



Social critique in the light of radical phenomenology

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Among critical theories, which denounce the historical conditions of social alienation, the role of phenomenology could be said to consist in a deepening and radicalization of a philosophical reflection, which renders possible, or in a revitalization of collective action. This revitalization can be also understood as a revival, when, drawing on the possibility of a reflection that penetrates into the involved commitment implicit in concrete experience —a *seeing of seeing* made possible by the phenomenological reduction—, the new epistemological task is to become attentive to the neglected aspects of this vision. Rather than embarking on an exploration of the primordial immanence from which experience proceeds, the goal of this task is an analysis of the modalities of this experience itself as it implicates individuals who are called upon in their ipseity by historical processes, which as such only become visible in determinate conditions of space and time. Subjectivation is brought into conceptual illumination not through the acts of transcendental consciousness, but rather through the historical horizon in which they are inscribed: the unknown territory of the activity of knowledge, which must be taken into account, if this activity is not to lose its ground as a living, vibrant experience

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In the structure of this horizon, a structure made up of a “non-actual diversity of appearances” necessary for our “world of experience (*Welt der Erfahrung*)”¹, a slumbering process of the formation of meaning (*Sinnbildung*) emerges in the margins of its noetico-noematic determination. Its genesis cannot be considered as a simple logical succession, but has to be described as “an unfolding, a becoming”² through which past meanings constantly join present meanings. In the same movement, each present goes into a passive life constituted by sedimentations, which are progressively made more and more inaccessible. As for novelty in general, which is to be defined as such only in relation to a familiar and ancient horizon, there is no actual meaning without a non-actual background from which it becomes estranged. The hidden zone of this background is to be explored in

¹ E. Husserl, *Hua VI, Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*. Ed. Walter Biemel, 1954, § 46, p. 162.

² E. Husserl, *Hua XI, Analysen zur passiven Synthesis. Aus Vorlesungs und Forschungsmanuskripten, 1918-1926*, Ed. Margot Fleischer, 1966, p. 339.

a two-fold manner: firstly in terms of generation of the intentional apperceptions and secondly in terms of the exteriority which accompanies their affirmation and their sedimentation.

The nature of this exteriority is to be analyzed by a phenomenology of alienation, not only as the impossible link to what always escapes the grasp of consciousness³, but also in terms of its violent impact on creative movement of subjectivity within experience and its capacity to displace itself and to be ethically and socially called upon (*interpellée*). Self-transformation is thus to be understood through a historicity which emerges from combined impulses and with a view towards social action that they are able to produce. In this perspective, both the blockages and the resistances, which move and immobilize the becoming of individuals, appear as the practical condition of the renewal of experience in its development and of the revival of meaning in its multiple geneses.

Our intention is to explore some of the newly discovered, unmapped territories opened up by Husserl's genetic phenomenology and to advance them toward a phenomenology of history, in order to bring to the fore the radical meaning of the phenomenological "seeing of seeing" by focusing on off-limit visions and the blind spots that it implicitly institutes in experience. The becoming of each ipseity is thus to be understood as related to the historical community present at each moment of its development.

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1 Social critique and the question of alienation

If we were to consider the question of alienation in the light of contemporary phenomenology, M. Henry's *Marx*, published in 1976, is an indispensable point of reference. Social alienation is described as a relation of immanent life to a specific kind of alterity. Nevertheless, this relation emerges in a movement that defines the very nature of life: the movement of objectivation. Henry writes:

"Alienation and objectivation are identical for a two-fold reason: it is itself that thinking posits in the form of alterity, it is thinking itself that assumes the appearance of exteriority and nature, but it is also thinking itself that accomplishes this positing, which is a positing, this positing of itself in the other. The result is that what is posited by objectivation of thinking is not in reality something else than this thinking itself, but rather its product. We can say that objectivation is thinking under another form."⁴

³ Cf. L. Tengelyi, *L'histoire d'une vie et sa région sauvage*, Grenoble, Millon, 2005, pp. 18-54.

⁴ M. Henry, *Marx*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, t. I, p. 299.

