The history of ideas does not always follow predictable paths. Sometimes it goes through ways so tortuous that it comes to connect cultures and geographical areas where nothing is predisposed to meet. The reception of phenomenology in Africa is a good example of this. Husserl, as everyone knows, is considered the philosopher of “European humanity” who, as such, never worried about Africa. When he happened to mention African or non-Western people in general, it was always in order to make a contrast with what he used to call the “Idea of Europe”, as if the very essence of the latter could not be cleared if not opposed to a radical exteriority. His purpose is then so scandalous that one can wonder if he never really expected to be read and commented on one day by Papuans, Indians, Gypsies, and Africans, those radical figures of otherness. However, Husserl is paradoxically massively present in the discussions that have continued to mobilize African philosophers around the famous book of the Belgian missionary, Reverend Father Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, published in 1947.1 Obviously, this does not imply an “African” phenomenological moment, because phenomenology is not yet really institutionalized as such in the continent, for example in journals, scientific societies, annual conferences, or dedicated research centers, as is the case elsewhere.2 But when we consider that the history of philosophy in contemporary Africa has been, to some extent, the history of the controversy around Tempels’ book, we can see how phenomenology is closely linked to the birth and the history of philosophy in Africa. More specifically, it has significantly inflected this debate by influencing not only the positions of a central figure of it, namely the Beninese philosopher Paulin J. Hountondji in his criticism of the so-called “ethno-philosophy”, but also, though in a negative way, all those who saw him as the representative of what they called “Europhilosophy” (Diagne 1981). The hypothesis we would like to highlight here is the following: the way Hountondji reads Husserl is so faithful that it seems to marry the two characteristic moments of the evolution of Husserl’s phenomenology as it’s generally established between, on one hand, an early Husserl, exclusively concerned with theory of knowledge and epistemology, and on the other hand, a later one, rather anxious to find that same epistemological requirement in the soil of the “Life-world”. As led by Hountondji, it seems that the criticism of ethno-philosophy is based on the Husserlian stance of philosophy defined as a rigorous science. According to such a stance, philosophy as a “worldview” is an avatar of skepticism and of irrationalism. That’s why Hountondji’s approach, inspired by such a conception, may appear at first sight to be denying any kind of importance to local cultures against which philosophy should be established.
Then, philosophy must be literally polarized by the ideal of universality and scientific rigor, without which there is no rational knowledge. Thus, when in the 1990s Hountondji began to examine issues related to culture, in order to think the endogenous development of sciences in Africa, he didn’t deny the criticism against Tempels he made on behalf of the scientific ideal defined by Husserl, nor the heritage of the latter, contrary to what a superficial reading might lead one to believe. Rather, by highlighting the cultural substructure from which emerged African endogenous knowledge, Hountondji remained faithful to the inspiration of Husserl and to his famous thesis, according to which scientific idealities are determined by the Lebenswelt, even though he did not explicitly mobilize this concept in his published works. It’s the logic that unites these two moments, both in Husserl and in Hountondji, that we would like to discuss, in order to show that it can give a new coherence to the contemporaneous African philosophical debates.

