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Tran Duc Thao, “On Indochina”

(Translated by Hayden Kee)¹

ABSTRACT – This is the first English translation of “Sur l’Indochine,” which was published in the February 1946 issue of *Les Temps Modernes*. While situated in a particular context and treating a specific issue, this essay offers one of the first sustained phenomenological reflections on interculturality and decolonization.

KEYWORDS: decolonization, existentialism, Indochina, interculturality, phenomenology

Translator’s Presentation

In the history of phenomenology and European ideas more broadly, Tran Duc Thao belongs to that singular milieu of post-war Parisian thought that includes such luminaries as Sartre, de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Fanon, and Althusser. Born in Hanoi on September 26, 1917, Thao received a scholarship in 1936 to study in Paris. He studied philosophy at the *École normale supérieure*, familiarizing himself with phenomenology, existentialism, and Marxism. Alongside Merleau-Ponty, he was one of the first visitors of the Husserl Archives in Leuven.² His work at the intersection of phenomenology and Marxism resulted in his most celebrated book, *Phénoménologie et matérialisme dialectique*³, which offers an alternative take to Sartre’s position on the relation and integration of these two prominent strands of contemporary philosophy. The work, widely read in France in the 1950s and 1960s, impressed Althusser, Derrida, Bourdieu, and Ricoeur, among others. His existentialist-phenomenological reflections on colonialism (including “Sur

¹ I would like to thank the Éditions Gallimard for giving me the permission to translate this article.

² As with Merleau-Ponty, Thao’s familiarity with Husserl’s unpublished works, evident in “Sur l’Indochine,” allowed him to develop a more progressive and flexible vision of phenomenology than the vision offered by those who were not familiar with these works, such as Sartre and Derrida. Nonetheless, Thao still felt Husserl’s phenomenology ran up against ultimate contradictions and was to be superseded by a dialectical method. See Thao 1951/1986.

³ Thao 1951, reprinted in Benoist and Espagne 2013, English translation Thao 1986.

l'Indochine") influenced Fanon and Césaire. And his later writings on the origins of language and consciousness, consolidated in *Recherches sur l'origine du langage et de la conscience* (Thao 1973; 1984), were visionary for their time, anticipating more recent naturalized approaches to phenomenology and embodied and enactive approaches to language.⁴

If Thao's name is not as widely known today as those of his fabled cohort, it is because he heard another calling – and history, too, had other ideas for him. After capitulating to Germany in 1940, France's colonial hold on Indochina loosened. Japan moved in to occupy the region. But after the surrender of Japan in 1945, Vietnam's Hue monarchy (which had collaborated with both occupying regimes) abdicated, leaving a political power vacuum. It was filled in the north by the communist Vietminh, led by Ho Chi Minh, who declared the independence of Vietnam in Hanoi on September 2, 1945. Political control, however, was internally fractious and threatened from without by global powers. At Potsdam, World War II's victorious Allies made no concessions for Vietnamese unification and independence, instead planning a partition of the country under Allied occupation. The Chinese were commissioned to oversee the surrender of the Japanese in the north while the British-led Southeast Asia Command was given the same task in the south. British-Indian forces arrived in Saigon on September 13, rejecting the authority of the Vietminh government and paving the way for the return of French colonial forces. Conflict escalated, leading to the First Indochina War from 1946 to 1954 and inaugurating three decades of bloody warfare in Vietnam.

During his stay in Paris, Thao became increasingly politicized, advocating for Vietnamese independence. He was elected member of the *Délégation générale des Indochinois en France* (General Delegation of Indochinese in France) in 1944 and helped distribute pamphlets in Paris, agitating for independence. This earned him the suspicion of the French authorities and Thao, along with many of his fellow activists, was imprisoned in October 1945 under charges of "threatening the security of the French state." He was released in December of the same year. While in prison he wrote "Sur l'Indochine" for *Les Temps Modernes*, and

⁴ See Benoist 2013; Di Paolo, Cuffari, and De Jaegher 2018; D'Alonzo 2018. For more general biographical information and discussion of Thao's role in the post-war French intellectual world, including his role as an early anticolonial writer in *Les Temps Modernes*, see the papers collected in Benoist and Espagne 2013 and McHale 2002; Herrick 2005; Davies 2009; de Warren 2009; Ford 2020.

it appeared in February 1946, the first in a series of three articles he wrote on the topic for the journal.⁵ He continued advocating against colonialism and for the independence of Vietnam in the late 1940s while also writing theoretical work on phenomenology and Marxism. In 1951, after the publication of *Phénoménologie et matérialisme dialectique*, Thao returned to Vietnam to contribute directly to the independence movement. He participated in a "rectification and self-critique" course before returning to academic work, publishing on Vietnamese history and literature, and earning the appointment as dean of the faculty of history at the national university in 1956. Soon, however, Thao's penchant for original and critical thought landed him in trouble with the Vietnamese communist party. He published articles critical of the repressive regime and pleading for democratization. Along with countless other intellectuals of the period, he was silenced. Having traded a gilded academic career in France to return to Vietnam in the service of the revolution, Thao was charged with "Trotskyism," banned from teaching, and relegated to translating Lenin and Marx into Vietnamese during the ensuing decade. Later, he returned to a philosophical work of a less political nature, writing his book on the origins of language and consciousness. In 1991 Thao returned to Paris for medical treatment⁶, where he passed away two years later.

