

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.

General Impressions of Our Tradition Today

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The Organization of Phenomenological Organizations

www.o-p-o.net

Abstract

These remarks were offered at the opening session of the founding meeting for the Organization of Phenomenological Organization. After a sketch of how they were arrived at, impressions of nine aspects of the phenomenological tradition are sketched: a generational change, a greater receptiveness to women, an increased interconnectedness on all levels, a seeming return to the articulation of philosophy into sub-disciplines, a number of new areas of investigation, a movement from scholarship on texts to investigation of things, stronger competition with the analytical philosophies, and more and more interdisciplinary work.

Before I sketch some general impressions, let me tell how I have arrived at them. In leading the team that edited the *Encyclopedia of Phenomenology* (Kluwer, 1997), I was struck by two major facts. In the first place, there are at least twenty nations with traditions of phenomenological philosophy in them. In the second place, there are at least twenty-two disciplines outside philosophy in which phenomenological investigations have been conducted during the 20th Century. These facts interested me in understanding our worldwide and multi-disciplinary tradition more deeply.

Editing the encyclopedia brought many invitations to international conferences. I started traveling a great deal, beginning with a meeting on interculturality at Hong Kong in 1996. Since then I have been to Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Czech Republic, China, Denmark, Germany, India, Ireland, Korea, Mexico, Peru, Romania, Spain, and Taiwan and expect to go to places in

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Africa, Australia, and Eastern Europe next year. Altogether I have been to twenty-eight international meetings in six years. I have met scores of new colleagues in our tradition, we have discussed many topics practical as well as theoretical, and, among other things, I have witnessed the formations of regional phenomenological organizations for Latin America, the Nordic Countries, Central and Eastern Europe, and East Asia. (As yet there are no regional organizations for North America or Western Europe, where there is already good interaction among colleagues in our tradition, so perhaps regional organizations are not needed.) And from encountering this last type of development, it has been an easy step to the effort to catalyze this planet-wide Organization of Phenomenological Organizations.

On the basis of these six years of travel and talking with colleagues almost everywhere I can offer nine tentative comments about our tradition as a whole:

(1) Above all, it appears that a generational change is taking place such that colleagues with no personal memory of World War II are coming into leadership positions everywhere. The recently deceased, retired, and retiring generation deserves great credit for how much larger this new generation is as well as for restoring phenomenology after the periods of Fascism in Germany, Japan, Spain, and Portugal. (I do not yet know enough about the older generation in Central and Eastern Europe and what happened under the Soviet Empire, but I can say that there is a large and impressive “Generation of ‘89” that is doing a great deal there.¹) Let us hope the currently ascendant generation can do as well for the generation to follow.

(2) In philosophy before the 1970s no other tradition has been anywhere as receptive to women as phenomenology, but, while there were still very few women in our just previous generation, there are now many women in phenomenology.

(3) Geographically, while the center of phenomenology is still in the West, our tradition is now extremely well represented across the planet and Klaus Held in particular has played a huge role in increasing this development. There is also a constantly increasing interconnectedness within our tradition today due to greater international travel, the use of English, and the Internet, an interconnectedness that makes one wonder about why there was so much prior disconnectedness. The constantly increasing positive interaction between phenomenologists in Germany and France has been exemplary and is also in the background of the establishment of the O.P.O.

¹ See, however, the entries on Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Russia, USSR, and Yugoslavia in the *Encyclopedia of Phenomenology*.

As for the intellectual outlook and interests occurring around the globe, I hope I am not too optimistic in the following additional remarks.

(4) The traditional articulation of philosophy into sub-disciplines went into an eclipse with Heidegger that continued in the periods of Existential and Hermeneutical Phenomenology, but it appears to be reemerging with increasingly distinct recognition of aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics, philosophy of history, philosophy of science, political philosophy, and philosophy of religion. Earlier investigations in these areas are being remembered and then extended in specialized ways.