With this identification of alienation and objectivation, Henry refers to the Husserlian thesis that transcendental life becomes rigid when it starts to be effective in the world, when it starts to produce an objective form as a general horizon within which all subjective acts meet. The ambiguous status of objectivation appears through the concept of “substruction,” which is defined by Husserl as “idealization of sensible appearances above and beyond any possibility of effective intuition”⁵. The idealized meaning of nature is thus replaced with the originary meaning of the sensible experience. The “*anticipation* prolonged to infinity” of the intuitive teleology of the world-life (*Lebenswelt*) is covered by the garment of ideas (*Ideenkleid*) made from an open infinity of possible experiences, a garment which suits it well, a garment of truths which one can call “objectively scientific”⁶. But this Husserlian distortion of meaning (*Umdeutung*) is not a simple accident in the evolution of the European sciences; it also affects the formation of meaning (*Sinnbildung*) in the world-life. The weakening of the teleological horizon of science is thus related to a crisis present in the world-life, as it is confronted with a progressive technologization which separates it from its first intuitivity. Husserlian genetic phenomenology has made clear that, if the idealization of natural life produces an occultation of meaning, the cause of this to be found in the fact that each present has the tendency to conceal the previous evolutions of meaning within the passive undergrounds of conscious life. The search of an originary meaning (*Ursprungssinn*) has to deal with this gap between the objectively determined meaning and phenomenological meaning which is continuously transforming⁷.

In the light of these investigations, objectivation appears on one side as the *modality* in which the life of meaning expresses and shares itself, and, on the other side, as the *form* of its own self-positing, exterior to the intrinsic dynamism of the effectivity of meaning, and reflecting it in its accomplishment.

This Husserlian diagnosis is radicalized by Henry insofar as he understands transcendental life as irreducibly individualized and its meaning created in another sphere than one of intentional acts. This critical perspective allows Henry to present objectivation as the first form of alienation that affects life. Do we have to think that alienation is the only way that life is able to express itself? Is alienation intimately related to the productivity of life or is it a mere turning away from life? An attentive analysis of Henry’s texts is needed in order to answer these questions.

What does it mean for life, as Henry says, “to posit itself in another”⁸? What does it mean for life to produce itself “in another form”? An intrinsic deviation seems to interfere

⁵ E. Husserl, *Hua VI*, §9, d), p. 37.

⁶ *Idem*, §9, h), p. 51.

⁷ Cf. E. Husserl, *Hua VI*, Beilage III, zu § 9 a), pp. 365-386.

⁸ M. Henry, *Marx, op. cit.*, t. I, p. 299.

in the process of the production of life and to change its destiny, guiding it towards territories where life as a living, dynamic production cannot recognize itself anymore, disguises itself in forms which are foreign to its own inner dynamism and in manifestations where it cannot see itself as their vivid source.

When describing the modalities of expression undertaken by life which found each manifestation, Henry underlines the temporality of self-presence (*presence à soi*) made possible starting from a first passivity —the passivity of the givenness of life in us. It appears that self-presence implies a “phenomenological distance”⁹ as an essential law and an ontological structure. It is the distance between two regimes of living: on one side the regime of what is received passively and on other side the regime of what is appropriated actively. Insofar as the productivity of life as *poesis* is to be understood as a way of “bringing the non-present into presence”¹⁰, its task is to relate this two regimes of temporality, implying the passivity of life in individual activity.

But it is also because of this distance that the movement of life separates itself from its results, just as the creative impulse drives one to leave behind, to distance itself from, one's productions. We can thus make a distinction between, on one side, a process that, receiving itself, receives the world as its production, and, on the other side, the static, objectified determination of an appearance in which this same process loses its effectivity. Two forms of passivity are to be observed: the passivity that we experience within the vivid activity of the self as a condition of its sensible genesis, and the passivity in front of that which separates itself from this subjective activity, transforming us into mere submissive spectators of our own existence.

As if by an inexplicable self-forgetting, life steps away, distances itself, from what it renders possible and thus material reality separates itself from its phenomenological effectivity¹¹, thereby destroying its attachments to it. The immediate link between the process of passive genesis and its productions, between the its first movements and its historical inscription, it thus lost. The alienation of this “becoming other” of life is total in the illusion of “being immediately the other of one self”¹², which allows us to believe that we can offer in our own present a living, dynamic foundation to alterity, separated from the living, dynamic foundation of the ipseity of each individual.