"Sur l'Indochine" offers a phenomenological diagnosis of the failure of understanding between the perspectives of the colonizing French and the colonized Indochinese. For the French, or the "average French person" ("le Français"), whatever changes need to occur within Indochina and for the Indochinese people, and whatever progress has been made there, these developments can only be understood insofar as Indochina is viewed as a constituent of the French empire. The Indochinese, by contrast, see an alternative possibility, one ruled out in advance by the French: the possibility of an Indochina that had never been colonized, of what it could have and should have been, and of what it might yet be without colonial interference. Thao relies on two key phenomenological notions in developing this analysis: (1) the *pre-predicative* nature

⁵ Thao 1946. The two other articles were "Les relations franco-vietnamiennes" and "Sur l'interprétation trotskiste des événements du Viêt-Nam," which appeared in March and June, 1947 respectively. See Thao 1947a; 1947b.

⁶ Another version of the story claims he was exiled on political grounds. See the testimony of Thierry Marchaisse (2013) on the mysterious circumstances surrounding Thao's return to France.

of primary experience, prior to explicit judgment and discourse (though Thao does not use these exact terms); and (2) the *horizontal* character of experience and understanding.

Debates at the time concerning the role of France in Indochina quite naturally unfolded as putatively rational discourse: facts were cited, arguments advanced, conclusions drawn. The problem, Thao insists, is that the conflict itself initially occurs on a deeper level than that of words and arguments, in an experience prior to explicit linguistic judgment. Indeed, the sense of the words themselves used in such debates draws from this pre-linguistic source. As a result, if this original experience is not taken into account, a misunderstanding at the level of words and arguments is inevitable. Hence the opposition between the French and the Vietnamese, Thao writes, is “radical, rooted in the mode of existence, in two ways of living and of understanding the world” (885). Thao is here drawing on Husserl’s phenomenology of the founding (*Fundierung*) of judgment in pre-predicative experience of the world. But whereas Husserl was primarily focused on cases where the ideal meaning of a judgment (and, indeed, the ideal objects of the formal sciences constituted through founding relations) is the same for everyone at all times, Thao is here addressing a case where two radically different experiences and perspectives may hide behind what are ostensibly the same facts and judgments (at least in their external, spoken or written form). Thao’s case is of real and practical discourse, whereas Husserl tended to focus on ideal, theoretical examples. Hence, even if Thao presents an extreme example of failure of understanding, one is still left wondering if the discourse situation he describes is not in some respects much closer to the reality of practical, everyday speech and communication than Husserl’s idealized examples.

To these opposed pre-predicatively lived “modes of existence” there correspond radically different *horizons* within which new experiences, facts, and judgments are assimilated. Shaped by past experience and delineating the anticipated possibilities of future experience, horizons inform the sense that infuses our present experience and judgments. With their background and education, the French, Thao says, will tend to assimilate all new experiences, facts, and arguments into a “French” horizon. If they learn about the deplorable living conditions in Indochina or the work that needs to be done there, all of this will be understood in terms of what has been and will be achieved within the broader horizon of French empire and community. Even independence and

liberty of Indochina will be understood as *liberté et indépendance à la française*, as it were. For the Vietnamese, by contrast, the prospects of Indochina are viewed from a horizon that takes in facts and possibilities in radically different terms: in terms of an Indochina free to pursue freedom and independence as it sees fit, in terms of Vietnam as it might have been had it never been trampled upon by French colonialism.

The prospects for intercultural understanding based on the analysis thus far look bleak. Thao even goes so far as to write that it is futile to use reason in seeking an agreement in a conflict of this kind. However, to some extent, the misunderstanding between the French colonialist who cannot see beyond a nationalist-imperialist horizon and the Vietnamese who sees everything from within the colonized Vietnamese horizon represents only the most extreme and degenerate form of intercultural exchange. Another possibility shines forth here. We are not condemned to forever only assimilate new facts and experiences to our respective national horizon, or that of our "original community" (898). For, Thao insists, each of us, also belongs to a *human* community, a community with which we come into contact by delving deeper into ourselves (898, 900). It opens us to a universal horizon transcending – or, perhaps, descending below – the parochialism of nationality and the other limited cultural communities to which we belong.

Herein lies the promise, unfulfilled in his own work, of Thao's analyses for a phenomenology of intercultural understanding. They account for and give us deeper insight into the very real (and, indeed, very likely) situation of intercultural misunderstanding. But they also remind us of the possibility of genuine understanding – however hazardous and horizontal, partial and provisional any such understanding must always remain. By claiming a universal human horizon or perspective that is not an abstract and future goal of intercultural understanding, but rather a depth dimension of human experience at the heart of all communication and exchange, Thao sketches a possible contribution of phenomenology to the theory of intercultural communication that is largely neglected in contemporary identity politics. However, this aspect of Thao's account remains underdeveloped, and we are left waiting for a phenomenological description of "delving deeper into ourselves" through which we connect with the human community (898) and "rising above particular horizons" through which one achieves a human perspective (900).

The challenge of elaborating such an account, based on Thao's own horizontal view of experience, is the following. In our concrete,

pre-predicative experience, we do not alternate between the horizons of a particular community and of our universal humanity sequentially, as though by changing lenses or effecting a Gestalt switch. Rather, our concrete experience is always ambiguously informed by both, or, indeed, by many intersecting horizons, at one and the same time. This is true for the expression and experience of even the most basic of human gestures. A smile is a human universal expression of happiness – and, depending on cultural, pragmatic, and communicative context, it may also express (or be deployed to express) much, much else, from nervousness to contempt. As Merleau-Ponty observes, for human being, everything is both constructed and natural, a “genius for ambiguity that might well serve to define human being” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 195. Translation modified). This ambiguity of the phenomena is not always only the result of an epistemic failure on the part of the interpreter, as though it were only a preliminary and deficient stage of understanding to be surpassed by an improved state of knowledge. Rather, in at least some cases it belongs essentially to the nature of expression and communicative exchange between humans.

