

Chapter 20

Phenomenology, Marxism, and the Problem of the Political

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In his remarkable short essay “Marxism and Phenomenology,” Tran Duc Thao argues that phenomenology can aid Marxism in its delineation of a properly conceived historical materialism. Here he claims that there is a confluence to be explored between phenomenology and Marxism insofar as it is the case that “Historical Materialism referred, at least in its origin, to a *total experience* in which the world is given to us with its plenitude of human meaning and with which it exists *for us*, as long as we live *in it*.”¹ Historical materialism is one side of the twofold innovation given to us in Marx’s thought (the other side being dialectical materialism). Historical materialism is the science of history and the history of social formations that Marx constructs, which accounts for both how it is that societies reproduce and sustain their particular sets of social structures and also gives an account of how and why there is social change. Dialectical materialism is, as French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser has argued, the philosophy within which historical materialism becomes possible.² Thao is right to claim here that the science of historical materialism gives an account of the “total experience” of those humans living at a given place and in a given time via its work to describe social relations—political and cultural—as anchored in and emerging from material economic structures. As Marx himself argues in *The German Ideology*, historical materialism begins its investigations not from “abstractions” or theoretical axioms, but rather with “real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity,” and so, Marx continues, “The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals.”³ It is here that Thao sees a connection between historical materialism and phenomenology:

It is precisely to this experience that Husserl returned in the beginning of the twentieth century when he created his phenomenological school in gathering a pleiad of young philosophers around his famous marching order *zu den Sachen Selbst!* “back to the things themselves.” At issue of course, is not the physical objects as defined by a system of equations, but all that exists for us and the meaning itself in which they exist for us.⁴

As we will see below, phenomenology’s emphasis on meaning—defined importantly by Thao as the meanings *in which* objects and individuals exist—is akin to Marx’s emphasis on the production of particular modes of subjective awareness, or “ideologies” as Marx calls them, in and through the processes of labor and its alienation in capital. Thao’s work of putting these two philosophical traditions together offers us a fruitful view of both the ways in which they do in fact come together around questions of human experience and its meaning, and at the same time, it exposes the limitations for phenomenology if we are to attempt to understand it as a political philosophy in itself.

In what follows then I argue, along with Thao, that phenomenology can in fact be helpful in exposing the ways in which the world of human experience and human understanding is the result of particular historical ways of understanding and being. I am especially interested here in the ways that Thao makes use of phenomenology in identifying the proper way of conceiving of the Marxist notions of the superstructure and its ideological forms as Thao points out the potent ways in which phenomenological description exposes the lived experience of this superstructure and its ideologies as just that: actual lived experience and not simply mistaken identification or distortion of our proper or correct relationship with the being of what is.

This reading is in contrast to some of the readings of Marx’s notion of ideology, in which under capitalism our relation to the world is seen as an unreal or untrue abstraction—a false consciousness supported by ideological justification—that can be overcome merely by coming to conscious awareness of ideology and its function in propping up unequal and oppressive social relations that exist under capitalist modes of production.⁵ However, I want to also show how it is that Thao’s conception of the similarities between Marxism and phenomenology ultimately works only on the condition that we see the ways in which phenomenology *needs* a more overtly political philosophy in order to turn its insights into political insights—capable of grounding a politics, so this then is the sense in which phenomenology on its own is not a political philosophy. I will return to this below, but before coming to a proper understanding of this latter claim, we should first say a bit more about phenomenology itself and how it is that it can be helpful in constructing a critical theory that takes proper account of the lived experience of individuals in the social relations in which they find themselves.

I

Husserl's dictum, cited by Thao above, does not, as is well known, mark an attempt at getting to the objective world as it is apart from human cognition, but rather to make sense of that world by putting it back together with human cognition—the world that we experience is the result of the meanings that are imparted to it by consciousness itself. If one wants to truly understand existence, one needs, according to Husserl, to study consciousness and how it relates to (or “intends”) its objects. In this way, the “objective” world is not a world to be found at a distance from subjectivity, but rather to understand objectivity, one must understand how it is inextricably bound up with subjectivity. For Husserl, however, the subjectivity that we must understand is not the everyday subjectivity or subjective experience that individuals have and that is tied to a host of other individual and individualized beliefs, ideas, judgments, and desires; what is needed, according to Husserl, is to distill what is universal in these experiences. That is, we need to understand the impersonal or transcendental cognitive conditions that underlie and make possible all consciousness whatsoever and, in turn, also the phenomenal objects found in consciousness's world. It is because of this, as Dorthea Frede has argued, that Husserl can be characterized as a “transcendental subjectivist” in that he claimed that subjectivity is what founds and determines the world and its objects.⁶

