

On the Will to be Free in Spite of History

Tran Duc Thao and the Activist Roots of “French” Postcolonialism, 1944-1951

Dominique Ankoné

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Between 1944 and 1951 a brilliant young philosopher from Vietnam addressed the Parisian public by means of activism and philosophical writing to teach them about the experience of colonial rule. This paper will answer the main question as to what Tran Duc Thao taught the Parisian intellectual scene concerning colonialism, freedom and democracy. To this end this paper investigates Tran Duc Thao's activist attempt to rally the French public to the cause of decolonization. It will discuss how Tran Duc Thao's activism shaped his anticolonial philosophy. The essay compares Tran Duc Thao's conception of decolonial freedom to Jean-Paul-Sartre's existentialist conception of freedom. The most important findings of this paper are first that Tran Duc Thao considered capitalism and colonialism to be related phenomena exploiting conscripts of modernity in a broad sense. Second, that his anticolonial philosophy was a means to explain why people in France did not understand this. Third, that Tran Duc Thao's philosophy of freedom better fits contemporary postcolonial philosophy and environmental philosophy. While Tran Duc Thao's work became obscured, he was nevertheless responsible for introducing anticolonial activism in the French university. His concept of the imperial horizon is a powerful tool for historians to understand why so many Europeans failed to support the wish for freedom and democracy of colonial peoples after WW II.

KEY WORDS

Tran Duc Thao, postcolonialism, phenomenology, anticolonial activism, Marxism

INTRODUCTION

On the fifth of October 1945, after months of tracking and spying by the French police, about 40 people from colonial Indochina were arrested in Paris during a meeting.¹ The reason for their arrest, wrote a journal aligned with the international Marxist movement, was the publication of a tract one day earlier, informing people of the “real situation” in Indochina, and calling on the people to support the movement for independence: the Viet Minh. This little text was drawn up by the secretary of the *Délégation Générale des Indochinois*, the philosopher Tran Duc Thao. Tran Duc Thao was arrested one day later while at his home on 10, Rue de la Sorbonne in Paris. It was an event that did not go unnoticed. According to the journal, *La Défense*, France was taking the ‘wrong route,’ by arresting the members of the delegation, yet the journal insisted that it was not too late to repair the damage.² Only months later, as the last of the arrested, Tran Duc Thao was set free provisionally on the 16th of December. He wore a blue Canadian jacket at the time

and his characteristic rounded metal glasses. In the news it was said that he smiled in disdain at the injustice inflicted on him. The police had found nothing incriminating, he was still waiting for his process, and he did not expect it very likely for this ever to happen.³ In the years that followed, Tran Duc Thao would become one of the most important spokespersons of the anticolonial cause in Paris, yet his life and legacy are little known today.

As it turns out, the arrest of Tran Duc Thao did not prevent him from making his voice heard in public. On the contrary, the injustice inflicted on him proved to be the beginning of a fruitful career as an engaged intellectual. After being released from prison, he was invited to explain his views on colonialism in Indochina in the influential journal *Les Temps Modernes* (TM) by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a by now distinguished Parisian philosopher. Between 1944 and 1951, Tran Duc Thao wrote a number of remarkable and poignant articles about colonialism, Marxism, phenomenology and existentialism. His name and reputation at the time were well-known, and his first book *Phénoménologie et Matérialisme Dialectique* (1951) proved to be a decisive influence for a generation of reputed French philosophers, such as Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricoeur (Derrida 1983; Lawlor 2002; Giovannegeli 2013). The discussions in which Tran Duc Thao partook have later acquired a historical significance, as from the discussions of these philosophers the ‘French dimension’ of postcolonialism has come forth, in which ‘colonial ideology was subverted’ (Majumdar 2009, 84-109).

The core aim of this article is to reposition Tran Duc Thao within this ‘French’ dimension of postcolonial studies and to reflect on the value of his work for postcolonial approaches to history writing. To this end, this essay addresses the following question: What did Tran Duc Thao teach the Parisian intellectual scene about colonialism, freedom and democracy? By asking this question, this essay takes a conscious approach inspired by postcolonial scholar Priyamvada Gopal’s book, *Insurgent Empire* (2019). Gopal focuses on what she calls *reverse tutelage*, defined as a pedagogical process in which activists from the metropolis learned from activists from the colonies and the movements they represented (Gopal 2019, 24). According to her, ideas about freedom and democracy were devised by intellectuals and activists to suit the need of the colonial peoples. Their ideas are therefore excellent sources to decolonize politics (Gopal 2019, 26). Although not reflected upon in Gopal’s book itself, the years following WWII saw ideas about freedom and democracy taking central stage in the public debate in which metropolitan as well as colonial peoples participated.