Yet, this notion of alterity is unclear. Insofar as the “positing of self as other” gives life the possibility to create a history, enabling its invisible process to leave traces of itself, to appear in a present and thus to pass itself on. The fact that the relations between

⁹ Cf. M. Henry, *L'Essence de la manifestation*, Paris, PUF, 1963, t. I, §10.

¹⁰ M. Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie*, 4 t., Paris, PUF, 2003, t. III, p. 13.

¹¹ M. Henry, *Marx, op. cit.*, t. I, p. 303.

¹² *Idem*, p. 303.

individuals are always made possible in historical conditions that these same relations are able to change invites us to reconsider the question of the alteration of life from a new point of view. The movement of life's expression in the horizon of a world is also to be considered as an insertion of invisible in the visible, which makes possible its continuation—that is, as an alternative to its alienation. How does history give to life the possibility of accomplishing itself in its effectuation and therefore overcome the heterogeneity of its objectivation?

How can life defend its freedom of development and escape alienation? How can this process of “becoming other”, which affects the expression of each self, avoid complete self-alienation, fight against this self-forgetting, this loss of its immanent source? Henry seems to indicate to us the possibility of a reappropriation of the products of life by life itself¹³, which passes by a *recognition of the self in the other* instead of the *positing of the self as other*, following what Marx said about the fact that “man feels himself, feels at home, in his being-other”¹⁴. The affirmation of the world from the point of view of the life that generates it redeems the world.

The fact that “man feels himself, feels at home, in his being-other” points to the fact he recognizes his historical position as related to his own act of self-positing: from alienation he returns to the immanent process of the self-actualization of life, to the self-seizing interiority at the basis of all subjectivity, present in all its potentialities, and breathes life into its other but *only insofar as it primordially retains itself, adheres to itself*. The main explanation of this modality of the effectuation of life is given in the *Généalogie de la psychanalyse*:

“Life never actualizes itself in, never enters into, the limited place of the light; it retains itself entirely outside of it, in the immediation of its own omni-self-presence. For life, actuality, virtuality, potentiality have another meaning: actuality designates auto-affection in which potentiality is effective, the reality of the possibility consubstantial to each power and identical to each presence”¹⁵.

What makes possible the effectivity and power of life resides precisely in this, that is, its inability “*to come into the light of ek-stasis*”¹⁶. Life must be recognized in its invisible process, as that which makes possible the strength and the power of life.

A new problem becomes here obvious, from two perspectives:

¹³ Cf. sur ce point M. Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie*, op. cit., t. III et *Du communisme au capitalisme, Théorie d'une catastrophe*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1990.

¹⁴ K. Marx, *Manuscrit de 44*, quoted by M. Henry in *Marx*, op. cit., t. I, p. 302.

¹⁵ M. Henry, *Généalogie de la psychanalyse*, Paris, PUF, 1985, p. 78.

¹⁶ *Idem*, p. 392.

1/ From a psychological point of view, this Henrian thesis doesn't take into account the blockages of the activity of life, which appear at a level that can also be described as *passive*: this passivity in which the absence of freedom of an affectivity able to primordially seize itself is made visible at precise moments of each one's life's history.

2/ From a political, but also from a phenomenological, point of view, trying to resolve the problem of alienation by a return to the auto-affectability of life doesn't take into account the fact that life is never "safe"¹⁷, but always in danger, insofar as it is always exposed to changing social and historical circumstances. These challenges become a part of its history when the difficulties they pose are solved, but they can also intimately affect its intensive growth, when life is mishandled, worn out, and sometimes even violently overpowered. What affects individuals in their existence is not what affects life from an abstract and general point of view, but what affects the power of life to be lived and shared.

Not only the resistances and the anti-resistances which span every living, dynamic evolution, but also the traumas and the shocks which characterize it, must be taken into account in order to understand the historicity of life, its exposure to contingent circumstances and thus its vulnerability. If these dimensions of the experience of life are not taken seriously, we are confronted with a possible danger if we proclaim that the only solution to alienation is to return to the auto-production of life in itself. This would merely repress a *double exteriority* to which it is always exposed¹⁸.

