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TRÂN DUC THAO

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AND DIALECTICAL
MATERIALISM

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Translated by

Daniel J. Herman *and* Donald V. Morano

Edited by

Robert S. Cohen

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EDITED BY ROBERT J. COHEN AND MARK W. RAYBURN

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EDITORIAL PREFACE

Trần Duc Thao, a brilliant student of philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure within the post-1935 decade of political disaster, born in Vietnam shortly after the First World War, recipient of a scholarship in Paris in 1935–37, was early noted for his independent and original mind. While the 1930s twisted down to the defeat of the Spanish Republic, the compromise with German Fascism at Munich, and the start of the Second World War, and while the 1940s began with hypocritical stability at the Western Front followed by the defeat of France, and the occupation of Paris by the German power together with French collaborators, and then ended with liberation and a search for a new understanding of human situations, the young Thao was deeply immersed in the classical works of European philosophy. He was also the attentive but critical student of a quite special generation of French metaphysicians and social philosophers: Gaston Berger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emile Bréhier, Henri Lefebvre, René le Senne, Jean-Paul Sartre, perhaps the young Louis Althusser. They, in their several modes of response, had been meditating for more than a decade on the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, which came to France in the thirties as a new metaphysical enlightenment – phenomenology. With Husserl's phenomenology, there also came the powerful influences of a revived Hegel (of the *Phenomenology*) and of Martin Heidegger's existentialism, and, in a tangle of variants, there came a startling renewed investigation of Marx. The young Trần Duc Thao joined the search for objective truth, worked to overcome both psychologism and every weakening of knowledge by subjectivist limitation, investigated Husserl's writings in print and in the fine archives at Louvain (with the kindly help of H. L. van Breda). His progress was dialectical, Socratic and Hegelian, but also it was a material dialectic due both to his Marxist studies and to the grim tasks of the greater liberation in his social life-world – the liberation of Vietnam.

Thao's themes drove him to the border of Husserl's thought, just as Thao saw Husserl himself driven toward the apparent relativism of the final *Krisis* manuscripts. The privileged, indeed most precious, phenomenological activity is that of 'constitution', for which there is the endless work of passing from naive certainty to the developed no-longer-naive certainties of intentional

praxis. Such praxis has to be understood in so many ways of becoming, and especially of becoming aware; the awareness is of what is mine and what is the historical world; the praxes are social, political, symbolic, communicative, even philosophical. If to constitute is to act, the phenomenological re-establishment of meaning must investigate the temporal within action, both as the particular quality of a time-consciousness and as the dialectic of past, present and future: the past made present cannot be mine alone; the future yet to be chosen, 'constituted', must be inter-subjective and historical, so it is Husserl's future as 'horizon'. For Trần Duc Thao, the human activity of 'constitution' in the present demands understanding, which retrospectively deals with genesis and prospectively with goals. Genetic understanding entails materialist science, the investigation of the evolutionary biological foundation and historical development of consciousness, and especially of that practical consciousness which is language. Understanding of goal-directed present 'constitutive' action suggests a materialist science of intentional possibilities, a political economy of historically determined needs, desires, ideologies, resources and alternatives.

Whether the phenomenological method is capable of leading to such understanding, whether that method can situate the social sciences so that they may rightly formulate their investigations, is shown to be doubtful in Part One of this book. Thao here, and in his articles of those same early years, sets aside the existentialist turn (effectively close to Lukacs's 1947 critique of the existentialist pessimism of 'dreadful freedom'); for Thao, the way forward must lead through the theory and practice of Marxism. What Marxism may say to the philosopher at this point was roundly debated in France in the two decades after Liberation. For Trần Duc Thao, the Marxist heuristic led to the question of clarifying the nature of production. Thus production is the moment of constitution (and in Thao's later work we see how representation, gesture, and the embryology of language elaborates production at the origin of human mentality). But Husserl, as Thao tells us in his careful exposition, provided only a program: to go beyond the undoubted virtues of anti-formalism and anti-dualism, phenomenology would have to transcend its own analytic restrictions and enter upon analysis of the historical materialism of the subject, a critique of the forces pressing upon the subject as that subject's very life-world. Thao writes of 'the historical movement of reality' and at the conclusion of his Husserlian study he summarizes: "... there is no longer any valid reason to refuse to (the) constituting subjectivity its predicates regarding reality". And why is this possible, why can we trans-