How are these depth elements of experience, these aspects of both our original cultural horizon and our universal human horizon that are formative for all experience, to be investigated phenomenologically? Though Thao is not here concerned with methodological questions, we can already see him engaging some of the issues that would lead him to declare in *Phénoménologie et matérialisme dialectique* that the classical phenomenological method of first-person reflection ultimately arrives at an impasse. So much of our present experience is informed by past, pre-predicative experience that has shaped the current horizons within which all new experience is formulated. But the genetic history of such past consciousness is not available to the phenomenologist through first-person reflection on the present phase of consciousness. Hence Thao would come to believe that phenomenology must be complemented by the study of the very real, very material conditions – inter-subjective, socioeconomic, and embodied – through which the conscious experience studied by the phenomenologist is always already informed.⁷ In the context of his interest in the Vietnamese conflict and intercultural and anticolonial phenomenology, Thao thus anticipates

⁷ See Thao 1951/1986, especially §21.

the turn, more often attributed to Fanon, towards an interdisciplinary "critical phenomenology."⁸

These most groundbreaking and provocative philosophical and phenomenological themes of Thao's writings for *Les Temps Modernes* are only outlined in those articles. Nor does his later work provide the final word on them. It is part of the task of an intercultural and postcolonial phenomenology to elucidate these issues without imposing an artificial determination or clarity on the polyvalent and ambiguous phenomena of cultural and intercultural experience. Thao was one of the first to indicate this direction of phenomenological research.⁹

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⁸ Fanon's *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Fanon 1952) appeared several years after Thao's series of articles in *Les Temps Modernes* and a year after Thao's first major monograph. On critical phenomenology, see, e.g., Weiss 2017. Guenther (2013) also credits Merleau-Ponty and Levinas with helping bring about a critical (post)phenomenological approach.

⁹ I am grateful to Jordan Glass and Pol Vandeveldel for helpful comments on earlier drafts of the translation.

On Indochina

[878]¹⁰ It is difficult, when one has some familiarity with discussions of the Indochina problem, to hope to arrive even at a simple understanding, to say nothing of an agreement. The same arguments are repeated on both sides with a wearying regularity, an often-genuine sincerity, and always the same failure. The words do not seem to carry the same meaning for the Annamites¹¹ and for the French, and the discussion generally terminates with the accusation of bad faith.

It is a platitude to speak of the colonial administration's abuses, of the people's misery, of the inhumane existence [879] forced upon the workers in the mines and plantations (where up to 80% of the workers have perished), of the savage repressions in which unarmed and innocent masses of people have been massacred, and the means of torture to which those accused of political crimes have been systematically subjected. We come up against that no less platitudinous response that it is not possible to do everything, that the conditions are difficult, that those who abuse their power do not represent the "true" France, that efforts will be made to improve all this in the future. And there will be talk about the roads, the schools, the hospitals, and "the magnificent work" accomplished by the French.

The Annamites then explain that the Indochinese taxpayer has paid a terrible price for those roads, of which the majority, incidentally, only have a touristic interest and just serve those who have vehicles (that is, the French); that the former Vietnam did not lack schools; and that illiteracy (which in 1939 attained the scandalous rate of 80%) only appeared with French colonization, which eliminated traditional education, only to replace it with practically nothing. Not only had the administration not promoted the development of education, but it has moreover hindered the efforts of the Annamites of good will by

¹⁰ Translator's note: The number in square brackets refers to the page number in the French original (Thao 1946).

¹¹ Translator's note: In colonial French Indochina, Annam was the protectorate encompassing modern-day central Vietnam. More generally, the term was used in the West to designate Vietnam as a whole, and the demonym "Annamite" was used to designate a Vietnamese person. Thao uses the terms in this sense.

prohibiting various societies of popular education. As for the hospitals, one can hardly find one in a province with a population of several hundreds of thousands of inhabitants.¹² Besides, the Annamite people are in much direr need of the rice that is taken from them for export than they are of medicine. But these facts, which are incontestable, cannot convince the French. They insist that, in whatever form modern civilization has been brought in, it has indeed been brought, and that this entitles them to the gratitude of the inhabitants. For the Annamites, the conquerors simply wanted to secure their amenities, requiring roads so they could tour around by car, schools to educate the qualified personnel necessary to serve them, hospitals to take care of themselves and prevent the development of epidemics (which could afflict them, too) – all of it, furthermore, entirely paid for at the highest price by the Indochinese worker. But the French view all this as something that they have provided and that would not have existed without them.

It is clear that, whatever the undoubtedly self-serving motivations [881] of colonization may be, it has nonetheless brought unquestionable progress. And if the Annamites have only occasionally benefited from this progress, they have nonetheless benefited from it. But it is easy for them to respond that the expansion of capitalism in the XIXth century had developed the relations between East and West; that the advances in industry and means of transportation had made all isolation impossible; that, one way or another, as a result, modern civilization *had to* come to them. It could have come in a peaceful way, respecting the independence of peoples who had not been prevented by their technological inferiority from achieving a high degree of cultural development. Their evolution would have been infinitely faster, as the example of Japan shows. Once contact with the Western world had been established – and this contact had to be established owing to the progress of large-scale industry – colonization could only impede the natural evolution of the conquered people. Political power halts economic, cultural, and social progress in order to maintain by force the conqueror's superiority. How could the Annamites be grateful to France for the acquisition of modern technology when they know perfectly well that agriculture in Indochina has preserved exactly its traditional procedures and that industry there is rigorously prohibited (aside from the extractive industries, which obviously have to be developed onsite)? They know that, without colonization, they

¹² These are rather infirmaries. There are hospitals only in the major cities.

would have imported machines from Europe or America and modernized their nation within a few years. And they know that in official discourse, at least prior to the war, the administration never forgot to praise the Annamite civilization enthusiastically in order to advise the people to preserve it and to be wary of a too rapid evolution.