This essay will consist of three subsections to answer the main question. First, Tran Duc Thao’s activist ideas by considering his attempt to rally the French public to the cause of decolonization

will be traced. Second, one of Tran Duc Thao's most interesting philosophical discussions in which he argues for a phenomenology of colonialism will be highlighted. Here this essay asks how Tran Duc Thao tried to continue his project of decolonization by means of his philosophical writing and in particular, how he understood colonialism from the perspective of phenomenological philosophy. In the last paragraph Tran Duc Thao's philosophy will be compared to the philosophy of his contemporary Jean-Paul Sartre, famous for his existential conception of freedom. This conception became very important within postcolonialism because it argues that people are capable of transcending their colonial situation. It is interesting to note, however, that Tran Duc Thao profoundly disagreed with Sartre on precisely this element of his conception.

Within this essay a gradual shift can be observed from a more historical approach to a more philosophical approach. The argument proceeds from the concrete actions of Tran Duc Thao to the larger philosophical questions that his life and work raise. This is intentional: while it mirrors the actual unfolding of his life (he only started publishing his philosophy after he became known as an activist), this order is also relevant to this essay's attempt to understand Tran Duc Thao's thought by taking into account not just his philosophical writings but also his actions. The sources from which this paper draws mirror this shift as well. Two types of sources will be drawn on: sources such as pamphlets, tracts and resolutions, which are kept in a collection called SLOTFOM in France's National Colonial archives and the archives of the Parisian police precinct; and philosophical writings such as his articles published in the famous journal *Les Temps Modernes* and his posthumously published personal correspondence kept in the archive of the Husserl archive in Louvain.

THE DELEGATION AND THE INTERNATIONALIST COMMUNIST PARTY (PCI), 1944-1946

On the eve of the Second World War, about 20.000 laborers from Indochina were shipped to France to help with the war effort as industrial or agricultural workers. In addition, about 7.000 Indochinese soldiers were brought to France as well. After the French defeat in June 1940, about 4.500 were repatriated to Indochina and when the liberation came in 1944, another 1.500 people had passed. Therefore, along with a sizable community of students who had already been in France, about 20.000-25.000 laborers, students and (former) soldiers from Indochina were present in the metropole (Luguern 2007, 185).⁴ The defeat and occupation of a large part of France by the German army and the collaboration of the rest of it, had destroyed any remaining respect

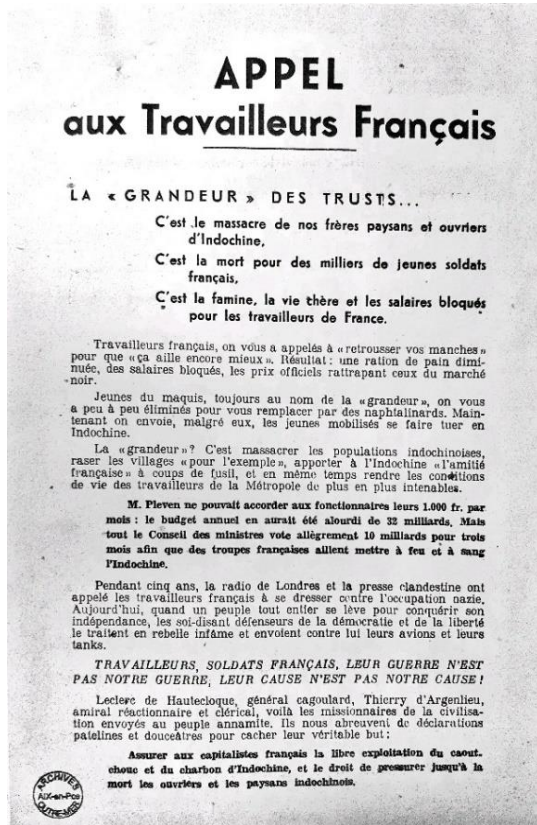


Image 1. Tract of the International Communist Party (PCI), distributed for the occasion of the Têt holiday in Vietnam, the most important holiday of the year. SLOTFOM XIV 3/2.