cend the transcendental idealism? Because “. . . it is *nature* itself *becoming-subject*” (129).

In Part Two, Thao sketched his alternative to the ‘radical contingency’ of Husserl’s *Weltkonstitution* (130). He wrestled then, and since (and how many others have done likewise), to argue, indeed to *show*, the plausibility of a non-reductive materialism. His epigraph from Engels set the problem: “Matter is not a product of mind, but mind itself is merely the highest product of matter”. The sketch was supported by Thao’s persuasive interpretation (1948) of Hegel’s ‘Phenomenology’ as naturalistic, anti-reductionist, indeed nature becoming mental and substance becoming subject. The material content of Hegel’s logic and phenomenology receives much deeper investigation in Thao’s major essay on the Hegelian dialectic (first published in the Vietnamese language in Hanoi (1956), then in French (1965)). Here Thao elaborates the forms of work (social praxis) and of consciousness within historical stages, typically Hegel on desire, master and slave, death and the struggle for life, private truth and public intersubjectivity. But beyond his materialist reading of Hegel was the need for scientific investigations. Thao’s essays of the 60s and early 70s, and his monograph of *Investigations into the Origins of Language and Consciousness*, are scientific works, however much they are also philosophical, i.e. explorations of a historical materialist dialectic. If Thao’s Marxist exploration of the limiting crisis within phenomenology is compared with his phenomenological reading of Marxist philosophy (as in ‘The Dialectic of Human Societies as the Becoming of Reason’, Part Two, Chapter 2, below, but also in his early interpretation of Vietnamese practical affairs in *Les Temps modernes*, 1947), we see that his turn to scientific inquiries was the inevitable and natural development. His French critics, with respect for his sensitive and acute qualities, pointed to the *philosophical* (they often wrote ‘theoretical’) limitation of Thao’s Marxist alternative; they were less ready to accept that Trần Duc Thao and a sober Marxism could overcome this limitation through the sciences, through Soviet as well as Western anthropology, archeology, paleontology, linguistics, cognitive and developmental psychology, historical sociology. We see the young Trần Duc Thao’s courageous and complex argument in this book — concerning Husserl, Hegel and Marx — as a classical text of 20th-century philosophy, and his subsequent synthesis of work in the human sciences as his mature and profoundly stimulating accomplishment in the philosophy of science.

