

A conference was held in Prague, Czech Republic, in November 2002 that was entitled “Issues Confronting the Post-European World” and that was dedicated to Jan Patočka (1907-1977). The Organization of Phenomenological Organizations was founded on that occasion. The following essay is published in celebration of that event.

Essay 50

Thao’s Smile: Phenomenology and Non-European Thought

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Abstract

Post-European world philosophical issues, ideological as well as philosophical, are today inextricably bound to discussion of “post-colonial” or, more accurately expressed, “neo-colonial” projects. Pressing questions concerning the ability of the colonized subaltern to “speak back” within the European imperial narrative are widely discussed today outside of the phenomenological movement and may serve as a deciding test of European phenomenology’s ability to transcend what are primarily German and French cultural studies and come to an understanding that addresses the unpleasant possibility of an *eidetic colonialism* that is neither intended nor acceptable. A pivotal link between European thought is provided by Tran Duc Thao’s enigmatic place between phenomenology and the “non-European world,” his early stance as an “Husserlian Marxist,” and his final critique of phenomenology through the natural science of historical materialism and the philosophy of dialectical materialism. The ironic “smile” he was said to have after returning from the Husserl Achieves in Louvain to L’ École normale supérieure in the late 1940’s may be taken as an expression of his unique position as a transcultural philosopher. Further, discussion of “post-European” issues confronting phenomenology allows for reflection on Jan Patočka’s failed political philosophy as well as practical problems confronting international phenomenological societies, in this case, the Society for Phenomenology and Media.

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Introduction

The “Thao” I speak of is Tran Duc Thao, the Vietnamese philosopher whose long career at L' École normale supérieure influenced Louis Althusser and others. The “smile” I speak of is mentioned by Althusser in his memoirs. I will return to Thao's smile after a few digressions.

At different times in the admirable planning of the founding meeting of the Organization of Phenomenological Organizations, suggested topics for discussion were made by its organizers, each of interest:

- (1) consider an issue or issues confronting the post-European world;
- (2) comment on Jan Patočka;
- (3) discuss a topic of our own choosing;
- (4) summarize the activities and nature of the phenomenological organization they represented.

Because all of the topics are of interest, because I have, with the exception of Jan Patočka, written on them and am able to draw, in part, on those reflections, and because I am interested in what other participants have to say, I have decided to sketch each theme. It slowly came to me that all of the suggested topics were related—or could be related.

I. Issues Confronting the Post-European World

Discussion of “post-European world issues,” ideological as well as philosophical, is today inextricably bound to discussion of “post-colonial” or, more accurately expressed, “neo-colonial” projects—this depending on class perspective in an era of political-economic “globalization” and corrupt bourgeois democracy. Outside of the complex position that lumbers through a swamp of unresolved issues within the Western philosophical tradition under the flag of “phenomenology,” more pressing questions concerning the ability of the colonized subaltern to “speak back” within the European imperial narrative—whether that narrative takes place on the European or any other continent, whether the narrative is philosophical or other—are widely discussed today outside of the phenomenological movement and may serve as a deciding test of European phenomenology's ability to transcend what are primarily German and

French cultural studies and come to an understanding that addresses the unpleasant possibility of an *eidetic colonialism* that is neither intended nor acceptable.

Discussion of “post-European world issues” leads to a specific challenge to phenomenology at the present historical juncture, the creation and practice of a *phenomenology of listening*. Setting aside for the moment post-colonial theorists’ claims that the subaltern has no authentic voice but must speak within the imperial narrative (better known today as “globalization”), the other possibility of stillborn dialog is explained by a failure of imperialism, political and philosophical, to listen. *Unheard* subaltern “speaking back” may as readily be explained as a failure of imperial listening as a failure of subaltern speaking. In either case, listening along with speech forms the corrective feedback loop that defines a living language, as contemporary linguistics, a natural science, has taught us. Listening, as a passive or receptive perception, rather than an active or constituting act, presented an additional problem for phenomenological intentionality since the essential referential character of language “apodictically” accepts a transcendent other.

Implicit in the task of listening is the acceptance of phenomenology as not only *Geisteswissenschaften*, but as itself a European cultural expression of universal themes. A phenomenology of listening entails self-transcendence as well as the transcendence of cultural barriers. Listening, grounded in the acoustic aspect of phonology, is built into the structure of a natural language along with speaking, grounded in articulatory aspect of phonology, but a higher-order communicative function permits people to receive what is heard as “noise” or block the message. Reasons for this “blocking” of the feed-back loop of speaking-listening dialog are, I suggest, intimately bound to ideological considerations arising from class differences. Contrary to post-colonial claims, the problem of “narrative” does not solely exist within a one-sided, context of *voice* as speech, grounded solely in articulation, but in *voice* understood as listening, and it is in this regard that the implications offered by Roman Ingarden’s understanding of “reading” and Wolfgang Iser’s reader-response theory can be useful, accepting the analogy between writing-reading and speaking-listening, though not, of course, conflating the two processes. At this first meeting of the Organization of Phenomenological Organizations, we have the opportunity to confront directly the problem of a phenomenology of listening in its global context, as our conference theme invites.