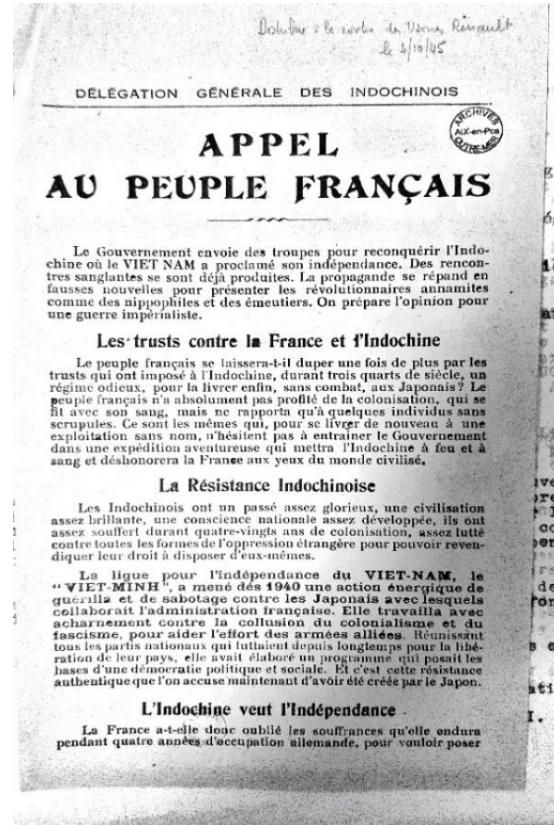


Image 2. Tract of the Délégation Générale distributed in a Renault factory on 10 October 1945. SLOTFOM XIV 4/7, subfolder October.

there was from the Indochinese towards French culture and military strength.⁵ On the 15th, 16th and 17th of December 1944, laborers and intellectuals from Indochina (the two largest groups present) came together in Avignon, a city in the South-east of France. Here they voted for the constitution of a Delegation to represent the interests of the Indochinese diaspora in France in opposition to the French government (Hémery 2013, 56). The result was a Delegation of 15 seats for students and intellectuals and 15 seats for workers, despite this group's more numerous presence. The Delegation regarded itself as the provincial government of Indochina (implying its independence), and decided that the intellectual Delegation should be tasked with discussing the independence of Indochina with the French government.⁶

Daniel Hémery, author of the only historical article on Tran Duc Thao's anticolonial activism in Paris, wrote that the politization of the Indochinese diaspora in France went hand in hand with Trotskyist activism. Trotskyism was at the time considered the leftist opposition against the political line of Joseph Stalin, known in particular for its international orientation. A tiny Indochinese Trotskyist movement (trained by the metropolitan Trotskyist movement) was at the

center of it, with the help of some notorious activists. Some of them, such as Daniel Guérin, later also actively supported the Algerian independence movement (Hémery 2013). The police investigation into Trotskyist sympathy among the Indochinese in France contains an interesting passage regarding the question of Trotskyist influence on Indochinese anticolonial activism. It is mentioned that the General Delegation is transferring money to the Trotskyist party (PCI) ‘to help its journalistic campaign in favor of independence.’⁷ By aligning their political ideologies, Tran Duc Thao and the Delegation campaigned together with the Trotskyist party for the independence and self-determination of Indochina. If the police were correct, the Delegation and the PCI were trying to build a common front against imperialism. In other words: a democratic alliance seemed to be taking shape. Given that the Delegation financially supported the campaign of the PCI, it follows that they were the leading party.

In October 1945 the PCI published and distributed a tract which stands out given this aforementioned common front. The tract is titled *Au secours de l’Indochine! (Help Indochina!)* and discusses the wishes of the Indochinese people as interpreted by the Trotskyists. These wishes are independence and the right to govern themselves and to sell the products of their soil to the people they wished (it is explicitly noted that this included the French) without the interference of banks and large international trusts which aimed to extract a ‘scandalous’ profit.⁸ The tract of the Trotskyists calls on French workers to imitate the workers of the United States, Australia and India. It recalls that at the time 20.000 workers were striking in Bombay in solidarity with the Indonesian people, that the dockers of Sydney were striking as well, and that there were demonstrations in San Francisco in front of the Dutch and English embassies. The fight of the Indochinese workers against colonialism completed the fight of the French workers against exploitation at home.⁹ One important demand is the recognition of the Viet Minh as the legitimate government of Vietnam. Another demand is that Tran Duc Thao along with an Algerian and a Tunisian nationalist, arrested by the police, should be set-free.¹⁰

Common ideas between the Trotskyists and the Delegation were about the role large trusts played in colonialism and the interest of the European proletariat in fighting them. The insistence of the Trotskyists on the role of international trusts and the demand to recognize the Viet Minh mirrored the arguments of the Delegation itself. Working together with the PCI, the Delegation presented the struggle against colonialism and for the independence of Indochina as being in the interest of the French working class as well. One tract of the Delegation in particular stands out in this respect. This tract was called *Appel au peuple français! (Appeal to the French people!)* and is likely to have been the reason for Tran Duc Thao’s arrest.¹¹ This tract argues that colonialism was not good for the French people as a whole; it was merely in the interest of a small number of

individuals. In the tract it is claimed that colonization has only benefited large international companies that claim national prestige to win over public opinion. Therefore, the French people should express their solidarity with the Indochinese people and become cognizant of their shared interests. Since the liberty of each, is founded on the liberty of all, according to the Delegation, letting large international companies to continue to exploit Indochina, was to give them the power they needed to also crush the people of France. In a way, Tran Duc Thao and the Delegation considered the French working class as conscripts of modernity like the plantation laborers in Indochina.¹² As an oppressed social group, they could understand the pleas of the people in Indochina: the situation of the Indochinese laborers was not so different from their own.