Works of Trần Duc Thao in Western languages

- 1943: 'The phenomenological method in Husserl' (Thesis, in French, unpublished).
- 1946: 'Marxisme et phénoménologie', *La Revue Internationale* 2, 168–174.
- 1947: 'Les relations Franco-Vietnamiennes', *Les Temps modernes* 2, 1053–1067.
 'Sur l'interprétation trotskyiste des événements d'Indochine', *Les Temps modernes* 2, 1697–1705.
- 1948: 'La "Phénoménologie de l'esprit" et son contenu réel', *Les Temps modernes* 3, 492–519.
- 1949: 'Existentialisme et matérialisme dialectique', *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 54, 317–329.
- 1950: 'Les origines de la réduction phénoménologique chez Husserl', *Deucalion* 3, 128–142.
- 1951: *Phénoménologie et matérialisme dialectique*, Éditions Minh-Tân, Paris. 368 pp.
- 1965: 'Le "Noyau rationnel" dans la dialectique hegelienne', *La Pensée* No. 19, 3–23. (First published in 1956 in the Vietnamese journal *Tập san Đại học* at the University of Hanoi.)
- 1966: 'Le mouvement de l'indication comme forme originaire de la conscience', *La Pensée* No. 128, 3–24.
- 1969: 'Du geste de l'index à l'image typique', Part I, *La Pensée* No. 147, 3–46.
 'Du geste de l'index à l'image typique', Part II, *La Pensée* No. 148, 71–111.
- 1970: 'Du geste de l'index à l'image typique', Part III, *La Pensée* No. 149, 93–106.
Fenomenologia e materialismo dialettico, Italian translation by Roberta Tomassini, Lampugnani Nigri Editore, Milan, xix and 282 pp. With a bio-bibliographical note by the translator and a critical introduction by Pier Aldo Rovatti (to which we are indebted).
- 1973: (*Recherches sur l'origine du langage et de la conscience*, Éditions Sociales, Paris. 343 pp.
- 1984: *Investigations into the Origin of Language and Consciousness* (Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science 44). English translation by Daniel J. Herman and Robert L. Armstrong; edited by Carolyn Fawcett and Robert S. Cohen, D. Reidel, Dordrecht and Boston. xi and 214 pp.

1985: *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism* (Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science 49). English translation by Daniel J. Herman and Donald V. Morano; edited by Robert S. Cohen, D. Reidel, Dordrecht, and Boston. xxviii and 242 pp.

Note: A sampling of critical appreciations of this book and the essays of Trán Duc Thao may be found in Paul Ricoeur 'Sur la phénoménologie', *Esprit* 21, 827–836 (1953); the A. De Waelhens review in *Critique* 58, 85–88 (1953) and in *Rev. Metaph. et morale* 58, 310–312 (1953); G. Neri in his *Prassi e conoscenza*, 149–163 (Feltrinelli, Milan, 1966); Roger Garaudy in his *Perspectives de l'homme*, 304–313 (PUF, Paris, 1969); P. Lyotard in his *La Phénoménologie*, 110–126 (PUF, Paris, 1967). See also Michael Kelly's perceptive exposition of Thao's 'materialist inversion' in the 'rational kernel' paper of 1965 in Kelly, *Modern French Marxism*, 160–164 (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, and Blackwell, Oxford, 1982); and the remark by J. Derrida in *Philosophy in France Today*, edited by Alan Montefiore p. 38 (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

On the translation: Where Husserl uses 'Abschattungen', Thao uses 'silhouettes' as do Thao's translators, while Husserl translators generally use 'perspective variation'. For Husserl's 'Erlebnis', Thao uses 'vecu' and Thao's translators use 'lived experience' or 'lived' depending upon syntactical need, while Husserl translators use 'experience'. For Husserl's use of 'ursprünglich' and similar 'ur-' prefixed terms, Thao uses 'originaire', his translators use 'primordial' and the Husserl translators use 'original' or 'primary' or 'primal'.

Footnote numbers followed by asterisks indicate notes introduced by the translators as required by the French text.

* * *

We are grateful to Daniel J. Herman and Donald V. Morano for the linguistic and philosophical skills which they gave so generously to their craftsmanlike translation.

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ROBERT S. COHEN
Boston University

MARX W. WARTOFSKY
*Baruch College, City University of
New York*

TRANSLATORS' FOREWORD

In the second half of the twentieth century, when communication and dialogue between all peoples of the world is so urgently needed, this philosophical work of 1951 by the Vietnamese Trần Duc Thao merits our attention.

Professor Thao received much of his education in the West. In his twenties he was a scholarship student at the prestigious École Normale Supérieure of Paris, at which, from his first days, he was regarded by his instructors as 'prodigiously talented'. His studies there spanned the years of the German occupation. Though never studying under or even meeting Edmund Husserl, he made several visits to the Husserlian archives at Louvain and was provided by Fr. Van Breda with unpublished transcriptions of Group C of Husserl on temporality. He alludes to these rather extensively in *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism*. He has remained in Vietnam since 1950, serving between 1958 and 1964 as an adviser and agricultural minister and later as the director of a school. Therefore, his extensive and varied background, in addition to the timeliness of the topic, *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism*, leads us to pay serious attention to this 1951 study. For phenomenology and Marxism are certainly two of the major philosophical movements – if not the most significant – of this century.