**71.1. The idea of philosophy**

As a former student of the Ecole Normale Superieure de la rue d’Ulm, Paris, Hountondji passes generally for an Althusserian. In most of his texts where he explicitly referred to Althusserian analysis, he mostly sets up an idea of philosophy that could oppose Tempels’. But one cannot grasp the very critical scope of these texts if one does not bring them in relation to the issue of science as aroused from the very beginning of Husserlian phenomenology. So it’s towards Husserl that we must turn, that is to say, to the academic works Hountondji devoted to him, especially in his postgraduate doctoral thesis in 1970 on the subject: “The idea of science in the Prolegomena and in the first logical Investigation”, conducted under the direction of Paul Ricoeur. This work is the foundation of his philosophical orientation because it gives the first outlines of what will constitute the theoretical justifications of his rejection of ethno-philosophy. Indeed, the question of the epistemological status of philosophy is not a question among others for Husserl, for it illuminates his whole project and can allow us to track the different stages of the development of phenomenology. From the Logical Investigations (1901) to Philosophy as Rigorous Science (1911) and Renovation of Man and Culture published in the Japanese magazine The Kaizo (1923–1924) to the texts collected in Teelologie in der Philosophiegeschichte (Hua XXIX) (1936–1937), Husserl supported the development of phenomenology by a patient and sustained meditation on the meaning of philosophical activity he conceived in accordance with an ideal of scientificity that should not only emancipate it from the theoretical models inherited from experimental sciences, but should even be able to found the latter. For Husserl, the positive scientificity of natural sciences is a factual datum. In other words, it is a fact of history whose true meaning could only be grasped if related to the primary sphere of donation where all scientific practice originated. By such a gesture, as everyone knows, it is a question to reveal the genetic process by which scientific concepts are generated from the natural life, a process that the positive practice of sciences tends to overshadow. It is clear, therefore, that if this ideal of scientificity is wider than that of the experimental sciences, it is partly because it has a more original relationship with the pre-scientific word. It is also because it is closely in accordance with the requirement of self-reflexivity by which science should be able to get back to itself, and thus, render account of the methodological approaches by which it proceeds. But in the last part of his life, facing the rise of Nazism in Germany, Husserl articulated this requirement of scientificity as a practical concern. The challenge now is to show that the aspiration to rational knowledge implies a fundamental ethical issue, that of the individual responsibility of each philosopher to think the history of philosophy as the unity of an intention that drove European history since its origins in Ancient Greece. Such a history is inhabited by a telos that prescribes its unity, despite the apparent disper-
sion of philosophical systems. The task of the philosopher, then, should be to uncover the latent yearning for unity that springs instinctively in each particular philosophy and to appropriate it for his own account. History, understood in this way, should overcome the opposition between factual doctrines by releasing the secret intention that unites them. By doing so, one can find the requirement of universality underlying philosophical doctrines and give himself the means to defeat historicism, and, therefore, ultimately, irrationalism.

It’s this teleological conception of philosophy as rigorous science that Paulin Hountondji addressed in the African philosophical debate, and particularly in his criticism of Tempels’ work. If in the historical context of the 1960s and 1970s in Africa, dominated by the issue of national liberation struggles, Husserl found himself paradoxically to be the main reference of a considerable part of the intelligentsia and the African left, it’s probably because the phenomenological conception of philosophy as rigorous science, as Hountondji would defend it, was seen at that moment as the only true remedy against what was then considered a kind of “philosophical nationalism” that had flourished across the continent in the wake of the Blackness movement (Negritude). Published in French in 1947, slightly less than ten years after the first texts on Negritude, Tempels’ book immediately aroused the enthusiasm of African intellectuals, including Senghor, Alioune Diop, and Cheikh Anta Diop, who saw this as a refutation of Lévy-Bruhl’s thesis on the pre-logical mind of “primitive societies”. As many have noticed, it is probably in this book that the term “philosophy” has been applied for the first time to an African system of thought. The methodological premise of the book, which is shared by many in Africa, is the assumption that there are in African societies unspoken philosophical thoughts that are experienced daily and that control the entire existence of the African communities. The task is then to have these philosophical thoughts clearly expressed by a process that will consist in reconstructing its logical consistency. With respect to the populations studied by Tempels, we are dealing with an ontology organized around the key concept of vital force: all things that exist are endowed with a specific force, and the universe in its totality is a hierarchical system organized according to their degree of intensity. If, according to Tempels, the difference between beings reflects the intensity of the force that characterizes them, this force can be increased or decreased depending on whether we act in accordance with good or evil. Thus, ontology leads to an ethic that can be formulated as a categorical imperative: “Act always in order to increase the strength to life of all Muntu (men)”.

As we can see, this ontology proceeds methodologically as a hermeneutical approach based on empirical data that are collected in the field and cannot, therefore, be regarded as the work of a Bantu philosophical subject, but rather as that of Tempels himself. However, such a process is never neutral. It always obeys biases and choices, consciously or not, and Hountondji’s work will consist of tracking, under the ethno-philosophical discourse’s appearance of objectivity, the epistemological and ideological premises that guide it. As he wrote, the ethno-philosophers believed they were reproducing existing philosophemes whereas they were producing them. They believed they were telling when in fact they created. This commendable modesty is a treason in fact: the clearing of the philosopher before his own speech was inseparable from a projection that made him arbitrarily give his people his own theoretical and ideological choices.