The discourse of our times is that of the natural sciences and political economy is here understood as a natural science, which means that the study of

oikos is more than a Greek etymological wild-goose chase, the sort of clever hermeneutic adventure all-too-common in the prevailing subjectivism that has earned “scientific” phenomenology such contempt among our non-phenomenological colleges. Such excursions are especially unhelpful, even obfuscating when pressing issues of global economics affect lived families every day. Other than an etymological connection, valuable perhaps as a springboard for speculative rapture, the relationship between the *oikos* of antiquity and the political economic of contemporary globalization is not only deceptively fruitless but also deceptive, placing the subaltern, once again, within the Western explanatory imperial narrative. Such exegetic excursions on *oikos* make as much explanatory sense as descriptions of contemporary bourgeois democracy in terms of the Greek *polis*. Current global political-economic considerations go far beyond explanation through *family hearthside* economics (*oikos*) and, as Marx and Engels long ago pointed out,

The bourgeois claptrap about the family and education, about the hallowed co-relation of parent and child, becomes all the more disgusting, the more, by the action of modern industry, all family ties among proletarians are torn asunder, and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour (Marx, *Manifesto* 55).

The globalized forces of production, consumption and distribution in our time are undergoing profound change, producing economic displacement and social unrest and, again relying on Marx’ insights on the source of this change, “with the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed” (Marx, *Contributions to the Critique of Political Economy* 12) and, as Lenin challenged concerning this transformation,

A new capitalism has come to take [old capitalism’s] place, bearing obvious features of something transient, a mixture of free competition and monopoly. The question naturally arises: *to what* is this new capitalism “passing”? But the bourgeois scholars are afraid to raise this question. (Lenin, *Imperialism* 43).

This superstructural/ideological transformation entailed by a more fundamental shift in the means and mood of production in the economic base (i.e., neo-liberal globalization) needs to be accounted for because it is this

change—a very material, political-economic transformation—that the subaltern narrative addresses and whose narrative requires close listening. This transformation transcends national, cultural and gender considerations, as important and as intrinsically bound up as they are to political economy, although the subaltern “speaking back” to which our proposed phenomenology of listening directs its attention responds, point for point, to the entire range of issues spoken by the imperial project in its globalized narrative, including philosophical issues. It is the subaltern narrative of economic base that speaks the loudest and, in order to focus our phenomenology of listening on this narrative, we are led to class analyses that underpins cultural and gender content. In turn, these analyses offer the possibility of a first step in the retraining of our power to listen, an unplugging of Western our ears—a *bracketing of class presumptions*.

Political-economics, a natural science, is decidedly not a cultural study. It is in this regard that the work of Tran Duc Thao provides an opening for discussion, one that begins with Husserl’s observation that “at the base of all other realities one finds the natural reality, and so the *phenomenology of material nature*, undoubtedly, occupies a *privileged position*.” (*Ideas* 192).

Discourse on post-European issues by its very title places discussion within the context of historical reflection, bringing *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* to stage center. I do not find this focus to be helpful. Others have noted that the *Crisis* itself might not qualify as phenomenology by Husserl’s own criteria:

If a treatise on the history of philosophy seems out of keeping with Husserl’s phenomenological approach, a philosophy of history, at least in the most familiar sense of that term, seems even more so.” (David Carr, “Introduction,” *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* xxxiii) and “The question of historical genesis is explicitly banned from phenomenology per se in Husserl’s writings up through *Cartesian Meditations*.” (xxv)

So—inspired by the speculative philosophy in Balnibarbi observed by Lemuel Gulliver—rather than trying to “extract sunshine from cucumbers,” focus is better placed on phenomenology’s place in a wider sense of history. As such, discussion of issues confronting phenomenology in a post-European world is itself not phenomenological but takes place and relies on philosophical traditions that have given longer and greater attention to the theory of history

and history itself, specifically the science of historical materialism, an approach that Husserl would undoubtedly have considered an unacceptable reduction, that is, *historicism*, but one that, as Marx noted when warning of possible confusion in times of rapid transformations in the economic base:

In considering such transformations, the distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production *which can be determined with the precision of a natural science* [italics added], and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophical—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.” (*Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 12)

Nonetheless, I have no difficulty considering this discussion “phenomenological” because I have come to consider phenomenology as a *style*, what I have referred to in other places as *phenomenological eloquence* (Husserl’s “queer sentences, Fink’s “phenomenological sentences”), and, even though the present discussion of post-European issues may not be strictly phenomenological—this discussion takes place within the discourse of *Naturwissenschaften* rather than *Geisteswissenschaften*—discussion on the post-European theme not only shares a context with theoreticians of political economy and history as natural sciences, but also shares concerns for methodological *reflection* and *rigor* in common with the natural sciences.

Our conference theme presumes that the world was, in fact, at one time *European*. In a political-economic sense, the distasteful truth is that the world was, indeed, at one time European and, in that same sense, it can now be argued that the world is *more European* than ever—hardly “post-European.” But the term “post-European”—like the term “post-modern”—is itself ambiguous, even misleading. The globalization entailed by the “New World Order,” empowered by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and encouraged by a renewed class-impulse towards imperialism, intertwined with the radical transformation of the digital mode of production of artifacts and knowledge in the economic base, means that the world remains European, though the people in this hyper-European world are not all European. What does it mean to be non-European in a European world? Specifically, what does it mean for phenomenology to confront issues in a “post-European”—in fact, more-European—world?