The first exteriority is the exteriority of other lives, correlated to an irreducible multiplicity of their manifestation. The unique source from which life proceeds relates it to different individual existences, but it also separates them in the specificity of their manifestation. The fact that the other is an other self —the fundamental idea behind the Henrian theory of intersubjectivity— makes him close to me, but also a stranger, determines him as important, but also as indifferent. This is the reason why the question of "suffering-with" (*pâtir-avec*) is to be developed in the direction of a phenomenology of the community present in each one's own affectivity, in order to show that the question is not to establish an analogy between several manners of receiving life and of being situated in its movement, but to underline the necessity for different singularities to meet in the determined horizon of a history.

This mutual empowerment (potentiation) immanent to life that Henry calls "pouvoir pouvoir"¹⁹ brings us to the second exteriority with which life is confronted: exteriority towards its self, due to the temporalization of its acts that prevent life from ever being

¹⁷ Cf. J.-L. Chrétien, «La vie sauve», in *Les Études philosophiques*, 1 (1988), pp. 37-49, p. 37 sq.

¹⁸ *Idem*, p. 40.

¹⁹ M. Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie*, op. cit., t. I, p. 174.

entirely present in all its productions. If, as Henry writes, “being is a desire of self, it is its own nostalgia”²⁰, it is so because self-presence is never automatically assured by the givenness of life. If this givenness is a self-givenness, it must be transferred from the regime of passivity in which we access it to the real self-presence of a living individual. Even if life is always given, we must become able to “give ourselves self-presence”²¹. This act of giving or the bestowing of present time is surely the first act of freedom by which we take a stand against alienation –but it cannot become effective if we do not take into account the historical condition of life, a correlative of a givenness which is always partial. Although this historical limited condition invites us to search for a full, exorbitant self-givenness, it also confronts us with situations where our affectability is suspended or contradicted.

2 Alienation and history

To clarify this problem, the debate between Ricoeur and Henry is important. Ricoeur blames Henry for having concealed the relation between individuals and their historical material circumstances. It is the originality of the anthropology of Marx to refrain from separating the individual from the circumstances in which he acts. Marx never stops saying: “the people and their conditions”, never stops talking about what the people do “in situation”, “in accordance with their material productivity”²². The Ricoeurian critic is important. Henry's text is however able to grant it.

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“La vie phénoménologique individuelle, toutes ses vies ou, pour parler comme Marx, les “individus vivants”, bien qu'ils entrent dans l'histoire et soient déterminés par elle, la déterminent au contraire, et cela dans un sens ultime: non pas parce qu'ils concourent, chacun pour sa modeste part, pour une part infime à vrai dire, à produire le cours du monde et à façonner sa physionomie d'ensemble, mais parce qu'ils constituent sa condition de possibilité, ce sans quoi l'histoire ne serait pas”²³.

The first answer is however only partial because Ricoeur questions a second aspect of the same critic which Henry's reading of Marx had neglected. For Ricoeur, it should be recognized that “the individual has always already entered in history under conditions and circumstances which it did not produce and through which it is however summoned to produce history”²⁴. If not, Ricoeur says, “how is it so that the individual who produces the conditions of his own existence can feel them as an external destiny”²⁵?

²⁰ M. Henry, *L'Essence de la manifestation*, op. cit., t. I, § 10, p. 90.

²¹ *Idem*.

²² P. Ricoeur, *Lectures*, 2. t., Paris, Seuil, 1999, t. II, p. 133.

²³ M. Henry, *Marx*, op. cit., t. I, p. 195.

²⁴ P. Ricoeur, *Lectures*, op. cit., t. II, p. 133.

²⁵ M. Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie*, op. cit., t. IV, p. 103.

Henry however thinks that he is being true to the spirit of Marx: “the circumstances are produced by the people as much as the people produce the circumstances”²⁶. That circumstances are produced by people does not cancel out the fact that circumstances are the circumstances of their activity, that this, that they “the forms in which such an activity occurs”²⁷. Henry thus doesn’t separate the circumstances which form the horizon of activity from a pure activity, a separation which, from a Marxian point of view, could only lead to the perpetuation of the alienation. On the contrary, he even points out that “there is a very important idea in Marx which goes completely in the direction of what Ricœur said: the idea of generation. When we think history, it is necessary to think history by generation, that is the individuals who arrive to find the conditions of production, which are the conditions of their life”²⁸.