Modern culture is not the monopoly of any country. It spreads through its internal power of expansion, and colonization is only a means to slow down that power and channel it for the benefit of self-serving interests. The rare progress achieved in Indochina has only occurred because the conquerors, despite their will to keep their superiority, were forced to sacrifice a part of it for the success of their enterprise. But the French cannot understand these arguments because they believe that, despite everything, what has been achieved has been achieved by the French and that, as a result, the Annamites are beholden to them for it.

The facts are known and difficult to deny. Yet the opposition remains complete. For the opposition is not so much about the facts as it is [881] about their interpretation. Faced with educational statistics, the French will be filled with awe, while the Annamites will protest that in Vietnam prior to French conquest there was practically no illiteracy. The French see what has been done, the Annamites what has not been done and could have if they had been left to themselves, free to develop without interference. During these eighty years, Indochina had more than enough time to become a modern country. It would have become such a modern country without colonization. The Annamites are convinced of this. They experience [*éprouver*] it in their will to live, in the obstacles they face on all fronts, in the examples provided by neighboring countries. The French stick to the facts. The arguments objecting to their view are based on mere hypotheses, and they remain persuaded that, without them, nothing would have happened.

We will not attempt to settle this matter. We are only attempting to understand. The whole opposition comes from the manner in which one *delineates the possible* – not what is *purely possible*, for, in this sense, everything is possible, but what is *effectively possible*, that which almost has the value of reality, that which would be real without a certain obstacle that one holds responsible for it remaining unrealized. For the Annamites, the modernization of their country within eighty years was an effective possibility: they experience it in the consciousness they have of themselves, as Annamites, as members of a nation that has shown, over the course of ten centuries of independence, its vitality, its

intelligence, its capacities to organize. They come to terms with themselves [*s'assumer*] as Annamites and the world is constituted around them with the meaning that it should have had, that it would have had, if Vietnam had remained independent, if it had been able to realize fully its possibilities. Vietnam, as it would have become without colonization, is not a “mere hypothesis” for them, but a project effectively experienced, the very project of their existence, that which defines their existence as Annamites. This world of possibilities constitutes the *background* against which perceived realities appear and it gives them their meaning. What colonization brought about, emerging in this world, immediately reveals its negativity. That which is draws its meaning from that which should have been, not according to a dream of pure fantasy, but according to the very meaning of the world within which lives the consciousness that has come to terms with this existence. Things only *are* for that consciousness insofar as they are endowed with this meaning. And if the Annamites criticize the “magnificent work” of French colonization, if they see in what has been done only the lack of what has not been done and should have been done, this [882] is not bad faith or bias. It is simply because, as Annamites, they live in a world where the possibilities of an independent Vietnam are part of a project, a Vietnam free to industrialize, to create the number of schools it would have seen fit, to send its students to all the universities of Europe and America, to let the law of competition play out, buying and selling at the best prices. They point out that they are forced to purchase from France products much more expensive than those they could have manufactured themselves at home; that the administration only assigns to education a budget greatly inferior to the one assigned to the secret police, that the administration moreover forbids (under the pretext of “communism”) the efforts of people of good faith who want to make up for this deficiency by organizing free courses, and that the number of students sent to France is rigorously limited; that nothing has been done to improve agricultural technologies, and that the peasants of Tonkin¹³ die of hunger six months of the year while enormous quantities of rice are exported from Cochinchina¹⁴ for the exclusive benefit of the great French landlords and a few Annamites

¹³ Translator's note: The northernmost protectorate of colonial French Indochina, surrounding Hanoi.

¹⁴ Translator's note: The southernmost protectorate of colonial French Indochina, surrounding Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City).

devoted to the cause of colonization. If they realize all this and many other things, and sometimes come to speak of it, it is simply because everything that they perceive is situated immediately within a certain *horizon*, a horizon that defines their existence as such, insofar as they come to terms with themselves as Annamites. They would no longer be Annamites if they did not see everything in relation to what it would have been in an independent Vietnam. There is no malevolent intention or disparaging bias in their critiques. These critiques only express their proper and spontaneous way of seeing the world. They cannot see it otherwise.