(Hountondji 1977, 21)

The principle of such a criticism will be to focus on what appears to be a mix of genres, a regrettable confusion between philosophy and ethnology that consists of theorizing on ethnological data that have been too hastily promoted to the status of philosophical concepts.
Thus, according to Hountondji, by expanding the concept of philosophy to tales, myths, cosmologies, and other cosmogonies, ethno-philosophy disqualifies itself both from a methodological point of view and from its contents. To this criticism one can add others, more explicitly political and ideological, according to which Tempels’ work could be seen as a fantasized vision of African societies that are falsely perceived as “unanimist”. Such a stance excludes the existence of different individual thoughts and could explain why Africans are inevitably doomed to eternal stagnation.

All these criticisms developed by Hountondji, Marcien Towa, Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, and others are rejected by “la contre-critique”, that is to say, by all those who see in the definition of philosophy as proposed by Hountondji, who follows Husserl, an undue restriction of it which depends, moreover, on a purely Western criteriology. Thus, Hountondji and all those who rejected Tempels’ works will be accused of developing an idea of philosophy that disconnects them from the African realities. The Senegalese philosopher Alassane Ndaw, for instance, will seek to show that there is a great similarity between pre-Socratic thoughts and those of the Africans, and there is no reason, therefore, to allow the firsts of the philosophical and to reject the seconds. Considering the example of Platonician philosophy, which was widely inspired by the ancient Greek traditions, he goes further and says: “You could even say, by analogy, that all philosophy is ethno-philosophy. No serious philosopher can neglect the problems of his soil and his ethnos, modern or traditional” (Ndaw 1966).

As summarized, we can see that beyond its multiple twists, the debate on ethno-philosophy is ultimately settled around the question of the relationship between philosophy and the social sciences, particularly ethnology, and then, subsequently, around the question of the universal in its relation to the particular. Therefore, when Hountondji began a sociological reflection on African indigenous knowledge, in a move that seemed to replicate Tempels’ gesture, there were some African scholars who said that he had given up the critique of ethno-philosophy, and thus, Husserl’s stance of philosophy as science as well. But as Souleymane Bachir Diagne judiciously put it:

“If [Hountondji] returns […] to what was written and discussed and on the answers he already made to critics which did not miss […], it’s above all, simply to make visible to those who misunderstood his theoretical path because they have had a truncated understanding of it, the whole totality of it. Thus, before the criticism of ethno-philosophy to which it is often reduced, there has been work on Husserl, and that’s why “after” this criticism, or rather at the same time, with it and through it there is the thinking about science.

(Hountondji 1997)

In other words, when Hountondji thematizes the issue of the re-appropriation of indigenous knowledge, far from breaking with his former stance, he continues a meditation that we cannot grasp the meaning of if we do not relate it to his interest in science. We think that, in order to explain this thesis, it is necessary to assume a continuity inspired by Husserl’s course, who himself came from a figure of Reason mainly focused on the egological subject and moved to a conception of rationality that recognizes that its own principle is not immanent to it, but resides in non-thematized presuppositions that are buried in the very depths of the surrounding world. To support this thesis, it is necessary to see the reasons that led Husserl, in the last years of his life, to rethink the question of the basis of science within the framework of the Lebenswelt. Such a decision led him to consider in a new way the links existing between philosophy and social sciences, especially with ethnology.
71.2. Lebenswelt and the basis of sciences

In order to solve the difficulties generated by the objection of transcendental solipsism, Husserl, in the 1930s, had to confront the task of unveiling, by his famous “question in return” (Rückfrage) the forgotten foundations of scientific rationality, as they are given in the world of cultures and mentalities, that is to say, in the natural attitude that transcendental reduction had nevertheless switched off. Husserl’s initial project, as we said, was to find an ultimate foundation for science. By means of reduction, he first found it in the “ground of absolute being,” that is to say, in the Ego, thereby defining transcendental phenomenology as Egology. But faced with the objection of transcendental solipsism, he was forced to root the Ego into the primordial ground of corporeality. Then, from the Ego, Husserl moved to the bodily life, which has brought up many questions about the coherence of the phenomenological project. By this second reduction, Husserl discovered that the Ego is always preceded by a materiality on which are built the theoretical thoughts that appear then, as surface effects. Logical acts are then returned to the “basement” of primordial strata that the Ego can access only through the mediation of the body and the surrounding world. Thus, as the task of the first reduction was to clear the eidetic structure of the Ego, the task after the second reduction is to uncover the essential structures of life-world. The shift that phenomenology went through is noteworthy, because it took its meaning in a new direction. While in the Cartesian Meditations, The Ideas, and contemporaneous texts the basis of the Ego is to be found in the corporeal nature, so much that biology was seen for a moment as first philosophy, in subsequent works, Husserl saw this kind of foundation as an avatar of objectivism. It was first in Husserliana XV and in the Crisis that he rejected this naturalistic and reifying approach of the life-world. In fact, if the latter always refers to everyday life, intuitive perception can never meet simple sensory substrates as such, but socially constructed objects, and therefore spiritual objects that are already fully loaded with human intentions. In other words, nature is always invested of culture and cannot, therefore, be held as primordial ground, because it is a result of idealization produced by experimental sciences. This means that the presence of other subjects is always required for a nature and a world to be possible as such. Hence, it’s towards transcendental inter-subjectivity, understood as an original pregiven, that we should instead turn, because it is the only real subject that could give to itself the infinite horizon of objectivity as a correlate, and thus, could constitute the world. As Husserl put it,