Next to the writing of tracts and pamphlets, the Delegation published resolutions, which were intended as a means to address the French public and teach them about the view of the Indochinese diaspora concerning the future of Indochina. In March 1945, the Delegation wished to ‘warn the public opinion’ against the illusions of the declarations of the French government, which seemed to be creating concern regarding the future of Indochina (namely, that it would be become independent and democratic).¹³ The Delegation pointed out that the actual experience of Indochinese people in both France as well as in Indochina itself, was in contradiction of the ‘proclaimed’ democratic intentions of the French government as the policy that the French government was pursuing would expose people in the protectorate to an inhuman exploitation whilst leaving them with no defenses. According to the Delegation, for Indochina to be free meant to be able to make its own decisions, which, in spite of the proclaimed intentions of France, was not guaranteed by the new statute. In conclusion, the only thing the reforms of the government seemed to be doing was to limit the control of the metropolitan French government viz-a-viz the French colonial government. This implied that the colonists in Indochina could continue to exploit the colony unchecked.

When he was arrested, officially for the distribution of tracts written for the Delegation, Tran Duc Thao gave a declaration to the police which contains more clues about the political position of the Delegation. According to the report, Tran Duc Thao had declared to the police: ‘We pursue two goals: the defense of the rights of Indochinese laborers and the establishment of a democratic regime in Indochina.’¹⁴ He further remarked that the actions of the Delegation consisted of seeking contact with the French government and to distribute tracts to reach the general public in France. Since the 20th of August, he said, this goal was extended to try and reach the international public as well. To this end a memorandum in English was written. It is significant that Tran Duc Thao said the goal of the Delegation shifted from addressing the French public, to addressing the international public by means of a memorandum written in English. This points towards the

suggestion that Tran Duc Thao and the Delegation increasingly looked towards the international community, while losing, perhaps, faith in the likelihood of the French working class successfully opposing the colonial policy in Indochina. The ultimate aim, according to Tran Duc Thao, was the establishment of democracy in Indochina and the end of colonial exploitation of the Indochinese people.

During the next year, 1946, a democratic alliance seemed finally to be taking shape. On the 4th of December 1946 a meeting was held in *Salle Wagram*. All the Parisian parties which were taking action against colonialism had a representative present at this meeting. The occasion of the meeting was to discuss the situation of the Algerian nationalist leader Messali Hadj, who was being held under house arrest. In the room, there were about 2.5000 Algerians present, and about 50 people from Indochina. According to the Parisian police, the meeting turned into a violent protest. The police report unfortunately only cites a couple of speakers. For instance, someone called Tou Ane spoke on behalf of the Indochinese laborers in France, but his speech was not transcribed. The most revolutionary speech was delivered by Marcel Beaufrère according to the police. Beaufrère, activist of the PCI, called upon the colonial peoples ‘to chase the French from their lands.’¹⁵ By condemning the oppression of the Algerian nationalists as crimes worse than those of the Nazis, the speakers of the conference aimed to create a democratic alliance against colonialism and oppression.

So far, this article has demonstrated that Tran Duc Thao saw decolonization to be in the interest of people in France and Indochina alike. He pushed this point because he considered colonialism to be an important element in the capitalist exploitation of laborers in both countries. Tran Duc Thao hoped that the working-class in France realized its shared interests with the Indochinese people. Yet, by 1947 it became clear that too few people actually did. How this activist experience led to Tran Duc Thao’s first anticolonial philosophical text on the basis of phenomenology will be discussed next.

THE IMPERIAL AND UNIVERSAL HORIZON

By 1947, the cooperation between the Delegation and the PCI had turned into opposition. A police report written in this year remarks that the Delegation was doing everything it could to avoid giving Indochinese people membership.¹⁶ The internationalists of the PCI, supporters of Trotsky’s ideas, started to criticize the policy of the independence movement of Ho Chi Minh as being reactionary; the socialist revolution should not be sacrificed in favor of independence, nor should it be postponed. Behind the scenes the conflict between nationalist and internationalist Marxism

was translated into a question of what came first: a social or national revolution? The significance of the failure to establish a democratic alliance in the context of this research is that Tran Duc Thao consequently revitalized his academic career. His phenomenological philosophy and his anticolonial activism are intimately related. That is why it is necessary to investigate how Tran Duc Thao tried to continue his project of decolonization by means of his philosophical writing and in particular, how he understood colonialism from the perspective of phenomenological philosophy.