The post-European theme suggested for this first gathering of OPO was undoubtedly primarily meant to refer to philosophical issues, not ones of political economy. In this sense, the theme suggests a number of interpretations—most easily, how European thinkers deal with the expansion of and reaction to phenomenology by non-European philosophical thought and culture. A more relevant way to approach the theme might be for phenomenology to confront philosophical issues that arise in non-European philosophical traditions, to find parallels in the thought that arises in diverse cultures and open itself, at the minimum, to the possibility of discovery of ideas more sophisticated than those in Europe. That may be difficult. The European philosophical tradition and its thinkers have often deafened themselves to universals discovered elsewhere and there is no evidence that present-day reactions are different, so the danger remains one of “ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.” As noted above, during these periods of change,

at a certain stage of their development the material forces of production in society come into conflict with the existing relationships of production, or—what is but a legal expression for the same thing—with the property relationships within which they had been at work before. From forms of development of production these relations turn into fetters. (Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 12)

We cannot believe that the theme has the trivial and vulgar meaning that Europeans are now willing to accept non-Europeans into the ranks of those who study European phenomenology, a notion as condescending as it is demeaning, but it is difficult to avoid this conclusion. Sorrowfully, this seems to be the case. Phenomenologists will now admit into its club non-Europeans. This is not to confront, but to conquer, and it is in this sense that phenomenology is in danger of becoming a narrative justification within the imperial project. The OPO theme does not imply that phenomenologists have discovered a universal road to truth—fratricidal disputes within European phenomenology hardly bare that out.

If the theme is merely an invitation given to non-Europeans to take up European Cultural Studies, then the pursuit is no longer a philosophical one. When this condescension, together with concerns of ideological neo-colonialism are in the air, then phenomenology must pause and consider the possibility that its discourse is tainted by the power its own base provides. Nonetheless,

phenomenology has within itself and has from its inception been a reflection on its own reflexivity. What is called for is a *phenomenology of listening*. It is not that the subaltern is silent in the face of the narrative of the imperial project or can speak only within the narrative and language of the imperial master, as post-colonial theorists maintain, but that those who benefit from its reach have not listened carefully. Listening to non-Europeans could provide phenomenology with verification for its own ideas in other cultures. This is not intended to suggest that phenomenology become a study within “comparative philosophy,” as worthwhile as that enterprise may be, but a process of discovery that transcends cultural studies. An archeology of knowledge that emphasizes “digging up” cultural knowledge should not conflate the process of digging with what it dug up. It is the later that is of interest here.

Other Western philosophical traditions have already addressed questions of what “post-European” and related issues mean in depth, particularly post-colonial and Marxist theorists. Some have come to the conclusion that “post-colonial” is a neologism for “neo-colonial” and, in the era of globalization, “post-Europeanism” is “neo-Europeanism.” Of course, “Europe” includes much outside of the continent; the ruling classes of many former colonies throughout the world, as we all know, are also culturally “European.”

Two problematic aspects of “post-European” ideology draw our attention: 1) the role of Husserlian phenomenology within the larger philosophical context of dialectical materialism; and, 2) the meaning of “post-European” in the context of neo-liberal globalization. “Post-European” theory understood as “post-colonial” theory faces the danger of becoming the ideology of neo-colonialism—and phenomenology the danger of becoming a form of eidetic colonialism.

It is not only phenomenology that faces the danger of becoming a voice of contemporary imperialism. Contemporary post-colonial theory that attributes an absolute epistemic hegemony to imperial discourse over native articulation in terms of an inability of native texts “to answer back” to imperial overlords (Spivak 128) also runs up against evidence of a speaking back. This evidence casts doubt on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “post-colonial” claim that “There is no space from where the subaltern subject can speak” (Spivak, 129) and contradicts self-deceptive post-colonial theorists who suggest, for example, that “Marx offered an epistemological position that allows us to understand the world *as if* we belonged to the proletariat” and that Franz Fanon “forces us to see the world *as if* we were people of color.” (Franco, 368). Phenomenology could easily find itself in the same situation. Such contentions are without basis in the

epistemological empathy necessary for the recognition of the other-as-subject (Majkut, "Empathy's Imposture" 59-60). It is a remarkably credibility that believes that the soft hands of academic praxis can yield understanding of manual labor *as if* they were callused. Such theories—forms of *eidetic imperialism*—deny the Marxist notion that knowledge originates in *praxis*. Acts of intellectual faith aside, calluses remain decidedly not *as if*.

Nor is it credible to see the well-fed Western academic's experience of a good meal as an *as if* understanding of the empty stomach—unless social and cultural reconstruction of the material world is mistaken for ersatz *matter* of the will. The notion of the "silent subaltern" that underpins "post-colonial" epistemology is not only counterproductive to human liberation (not to mention animal and environmental liberation), but itself speaks in the neo-colonial voice commonly found among post-colonial theorists in Western academic institutions. As Stephen Slemon admirably puts it, "academic interest in this history and the discourse of colonialism bids fair to become the last bastion of global theory and for European universalism itself" (Slemon 52). Note that Slemon uses the oxymoron "European universalism"

Theoretical confusion that results from the conflation of epistemological subject and socially-constructed self resides at the root of what is better understood as epistemic neo-colonialism, that is, the "post-colonial" theory that, as Bill Ashcroft suggests, promotes "ways in which post-colonial discourse could, unwittingly, become a 'colonizer in its turn'" (Ashcroft 4), although phenomenology has not taken the post-colonial perspective criticized here, perhaps because it has yet to address these difficult questions. The danger for phenomenology when it does directly address questions of post-colonial and post-European experience will most likely not arise from post-colonial theory's rejection of all universals. On the contrary, phenomenology would more likely and unwittingly error by repeating European historical practice of casting the abstractions of its own cultural practice as universal (for example, "transcendent," "immanent," *Erlebnis*, *Erfahrung*, and so on), the very practice that post-colonial theory correctly critiques at the beginning of its analyses. The rethinking and relearning of universals through a phenomenology of listening that learns from the subaltern narrative would give phenomenology an advantage over other approaches, none of which begin by listening but, instead, error either by imposing culture-bound, pseudo-universals or denying universality altogether. What is the essence of hunger? The idea of a potato is not filling and to posit an "essential experience" of hunger removed those positing even further

from understanding. A little more “seeing” is required in addition to eidetic “seeing-through.”