The French know perfectly well that Vietnam had an illustrious history, that it repelled multiple attacks from its powerful neighbor to the north, and that it has succeeded in spreading itself to the south over more than 1,200 kilometers all the way to Ca Mau, while allowing all the while the arts of peace to flourish. The French know that this people is intelligent, skillful, and tenacious. But the idea that Vietnam could have remained independent appears to them perfectly arbitrary, and all the considerations that one can adduce in support of this hypothesis are to their eyes pure suppositions. It is not that they refuse to entertain such considerations, but rather that they only understand them completely from the outside. [883] No sympathy animates this understanding, for it is impossible for them to seriously think that this nation exists, as an effective reality, even if not recognized. Indochina has been conquered and is thus part of the French domain. It would be contradictory for something that is part of the French domain to have an independent existence. This is unthinkable. The French, by coming to terms with their existence as such, place themselves at the outset in a world where everything is defined by reference to a certain community, where everything is either internal or external to that community. Since the time they were taught in school that Indochina is French, this country was spontaneously inserted into their “internal horizon,” into the framework within which everything that is part of the French community appears. In this community, certain things are beautiful, others reprehensible, but the ensemble forms an indissoluble totality where each element receives its meaning within the whole: it *only exists* for a French consciousness with this meaning. A meaning that would place this element outside of that horizon would be entirely inconceivable otherwise than as a purely arbitrary construction. Indochina belongs to the French community. Any representation concerning Indochina presupposes Indochina

as a member of that community. For, Indochina in fact only appears within this *framework*. Thus, the same facts reappear with a meaning that goes without saying for the French, while it plunges the Annamites into a profound amazement. What could be more natural than Indochina buying from France at prices higher than those it could get elsewhere since Indochina is French? It is exactly as if a Parisian wanted to buy from America or Japan: the excessive cost of French products is a defect that should be corrected but one would not imagine that someone would go outside of the community for a reason like this. If education is insufficiently developed in Indochina, an effort must be made to develop it further. If the cultivation of rice there has maintained its millennia-old technology, it is because the administration has not measured up to its task. But even in France, one has grown used to such a disorganization of the administration that one cannot even get upset about it anymore. One has to complain and try to get results. If the condition of the Annamite peasant is miserable, it is because the country is overpopulated and the soil not very fertile. There is evidently a great deal of work to be done. But this is precisely the very mission of colonization, and in order to fulfil it, one appeals to the “collaboration” of the Annamites. In brief, all the shortcomings that one could point out [884] appear to the French consciousness with a *positive* index: it is not something that condemns colonization, but rather something that points to a task to be fulfilled within the French community. More precisely, the work to be accomplished, for the French, is not the modernization of Vietnam as such, but the modernization of a certain insufficiently developed part of the French domain, and this task only makes sense insofar as it concerns the French domain. An independent Vietnam would be no more interesting than Afghanistan or Guatemala. The reproaches that one could make against its imperfections would not make any sense whatsoever. By contrast, that which interests the Annamites is not the development of the French domain, but that of Vietnam as such, whether or not it is part of France. The weaknesses of colonization accordingly appear to them with a *negative* index: they entail the condemnation of the system. For, besides this system, another solution, perfectly conceivable and infinitely desirable, presents itself: the renewal of Vietnam by Vietnam itself.

It is precisely this solution that the French refuse to envision. In general, they attempt to justify this refusal. They will say to their compatriots that the Annamites are incapable of governing themselves, that,

if the French were to leave Indochina, the country would be torn apart by quarreling parties, unless it were to fall under the domination of another power. In fact, it is a radical refusal: it is the very idea of an independent Vietnam that is rejected as such.

The “horizon” of the French community precisely excludes any such hypothesis. The experience of recent events provides us with a crucial proof. Vietnam *as a matter of fact* demonstrated that it was capable of governing itself by overturning the Hue monarchy (which had collaborated with the Japanese after serving French domination) as of August 20 and proclaiming a democratic republic.¹⁵ The Vietminh, a coalition of resistance parties, immediately took charge of the administration of the country and the new government, thanks to popular enthusiasm, is managing to defend its existence in the most incredible conditions. The proof has thus been given that the idea of a resurrection of Vietnam is not a gratuitous hypothesis, but the effective project of an entire people, a project that corresponds to deep aspirations and real capabilities. As for [885] the suggestion that this independence, currently realized in the facts, could be threatened by another power, this is to forget the parable of the mote and the beam. For, in fact, no other power makes a claim on Indochina, and the Chinese, while occupying the northern zone, have respected the national Annamite government and allowed it to keep its army. The only power that has contested the right of the Annamite people to govern itself is France, and it does this by armed force. The first act of French government in Indochina¹⁶ was to have the leaders of the Vietminh kidnapped in Saigon on September 23, a rather inelegant conduct to say the least and one that sparked military operations. We heard it said many times that France would not hesitate to leave Indochina if this would suffice to assure the happiness of Indochina, except that... Currently, the Annamites do not ask the French to defend them or to assure their happiness (and, besides, they never have). They only ask the French not to attack them and not to lay waste to the country.

¹⁵ Translator’s note: In August of 1945, the Vietminh-led August Revolution against French colonization broke out, quickly leading the Vietminh to take control of the government in Hanoi and much of northern Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh declared the Vietnamese Independence on September 2. See the Translator’s Presentation for further details concerning the historical context.

¹⁶ Translator’s note: This was their first act upon returning to Indochina after the end of World War II.

Besides, we do not doubt the sincerity of average French people, who are convinced that Leclerc's army came to put Indochina on the path to progress and freedom.¹⁷ Obviously, we are not talking about the higher spheres of power, who know perfectly well what is going on. But precisely these average people cannot conceive this progress and this freedom outside of their horizon, of the horizon of the French community. It is as a member of this community, not as an independent state, that Vietnam must be elevated to modern civilization. And the first condition of this – as paradoxical as it may seem – is obviously that one first makes sure that Vietnam effectively be a part of the French community, even if, to that end, one must lay waste to the country.