When, in 1946, Tran Duc Thao pursued his career as philosopher, he decided to bring phenomenology into discussion with his project of the previous years: Marxist anticolonial activism. Phenomenology is primarily an intervention into epistemology; the philosophy of how people can acquire knowledge. The most important contribution of phenomenology in this respect is the insistence on active perception: people acquire facts through intentional perception. With regard to his first article published in TM, Tran Duc Thao wrote that he ‘applied the phenomenological method to the problem of colonialism.’¹⁷ In another article, which contains his ideas about revolutionary thought, he employed phenomenology to explain the Marxian doctrine of the autonomy of superstructures, or ideology (Tran Duc Thao 1946a, 2-3). Following this discussion Tran Duc Thao suggests that a progressive intellectual should think of an ideology suited for a better society in the future in order to support the fight for democracy, instead of serving the interest of ‘capital’ (Tran Duc Thao 1946a, 6). Serving or fighting capital would in this context come down to an ideology supporting or denouncing colonialism. Tran Duc Thao’s philosophical writing had thus become an extension of his anticolonial activism.

His essay applying phenomenology to colonialism is arguably one of the most interesting articles Tran Duc Thao wrote and should be seen as one of the founding texts of francophone postcolonial thought. In this text *Sur l’Indochine*, Tran Duc Thao explained why it was in his view a ‘banality’ to speak about the abuses of colonialism: there was no such thing as good colonial rule marred by unfortunate abuses (Tran Duc Thao 1946b, 887-888). In this discussion Tran Duc Thao places the thought of a colonist and a colonized person within a different ‘horizon’ which delimits what a person perceives as truly possible (*l’effectivement possible*). People in France place Indochina within an *imperial horizon* in which it appears as an integral part of the French community, whereas people in Indochina themselves do not feel part of the French community. In the words of Tran Duc Thao, now speaking specifically about Vietnam: ‘All arguments that we give to support the “rights” of France (roads, schools, etc.) presuppose that one finds one’s self already within a certain horizon, in which Vietnam only appears as a member of the imperial

community. ... But the situation of the colonized is such that he experiences himself to be a part of another community than the one of the victor' (Tran Duc Thao 1946b, 897-898).

The point is that the French colonial policy started from the presupposition that all three countries constituting French Indochina could only exist in the modern world as part of the French imperial community. Therefore, it is not acknowledged that any of them could achieve something independently. Yet, for people living within these countries, for which independence is considered to be a historical fact, these possibilities are real. Therefore, they judge the colonial policy not only by the standards of what it achieves, but also by the standards of what they think could have been achieved independently. If not living up to expectations, the French occupation is therefore seen as an obstacle. Concretely, according to Tran Duc Thao, the French government considered its efforts to increase education as a gift to the Vietnamese people. When given a statistic on education in Vietnam, the French government would consider *any* education an improvement, because without it, so the French government believed, there would be no education at all. A person from France, explains Tran Duc Thao, is 'fulfilled with amazement' by what France has accomplished in terms of education, but someone from Indochina will protest that before the conquests of France, almost everyone already knew how to read and write—and that literacy has in fact greatly decreased (Tran Duc Thao 1946b, 881).

Yet, Tran Duc Thao did not conceive of the world as divided in two radically opposed sides with an incommensurable world view.¹⁸ As the previously demonstrated, he considered the European working class to be potential allies of the colonial peoples. In fact, all dualism—the division of the world into two sides, a master and a bondsman included—was something that he criticized of his contemporaries, especially of Alexandre Kojève. According to Tran Duc Thao, Kojève's seminar on Hegel had introduced a rich but selective reading of Hegel into the Parisian intellectual scene. Kojève insisted that the chapter in Hegel's famous book *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807) which speaks about the dialectic between master and bondsman holds the key to understanding the work of Hegel more generally. Tran Duc Thao disagreed with this analysis and rebuked it by arguing that this choice reflected a hidden agenda of Kojève to be able to make a (false) separation between human beings and animals and more precisely between history (being the world of humans) and nature (being the world of animals). Tran Duc Thao's problem with this reading may be summarized as centering around three problems: (1) the internal logic of the Kojévian system, (2) the problem of the ontological status of 'spirit' and (3) the problem of how human beings came to be, which seem to be a union between mind and spirit (Feron 2017, 254-261).

In Tran Duc Thao's own view, history was not only made up of a struggle between masters and slaves, but also of human labor. More importantly, Kojève downplayed the Hegelian notion of 'spirituality' which explains the reciprocal recognition of individuals within a social totality, for instance, masters among themselves (Tran Duc Thao 1948, 494). When it comes to the conflict between a colonized people and a colonizing people, Tran Duc Thao argued that both perspectives were not equally valid and that there existed a perspective outside the strict binary between master and slave. For this, he constructed a third viewpoint, which he called a universal horizon. Within this horizon, colonialism does not appear as a civilizing mission but makes itself interpreted as 'one of the ways in which western civilization, pushed by its internal power to expand, has invaded the rest of the globe' (Tran Duc Thao 1946b, 898). On the one hand, from the perspective of the universal horizon, the reasons of the colonizer for the conflict between France and Vietnam are mediocre and selfish. By contrast, the actions of a colonized people constitute a meaningful project of having its independence and existence acknowledged. From this perspective, no-one can doubt that Vietnam has the absolute right to exist (Tran Duc Thao 1946b, 900).