As persons we are in relation to a common surrounding world – we are in a personal association: these belong together. We could not be persons for others if there were not over and against us a common world. Each one is constituted together with the other. Each Ego can become a person in a personal association only when, by means of comprehension, a relation to a surrounding world is produced.

(Hua IV, 197/387)

If, as Husserl says in the Crisis, “There is, for essential reasons, no zoology of peoples” (Hua VI, 320/275), he means that a people could never be a natural entity whose essence could be captured and fixed in definitive natural categories, but a flow of spiritual life. Then we can see why it is always as a temporal dynamics, in the basis of a sedimented history, that each community experiences itself in a reciprocity that creates relations from man to man. Ultimately, therefore, it is towards a non-objectivist sociology, namely a transcendental sociology, that we must thus turn to in order to ground rationality. Such a sociology will be developed as a systematic ontology of social data. However, those data could only be delivered by the positive sciences, specifically ethnology. In his famous letter to Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, (1935) Husserl writes:
Naturally, we have long known that every human being has a “world-representation,” that every nation, every supranational cultural grouping lives, so to speak, in a distinct world as its own environing world, and so again every historical time in its [world]. Yet, in contrast to this empty generalization, your work and your exceptional theme has made us sensitive to something overwhelmingly new: namely, that it is a possible and highly important and great task to “empathize” with a humanity living self-contained in living generative sociality and to understand this humanity as having, in and through its socially unified life, the world, which for it is not a “world-representation” but rather the world that actually exists for it. Thereby we learn to understand its ways of apperceiving, identifying, thinking, thus its logic and its ontology, that of its environing world with the respective categories.

(Husserl 2008)

This letter is important in more ways than one because it prescribes a methodological recommendation that goes in the direction opened by the later Hountondji, even though the latter never explicitly mentioned it in his published works. In fact, it seems, according to this letter, that Husserl was no longer satisfied by his method of imaginative variation to grasp otherness in its very foreign cultural forms. It seems that he posed the necessity for an effective encounter with historical cultures, as that was the only way to provide a full understanding of what was the very best of their surrounding world. Then, only anthropology could provide such knowledge, as explained by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for whom the moment of relativism, as mentioned in this letter, is not only necessary and unsurpassable. For him, it should be necessary to reverse the roles of ethnology and philosophy in order to proscribe the prominent rule of the latter upon the historical sciences. According to this, one could say, as mentioned above, that there was an early Husserl, insensitive to the historical reality of cultures and for whom the eidetic reduction in its formal operations is sufficient to grasp the reality of foreign societies, and a later Husserl for whom the heterogeneity of cultures cannot be overcome simply by the use of morphological essences, and who thought, therefore, that the methods and resources anthropology makes available must be our starting point. But regardless of the way we understand this interpretation – Derrida, for instance, rejected it in his famous introduction to the French edition of The Origin of Geometry – it can account for Hountondji’s approach in his last writings.