The opposition is radical, rooted in the mode of existence, in two ways of life and of understanding the world. It is not about a discussion regarding this or that particular fact. The discussion itself would be of no use, since each fact is interpreted, *is perceived*, in a different manner. The arguments the Annamites give in favor of independence, upon entering the horizon of the French, immediately take on a meaning such that these arguments precisely exclude this very independence. It is a *radical misunderstanding*, not to be dispelled by any explanation, because the sentences are all understood with a meaning opposite to that with which [886] they were uttered. When one says “liberty” or “progress,” the other understands “liberty-” or “progress-within-the-French-system” so that for Vietnam to be free, it is first of all necessary that it remain within this system, by force if need be. The Annamites will explain that they see no objection in principle to colonization, but that it must be judged based on what it provides and condemned if what it yields is inferior. Yet, none of their arguments can convince their interlocutors, who understand them in such a way that French sovereignty is never seriously put into question. The dialogue is perpetually at cross-purposes, a complete and irremediable misunderstanding. The opposition is prior to discourse, at the very sources of existence, the place where the possible meaning of words is always already determined.¹⁸

¹⁷ Translator's note: Philippe Leclerc de Hauteclocque was in charge of the French Far East Expeditionary Corps, tasked with restoring French rule in Indochina after World War II.

¹⁸ We have conducted an analysis of the average French people. It should be noted that many minds in France have passed judgment on this affair by placing themselves outside the narrowly national “horizon.”

[...] ¹⁹

After a conquest, in order that the relation of power ceases to be the condition of the conqueror's presence and that the two peoples merge into a single people, the conquering party must abandon its advantages, or at least only retain them in a form that is acceptable to the conquered party. When moving into the Roman Empire, the Germanic tribes took on the social function of defending order [893] and protecting the people. This function allowed them to cast off the quality of being foreigners and to have their position accepted by the very people they were exploiting. The opposition of classes always involves a certain complicity on the part of the dominated class, which allows the dominating class to impose itself in the name of the general interest and to use force only in the most exceptional cases. A conqueror who wants to be accepted in the vanquished country and viewed in such a way that the oppressed group itself contributes to supporting the oppressing power must thus transform the opposition between peoples into an opposition between classes.

Such was, in broad strokes, the idea of the administration when it opened access to secondary and higher education to the Annamites of well-to-do families. The hope was that French education would dispel in them the patriotic ideas represented by the scholars of the old school and that they could somehow be coopted to the French colony to form a new class, a Franco-Annamite bourgeoisie, united by a community of culture and interests. The French could thus be integrated into the country, while the Annamite elite would be tasked with explaining to the people that the French had come to bring progress and civilization. The national struggle would disappear to give way to a class struggle, which would be easier to maintain.

There was scarcely any other means to consolidate the regime, and the proof of this is that one has always continued, tirelessly, to appeal to the "collaboration" of the elite of modern culture in order to assure the exploitation of the masses. But this solution – the only possible one – could not succeed. The Annamites rushed in droves to receive the new education, and if the movement had been allowed to develop, the French element would have been quickly submerged. Thus, the progress of the Annamite elite had to be curbed. But then the clauses of the contract

¹⁹ Translator's note: Several pages of Thao's original text, dealing with historical considerations, have been omitted.

were no longer being respected, and the idea of a “collaboration” no longer made any sense.

The transformation of the opposition between peoples into an opposition between classes was thus not possible. Within a few years, the Annamites would have overrun the dominant class – if, that is, they had been allowed to fight on equal terms. The French could only maintain their domination by continuing to grant themselves privileges on the basis of being French. The two nations remained in a standoff, each keeping its particular existence and envisaging their relations only in terms of power. After eighty years [894] of living together, the situation had remained at the same point as at the moment of conquest. No class of Annamite society was able to integrate itself into the French society. France only maintained its position by the superiority of its weapons. The administration’s despotism exceeded all measure. Because they were constantly in a state of emergency, the conquerors did not grant any liberty to the conquered. The conquered only saw in their defeat an inferiority of material means. The police infiltrated everything, employing the worst means of espionage and torture. The country lived in an atmosphere of latent war. The state mostly appeared as an organization of armed men tasked with repression.²⁰

In such an atmosphere, no Annamite could lose his or her national consciousness. The few lapses of commitment that occurred were judged harshly. The social unity, which had always been strong in this country, was further consolidated in the defeat: no sincere “collaboration” was possible under the colonial regime.

The failure to recognize this national sentiment has given rise to a perpetual lack of understanding. The same facts are immediately interpreted in a diametrically opposed manner. For a French consciousness, the treason of the Vichy government absolutely does not affect the honor or the rights of France precisely because it was a treason. That Indochina was handed over defenseless to the Japanese simply means that this mistake must be redeemed by securing Indochina’s return to the empire. This thesis, which goes without saying for the French, has always left the Annamites stupefied. For, they know perfectly well that the colonial politics has always been conducted by the same circles and dominated by the same interests. The French they see in Indochina are the same

²⁰ A faithful attestation concerning this regime can be found in Andrée Viollis’ book *Indochine S. O. S.* (Viollis 1935).

ones they saw in 1939. Whether or not the Vichy government committed treason is none of their business. They only know that the colonial administration, which trampled them for three quarters of a century only to abandon them in the moment of danger, is seeking, now that they have been liberated, to re-establish its domination. That the colonial administration was forced to yield before the Japanese is beyond doubt. But it is obvious that one does not assume the role of protector (with all the profit that comes with it) when one is not capable of assuring an effective [895] protection. In a word, the French point of view is that of a *consciousness of being a self* [*conscience de soi*]: there is a part of the past that the ego [*le moi*] rejects; it was not really the ego, but some sort of demon by which it was carried away in a moment of weakness and forgetfulness. The Annamite point of view is necessarily that of the *consciousness of being other* [*conscience de l'autre*]: the past is taken in its totality, in its objective reality. It is not, obviously, that the consciousness of being a self denies its faults. But it believes that nothing is definitive, that it can always redeem itself without losing anything of itself. But the other has no use for this redemption. Whether the Self wants to redeem itself or not is only a secondary concern for the other, and it cannot grant the self a chance to restore itself if this compromises the other's own existence. But precisely the *Self* did not know that the *other* is other, and it is sincerely astonished that the other intends to defend its separate interests.