Phenomenology would do well to learn caution from the overstatements of post-colonial theory. For example, culturally-transcendent revolutionary identity, it is clear, cannot be based on national culture propped up by a romanticized past or reference to teleological, theological or pseudo-scientific theories of race, ethnicity, or culture.

Franz Fanon is correct in finding that “colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content” (Fanon 154), but historical experience shows that the imperial narrative has not *and cannot be imperially completed*, that speaking-back resistance is present at every stage of colonial development, and, as a consequence, the imperial project cannot have definitive *narrative closure*. The voice of the colonized has never been silent nor silenced, so, again, our problem is one of listening, not silence. What is evident is that the imperial project, including all of its ideological expressions, has not listened. Phenomenology must avoid demanding that non-European thought echo its own pronouncements.

What is called for is a phenomenology of listening. Post-colonial theory mistakes its own inability to hear the universal as an instance of particularist, subaltern silence. But historical experience follows the lines of development discussed by Marx and Engels as a *synthesizing dialectic*. Fanon’s discussion of third-phase *revolutionary nationalism* is, in fact, *transnational praxis*—universal discourse rooted in human solidarity and the affirmation of human commonality that is not based on cultural difference. For example, the revolutionary praxis of American society that leads from slave revolts through the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement is now in the revelatory process of discovering a suppressed subaltern narrative, redefining the narrative canon, and rewriting the American historical narrative. Not only have a wealth of texts that “answer back” to the imperial project been unearthed, but they clearly demonstrate that “speaking back” forms the essential structure of the multicultural American narrative and, as Fanon wrote, “contribute to a democratization of the drive for literary expression.”

Revolutionary transnationalism stemming from multiculturalism is not solely an act of literary expression. It is not simply the act of *writing* a text that is not silent or that “speaks back” or “answers back.” The act of *reading* any text—as Paolo Freire points out—is not only a phenomenological but also a revolutionary act. This is especially true within the context of phenomenological analyses of the reading processes of *anticipation* and *retrospection* discussed by

Wolfgang Iser and, more importantly, Roman Ingarden (*The Act of Reading*, 1976). Post-colonial theory argues, for example, that the articulation found in the native text speaks within the narrative of the imperial project and is an “answering back” that has no space of its own but dwells only within the imperial narrative. This argument ignores the *phenomenological intertextuality* that informs all texts, whether imperial or subaltern. In practice, inattention to intertextuality undermines the possibility of revolutionary theoretical praxis and, without it, narrow cultural “readings” become a form of reactionary *neo-colonialism*. This is a problem shared by Critical Theory.

Phenomenological reader-response theory, on the contrary, provides solidarity a ground of shared, *intertextual expressed experience*—or, what might be called *revolutionary intersubjectivity*. Within an intertextual context, the subjectivity of the Other, known through the aesthetic-cognitive attitude of intersubjective empathy, does not present epistemological difficulty. On the contrary, within this context the Other is apodictic. This essentialist mood of knowing and experience is far removed from the “as-if” ideologies of bourgeois sociology, post-colonial theory and subjectivism that consistently find the Other problematic. The philosophical problem is not located in the epistemological *transcendent existence of the other* but in the ethico-political *suffering of the other*. Post-colonial theory, having mistaken its own theoretical inability to hear the *subaltern other* for ideological silence, can only locate this suffering within its own ideological discourse. A phenomenology of listening hears the universal and the first thing heard, yielding a knowledge that also calls the listener into existence, is the universal suffering of the Other. The second thing heard is that that suffering is caused by the listener before he was called into universality.

Post-colonial theory argues that “the myth of universality is thus a primary strategy of imperial control” . . . “which denigrates the post-colonial text on the basis of an assumption that ‘European’ equals ‘universal’” (Ashcroft 55). But post-colonial theory unjustifiably exceeds its theoretical grasp when, while correctly identifying European universalism as a strategy of conquest and oppression, it also denies universalism to post-colonial voices that seek liberation *in the discovery of revolutionary solidarity through universals*. Writing and reading an intertextual narrative can be a form of political struggle—not merely expression confined to the laws of linguistics and cultural anthropology. It is “neo-colonial” for academic post-colonial theorists of the West to impose the assumptions of their own arguable “post-modern” philosophical ideology on narratives that speak back from former colonies; it is self-serving to throw out the universal baby with the dirty imperial bath water.

Undoubtedly, the universalism and essentialism employed by the imperial project during the colonial era *were* and *are* Eurocentric, but it is even more wildly Eurocentric to now believe that essentialism and universalism themselves are solely features of a European philosophical tradition that European post-colonial theorists reject. It is simplistic to suggest that the “essential humanity of readers” (Ashcroft 55) that served as a colonialist ideological justification for oppression can be breezily or conclusively dismissed as *essentialist philosophy*. The struggle for control of the imperial narrative is not at an end. A cultural war is fought daily concerning the dialectic denouement of each stage of the struggle, but, in Marxist terms, the contest over the post-colonial text in terms of culture alone rests on a non-antagonistic contradiction. The antagonistic contradiction is not one between ethnic groups contending for mastery over a narrative, but deeply embedded in the class struggle.