Tran Duc Thao's conception of the imperial horizon reworked phenomenological philosophy into an ideological weapon for his struggle against colonialism. Now-a-days, it may help people understand why Europeans, in this case the French, supported colonialism, in spite of the country's official ideology advocating freedom and democracy. From the imperial horizon, colonization can seem to be a selfless action to develop another country. In reality it was a means to exploit a people to the benefit of a specific class of another people. While the imperial horizon prevented most people from understanding the importance of decolonization, not everyone was oblivious for this fact. Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance, has recently been given praise for his role in supporting decolonization and the Third World (Judaken 2008; Arthur 2010). Tran Duc Thao appreciated Sartre's philosophy, though in the end he disagreed with him on the matter of freedom. This research will now compare Tran Duc Thao's conception of freedom to Sartre's conception of freedom and reflect on how Tran Duc Thao's version might be better suited for contemporary postcolonial and environmental debates.

FREEDOM AND THE PAST

After the liberation of Europe and with the onset of decolonial revolutions, freedom was a much debated and contested concept. The Sartrean, existentialist, conception of freedom has become important in postcolonial studies via the work of for instance Edward Said and Franz Fanon (Judaken 2008, 1). In 1945, Sartre gave a famous lecture in the conference room *Club de Maintenant* in which he explained his concept of freedom. According to Simone de Beauvoir, his

conception captured the ‘mood of the times’ and ushered in the year of the ‘existentialist’ offensive (Drake 2002, 25). With regard to conceptions of freedom, postcolonial scholars can be more conscious of the implicit Eurocentrism in the genealogy of the concept (Gopal 2019, 14). According to Gopal, European philosophers and politicians which were critical of colonialism (like Sartre) often acquired these ideas through contact with insurgent movements of colonial peoples. These anticolonial movements were responsible for teasing out the revolutionary potential of European ideas about freedom and democracy. (Gopal 2019, 21-26). This research therefore highlights Tran Duc Thao’s conception of freedom. In order to do so, it is necessary to first explain Sartre’s theory of freedom on which he built.

Sartre’s major philosophical work in the 1940s was his essay *L’être et le néant* (1961 [1943]). Tran Duc Thao wrote about this book that while it was not always fateful to the philosophers it discussed, it was ‘without doubt the best piece of writing in the French language since a longtime.’¹⁹ While the overall message is that humans are free, the book does reflect extensively on many objections one might raise in this regard. One chapter actually discusses the problematic relationship between freedom and the past. Sartre sees a paradox in the common-sense idea that has the past as what ‘*is no longer*’, the present as what ‘*actually is*’ and the future as what ‘*is not yet*.’ If the past is what is no longer, then how can it influence the present? If we think of the past, is not the past then also present in our thoughts? According to Sartre we must conceive of time—past, present, future—as one whole: only in the present, can there be a past (Sartre 1961, 150). Sartre believes it to be absurd to say otherwise (Sartre 1961, 154). He is explicit that he does not mean that someone or something *has* a past, because this would still imply an inseparable bridge between the present and the past. Instead, Sartre thinks that a person or thing *actually is* its past: this past can ‘haunt’ somebody or something in the present, but it cannot be its present; instead, it is the present that is its past (Sartre 1961, 156).

Tran Duc Thao considered this Sartrean conception of free choice misleading. Consciousness always finds itself within a situation that is already constituted, including the moment of choice. This means that the choice itself cannot be separated from the situation. He argues that when existentialists say that people can freely choose to give a meaning and direction to their life, they artificially create a moment outside of the historical situation in which this choice takes place. From this, existentialists falsely construct an untenable binary between humans and nature:

From these considerations, seemingly evident, existentialism concludes that there is a scission between humans and nature. The sense of existence poses itself as an absolute that springs from an unjustified and unjustifiable act of freedom, and makes

human reality radically independent of the positivity of the situation. I *am* that what I choose to be, by an original act that makes me completely responsible for who I am whatever the circumstances I find myself in. (Tran Duc Thao 1949, 322)

In reality, according to Tran Duc Thao, every decision is itself made within a situation which imposes the meaning you give to yourself (and thus your past) and guides your decisions, your direction in life. The decision is made within a situation and is therefore also influenced by it. This means that it is important to specify the *actual* situation, instead of merely saying that there is a situation (Tran Duc Thao 1949, 321). Tran Duc Thao therefore suggested reasoning in a completely opposite direction, which he believed to be the line of reasoning proposed by Husserl himself. I do not choose my being, he says, but it imposes itself on me as already being (*étant d'ores et déjà*) as that without which I would no longer recognize myself, because without it I would no longer be myself (Tran Duc Thao 1949, 322).