In the horizon proper to each, the most common notions take on the most different meanings. One quite willingly grants that what the French have accomplished in Indochina has hardly been brilliant. But one absolutely does not understand that the Annamite intellectuals²¹

²¹ A clarification should be made here concerning certain rumors that have been spread by the rightwing press. In 1943, the propaganda offered some twenty scholarships for Germany to Annamite students in France. They could only find five candidates, with almost everyone having refused because of their antifascist convictions. Certain newspapers attempted to hold the Annamite Association of Paris responsible, to which three of the five students who accepted belonged. Now, this Association has more than a hundred members (of which the majority were students who had refused the offer in question) and, its statutes prohibiting any political action, it did not have to intervene in the affair. We will note, besides, that the acceptance of these scholarships did not entail any commitment: it was simply a matter of enjoying a free stay abroad. As for the refusal, it was obviously not motivated by any kind of "fidelity" to France, but simply by the natural sympathy that the Annamites, an oppressed people, felt for the suffering of the French people under Nazi occupation. I myself, having been accused of going to Leuven with

could be opposed to it: they, at least, cannot complain since they owe it to France that they are what they are. Without the French government, they would be (according to the expression of a certain newspaper) “rice hullers [*dépiqueurs*] or buffalo herders” (*sic*) and it is due to a favor of that government that they could attend the universities. [896] By showing their solidarity with the Vietminh, they demonstrated a monstrous ingratitude. But in fact, all of the intellectuals were of the same attitude, and no one had the curiosity to ask how there could exist a race that has produced so many monsters at once.

The point of view of the Annamite intellectuals is the following. They are very certain that in no case would they have been reduced to the deplorable drudgery of “hulling” rice and “herding buffaloes.”²² For, in the former society, they would have learned the [Chinese] characters and become scholars and mandarins. And if Vietnam had not been colonized, it would have entered at the beginning of the XXth century, along with all other countries with outdated technology, into the path of modernization. It is clear that the Annamite government would then have sent its students to stay comfortably at the main universities of Europe and America. Such is the case with Chinese, Thai, and other students. Now, it is true that, living under the colonial regime, they had to study under the aegis of the French government. But the aid that they received represents only a minuscule portion of the riches produced by the Annamite peasantry and proletariat, riches that have also permitted a multitude of French functionaries to live ostentatious lives (without doing much in the way of work) and French capitalists to receive fabulous dividends. Thus, if colonization has rendered the Annamite intellectuals a few services, these services have been paid well beyond their

a German permit, must clarify that my journey was made with a French passport, delivered by the prefecture of police under a mission order from the Ministry of the Colonies. It is worth noting that these accusations came from newspapers that drew attention to themselves during the purge for their particular solicitude for the collaborators.

²² In Indochina, one transplants [*repique*] rice. As for “herding buffaloes”... [Translator’s note: Thao may miss the meaning of the older French expressions “*dépiquer le riz*” and “*toucher des buffles*.” While “*dépiquer*” can mean to take a plant out of the soil in order to transplant it, as Thao understands it, it also means to hull or husk rice (or other grains) to extract the seeds by beating the grain with a flail or pounding it. The other expression, “*toucher les buffles*” (literally, “to touch buffaloes”), means to prod or poke animals with a stick or other tools to make them move forward. A “*toucher de boeufs*,” according to the Littré dictionary, refers to a person who drives cattle to the slaughterhouse. We translate “herding buffaloes.”]

value by the work of their compatriots. If they owe a debt of recognition, it is certainly not to the colonial administration, but to the Annamite masses. On the other hand, the Annamite intellectuals certainly have obligations of an intellectual nature to French culture. But it is clear that such obligations do not entail any particular engagement from a political point of view. One would not imagine that the Sorbonne could demand a pledge of allegiance from Chinese students. They would simply go study at Oxford or Harvard.

These arguments, which are self-evident to the Annamites, are inadmissible to the French. For, situating themselves within the horizon of the imperial community, they inevitably take the Annamite as one of its members – an inferior member who, by a special favor, has been treated as a superior member and who, thus, owes a profound gratitude to the authority that governs the community. If [897] this money has been taken from the work of the masses, it is one more reason for the Annamite intellectuals to feel obligations. For, instead of being exploited, they have on the contrary been made the beneficiaries of exploitation. By a favor of the ruling power, they have been elevated from the dominated to the dominating class. They henceforth belong to that dominating class, and to claim to go back to the side of the exploited is to commit *treason*.

But the Annamites, within their proper horizon, can only see themselves as citizens of Vietnam. To give them what has been given to them is only to return to their community a minuscule portion of that which has been taken from them in taxes and added value. As for saying that they have received a favor, this can only be one more reason for them to remain faithful to their country. For to abandon one's people for a personal advantage is the very definition of the concept of *treason*.