Martin Heidegger also looks to experience as a means for understanding existence. Like Husserl, he too is skeptical of the scientific attitude (or what he called the “theoretical attitude”) in which the world and its objects are treated as if they could be investigated by a knowing subject who is fundamentally divorced from such objects and could stand apart from them in attempting to grasp their meaning (and in doing this, the meaning of the world). Heidegger, however, is critical of the Husserlian search for a transcendental consciousness that is the ground of the phenomenal world. Rather, Heidegger argues that we need instead to take account of what he called the “concernful dealings” of *Dasein* (Heidegger's term of art for human existence) with its world in order to gain a clear-sighted picture of both this world and what kind of being *Dasein* itself is. What Heidegger means here, to put it briefly, is that instead of bracketing off an individual's beliefs, desires, and the like as Husserl counsels, we need precisely to take account of these as it is in doing this that we are able to truly understand both the meanings present in the world and the mode of being that offers a proper description of what it is for *Dasein* to be.

Here Heidegger argues that the set of things we just mentioned (individual wants, beliefs, needs, etc.) come together in one's “concernful dealings” with one's world insofar as these things are part and parcel of the kinds of “projects” that individuals engage in or are continually engaged by in their

everyday existence. As Heidegger famously puts this, “Dasein is an entity for which, in its Being, that Being is an issue.”⁷ The point is that to be Dasein is to be a being who, in one’s existence, engages the world through the lens of concern: the world in which one finds oneself is a world that is meaningful in relation to those things that Dasein cares about, those projects that Dasein is involved in, and those things that are at issue for it. We are all, as Heidegger argues, always already involved in a number of overlapping projects that make up who we are and condition the world that we experience. Such projects include, for instance, those in which individuals are teachers, students, friends, parents, children, lovers, employees, employers, and so forth. It is in the midst of these types of projects that the world shows up as meaningful for us, and this is why existence is best understood in Heidegger’s view not by attempting to examine objects and individuals in isolation, but rather in their “average everydayness” and their engagement with such projects in which both individuals and objects are entangled with one another in their being as a result of the meanings that exist at a given time and place. It is, for Heidegger, phenomenology that shows us this insofar as it is the phenomenological method that allows us to extricate ourselves from the theoretical attitude and view Dasein in this primordial state of engagement with its world through the care structure and the meanings that are imparted to existence in this, a state that Heidegger thinks remains hidden from us most of the time:

The Being of those entities which we encounter as closest to us can be exhibited phenomenologically if we take as our clue our everyday being-in-the-world, which we also call our dealings in the world and with entities in the world. Such dealings have already dispersed themselves into manifold ways of concern. The kind of dealing which is closest to us is not ... a bare perceptual cognition, but rather that kind of concern which manipulates things and puts them to use; and this has its own kind of knowledge. The phenomenological question applies in the first instance to the being of those entities which we encounter in such concern.⁸

What Heidegger’s phenomenology of everydayness finds is that the world of engaged Dasein is not a world that is difficult to understand (if we approach it via phenomenology itself: in describing it from the vantage point of the engaged Dasein), and the objects in that world are also easy to make sense of insofar as they show up as “equipment,” as parts of a larger whole that is defined by the project(s) of Dasein’s existence. For one who is engaged in writing, for instance, the objects involved in that project—books, a computer, notes, the desk, the coffee cup on the desk, and so on—show themselves as equipment for the project of writing. To be sure, these objects are not meaningful in relation to the project in isolation (or as isolated objects

that are used in the project of the writer), but rather, their meaning as equipment is founded in the totality of relations between such objects—that is, the relation between one another—and their relation to the project as a whole and its meaningfulness as a project:

Taken strictly, there is no such thing as *an* equipment. To the Being of any equipment there belongs a totality of equipment in which it can be this equipment that it is. Equipment is essentially “something in-order-to. ... A totality of equipment is constituted by various ways of the in-order-to such as serviceability, conduciveness, usability, manipulability.⁹

In the project of the writer then, each of the objects mentioned above shows up as equipment in the midst of the project of writing in order to make the writing possible in the way that it happens. Here the project of writing is made meaningful by and for Dasein by the totality of the equipment that shows up as a part of this project.