Tran Duc Thao insists that before this choice a person already lives within a nation and a class that existed before the present. He argues that he did not decide the sense and value of his life himself. Instead, it were his social surroundings that imposed this meaning on him:

On decisive moments during my existence I realized that my life was conditioned by a certain environment (*milieu*), certain social structures and a certain material organization, which did not make any sense but in these conditions and that I had to defend for them to keep their sense. I do not choose myself as belonging to any nation or member of this or that class, but I already (*d'ores et déjà*) belong to this nation or class by all the history of my past life and it is subtly revealed to my consciousness that it is all I care about and that it gives my life a sense and value, which does not exist but within the horizon of this system and would destroy itself if this nation or this class needed to disappear. (Tran Duc Thao 1949, 322-323)

It is important that Tran Duc Thao motivates his criticism of existentialism on the basis of his own experience. Importantly, his situation as a Vietnamese migrant in Paris is what he is referring to when he says that he came to this conclusion on 'decisive moments during my existence.' One cannot freely choose one's actions, because this decision is made within the historical situation. In no way the movement (*élan*) towards the future is free, in that sense that we are able to choose its direction, because there is always a privileged direction which is given by the meaning we attach to our emotional life. There might be a possibility to say no to this direction, but this would negate the actual meaning of one's life; there is only one true direction (Tran Duc Thao 1949,

323). This line of arguing has a clear implication: it is not a choice but a duty to support the struggle for Vietnam, especially if you are Vietnamese. This would be the only way to live in harmony with who you are.

For Tran Duc Thao, a project is not chosen freely, but instead destiny is foreshadowed in your historical situation. In concrete terms, Tran Duc Thao considers this passive accumulation or foreshadowing as coming from superstructures, or ideologies that we find around us (Feron 2017, 162). These ideologies are related to a specific way of living corresponding to a historical class or social group (e.g., the clergy) but remain around us even if our historical situation has changed. Thus, people can believe in things that do not correspond anymore to their actual way of living. This implies that people may have beliefs that are actually obsolete (Feron 2017, 163). For Tran Duc Thao it is therefore your task (or engagement) to become conscious of the true sense of your objective being and defend this (Feron 2017, 164). This analysis is very important for Tran Duc Thao because of his situation as a colonial intellectual in France. An intellectual who received an education of the colonizing power lives in a contradictory, conflicted situation (because of the colonial education but objective situation of being colonized). In a way, Tran Duc Thao's argument about freedom was in this case directed at Vietnamese intellectuals to rally them to Vietnamese independence instead of collaborating with the French colonial power. Their objective existential project at this moment in history would be to fight for the independence of Vietnam (Feron 2017, 164).

CONCLUSION

The most important idea found in Tran Duc Thao's activism was that he considered the European working class to be conscripts of modernity, just like the colonial plantation laborers. This has led to a critical discussion of some of the academic work on Tran Duc Thao's anticolonial philosophy. By keeping in mind that Tran Duc Thao tried to convince people within the metropole to support the independence of Indochina or Vietnam we showed that he needed to explain why his perspective was in a way universally valid (and not just for himself and his regional perspective). The imperial horizon is a phenomenological conception which explains why most Europeans supported colonialism. Now-a-days, it is a strong concept to understand this question from the other direction: it is also the reason why people failed to understand the meaning of the wish for independence of colonial peoples. It is a first step to understand the epistemological constraints colonial ideology imposes on European political thought.

While his efforts of creating a democratic alliance turned out to be a deception, in the intellectual scene he had more success. The failure of a democratic alliance gave Tran Duc Thao the idea to explain this difference in horizon using his phenomenological training: how could it be explained that the people of Europe supported the colonial project and did not understand the Vietnamese wish for independence? Resting on his expert knowledge in phenomenology, Tran Duc Thao explained this epistemic failure as coming from an imperial horizon which delimits what a person perceives as truly possible. In his unsuccessful attempt to rally the working class to the cause of independence lay his success in changing the opinions of the Parisian intellectual scene. An important conclusion is therefore that Tran Duc Thao's role in the development of postcolonialism was that he managed to make anticolonialism an accepted topic of investigation in the French university. This paved the way for the later theories which have come to be known as the 'French dimension of postcolonialism', which continued Tran Duc Thao's aborted enterprise (with his departure in 1951) to create an anticolonial and materialist phenomenology.