This more fundamental struggle for control of the narrative, a struggle based on an antagonistic contradiction, is being fought, for example, between the transnational media corporations and the working people everywhere. There is no greater “epistemological break” (*coupure*) than the cognitive chasm what separates the haves and the have-nots. Today, the imperial narrative is expressed in corporate media’s “Hollywoodization” or “Disneyfication,” especially in children’s literature, that distorts the egalitarian struggle with chauvinistic pseudo-universals such as sexual inequality (*The Little Mermaid*), the happy ending (*Mulan*), the Anglicizing of people of color (*Aladdin*), and revisionist reconciliation of differences (*Pocahontas*). If, as Marx noted, “Language is practical, real consciousness,” (*The German Ideology* 44) then linguistic and literary construction is the subaltern’s ability to “speak out” and “answer back” to the imperial project.

The appropriation of rhetorical traditions from outside of the tropes of the European imperial narrative facilitates their use as “weapons” in Fanon’s *literature of combat*, that is, as vehicles for “speaking back” to the imperial project. This narrative struggle takes place on philosophical as well as literary battlefields. On one side, in contemporary philosophy, best seen in the justification of the legal apparatus of the state by analytic philosophers’ construction of “normative ethics”; on the other side, in literature, best seen in the essence of call-and-response discourse, a narrative devise ideally suited to phenomenological reader-response analysis and contrary to post-colonial theory, provides a given “space from where the subaltern subject can speak.” To deny the dialectic space of call-and-response narrative is simply to deny the autonomy of subaltern narrative, not to disprove its existence. *But African and African-*

American narrative discourse, for example begins with the givenness of the other and the authenticity of the other's ability to speak. The tradition of West African and African-American call-and-response storytelling, in practice, grounds the speaking back of the pre-colonial, colonial, as well as the post-colonial subaltern text. The West African traditional role of the *griot*, the oral-historian/poet who guards historical truth and traditional values, requires listening. A potential problem for phenomenological reader-response theory as outlined by Iser arises in this case. Is the reader/listener an active or passive participant in the narrative? The sense in which I am proposing a phenomenology of listening is a process in which the listener is called into existence so, in this sense, listening is a process that begins as passive but ends active. It is not so much consciousness-raising in essence as it is consciousness-creating.

In the end, the subaltern is not silent after all—or, if silent, only so in the context of the particularism that shapes post-colonial theory, not as universal expression. It is “post-colonial”/neocolonial theory that is deaf to the voices of the subaltern other, just as colonial theory was deaf to the colonized in its day. To deny universality to the voice of the oppressed is to refuse to hear clearly demands and calls for justice and equality based on essential humanity. It is as though the sins of colonial fathers are visited upon the children of those they sinned against originally. Phenomenology, now willing to face the non-European world and *its* issues, must equally clearly choose the path by which it will form a relationship to intellectual traditions it has, for the most part, up to this time ignored.

II. Jan Patočka

In *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel*, Aviezer Tucker notes that the more things have changed, the more they have remained the same. He claims that an alliance of the old Communist and a post-communist elites have marginalized the attempts for reform of the Charter 77 group led by Jan Patočka and his disciple, Vaclav Havel, and bred corrupt governmental polity, a stagnant economy, and a culture of cynicism. Tucker places the blame squarely on the shoulders Charter 77, particularly on its claims of being “apolitical.” From my own perspective, the absurdity of such a position goes without saying, but what is of more interest in Tucker’s analysis is what he sees as the roots of this claim to apoliticism. Specifically, he blames the versions of phenomenology held by Patočka and Havel because, since they stress

“subjective individual experience over objective reality, its methods and conclusions are subject to wildly varying uses and interpretations.” This philosophical flaw, Tucker argues, proved fatal in the practical world of post-dissident Czech politics after 1989.

Tucker faults Charter 77 dissidents’ backward-looking rejection of aspects of modernism—such as science, technology, rationality, consumerism, and liberal-democratic politics—as an ideology inherited from the Nazi philosopher, Heidegger. Tucker claims that “Patočka, Havel, and their followers failed to grasp that these very features of modernity can be liberating.” In my own experience within a number of phenomenological circles, I have too often discovered anti-science revanchism to be commonplace, an attitude not only isolated to Czech thinkers who disregard Husserl’s call for philosophy as a rigorous science and not only “sets aside” the naivete of truths of natural science, but actively denigrates them as though the natural sciences were enemies. In this broader context, Tucker’s insights into Czech phenomenology may be writ large to include similar persistent tendencies worldwide.

Tucker believes that Heideggerian “phenomenology” allowed Havel to be outmaneuvered by “new Czech” opportunists. In this case, the cynicism of the Czech adage under the Communists—“He who does not steal from the state steals from his family”—is now reversed, and Tucker concludes, “The immediate prospects of Czech society and politics appear to be more boring than bleak. A bunch of crooks in suits cheating their voters is nothing exceptional in world politics.”

Again, we are led to agree with Tucker that the error may be traced back to subjectivist and idealist philosophy, specifically the phenomenology developed by Patočka and Havel and epitomized by Havel’s well-known remark that “my dissident experience taught me one great lesson—that Consciousness precedes Being, and not the other way around, as Marxists claim.” Needless to say, this once again places Descartes before the horse and, more importantly, illustrates Havel’s limited understanding of Marxist thought, which, although it places *praxis* before consciousness, has little to say about the logical or experiential relationship of “Being” to consciousness or, for that matter, to anything.

