible due to the “transfer and reversal” of the connections between perceptions, which opens up a dialogue and exchange between the perceptions, creating a shared experience.[[22]](#footnote-22) This same shared reflective connection within the body is found between people as well. Merleau-Ponty says that through conversation, such as one person describing a landscape they have seen to a friend, someone's perceptions can be passed on to another; the “individual green of the meadow under [their] eyes invades his vision”.[[23]](#footnote-23) Together they can create a generality or shared world of perceptions. When this sharing of perceptions is extended to thoughts, perspectives, and entire world views, that is when we reach intersubjectivity.

In his text *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty establishes that a human’s consciousness is world constituting, meaning that it is through our consciousness that our world and our understanding of it comes about. He says that, “One’s own body is in the world just as the heart is in the organism: it continuously breathes life into the visible spectacle, animates it and nourishes it from within, and forms a system with it”.[[24]](#footnote-24) What you perceive, think about, feel, reflect on; everything you experience creates your world, your point of view. And unlike philosophers like Descartes or Kant, Merleau-Ponty does not conceive of this consciousness as a detached specter, looking rationally upon the body's perceptions and experiences.

Instead, he establishes that the human consciousness is a perceptual consciousness. We are “being[s] in the world of existence”.[[25]](#footnote-25) There is no real way to completely detach oneself from your experiences and rationally evaluate an “objective reality”, detached from what you perceive. Just by existing and perceiving it through our own perspectives, we put a part of ourselves in the world, influencing it and inviting the world to influence us in turn. It is the same for every other person on earth. They are also world constituting, perceptual consciousnesses with their own perspectives, creating and influencing existence just by living their lives. According to Merleau-Ponty, society is a “coexistence of an indefinite number of consciousnesses”.[[26]](#footnote-26) However, if every other person on earth is a world constituting consciousness, only able to perceive the world through their own perspective of reality, then that means that there cannot be just one “objective” reality.

This concept shatters the idea that one individual or group has the “true” perspective and instead turns individual experience into a “private spectacle”.[[27]](#footnote-27) If everyone is world constituting, no one has complete control over what the world looks like and how things are ordered within it. Instead, different people’s perspectives bleed into one another’s, constituting a shared “single world”.[[28]](#footnote-28) Simply by exhibiting behaviors and interacting with the objects around them, people affect and elaborate on each other’s worldview. This single world made up of intertwined perspectives is the shared intersubjective world we live in. And though we perceive everything through our own perspective, we do have the ability to reveal and explore the lived experiences of others. For Merleau-Ponty it is through language, conversation, and dialogue that “a common ground is constituted between me and another” and we are able to transcend our singular perspective.[[29]](#footnote-29) Even when arguing or experiencing conflict, it isn’t until after the conversation is done and one has time to reflect and categorize the experience, that the separation is created and the other becomes a threat. In today’s world, with the widespread use of the internet, social media and other audio-visual forms of communication can also be used to share perspectives and explore the intersubjective world.

For Merleau-Ponty, even when people have widely different world views, just by interacting with each other, their perspectives intertwine and affect what the other experiences. Through conversation they can create a reciprocal and reflective connection, revealing what is shared between them. However, in order for conversation to do this, it must be a very particular type of conversation. Though the world is intersubjective, we still largely see it through our own subjective lenses. The overlap and intertwining of these lenses create our shared world, but we still all experience that world differently. It can be hard to intertwine someone else’s world view with your own and “live another’s experience”, especially if their experiences are vastly different from your own.[[30]](#footnote-30) In order for a conversation to truly share multiple points of view, there must be equal reciprocity and “coexistence must be in each case lived by each person”.[[31]](#footnote-31) Everyone in a conversation is a world constituting consciousnesses. If one person is willing to share their perspective, but another rejects the idea that they both are constituting the world, denying the former’s point of view, then the latter’s world view envelops the former’s, leaving no room for communication. And if both parties deny the other’s world constitution, then communication breaks down entirely. They are still in a shared world but on opposite sides of it, unwilling to meet on any type of common ground.