The conditions received from the previous generation assign to the following generation their own conditions of existence and give him a determined development, a specific character. Consequently, it is completely correct for Henry to say that “the individual finds the conditions of his activity, he finds his activity itself as an activity already achieved by the others and who is offered to him so that he exercises it in turn”. Only Henry adds that “he finds it as he accomplishes it himself, as it is its own life, there is nothing, consequently, which would be outside him, which would determine him from the outside”²⁹.

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Let us now at the most important Ricœurian critic: “the condition of history is for Henry heterogeneous to historical circumstances”³⁰. And this is indeed what Henry says explicitly: “as that which constitutes the condition of the possibility of history, he writes, life, although it belongs to history, does not belong to it, and must be understood as meta-history and as this heterogeneous foundation which founds the possibility of the development of history”³¹.

How can Henry claim that the conditions of history are conditions immanent to the development which they produce but are, at the same time, heterogeneous with history? It is necessary to pause at this thesis because it is the basis of the phenomenological position from which Henry proposes to construct a philosophy of history.

“Que signifie plus précisément l’immanence à l’histoire de sa condition méta-historique de possibilité ? Comment la vie peut-elle à la fois appartenir à l’histoire et ne pas lui appartenir ? Appartenir à l’histoire veut dire pour la vie, être chaque fois en elle, à chaque moment ou

²⁶ K. Marx, *L’Idéologie allemande*, in *Œuvres philosophiques*, t. VI, trad. Molitor J., Paris, Costes, 1946, p. 185 ; trad. Auger H., Badia G., Baudrillard J., Cartelle R., Paris, Éditions sociales, 1968, p. 70.

²⁷ M. Henry, *Marx*, op. cit., t. I, p. 249.

²⁸ M. Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie*, op. cit., t. III, p. 104.

²⁹ M. Henry, *Marx*, op. cit., t. I, p. 251.

³⁰ P. Ricœur, *Lectures*, op. cit., t. II, p. 133.

³¹ M. Henry, *Marx*, op. cit., t. I, p. 195.

plutôt en chaque individu, la condition d'une production effective, une production rendue nécessaire par cette vie et pour elle. Ne pas appartenir à l'histoire veut dire: cette condition de toute histoire n'est pas quelque chose qui puisse lui être soumis, qui serait emporté et aboli par elle, n'est pas un état historique, c'est-à-dire justement un état de choses en voie de transformation et finalement de disparition"³².

This heterogeneity does not place the condition of history "outside" of history. "That life constitutes the fundamental condition of history, its a priori condition of possibility or, as we can still call it, its transcendental condition, its meta-historical condition, none of this does not imply in anyway that it is situated outside history"³³. The condition of history is not structurally heterogeneous with history in such a way that there could be no possible relation between the origin of history and history. This heterogeneity does not indicate a exteriority of phenomenological levels. Far from indicating the absence of relation, the heterogeneity aims on the contrary to show their relation. It is because the essence of the individual phenomenological life is not historical but contains the possibility of any history, that the existence of the people is historical, is able to produce history and even contingency, that there is a necessity. Thus, it is not individuals who always naturally live within the concrete conditions of existence which determine them who constitute the heterogeneous element of history: rather, it is the condition of the individual life, namely, the absolute Life itself. And that is why it is not a cause doomed to disappear with the effect which it sets off. That is why, "in the phenomenological and ontological horizon of the life, the idea of the 'end of the history' has no sense"³⁴.

3 A way out of the crisis

Which consequence can we draw from this phenomenology of history at the level of the social criticism? The fundamental idea is that individuals are no longer able to produce history because history as a structure of potentiation does not allow it any more. Individuals consequently exercise a positive action when they try to escape what they thought, imaginarily or mythologically, to be the condition of history – or, in others words, when individuals recognize that history is not an automatic, self-unfolding process that determines itself by itself but that rather is only the structure by which the life potentializes individuals.

So, when Henry rejects the hypostasization of the history or the economy, he rejects in the same breath the hypostasization of the society.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 197.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

³⁴ M. Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie*, op. cit., t. III, p. 128.