The key to see here is that, as with Husserl, for Heidegger the phenomenological method allows us to understand the objective world and its meaning (or rather meanings) insofar as it grants us access to the way in which the world and its objects are made meaningful in the midst of those projects that Dasein finds itself involved in and through which it exists in the ways that it does. Attempting to understand the world and its objects apart from such engaged existence (as the empirical sciences do) is where we run into problems in that they become decontextualized, inert things without meaning. So, through Dasein’s projects, the world is made meaningful and Dasein is able to understand itself in relation to this world insofar as in its “everydayness” it is engaged in that world. Here we can return again to Husserl—though Heidegger thinks that Husserl got it wrong when he went in search of a transcendental subjectivity, phenomenology for Heidegger still affords us a glimpse at the ways in which the subject and the object are necessarily entangled in existence.

Heidegger also, however, wishes to show us not only how it is that the objects in a given world are made meaningful through Dasein’s projects but also how it is that individual Dasein is itself the product of a given historical time and place replete with a given selection of possible projects and modes of Being, or a historically grounded “tradition”:

In its factual Being, any Dasein is as it already was, and it is “what” it already was. It is its past, whether explicitly or not. And this is so not only in that its past is, as it were, pushing itself along “behind” it, and that Dasein possesses what is past as a property. ... Dasein “is” its past in the way of *its* own Being ... whatever way of being it may have at the time, and thus whatever understanding

of being it may possess, Dasein has grown up both into and in a traditional way of interpreting itself: in terms of this, it understands itself proximally and, within a certain range, constantly.¹⁰

We are beings that exist in a world with others, and it is out of this coexisting that we come to an awareness of ourselves and our possibilities. This is to say that our understanding of ourselves as individuals gets its traction from our “being-with” others in a world that is characterized by the meanings and relations that exist for us as a community of beings who exist in a particular place, in a particular time and have a particular set of historical possibilities that are handed down to us by the history of that community.¹¹ In other words, we are bound up not only with our own individual histories and the choices that we make—both conscious and unconscious—but also with the larger historical moments in which we find ourselves and with those others that also exist alongside us. As Heidegger notes here, “By others, we do not mean everyone else but me—those over against whom the ‘I’ stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does *not* distinguish oneself—those among whom one is too.”¹² It is, then, in this sense that I get my self-understanding from my community; I am *this* person that I am because I am one of *these* people, that exists here and now and who does *these* things that others do, and so forth. The meanings that exist for me are those meanings that are given to me, or handed down to me by—and in—the socio-historical location in which I exist (and which my existence repeats and reinforces).

Thus, the “world” in which I exist is also codetermined by the “being-with” of others in this manner according to Heidegger, it has a certain character based on the meanings that are found within this context and that I take up in my own engagement in the world. I am, in this way, always engaged in a world that has a significance that is given to it by the shared meanings of my historical moment. My particular project (whatever it may be) is made possible by the moment in which I find myself. I can do and be the things that I can do and be only because those things are possible modes of being, ways of understanding being, and available projects in a given moment or “tradition.” It is here that we can understand how Thao sees a relation between phenomenology and historical materialism. It is precisely *in* history and *in* existing social relations that Dasein takes up its projects. To return to the example used above, it is because I live at a particular time in a particular place that I can understand myself as a writer in the particular ways in which that project is made available to me. Certainly the project of writing has been an available project for many people in many different ages, but that project is not the same across all times in history and the equipment that shows up as a part of that project is also historically and socially bounded. Not only can we think here of the boundedness of the language in which I may write and the

subject matter that is made possible for this project, as well as the particular styles of writing that are available at a given time, but also in this age, the equipment that is available for such a project is the result of vast globalized production networks: my coffee cup is the result of machine mass production, as is my desk; the computer on which I write these words is a truly global product, produced by a globalized form of labor: from the mining in one place of the minerals that are used in the production of its processors, to the metals in another, and the assembly of the actual computer in yet another, and its being shipped around the world through globalized shipping and trade to be sold in the particular place in which I live etc.; along with this, all of the practices of globalized labor—oppressive, exploitive, and otherwise—are implicated in my project of writing. This is surely one of the things that marks the meaning of the project of writing differently now than it may have in different historical moments. Nonetheless, this project is one through which I can come to have an understanding of myself as the particular kind of being I take myself to be (along with other projects in which I engage). But is also clear, as I hope we can see in this example, that the meaning of the project is made possible by the history in which it is embedded, and though I may have made a choice to be someone who engages in the project of writing (for better or worse), the meaning of that project itself is not the result of my choice, but rather the project of writing as it is now, and its meanings precede my entering into that project. Here then, we can see that though Dasein as Heidegger describes it, is a being that lives its world via concerned dealings with that world, that concern itself is not simply the result of an individual Dasein's choices: to be Dasein then is to be both a determining being insofar as one picks and chooses among available projects (sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously) but given that the range of possible projects and meanings within which Dasein makes such choices is determined by a communal history into which Dasein is "thrown." Dasein is also a determined being, at the mercy of a history that precedes it and into which it is born.¹³

Phenomenology then, as we see, can be a useful mode of investigation of the ways in which individual consciousness lives its relation to its world through these existing social relations and the projects made possible by the current moment in history. This can expose the ways in which the consciousness of individuals is determined by its given moment and is so precisely *not* falsely, but in the ways that are made possible by history and tradition.