(5) Besides such traditional areas within philosophy, relatively new problematics have emerged that include ecology, embodiment, ethnicity, gender, interculturality, and technology and should soon also include social class and generation. Amazingly, the expression, “ecophenomenology,” has been independently coined in the United States and in Korea. Similarly, I heard my first paper on cyberspace in Hong Kong several years ago and then last the Spanish Society of Phenomenology had a whole conference on that topic last year. Then again, I heard my first paper on the phenomenology of nonhuman animals at the Husserl Circle in Seattle and then went on a year later to hear another on that topic, again in Spain. And I have heard my first reflective analysis in the phenomenology of photography by a Chinese colleague in Seoul just a week ago. Now I wonder if we are not more acquainted with the contemporary socio-cultural world through moving as well as still photographs than through direct experiencing and the texts that we academics focus on so much. What other new topics have yet to emerge for us!

(6) The revival of philosophical sub-disciplines as well as the emergence of new problematics suggests a return to interest in the things themselves, which also signals a renewed vitality. Since it also seems to me that these things are more obviously than ever *cultural things*, I have elsewhere speculated that we are in a fifth period of our tradition, one that began with the new French interest in religion and is perhaps best called “cultural phenomenology” (www.ipjp.org, Edition One, 2001). Much on the program of this conference supports this speculation.

(7) Scholarship will always play a large role in our tradition, because our sources are vast, complex, and often difficult to understand and the study of texts aids the philosophical and scientific investigation of things. The pondering of relations between Husserl and Heidegger seventy years ago will probably never end. The works of Scheler have now been finished, the completion of *Husserliana* appears in sight, interesting new texts of Merleau-Ponty have recently appeared, and the Heidegger *Gesamtausgabe* goes on. And books about great figures

continue to appear regularly. My impression is, however, that there is now, on the one hand, a greater sense of mastery of the positions of the giants in our past and, on the other hand, greater mutual tolerance than there used to be between devotees to them. Somehow this fits in with the increased turning from the texts themselves back (or forward!) to the things.

(8) Phenomenological ambivalence toward the analytical philosophies and their formalism and naturalism or objectivism is continuing at the same time that that other tradition is spreading internationally in what seems a Colonial attitude toward the current unipolar planetary superpower. On the other side of this opposition, the analytical philosophers are no longer able to ignore phenomenology and some fruitful interaction is going on, especially concerning cognitive science.

(9) One other traditional feature of phenomenology appears to be gaining strength again. I have begun to hear talk of *interdisciplinary phenomenology*. This is usually but not always a matter of philosophy in relation to disciplines outside it, especially where the latter rely on qualitative or interpretative if not explicitly “phenomenological” approaches. Of course there has been phenomenology in psychiatry since before World War I and currently there are monthly seminars at the Archives Husserl in Paris on Binswanger and phenomenological psychiatry. There are also strong phenomenological tendencies today in geography, nursing, and sociology. And on the other side of what then amounts to an exchange of inspiration, issues, and concepts that is badly characterized as between the “pure” and the “applied,” many philosophers since Heidegger and Gadamer have learned much from classical philology, Gurwitsch and Merleau-Ponty studied Gestalt theory, and Schutz gained insight into the social dimension of the lifeworld from economics and jurisprudence as well as interpretative sociology, to mention only a few cases. It is difficult to doubt that scientific as well as philosophical phenomenologists will benefit from more consciously continued interaction with colleagues in other disciplines as well as by remembering that not all phenomenology is philosophical.

The little center that I have been leading for twenty years has helped these developments along to a tiny extent, but essentially what I am reporting has been happening across the planet on its own. We maintain a website that has been visited over 90,000 times since March 1997 and the new *Newsletter of Phenomenology* has gained nearly 600 subscribers since it began six months ago (a free subscription can be had by emailing cristiciocan@xnet.ro). The list of phenomenological organizations that I have now identified is now over 100 and certainly not complete). Much is certainly going on and it does seem healthy to me. We have an ever larger tradition that it is an honor to belong to.