The Preface to this book was written last and should be read with great care since it vividly, if not sometimes rhetorically and even tendentiously, articulates the thesis of this study. Thao writes: "It is not a question in any sense of a mere juxtaposition of two contradictory points of view: Marxism appears to us as the only conceivable solution to problems raised by phenomenology itself."

Thao's rejection of phenomenology is based on an internal contradiction found in Husserl's own work – particularly the later work – since the practical results of phenomenology are incompatible with the theoretical principles from which these concrete analyses were elaborated. Husserl's undertaking from the first philosophy of essences to 'The Origins of Geometry' evolves within the horizon of idealism which is dominated with the 'constitution of the thing'. This constitution, as well as the constitution of all meaning and truth based on the phenomenological reduction which introduces this constitution reduces the being of the thing to a constituted being. But, as

Thao rightly points out, according to Husserl himself, all constitution, whether of the thing, being, values or persons, is always founded on an antepredicative perception; the categorial intuition, or the predicates of a proposition, are always formed on the background of the world, with the consequence that the constitution of the world is no longer the product of the transcendental Ego, but the product of each man's consciousness, of each man's individual experiences in his own particular environment. According to Thao, not only does phenomenology end up in a total skeptical relativism: "the merchant at the market has his own market-truth," it also uselessly duplicates empiricism for "the concept 'transcendental' was superfluous from the outset, since it maintains a strict identity of content between 'pure consciousness' and natural consciousness." Thao praises Husserl for appreciating the fact that "the universal is constituted in the real movement of time" for "the principal merit of phenomenology was its definitive destruction of formalism in the very horizon of idealism and its placing of all problems of value on the level of the concrete." Nevertheless, he concludes that "the great problem of our time . . . has found its solution for a long time in the Marxist dialectic, which defines the only valid process for a constitution of lived significations on the foundation of material reality."

In an elegant, laconic, and remarkably lucid prose, Thao elaborates the rationale that motivated Husserl's philosophizing: Husserl wished to go beyond psychologism in order to justify and delineate the realm of objective truth. But because of his idealistic scaffolding — the transcendental Ego, the phenomenological reduction, the constitution, etc., and being a bourgeois philosopher — Husserl was unable to achieve his original project and to realize fully that man's labor is the only source of truth.

Thao's knowledge of Husserl, as well as the entire history of philosophy, is most impressive, and he has the ability to elucidate and bring to life some of the most abstruse epistemological writings of Kant, Hegel, Descartes, etc. It would be foolhardy and redundant for us to attempt to summarize this work: we shall content ourselves with highlighting examples.

Both the beginner and the advanced student of phenomenology can delight in the lucidity of Thao's explanation of the eidetic reduction, the necessity of taking into account the subjective pole in every act of knowledge, and the difference between a causal and a phenomenological explanation. Thao provides for an especially illuminating discussion of the problem of error. He makes the paradoxical assertion: "The apodicticity of self-evidence does not militate against the correction of error." But, *prima facie*, it would seem as if apodicticity would preclude revision. Yet, Thao argues rather convincingly:

Truth, being defined in terms of self-evidence, cannot by the very fact be posited in the absoluteness of an in-itself, for it belongs to the precise meaning of all self-evidence to be fallible. Self-evidence exists as such only in its actual lived experience, which is renewed at each moment. Such a movement implies an absolute privilege of present actuality over the results previously acquired and the right of constantly rectifying them. Thus, truth is defined only in terms of its becoming, which must not be understood as an intelligible movement of ideas, but as an actually lived temporality.