Although the binaries of Sartre's system are under repeated attacks and the domination of humans over nature is seen to be an increasingly large problem, Tran Duc Thao's philosophy is an elaborate system that precisely wishes to break with all of this. While epistemology is still coming to terms with the dead end of postmodern skepticism, Tran Duc Thao presents us a theory of universalism that breaks with the falsities of Enlightenment universalism. No wonder, then, that his philosophy exerted such an incredible fascination among Parisian philosophers. But while the revolutionary turmoil that began in the moment 1944-1946—erupted again during the moment 1950-1968, and then slowly dwindled until, somewhere in the end of the 80s or the 90s, the wave of decolonial revolutions stopped—his political ideas became rather obscure, kept and read by but a few outside the eye of the general public. We might say that the role of Tran Duc Thao in the development of the 'French' dimension of postcolonialism was to introduce anticolonial activism within the university.

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¹ The number of people arrested differs slightly in the newspapers between 48 and 52. In the police records only mention is made however of 42 arrestees. See: 'Liste des Indochinois consignés à ce jour' (10 October 1945). SLOTFOM XIV 4/7, subfolder October.

² Gérard Spitzer, "Pas de politique de force en Indochine! Assez des mesures policières contre les démocrates Annamites!", *La Défense. Organe de Secours Rouge*, year 19 no. 47, 12 October 1945.

³ *Combat*, "Tran Duc Thao leader indochinois arrêté à Paris en octobre vient d'être remis en liberté", 20 December 1945.

⁴ See for instance a tract of the *Délégation Générale des Indochinois*, 'Adresse des travailleurs Indochinois aux travailleurs Français' (undated), SLOTFOM XIV 4/6 (ANOM).

⁵ See for instance an intelligence rapport on the activities of Indochinese people during WW II in France: 'Note relative au mouvement autonomiste annamite en France', (26 September 1945). SLOTFOM XIV 4/7 (ANOM). The rapport opens with the remark that: 'Il serait vain de de dissimuler que la défaite de 1940 a porté un coup très rude à notre prestige.'

⁶ 'Note relative au mouvement autonomiste annamite en France' (26 September 1945). SLOTFOM XIV 4/7.

⁷ 'Pénétration Trotskyste dans les milieux Annamites de Paris' (undated), SLOTFOM XIV 3/1.

⁸ 'Au secours de l'Indochine. Copie d'une affiche de Clermont-Ferrand à la PCI' (19, rue Daguerre à Paris, 20/1/1945). SLOTFOM XIV 3/1. A trust can be explained as a relation in which the trustor gives a trustee the right to hold assets to the benefit of a third party. In the tracts it is however used not in this specific meaning, but more generally to indicate large international investors and companies. In this essay for the sake of variation of language and comprehensibility the words trust is treated as synonymous to large international company.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Mention is made of Ben Youssef, of the *Parti du Peuple Algérien* and Ben Milad, who came from Tunisia.

¹¹ 'Délégation générale des Indochinois. Appel aux peuple Français' (undated). SLOTFOM XIV 4/7, subfolder October.

¹² The concept 'conscript of modernity' was coined by David Scott in his eponymous book, *Conscripts of Modernity. The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham and London 2004), 18-19. In his account the term only applies to captured Africans shipped to the

Americas as enslaved laborers. For them, he says, modernity was not a choice, but a 'condition of choice'. Modernity was something they had to deal with, but could not choose nor reject. In a way, everyone who feels uncomfortable in the modern world might be seen as a conscript of modernity.

¹³ 'Résolution de la Délégation générale' (8 avril 1945). SLOTFOM XIV 4/6. According to the police, it was only later translated into modern Vietnamese (Quoc Ngu). The police found a copy in Vietnamese on 3 May 1945.

¹⁴ 'Au sujet de la personnalité et de l'activité de TRAN DUC THAO', 1 W 765-3031, *Archives de La Préfecture de Police de Paris*.

¹⁵ 'Objet : Manifestation organisé par le P.P.A., Salle Wagram le Mardi 3 Décembre à 20 heures 30' (4 December 1946), HA 32 4563, 'Réunions et tracts', *Archives de La Préfecture de Police de Paris*.

¹⁶ See for instance a document of the *Direction Renseignements Générale*, 'La question Indochinois en France'. SLOTFOM XIV 5/5 (ANOM).

¹⁷ Tran Duc Thao à H.L. van Breda, 13 mars 1946 (Paris).

¹⁸ The notion of 'incommensurability' is mostly known from the work of the American historian and philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn. His precise definition of the concept is slightly ambivalent. Here it is meant to indicate that if two worldviews are incommensurable, the one cannot be explained in terms of the other.

¹⁹ Tran Duc Thao à H.L. van Breda, 13 Novembre 1943 (Paris).