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Contesting Historicisms: Teleology, Aesthetics and Dialectical Thinking in 1930s Viet Nam

This paper addresses the workshop's theme of teleology by taking it as a category of analysis within the contemporary writings of Phan Van Hum and his cohort of French-educated Marxist activists in the Saigon area in the early to mid 1930s, including Nguyen An Ninh and Bui The My. Tracing Hum's philosophical, scientific and literary writings, I attempt to illustrate his understandings of historicity in this period, and show that this Saigon-based intellectual elite, even those who professed to be Marxists, held a wide range of understandings concerning the questions of being historical subjects within a new world of colonial modernity. I analyze the multiple ways in which these emerging cultures of modernity were historicized, including Hum's understandings and representations of scientific positivism, and his attacks on Idealism. Much of this discourse derives from the debates that took place in the 1930s in connection with the Art for Art's Sake versus the Art for Life polemic. I trace the debates about materialism to their philosophical origins, as they were understood by such thinkers as Hum, and show how such notions as objectivity, autonomy and the absolute were used to contest bourgeois interpretations of historical positivism and its aesthetic tropes.