While I do not accept Tucker’s model of Jewish cultural experience as a model for a “universal morality,” noting the failure of Jewish culture in Israel to transcend the exclusivity of European nationalism (the last successful example of European territorial colonialism) and leading to Zionist territorial excesses not

unlike those he denounces in Europe, I sympathize with his effort reestablish “responsibility” as a ethical ground.

III. Thao's Smile: Husserlian Marxism

In rejecting what he considered to be Husserl's “prepredicative praxis,” Louis Althusser commented that he “detested any philosophy that claimed to establish *a priori* any transcendental meaning and truth at a fundamental level, however prepredicative it might have been.” (Althusser 178) Despite his repudiation of transcendental idealism, Althusser was unrestrained in his praise of Tran Duc Thao, whose brilliant but failed attempt to syncretize Husserlian phenomenology and dialectical materialism led some to refer to him as an “Husserlian Marxist.” Nonetheless, Althusser continued to consider Thao to be his “philosophical mentor.” Within this puzzling contradiction, one passage in Althusser's memoir, *The Future Lasts Forever*, strikes me as particularly telling. Althusser remembers that

In private lessons, Thao remarked that “you are all transcendental egos, and as egos you are all equal. You are all equal transcendental egos!” He smiled as he said it, but how profoundly true it was! ... Thao and [Jean-Toussaint] Desanti carried the hopes of our generation, as did Desanti later. Husserl was to blame for the fact that they did not fulfil them. (178)

It is Thao's smile that intrigues me. I understand it as the ironic smile of a “Husserlian Marxist,” a contradiction that alone is enough to make anyone smile. But in the “profound” sense that Althusser saw, the smile of the Husserlian Marxist can be taken as a trope for and expression of the Marxist unity of opposites or, as the American epic poet of democracy, Walt Whitman, himself a contradictory *mélange* of naturalism, transcendentalism, and socialism sang,

Do I contradict myself?
Very well, then. . . .
I contradict myself; / I am large. . . .
I contain multitudes.”

In *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism*, Thao explains that

Thus, concrete phenomenological analyses can grasp all their meaning and be developed fully solely on the horizon of dialectical materialism. It goes without saying that we are obliged under these conditions to reject not only the totality of the Husserlian doctrine but also the method itself to the extent that it has become ossified in abstract formulas. In addition, the concept 'transcendental' was superfluous from the outset, since it maintains a strict identity of content between "pure consciousness" and natural consciousness. Be that as it may, theory has meaning only in terms of practice. ... (Thao, *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism*, xxiii-xxiv)

It is precisely this transcendental "superfluidity" that interests me. The overwhelming importance of this unreal, zero-point of orientation is surely, as Thao says, "shameful idealism" ... "mystification" ... that "in the name of 'objectivity and of Truth' is no more than the pure subjectivity of 'resolute decision'" But I believe we should add, this superfluity isn't easy to ignore philosophically and, serving as a lemma, can be quite useful, although Thao rejects it—pointing out that it is not Husserl's rationalism nor his notion of *rigorous science* that he rejects, but finding that "On the contrary, we end with *dialectical materialism* as the *truth of transcendental idealism*." Thao places Husserl on his head, next to Hegel, in order, as Marx says, "to get at the kernel in the shell." Thao overturns Husserl's idealist philosophy so that he may get to the dialectical materialism that is the kernel inside the idealist shell.

Thao's smile offers a materialist dialectic for human activity not provided in either Husserl's eidetic or transcendental phenomenology. Thao's response provides active purpose to the eidetic seeing-through (*blick*) that Althusser could never accept, believing as he did that "The eye is passive, removed from the object it observes. It receives an image without having to do anything, without having to approach, make contact or handle whatever it might be." (*Future* 212).

The transcendental approach to phenomenological description within the dialectic process is suggested in *Phenomenology and Dialectical Materialism*, where Thao clears the ground for an eidetic approach to social reality:

The whole philosophical effort after Kant consisted in returning to the "concrete" as the identity of being and meaning. But the idealistic prejudices remained immanent in all of these attempts

that regularly consisted in a simple juggling of the real in a more or less subtle “interiority,” in which the horror of bourgeois thought for the harsh materiality of productive labor was covered over. (*Phenomenology* 171).

Recall that it is in his description of the origin of consciousness in the *praxis* of production that Thao maintains that “we end with *dialectical materialism* as the *truth of transcendental idealism*.” (*Phenomenology* 129).

There is no need to overthrow the classical law of contradiction in order to understand the enigmatic contradiction contained in Thao’s smile. Within the realm of contradiction, contradictory things coexist. A thing may *be* and *not be* in the same place, at the same time, and under the same circumstances because place and time have become functions of noetic modality, not noematic “objectivity.” Pure phenomenological descriptiveness allows apparent contradiction to be overcome. Husserl’s charge of the *naivete* of the natural attitude is Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “the hobgoblin of small minds,” but transcendental consciousness, as Whitman suggested, is “large enough to contain contradictions.” The existential self is much too small to contain such contradictory plenitude, but the natural world is. Similarly, Husserl explains in *Ideas I* that nothing is lost by performing the *epochē* except naïveté, but much is gained. The strolling-walking transcendental ego or *flâneur* may be understood as Althusser’s unchanging, hence timeless subject of ideology.