This description of a breakdown in conversation mirrors how Waldenfels described the rejection of the alien, where each person retreats from the other, certain that they are in the right and the other is in the wrong. This is the situation that political polarization puts people in. They sit on their own private islands in a social world, rejecting a different point of view and unable to see all that they share between them. A conversation that involves a mutual acceptance and openness to the other’s perspective is what truly allows someone the ability to grasp the intersubjective world. When describing being able to perceive what someone else sees in *The Visible and The Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty says "In being realized, they therefore bring out the limits of our factual vision…the seeing that I am is for me really visible; for the first time I appear to myself completely turned inside out under my own eyes”.[[32]](#footnote-32) Engaging in and truly opening oneself up to a different perspective, allows someone to better understand not only the world around them, but themself and their own world view as well. It is difficult to completely dismiss the views of another, when you can see the world through their eyes and get a different angle on details you may have missed. Approaching political discourse through the lens of an intersubjective world, a world made up of multiple overlapping subjectivities rather than a singular objective one, allows for these open and accepting conversations to take place. It rebuilds the generalized trust that political polarization has destroyed by allowing people, who may truly have different ways of ordering the world, to find the common ground needed to no longer see each other as alien threats.

### Conversation is not Enough

The concept of dialogue as a form of connection and a way to close socio-cultural gaps is not new. This paper is not the first, nor will it be the last, to highlight the importance of open and understanding conversation in efforts to cross political divides.[[33]](#footnote-33) There have been multiple studies, as well as hundreds of anecdotal examples within the media, that show the ways getting to know people different from you and better understanding where they are coming from can shift your view of them and how the world works.[[34]](#footnote-34) [[35]](#footnote-35) However, in today's current climate, where political polarization, made worse by widespread misinformation and highly segmented media, has reached the point of very serious threats of violence and government takeover, conversation between opposing parties no longer seems to be enough.[[36]](#footnote-36)

What can be done when the avenues used to encourage conversation and connection between people have been warped to instead encourage division, and the institutions specifically created to facilitate the expansion of one’s worldview through learning and exploration are under attack? An honest open conversation between Maggie and her parents might work to rebuild their connection but they are a family and have more easily accessible common ground through that connection. How will intersubjectivity help those who truly have entirely different world views and perspectives. How do we get people to the point that they are willing to have a conversation at all, rather than just immediately reject whatever the opposing party has to say? How can intersubjectivity be used to find new methods of connection when the old ones are being closed off?

It is the author’s opinion that, before anything else, we as a society need to re-establish what our shared experiences and priorities are. American culture as a whole is a rather individualistic one, where the vision of success is highly focused on the needs of one individual and maybe their family. We are incentivized from a young age to prioritize our own wants and opinions above all others, and this encourages people to go through life trapped within their own perspectives, unconcerned with those who do not share their exact lived experiences. The overvaluation of the individual and what makes one’s experiences different from others, obscures what people may have in common and discourages them from even trying to understand one another.

One good way to establish the common ground needed to facilitate intersubjective conversation is science, as it can be used as both an example of and a window into the intersubjective world. While Merleau-Ponty expressed in many of his writings his criticism of scientific thinking, or what he called “a bold way of thinking whose fundamental bias is to treat everything as though it were an object-in-general - as though it meant nothing to us and yet was predestined for our ingenious schemes”, science has evolved a lot since his time.[[37]](#footnote-37) Today, there are some researchers, like James Mahoney and Michael Friedman, who have embraced the intersubjectivity of science. While their versions of the concept are different from one another’s, termed “communicative rationality” by Friedman and “a constructivist orientation” by Mahoney, both refer to the intersubjective nature of human knowledge and rationality. According to Friedman, the Enlightenment era faith in human rationality, which is the basis for the scientific method, is rooted in communicative rationality, which in turn “is essentially…intersubjective. It aims, by its very nature, at an agreement or consensus based on mutually acceptable principles of argument or reasoning shared by all parties in a dispute. This is the kind of rationality underwritten by a given scientific paradigm or conceptual framework, whose function is precisely to secure an agreement on fundamental constitutive principles”.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Scientific discovery and exploration are not a solitary process. Multiple people and institutions have a hand in the crafting and experimentation done by scientists. In order for theories like evolution or the heliocentric solar system to be widely accepted, they had to go through dozens of peer review processes and be replicated by hundreds of teams of people, all of whom came with their own perspectives and experiences. And even widely accepted theories are never truly finalized, as they are consistently being added to and reanalyzed from new angels and with new technology. This fact, coupled with studies that use the information and beliefs of hundreds and thousands of individuals to come to a conclusion, makes it so a single scientific discovery can be the intersection of hundreds, if not thousands of perspectives all working together to reflect just one part of our already multi-layered intersubjective world. Scientific research does not find the "objective truths" of reality, since we as subjective individuals cannot perceive them. However, by recording and including as many perspectives as they can, researchers are able to point toward areas where multiple people's world views overlap, which can then be used as jumping off points to create common ground between individuals.