However, lest these remarks be construed as maintaining epistemological relativism in the long haul, Thao insists upon an irrefragable grounding for objective knowledge: "Evidence can be corrected or annulled by other evidence. But such a movement precisely presupposes the absolute right of evidence in general."

The first part, that is, the phenomenological part of this work, is a treasure house of such insights. Then in Part Two, Thao attempts to disclose dialectical materialism as the logical issue of a relentlessly pursued phenomenology. He traces the deplorable mathematizing of nature that resulted because of Descartes' pernicious dichotomy between a thinking mind and an extended object. "Scientific objectivity was established precisely through the radical elimination of all subjective signification. After Descartes, metaphysical rationalism gave itself the task of radicalizing the dualism and suppressing the mystery of the union in man by referring him to God, conceived as absolute substance or as the source of harmony." Furthermore, this abstract view of matter, in reducing the principle of identity or non-contradiction to an abstract mathematical point, failed to take into account the fact that "concrete identity includes difference and change." But, Thao argues, the dialectical aspect of nature that had been noted by Engels "has recently been shown in detail by natural science."

Having vitalized matter, Thao proceeds to explain the emergence of human consciousness and language by means of a movement within nature itself. He criticizes the Neoplatonism of phenomenology in its characterization of mind as ontologically prior to, and independent of, matter. Rather, Thao accounts for the emergence of consciousness as "the movement of deferred behavior, which sends us back to deferred circuits in the course of the nervous influx." Consequently, "subjectivity is but the formal aspect of the real dialectical process in which each new structure represses the one that precedes it and absorbs it in a lived interiority." "The sensorial impression, as the primordial form of lived experience . . . is only the irritability of the cellular element absorbed and repressed in the reaction of the whole organism." "The development of the nervous system is presented as a dialectic in which the successive

levels of behavior are superimposed on each other — each formation inhibiting the preceding one and absorbing its influxes in a broader regulation in which they are maintained as suppressed, preserved, transcended.”

Critics of Thao's work, such as Paul Ricoeur¹ and Jean-Paul Sartre,² though favorably disposed toward Thao's grounding of philosophical investigation in concrete experience, ultimately reject his account of the origins of consciousness and, especially, self-consciousness. For they argue: how, possibly, could matter give rise to the *idea* of matter?

Thao himself, dissatisfied with the second part of *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism* wrote essays in the 1960s and early 70s which develop and modify his views regarding the origins and nature of language and consciousness. These essays which form his second major work, *Recherches sur l'origine du langage et de la conscience*,³ are based on Marx's classical theory which considers that consciousness is from the outset a social product, elaborated in the material activity and material relations of men, in the language of real life. Such a conception, which is strictly materialistic, allows for the description of lived experience on an entirely objective and scientific plane, which definitively eliminates, by making superfluous, the phenomenological method from which the author could not entirely free himself in *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism*.

However, though Thao may have modified and even rejected some of his views regarding phenomenology and dialectical materialism in his most recent work, it is still useful and most instructive to study *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism*, which has had a wide influence on the European continent these past three decades, since we find in this work a serious philosopher grappling with the relationship between phenomenology and dialectical materialism: for whoever would come to serious grips with contemporary philosophy must take into account these two movements.

DANIEL J. HERMAN
The University of West Florida

DONALD V. MORANO
Los Angeles, California

NOTES

¹ His review-essay, 'Phenomenology' first appeared in *Esprit* (1953) 21, pp. 821–838. Daniel J. Herman and Donald V. Morano translated it into English for the Fall 1974 Husserl issue of the *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy*.

² 'Materialism and Revolution' (1949), in *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 3, edited by William Barrett and Henry D. Aiken, New York (1962), p. 389.

³ Trần Duc Thao: 1973, *Recherches sur l'origine du langage et de la conscience*, Paris: Editions Sociales. The English translation of this work is published as *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 44 (1984).

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