IV. Post-colonialism

Social and cultural phenomena are experienced socially and culturally. As a consequence, the phenomenological *flâneur* at first removes himself from his existential individuality, the “self” of the psychophysical observer, and becomes the generalized “man of the crowd,” not an isolated existential man. Edgar Allan Poe’s “Man of the Crowd” is helpful here.

The removal is accompanied by the phenomenological reduction of the object, but this need not be only a reflexive act. At the same time that the existence of the object of social and cultural phenomena is placed in abeyance, so too is the existence of the psychological and psychophysical ego put in *epochē*. The phenomenologist, Husserl warns, must always be on guard against “phenomenological residuum” that remains in the form of a “psychological ego” after the operation of the *epochē*. But is the appropriate *displacing* of the

existential psychophysical *cogito*, in order to grasp the phenomenological noemata of lived experience, in fact, merely a *replacing* of that psychological perspective with an existential-sociological perspective that formulates an equally ungrounded self? If so, this is merely the repetition of the same ungrounded perspective that was problematic in terms of certitude at the beginning, precisely the reason for the phenomenological reduction in the first place. It is not the place of the phenomenologist to become embroiled in the debate over the genesis and composition of the self, whether it is personal, social, or cultural. The question is *not* how to *embody* (engender, racify, and so on), but how to *disembody* experience yet still explain that experience, and this is done through action in the natural world.

Replacing the zero-point orientation that defines the transcendental ego with a soi-disant realist transcendental field creates a problem for intentionality: *directionality* is lost or deferred from a philosophical base to a psychophysical base. In other words, we are returned to the social world of the psychological ego that Husserl has already set aside. Without positing an *active* transcendental ego (*flâneur*) as transcendent, which I do not read Husserl as doing, we have either removed one point of the x/y-axis (noesis/noema) of intentionality, leaving polarity adrift, or misunderstood subjectivity as something other than a zero-point of orientation.

Stepping aside from these debates does not dismiss the problem. If it is a social-cultural icon that is experienced, must the experiencer also be social-cultural? Nothing is lost in the phenomenological reduction; much gained. Only the perspective, we are taught, has changed:

Hence if anyone loves a paradox, he can really say, and say with strict truth if he will allow for the ambiguity, that the *element* that *makes up the life of phenomenology as of all eidetical science* is "*fiction*," that fiction is the source whence knowledge of "eternal truths" draws its sustenance. (*Ideas* 184).

Fearful and horrific objects of consciousness that appear in the natural attitude, interpreted idealistically by the bourgeoisie, are characteristic of existential consciousness of the "harsh materiality of productive labor," but they do not remain qualities of consciousness after the *epochē*. After the suspension of belief by this act, the bourgeois fear and horror attributed to these objects are transformed into simple noetic qualities awaiting dispassionate description. Existential dread is replaced by transcendental hope. Objects of fear and horror

are manipulated by the bourgeoisie in acts of mystification that attempt to subjectivize their role in consciousness.

V. The Society for Phenomenology and Media

From its beginning in 1998, the Society for Phenomenology and Media (SPM) has focused not only on questions of media and communication studies, but also addressed what it means—besides having an open membership—to be an “international” organization. To a great extent, this pragmatic approach foreshadowed the OPO theme because it confronted issues facing phenomenology in a “post-European world.” The results were startling and moved far beyond initial organizational matters into areas that did not neatly fit into European notions of the “exotic” or alien Other. For example, “internationalism” immediately demanded openness, a phenomenology of listening that included two surprising turns: (1) the inclusion of non-academic thinkers and (2) a broadening of the notion of “phenomenology” to such an extent that it became so intellectually porous as to prove useless—although this “porousness” did not necessarily apply to transcendental thought.

In practical terms, the goal of inclusiveness first meant discussions of where to hold annual meetings and who to invite as keynote speakers at those meetings. From the beginning, the society decided that politico-ethical responsibility came with organization and, as a consequence, invited non-European as well as European keynoters, seeking philosophical parallels in non-European cultures. Finally, at its fourth annual conference in 2002, the society was able to relocate meetings outside of the United States.

But “organizational responsibility” was taken to mean more than openness to non-European participation or conference location. The prejudice against non-European participation in international conferences, it was thought, is routinely a matter of *institutionalized prejudice*, not individual preference. Organizational responsibility, it was thought, included the need to actively seek out non-European participation in every possible way and at every possible level, acknowledging that inequalities arising from economic-political realities often mitigate against genuine international dialog. To get to the point: European and North American conferences are too expensive for many colleagues in the economically oppressed, neo-colonialism world.

The Society for Phenomenology and Media began as a happy confluence of interest and financial support. While doing post-graduate work J. V. McGill,

who had studied with Husserl, I became interested in the question of deception as stated in *Cartesian Meditations*, leading to an unpublished work, *The Phenomenology of Deception*. I had sought out McGill not only because we shared an interest in Husserl, but because we both worked within naturalist and Marxist contexts. My career in journalism and the publication of Alison Leigh Brown's *Subjects of Deceit: Phenomenology of Lying* in 1998 rekindled my interest in media studies and phenomenology and, combined with generous support from National University, the Society for Phenomenology and Media was created and a call for papers announced.