“C’est parce que les individus vivent, travaillent, cohérent de telle manière qu’ils composent tel type de société. Une relation entre la société —qui n’existe pas— et l’individu est principalement impossible. Seule peut être problématisée la relation des individus entre eux”³⁵.

As long as we try to consider the potentiation of history by history, we settle for thinking the possibility of the revitalization of history only in terms of transformation of circumstances. We are trapped in “the absurd thesis which still determines the cultural world in which we live today, a thesis which claims that it is first necessary to change society and then naturally everything will be changed and in particular the life of individuals”³⁶. On the other hand, by returning to life as the condition of the potentiation of the history, we put the problem in terms of the potentiation of our capacities of self-transformation within the circumstances in which we act.

The consequence which Henry draws from this is that any resolution of this “crisis” which does not take into account the fact that the crisis affects not only a system but also the way in which individuals refer to their action in history is condemned to “repetition”. As long as the principles which guide their action involve “the deep disorganization of the individual life and its pathetic history”, they can only endlessly repeat the same construction of social and institutional organizations which bring forth the same crises. And, consequently, neither will the liberation of individuals be rendered possible by the external imposition of a new social and institutional organization considered as more virtuous or by a purely theoretical refoundation of norms which frame their actions.

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It is only in the transformation of affects that a truly liberating power can be fully unleashed, both in terms of overcoming various impasses we find ourselves confronted with and the destabilization of certain points of view. And it is what Marx already said against Stirner: “the state of society can only be modified if we modify ourselves”³⁷. Any social and institutional change has to first pass through a change within individuals who recognize that it is here and now, in their current conditions of existence, that they have to adhere to the power of self-transformation of life in order to renew history.

We cannot resolve, according to Henry, the crisis in the terms in which it has been posed. It is necessary to modify our entire concept understanding of this crisis in order to be able to revive history. And that is why one of the most fundamental theses of a radical phenomenology of history is that, confronted with such moments of crisis, it is the crisis itself which we should integrate because, as such, it contains the possibility of a revitalization of history.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

³⁶ M. Henry, *Marx, op. cit.*, t. I, p. 190.

³⁷ K. Marx, *L’Idéologie allemande, op. cit.*, Costes, p. 187 ; Editions Sociales, p. 71.

“Le concept de crise désigne en général un moment crucial à l’intérieur d’un processus dont elle n’est qu’une phase. Processus qui la précède donc et, le plus souvent, lui survit. La crise est passagère, elle sera surmontée: c’est elle qui [met] à nu des contradictions qui ont mûri lentement et les [porte] brusquement à un degré extrême de tension. [...] Plus qu’elle ne liquide un certain passé, la crise ouvre la voie de l’avenir”³⁸.

Conclusion

When we first approached alienation with Henry, we insisted on the illusion of “being immediately the other of one self” ³⁹, which authorizes us to believe that we can offer in our own present a vivid founding to alterity, separated from the vivid founding of the ipseity of each individual. In the light of our investigations, it is important to emphasize that alterity is relative to ipseity. Understanding alterity as an absolute exteriority exposes us to the danger of seeing the notions of hosting the other, of intersubjective share and of ethical interpellation disappear in the obscure sphere of a transcendence which denies its foundations. In this perspective, the search for freedom understood as social emancipation becomes impossible. Nevertheless, alterity is to be recognized as the source of transformation in each process of subjectivation, as interferes with a former ideological overdetermination and also with a practical intervention that is to change the social order.

If alienation is to be understood as an alteration of the relation that life has with itself, another notion of alterity must be emphasized : it is not the alterity of “positioning one self as another “ (pretending that we are not ourselves), but the alterity of “becoming another” (transforming our history) thanks to the others, to what they give us and to what they teach us. A vivid learning process is thus to underline that guides subjectivation, that allows us to understand life as a historical process of self-transformation. Its expression is to be searched not only in a self-position that turns against its foundation, covering it and disturbing its relation to itself, but also in a field of confrontation between several different forms of manifestation which cross and reflect each other.

³⁸ M. Henry, *Phénoménologie de la vie*, op. cit., t. III, p. 123.

³⁹ M. Henry, *Marx*, op. cit., t. I, p. 303.