

Introduction – Postcolonial Ricœur

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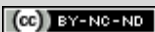
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While Ricœur's work is not central to postcolonial studies literature in either the Francophone or the Anglophone world, this issue of *Études Ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies* explores an under-studied aspect of Ricœur's work, namely its relationship to colonial history and decolonization. The texts brought together here aim to demonstrate the potential of critically re-reading Ricœur's work against this history and, more broadly, of imagining ways in which his philosophy might productively intersect with postcolonial theory.

Born in 1913 when the French empire was at the height of its power, Ricœur also witnessed the collapse of the European colonial empires, in particular the French colonial empire, as well as the shifting world order that put into question the presumed centrality of European culture. Ricœur's philosophy certainly did not focus on colonization. His writings that directly engage with colonization are limited to a few articles. The most significant is "La question coloniale" ["The Question of the Colonies"], which was published in the weekly journal *Réforme*,¹ in September 1947, a few weeks after the independence of India. In this text, Ricœur questions the French and European responsibility for the ongoing violence related to decolonization. Ricœur unreservedly supports the rights of people to self-determination and argues for a universalism bigger than nationalism, which he defines as "the human community" ["*la communauté humaine*"].

Reflections on decolonization are more numerous in Ricœur's writings. In 1951, in a broader reflection on war and peace, he analyzes the construction of a bipolar world and the international order, dominated in Europe by the American model. Here he criticizes the Vietnam War and defines peace in Indochina as "a condition for our moral health" ["*une condition de notre santé morale*"].² In 1955, his text "Vraie et fausse paix" ["True and False Peace"] attempts to analyze the political and historical context of the Cold War, in light of the project of an anti-imperialist and non-aligned coalition. Even though this text shows significant hope in the possibility of the French Union,³ he reflects specifically on the obstacles of decolonization, drawing insights from Paul Mus and Malek Bennabi's analyses.

These questions are important for Ricœur as both a philosopher and as a citizen. As the president of the Mouvement du christianisme social, Ricœur participated in multiple debates that surrounded the Algerian War, exacerbated in 1957 by the disclosure of the practice of torture by the French army in Algeria. Texts such as "L'insoumission," published in 1960 in *Christianisme social*, highlight the position taken by both Ricœur and the journal overall, which unceasingly denounced the French politics of repression in Algeria. This text takes some distance from the *Manifesto of the 121*, written by Jean-Paul Sartre and other contributors to the journal *Les temps*

modernes, which called upon young recruits to desert the army. Additionally, in his later works, Ricœur considers the condition of a civil peace in post-apartheid South-Africa⁴ related to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Here, Ricœur reflects on the ways to peacefully lay the new political foundations for a postcolonial state such as South Africa via what he calls “reconstructive justice.”⁵

While the texts mentioned above specifically approach colonialism and the politics of decolonization, other texts by Ricœur allow us to re-think colonization as well as the political and intersubjective relationships it implies. Ricœur’s philosophy can support us in thinking historically, politically, and morally about colonization and the challenges of the unfinished work of decolonization through, for example, his ethics, the ways in which he combines a hermeneutics of the other and a reflection on political institutions, his reflections on ideology and utopia, and more broadly his late works such as *Oneself as Another* and *Memory, History, Forgetting*.

The first task in exploring this complex dossier, then, is to critically reread Ricœur’s work. What are Ricœur’s engagements and standpoints with regard to colonization and independence movements? What role does this history play within the genealogy of his thought? How does Ricœur enable us to theorize concepts and notions such as domination, freedom, exploitation, nationalism, and civilization within the broader frame of colonial history? Moreover, what are the silences and limits of his work with regard to colonialism? In order to provide a starting point to answer these questions, it seemed important to republish in this issue Ricœur’s earliest key texts on colonization, “La question coloniale.” Our goal is not to present Ricœur as a hidden postcolonial theorist; to the contrary, it is to explore the complexity of the task of rereading Ricœur’s work in light of the history of (de)colonization. As the introduction to this text reminds us, part of our task is to understand whether a text like “La question coloniale” was an exceptional political commitment, “a punctual incursion in a field,” or the seed for a lifetime’s reflection which is further developed in later works. Rereading this text also reminds us of the necessity of contextualizing Ricœur’s thought in the social and political “*climat*” of his time, while identifying what may still be relevant for contemporary scholars.