Response indicated that interest in the phenomenological study of media was international. Twenty papers were accepted for the first meeting, including doctoral students, who were encouraged to apply with small stipends. The ratio between US and international participants was and remains evenly divided, with participants coming from Argentina, Belgium, Canada, China, Denmark, England, Finland, France, Germany, Holland, Iceland, India, Lithuania, Mexico, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Ukraine, and 21 universities in 15 states within the United States. Conference papers are printed in the journal of the society, *Glimpse*, which, in 2005 will change its purpose to become the journal of the society, open to consideration of submissions by its editorial board, rather than a publication of conference proceedings. Conference proceedings will continue to be published in a different format. In addition, a complex web site is now being constructed that will contain all society materials and information.

The society has been fortunate to have been addressed each year by distinguished keynoters, including Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, President of the World Phenomenological Institute, who spoke on media as similes for reality; Alison Leigh Brown, Assistant Dean of Women's Studies at the University of Northern Arizona, who spoke on the dissembling images of electronic communication; Vivian Sobchack, Associate Dean of the Graduate School in Film Theory at UCLA, who analyzed digital Quick-Time movies; Bina Gupta, whose work on parallels between phenomenology and Vedanta appeared most recently in *The Disinterested Witness: Fragments of Vedanta Phenomenology*; J. N. Mohanty, whose on-going work in phenomenology and Vedanta are too well-known to need comment here; Maricio Beauchot, who holds a chair in philosophy at the Universidad Autonoma de Mexico and spoke on the concept of "borders," drawing from the Mexican cultural concept of *mestizaje*; Vicente Cerqueda, a Zapotec linguist from Juichitan, Oaxaca, who spoke on Zapotec concepts of "truth" and "knowing"; Janina Makota, a student of Roman

Ingarden, who spoke on the theory of ideas in Edmund Husserl and Roman Ingarden; and Barry Smith, who spoke on the ecology of mobile communication.

SPM conferences have also been fortunate to have two speakers who summarized current work in phenomenology: Lester Embree, representing the Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology, who gave an overview of contemporary phenomenology around the world; and, Antonio Zirion, representing *Circulo latinoamericano de fenomenologia*, who introduced members to current work in Latin American phenomenology—and gave us the memorable description of the contemporary division of phenomenologists into “eidetic pillars of salt” and “lyrical barbarians.”

The first three SPM conferences took place in San Diego, co-sponsored by National University and Universidad Iberoamericana in Tijuana. By the fourth conference, SPM was able to realize its plan to hold conferences outside of the United States. The first bilingual conference using simultaneous translation was co-sponsored by the Universidad Autonoma de Puebla, Mexico, on the theme of “transnational and multicultural considerations.” The next conference was held in Helsinki, Finland, co-sponsored by Arcata Polytechnic on the theme of mobile communication.

The SPM Executive Council decided that half of its conferences should to be held outside of the United States and welcomes co-sponsorship from universities in any part of the world. National University will continue to co-support of these conferences.

The decision to have conferences in different regions of the world was made for two reasons: 1) as an international society, it is the responsibility of SPM to balance the locations of its meetings; and, 2) important colleagues from South America, Asia, Africa, and Europe, find the costs of meetings in the United States and Western Europe prohibitive. SPM believes that discourse with thinkers from outside of the United States and Western Europe is perhaps the most important issue confronting contemporary phenomenology—and is a dialogue essential for the survival of phenomenology as something more than a variety of European cultural studies.

In addition to annual conferences, SPM also sponsors an annual work project on the question of deception. The Outis Project, the title of which is taken from Odysseus' name trick in the cave of Polyphemous:

Kuklôps, eirôtai m' onoma kluton, autar egô toi
exereô: su de moi dos xeinion, hôs per hupestês.
Outis emoi g' onoma: Outin de me kiklêskousi

mêtêr êde patêr êd' alloi pantês hetairoi.

Originally, the Outis Project took its initial inspiration from questions asked concerning deception in *Cartesian Meditations*:

How far can the transcendental ego be deceived about himself? And how far do those components extend that are absolutely indubitable, in spite of such possible deception? ... When making certain of the transcendental ego, we are standing at an altogether dangerous point, even if at first we leave out of consideration the difficult question of apodicticity. (Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*. 23)

The Outis Project is an interdisciplinary project intended as a series of working conferences over the next five years, having as a goal an anthology of essays given at those conferences in addition to conference proceedings. It was initiated by SPM to give members a unifying effort of common work. The first Outis Conference took place in Krakow, Poland, co-sponsored by Jagiellonian University. Papers were presented on topics in aesthetics, linguistics, literature, psychology, architecture, history, marine biology, film studies, sociology, as well as philosophy. Maria Golaszewska keynoted this conference, dealing with classical notion of deception. The second Outis Conference was held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in October, 2003, co-sponsored by Universidad del Salvador. Julia Iribarne keynoted this conference, speaking on a phenomenological approach to the question of deception.

SPM is a non-sectarian society. All varieties of thought within a loosely-defined “phenomenological movement”—as well as some they are only marginally phenomenological—are welcome and have been represented. It was decided that it would be better to err on the side of inclusiveness rather than dogma.

At the conference in Finland, Professor Christopher Nagel, Stanislaus State University, California, became the second president of the society; Lars Lundsten of Arcata Polytechnic, Finland, became vice president; and, David Koukal of the University of Detroit Mercy, Michigan, became treasurer. Stephen Crocker of St. John's University, Canada, became editor of *Glimpse*. I assumed the editorship of *Outis*, the separate publication of the Outis Project. In addition to these, the SPM Executive Council includes Alberto Carrillo Canan and

Miguel Jarquin (Mexico), Krsytyna Wilkoszewska (Poland), Jan Strehovec (Slovenia), Kay Egan (USA).

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