II

For Marxism, this tradition, those projects that are made possible, and the meaning that exist for humans, are founded first and foremost by the

economic processes in which humans produce the world and also the modes of existence that emerge in relation to these economic processes. This is of course the Marxist base/superstructure model that defines the science of historical materialism. This model conceives of the very material, embodied means of production and forces of production (the “base”) as that upon which all social relations are built. These are nothing other than the tools, technologies, human labor power itself, and the ways in which labor power is organized and put into use.

The “superstructure” consists of laws, government, culture, conscious awareness of individuals, and so forth. These superstructural elements exist in the ways that they do as a result of the economic base and serve as supports of its current modes of production. As Marxism understands it, social change happens first at the level of the base: as new modes, means, and forces of production come into existence, the base comes into contradiction with the superstructure forcing it to change in order to fit the new modes of production. Notice here that conscious awareness is itself one of the superstructural elements according to Marxism: it is defined by the types of economic activities that exist at a given time, and thus it is, in this way, ideological: it is constructed in such a way as to support or lend justification to the existing modes of production. Here is where the Marxist conception, discussed at the outset of this chapter, of consciousness as “false-consciousness” under capitalism arises.

If it is true that consciousness is constructed in such a way as to lend support for existing modes of production; then under capitalism consciousness is constructed in such a way as to view capitalist modes and means of production as natural and necessary rather than historical and changeable, so it is in this way that consciousness is “false”; it mistakes historically constructed, and hence changeable, social relations for ahistorical and unchangeable ones. And part of the Marxist project, then, becomes an attempt to reeducate the conscious awareness of individuals so they are no longer living in a distorted relationship to their world. This is in large part the function of the critical theory/theories of society that Marxist philosophers engage in. This is also one place in which phenomenology and Marxism come apart in their respective philosophical commitments. Here Thao writes:

It is true however, that the classical texts of Marxism define the primacy of the economical in a manner unacceptable for phenomenology. The superstructures are considered mere illusions, which reflect on the ideological level “real” relations, whereas the originality of phenomenology consists precisely in legitimating the value of every meaning of human existence.¹⁴

If we continue to conceive of the conscious awareness of individuals as “false” under capitalist social relations, insofar as they merely reflect and lend justification to those relations as they exist at a given time, then

phenomenology and Marxism have no truck with one another as it is the case that phenomenology does not conceive of existence, and phenomenological accounts of existence, as being able to be false: phenomenology, as Thao points out here, “legitimizes” human existence and its meanings; it does not delegitimize some and lend credence to others in the way that this conception of Marxism does.

Though there is not space to go into details here and doing this would take us away from the overall thrust of the arguments at hand, it is worth noting that it is true that in phenomenological accounts of existence we find critiques of certain modes of being. We can think here of Sartre’s critique of what he calls “bad faith” in which individuals fail to take responsibility for what Sartre sees as their fundamental freedom, or Heidegger’s criticisms of Dasein’s tendency to live in what he calls “the They” and the attendant mode of inauthentic existence that he discusses here.¹⁵ Neither of these, however, posits the conscious awareness of the individual as false or illusory—one can certainly delude themselves on these accounts, but the actual experience and awareness of consciousness are never taken to be somehow unreal.

Returning then to Marx, we need not stick to what Thao refers to here as classical conception of false consciousness in Marxism, and in fact, part of what phenomenology can aid us in seeing is precisely why we should not. Here Thao argues that within the Marxist system, “the autonomy of the superstructure is also essential for the understanding of history as well as the movement of the productive forces. But how can one provide such an account, if it is only an issue of mere reflection of real processes?”¹⁶ If it is true that consciousness and the rest of the superstructural elements of social relations merely reflect and reinforce existing modes of production, we cannot make sense of the autonomy of the superstructure. But making sense of this autonomy, or at least being able to take account of this autonomy, is necessary for historical materialism to offer the theory of social change in the way that it does. This is because the base and the superstructure have to be able to come into conflict with one another for change to happen. And this is possible only if the superstructure can be understood as autonomous, as having an existence of its own, and not simply and always an (unreal) reflection of the true relations founded in base. Thus, the superstructure cannot, then, merely “reflect” and offer support to the base. It cannot be mere illusion or mere falseness; it has to contain some truth—or reality—of its own in order that the possibility of conflict (and hence change) arises:

Marxism does not consist in the mere affirmation of reference behind the infrastructure, since the course of history can only be explained through class conflict, whereas the dialectic is founded in the autonomy of the superstructures. The relations of production must change when surpassed by productive forces. But these changes require a struggle and become realized in the form of a revolution.¹⁷

What phenomenology can offer us is precisely this: an account of the reality—as the lived autonomous reality of the superstructure in the lived experience of individuals via the meanings through which they live their worlds. This recognition of the reality of the lived experience of the superstructure (and its autonomy) then also allows for the Marxist understanding of the ways in which class conflict and struggle act as determining forces in the movement of history. The lived experience of individuals and communities has a reality and autonomy, which allows for their ability to understand the ways in which existing modes of production condition social relations that benefit some and oppress others, to allow those who are oppressed to come to work together in opposition to existing modes of economic and social power in order to challenge the structures within which they are first defined. This, however, need also not negate the rootedness of the superstructure in the economic base and the dialectical relations between base and superstructure that are defined in the Marxist theory. These superstructural elements can and should still be understood with reference to their economic underpinnings:

The *primacy* of economics does not suppress the truth of superstructures, but refers it back to its authentic origin in lived experience. Ideological constructions are relative to the modes of production, not because they are reflected in them—which is absurd—but simply because they draw all of their meaning from a corresponding experience in which “spiritual” values are not represented, but lived and felt, and because every particular experience is inserted in a total experience of human beings in the world.¹⁸

III

It is here though that we exit the realm of phenomenology only and reenter a properly Marxist philosophy. In order to make use of phenomenology as this type of critical theory, one must embed it in Marxism, within historical materialism and its background explanation of the ways in which particular historical moments allow for the types of projects and meanings that are available to individuals and within which individuals come to live their worlds in their everydayness in such a way as to make phenomenology into a philosophy, which can support a politics of change.

This, of course, requires, as we have seen, a return to the economic and the Marxist description of the base/superstructure model wherein the culture, law, governmental structure, and modes of knowing (the superstructure) are first determined by the means and forces of production as they exist at a given point in history (the base) and become, as Thao argues here with the aid of phenomenology, part of the lived experience of individuals in their

meaning-producing activity (and hence autonomous). As we can now also see, this is precisely what Thao does: in this short essay, he works to embed phenomenology in Marxism in such a way as to make it political, to give it a place from which it cannot merely offer potent descriptions of lived experience, as we have seen in Husserl and Heidegger, but also become a part of the Marxist project of seeking to change the world.

NOTES

1. Tran Duc Thao, "Phenomenology and Marxism," reprinted in *The Graduate-Faculty Philosophy Journal*, Volume 30, Number 2 (2009), 327.

2. For more on this distinction, see Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York and London: Verso, 2009), and Geoff Pfeifer, "On Science, Ideology, and the New: Or, Why We Should Continue to Read Reading Capital," in *Crisis and Critique*, volume 2, issue 2 (November, 2015).

3. Karl Marx, "The German Ideology," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings, 2nd Edition*, ed., David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), 176.

4. Thao, "Phenomenology and Marxism," 327.

5. Both Lucaks and Gramsci offer, in differing ways, these types of readings of these two concepts. For more on this, see, for instance, Ron Eyerman, "False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory," in *Acta Sociologica*, Volume 24, Number 1–2 (1981), 43–56.

6. Dorteia Frede, "The Question of Being: Heidegger's Project," in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger, 2nd Edition*, ed. Charles Guignon (New York: CUP, 2006), 52.

7. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962), 236.

8. *Ibid.*, 95.

9. *Ibid.*, 97.

10. *Ibid.*, 41.

11. *Ibid.*, 153.

12. *Ibid.*, 154.

13. Heidegger takes this "thrownness" to be one of the defining features of Dasein's existence. See, for instance, *Being and Time*, where he argues that "every Dasein always exists factually. It is not free-floating self-projection but its character is determined by thrownness. ... Dasein has been thrown into existence" (321).

14. Thao, "Marxism and Phenomenology."

15. See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), 86–112; and Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 163–168.

16. Thao, "Marxism and Phenomenology."

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*