The meaning of individual existences is prior to the arguments by means of which one could justify this meaning. The notion of "duty" signifies nothing outside of a community to which one always already belongs. It is not possible to persuade individuals to enter a community because all the reasons that could be given presuppose that they are already part of that community. The project that is outlined before individuals, as having meaning for them, can only apply to the community in which these individuals feel themselves as *existing*. Such a feeling defines the very being of their existence, that which *is* for them, that without which they would no longer exist. This does not at all imply that individual existences are irreducibly separate, but only that one does

not win them over at the level of pure concepts. If France had truly absorbed Indochina into a larger life, no Annamite would think of claiming independence. But colonization is only a particularly perfected form of capitalism, as exploitation of human beings by human beings. The *situation* of the colonized is such that they experience this irreducibly in the feeling of belonging to another community than that of the conquerors. They cannot feel effectively in solidarity with the conquerors because they are trampled on in their existence. It is useless in these conditions to want to *demonstrate* to them that which they do not feel. All the reasons take on a meaning opposed to that which one wanted to give them. It would have been necessary, while there was still time, actually to elevate them in their existence – not, obviously, by taking a few individuals, but the entire community. For, wanting to win [898] a few individuals while trampling on the masses is to ask them to betray the masses. There is an original community, the one to which one belongs by birth and first education, the one that cannot be abandoned because it is through this community that each of us plunges into the roots of our existence. It is this totality that we must absorb in our actual being, by making this totality flourish into a higher life. But this was not possible in a capitalist regime. The Annamite people came to the absolute realization that it can only fully develop itself independently and by integrating itself into the international community. Hence, the discussions no longer have any other meaning than to reflect a conflict of existences in which the one encroaches upon the other and justifies its invasion by regarding the other *a priori* as a part of itself. All the arguments given to support the “rights” of France (roads, schools, etc.) presuppose that one has always already situated oneself within a horizon where Vietnam is immediately interpreted as a member of the imperial community. The weaknesses and the shortcomings can thus be excused and understood as a call to a common undertaking. But a horizon is not imposed from without: it arises from within when hearts have been won. This conquest cannot succeed by way of words, but by a real elevation of the actual condition. Indeed, one feels oneself to be such as one is. The fact that all Annamites in this decisive moment desperately testify their will to independence shows that their actual existence has not been lifted up, but rather trampled upon, and that it has always been experienced as separate. Consequently, the battle being waged at the current moment can only be understood as the *aggression* of one existence against another existence.

In a conflict of this kind, it is useless to seek an agreement through reason. The order of reasons only expresses the order of the heart. But, by delving deeper within ourselves, we all individually discover ourselves as a member of the human community. Humanity is not only an abstract concept: it can be felt as a concrete and living totality. Within this universal horizon, colonization can be understood as one of the paths by which Western civilization, driven by its internal power of expansion, has invaded the entire surface of the globe. But this path was so narrow that it only took a few years for it to become an obstacle that now opposes the emergence of new forces. As soon as the perspectives opened up by the possibilities of [899] modern technology and culture manifest themselves, there arises within the conquered country a will to regeneration that reveals itself to be incompatible with colonial domination. The new aspirations are held back, not only because the development of the colony is necessarily subordinated to the interests of the metropolis (without which, of course, the colony would have no purpose) but furthermore, and especially, because this subordination gives rise to protests from the colonized people. From that moment on, subordination can only be secured by force. In this state of perpetual conflict, every progress on the part of the vanquished appears as a threat to the domination of the conqueror. The colonial regime, because of its very structure, plays the role of reaction and oppression. In a country capable of governing itself (and Vietnam is such a country), this regime constitutes an absurdity against which the inhabitants cannot help but revolt. Against the revolt further repression is exercised, and each repression brings the oppressed people further to the realization that their existence is incompatible with the existence of the regime. The latter cannot be reformed, but only *abolished*.

In the current struggle, what matters to France is to recover part of its domain. For Vietnam, what matters is its very existence, which emerges from the memory of twenty centuries of history. France defends the interests of a few of its citizens, interests which certainly should not be confused with the national interest. Besides the fact that the majority hardly participates in the profits of the few, the latter have even weakened the power of the country. By allowing the industries of the metropolis to live off artificial advantages, colonization leads them to forget the necessity of constant progress. Certain of their prospects, these industries no longer innovate, and enter the path toward decline.

For the Annamites, what matters is to create a new country. With independence, even if only political, immense possibilities open for

them. For, the advantages that they will give up on the economic front²³ will be strictly defined, whereas political domination would submit them to a discretionary power on all fronts. A rapid evolution is necessary for a people that frequently borders on famine. Once freed from this extraordinary machine of repression, which colonial domination represents, the masses will finally be able to have their rights prevail. From a [900] spiritual perspective, the possibility of an original civilization opens up. The most diverse currents will come to converge with the traditional culture, which has maintained itself in this country, as a special case within the Far-East world.²⁴ In a word, for France, what is at stake are a few interests, which are quite particular and, besides, rather illusory. For Vietnam, what is at stake is its life as a whole, which must either freely flourish or be trampled upon once more. For those who are capable of rising above particular horizons and taking a human perspective, the conflict that is unfolding in Cochinchina represents, in one respect, interests that are utterly mediocre, and, in another respect, a wealth of meanings so great that no hesitation is possible. A young country liberating itself has the absolute right: the right to existence.

Tran Duc THAO
(transl. Hayden Kee)

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²³ President Ho Chi Minh has declared that he is ready to guarantee French interests and to secure for France all the economic advantages it desires.

²⁴ The Vietminh government has just declared primary education obligatory, and secondary and higher education free. This measure is to be effective immediately, in spite of the extraordinary difficulties in which the country finds itself submerged.

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