It’s quite clear that the figure of Reason that emerged from this theming of the Lebenswelt has very little to do with that of the Cartesian Meditations, and consequently with that of the early phenomenology that Hountondji mobilized in his criticism of ethno-philosophy. It is clearly explained here that science is built on a pregiven universe of meaning that existed previously and that could not be taken back as a theme if one doesn’t renounce the idealistic requirement of a science without presuppositions, as had been established in the Logical Investigations. This is probably why Hountondji never really mobilized systematically the concept of Lebenswelt in the mid-1980s when he began, not to rehabilitate ethnology he never really disowned, but to identify the philosophical significance that underlies Tempels’ work. Rather, it is thanks to the work of French anthropologist Marc Augé, on “ideo–logical”, i.e. the logic of collective representations, as he explained himself, that he turned to read Tempelsian works, which now appear to him as the necessary reminder to a self-evident truth, that of the radical impossibility of an absolute beginning in the field of thought and, therefore, the need for any human, even and especially if he wants to be innovative, to take root in the concrete soil of a tradition. From these re-readings, a lesson is learned according to him:
the particular exists and must be taken into account. However, instead of enclosing himself into it, one should be aware of it in order to get through, to put it back in its place and into context and, if possible, to go beyond.

(Hountondji 2007, 207)

The new research program that emerged from there will then be to undertake, in the field of social sciences, a positive survey of African thoughts, because it is has become a matter of, according to Hountondji,

holding both ends of the chain – the empirical and the transcendental – knowing that there is freedom only for [he] who knows to accept himself and assume his affiliations, but conversely, affiliations were never, and have never wanted to be any more in Africa than elsewhere, a prison.

(ibid., 212)

This direction will then guide the two important works he coordinated. The first, *Les savoirs endogènes: pistes pour une recherche* (Hountondji 1994) and the second, *La rationalité, une ou plurielle* (Hountondji 2007), in which the question of African scientific research extraversion is posed in terms both of the critical appropriation of these traditional knowledge and the questioning of what should be a rationality capable of integrating them

in the unity of an exigent thought which is anxious of its own coherence and aware of the intelligibility of its own practical approaches. It must be possible to operate not a leap from a mode of thought to another, from a logical universe to another, but a passage, a conscious and intelligible trajectory whose steps are identifiable.

(Hountondji 1994, 12)

Then, for this new research program, it will not only be a matter of rehabilitating the indigenous knowledge through a critical validation approach, but mostly “to build bridges, to restore the unity of knowledge, and more simply, more profoundly, the unity of man” (ibid., 13).

Hountondji has not personally engaged himself in that direction as he would have liked, although he has organized two symposia on this issue that resulted in two important publications. But nonetheless, this new direction of research could take into account philosophical works on language, politics, etc. in Africa that explicitly refer to anthropological data as a starting point for a further theorization. Although these authors did not appeal to Hountondji nor to Husserlian phenomenology, their approaches reflect, to some extent, the methodological recommendations to pass through the element of the particular, in this instance the local cultures, as a gateway to the universal.

71.3. Conclusion

We started from the hypothesis that Hountondji’s evolution of thought reproduced somewhat the passage, in Husserl’s phenomenology, from an idealistic figure of Reason to a conception of the transcendental subject who’s more conscious of its roots within its surrounding world. It seems, if one is aware of the evolution of his entire career, that on such a central issue in Husserl’s phenomenology as that of the subject, Hountondji developed a philosophy that could be situated in the wake of that of the *Crisis*. Like Husserl, who did not abandon the requirement for the
apodicticity of the transcendental Ego, even when he overcame his so-called *Cartesian moment* by establishing the subject in its social origins, Hountondji maintained firmly the primacy of the philosophizing subject upon the tradition. Then, even though we recognize that every thought takes shape in a cultural substratum that feeds it, in fact,

We merely shift the problem. Due to the fact we recognize these cultural determinants, one cannot help recognizing that, at a certain level, tradition itself is plural and as such, offers a range of possibilities that confront the individual [with] the task of determining himself, placing him, again and again, in front of an inescapable responsibility.

*(Hountondji 2016)*

**Notes**

1 Mamoussé Diagne is right to say that even though the debates on African cultures predate this book, Tempels can be considered the “paradigm of origin”, in the sense that “discussions about the existence or not of an African philosophy refers to his work as an inescapable reference. By this very fact, he is a theoretical ancestor about who a dispute arises over his inheritance” (Diagne 2006).

2 With the notable exception of South Africa, where the *Center for Phenomenology in South Africa* regularly organizes international meetings. It should also be noted that phenomenology in Africa was essentially Husserlian in its inspiration. That is to say that the debates that led the first disciples like Heidegger, Patocka, Landgrebe, Levinas, Sartre, or Merleau-Ponty to break with Husserl on certain points of doctrine have had almost no echo on the continent. Certainly, these authors are read and widely commented upon and are studied by African scholars, but their divergence with Husserl does not constitute an essential point in the African philosophical debate

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