Communicative and constructivist science has already been used to do just that. Gun owners do not try to understand gun control advocates, nor do the advocates try to understand gun owners. However, it’s been found by multiple studies that gun owners tend to support a lot of the same gun control reforms that gun control advocates do, but they not only underestimate the amount that fellow gun owners support said measures but also misunderstand or misinterpret the goals of gun control advocates.[[39]](#footnote-39) [[40]](#footnote-40) [[41]](#footnote-41) One study in particular, called ‘*Correcting misperceptions of gun policy support can foster intergroup cooperation between gun owners and non-gun owners*’ found that when efforts were made to correct misconceptions between gun owners and gun control advocates, they showed “greater perceptions of identity overlap between gun and non-gun owners, greater willingness to work with each other to promote gun safety policies, and less negative affect towards each other”.[[42]](#footnote-42) While this obviously won’t be the same for everyone with differing political views, if political polarization is to be overcome, then we cannot start out by seeing others as living in an entirely different world from our own. We must be able to find where our perspectives can overlap in order to get a fuller view of the world around us, or else we will be stuck in our own private worlds, unable to bridge the gaps between us.

This study was able to expand participants’ world views beyond their individual experiences and encourage the building of new connections. Science as a method of study is an intersubjective practice that can allow individuals to see where many people’s perspectives overlap, which can lead to a better understanding of the world and their place in it. Where conversation has failed or is impossible, looking to scientific research, or conducting your own research, could also be used to find common ground. Science isn’t perfect and we cannot always rely on it to give us a clear or reliable view of where our experiences really intertwine, but it is an important part of understanding the world as intersubjective and more expansive than one’s particular point of view.

### Conclusion

Humans are world constituting. Our perspectives are a part of the world, and the world is a part of us. This is an inherent component of our being that both Merleau-Ponty and Waldenfels attest to. Waldenfes says that “There are no ready-made individuals; rather there are only processes of individuation, which subject our bodily selves to a certain degree of anonymity…What we feel, perceive, do, or say interweaves, like a Tibetan carpet, with what others feel, perceive, do, or say”.[[43]](#footnote-43) From the moment we are born, our names, language, gender, and various other sections of who we are, are all given to us by others. Many of the integral parts of our identities that can dictate our perspective on the world are given to us by the world when we are born. Merleau-Ponty takes Waldenfels assertion one step further by saying that “I am given to myself”.[[44]](#footnote-44) We come into the world already a part of it and it makes us who we are. To say that our perspectives are completely separated from and unaffected by perspectives outside of our own, is to deny the ways in which human identity is created. It ignores the effect that parents, families, and communities have on individuals. To exist as a person is to be in the world, and to be in the world is to share it with others.

Accepting this fact, that there are other worldviews that intertwine with your own; that they might conflict with your perspective and yet could be just as real, is the first step toward mutual conversation and coexistence. Part of why people cannot trust one another is because they do not see each other as working within the same ordered boundaries. They see each other as alien threats, living in completely separate worlds. By reminding people of what they have in common, by finding what they both want and establishing what they already share, it becomes easier to bridge that gap. It is not a simple task by any means and all parties have to be equally invested in finding that common ground in order for it to work. However, through mutually open conversation founded on a shared scientific understanding of our similarities, we might be able to find that common ground and create a world that is more unified and trusting.

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