A second task which we hope this issue will support, is to highlight either the potential of Ricœur’s thought for postcolonial studies or its contribution to analyses of colonialism and colonial contexts, decolonization, and/or the possibility of a true postcolonial world. As we can see in the following texts, some major notions – and problems – of postcolonial studies are also at the heart of Ricœur’s thoughts, namely universalism, liberty, history, memory, and justice. For example, Ricœur’s philosophical reflection on the articulation of the universal and the particular, later developed in texts such as “Universal Civilization and National Cultures,” (1961)⁶ or “The Paradigm of Translation,” (1999)⁷ is first formulated right after World War II, particularly in texts such as “La question coloniale.” The notion of memory, which Ricœur theorizes in *History, Memory, Forgetting*, (2000)⁸ may find its roots in Ricœur’s first political engagements against colonization. The theme of freedom, which is one of the theoretical stakes of late works such as *Oneself as One Another*, (1996)⁹ is already central in the above mentioned texts related to decolonization. The notion of justice, which is studied in two full volumes (1995, 2001)¹⁰ in addition to *Oneself as One Another*, also finds new resonances when approached through the lens of post-war debates related to (de)colonization. With respect to this goal, Paulin J. Hountondji’s text entitled “My experience with Paul Ricœur” [“Un maître inoubliable: Paul Ricœur”] provides

a testimony of Ricoeur's relationships with distinguished African philosophers and thinkers. While Hontondji refuses to define "Ricoeur's relationship with Africa," his autobiographical account sheds light on the ways in which Ricoeur's itinerary crossed the path of major intellectuals from formerly colonized countries. Hountondji's personal testimony of Ricoeur as a "universal mind, always listening to others, with that intelligent listening that makes one see both the coherence and the limits of their discourse" [*esprit universel toujours à l'écoute des autres, de cette écoute intelligente qui fait voir à la fois la cohérence et les limites de leur discours*] endorses Ricoeur's own theories of intercultural communication.

George H. Taylor's contribution to this issue approaches our theme from the wide angle of the vitality of hermeneutics for the contemporary world, faced with external and internal challenges. Against an authoritative and rigid reading of the world which pretends to tell us what it should be, Taylor underlines the importance of hermeneutics in order to maintain pluralistic interpretations and therefore to undermine persistent asymmetries and power relationships – even though as a field it may have to open to a real, concrete plurality of voices. In the wake of Ricoeur, Taylor claims that the "choice in favor of meaning" is crucial to overcoming our "contentious times." Taylor's study can be understood as confirming that Ricoeur's hermeneutics has a potentially valuable role to play in the field of postcolonial studies, broadly defined – one defined by "the task of seeking meaning across the discordant." At the same time, this role necessitates confronting Ricoeur's strongest philosophical commitments with alternatives from philosophical traditions outside of the West.

The third task promoted by this issue, in agreement with the spirit of postcolonial studies, is to question all forms of chauvinism, whether cultural (including Eurocentrism) or methodological (seen both in philosophy and social sciences). This task requires, among others, opening Ricoeur's philosophy to authors, philosophies, theories, and contexts outside of the West. How can such philosophical inputs – in coordination with a critical reconsideration of Ricoeur's work – help us interpret the ways in which the world is plural, analyzing the negative or constructive relationships that can be observed across regions, languages, traditions, and cultures? The contributions of both Alina Achenbach and Anna Milioni provide us with attempts to address some of these questions. Alina Achenbach reflects on the ways in which Ricoeur's conception of both modernity and universalism can help us understand more precisely his views on colonialism. By reconstructing a dialogue between Ricoeur and his former student Enrique Dussel, she provides a critical understanding of what Ricoeur calls the "crisis of the concrete universal in the thinking and in the historical experience of Western Europe." She assesses the European orientation of, and the occasional paternalism attributed to, the French philosopher's thought, with special attention given to the theoretical stakes and the concrete implications of European domination for the production of knowledge and an ethical relationship with the other. However, Achenbach also demonstrates that Ricoeur's philosophical concerns resonate with many non-European thinkers' claims, and Dussel's in particular, in resisting the invasive concrete universalism rooted in colonization. She also shows that Ricoeur's hermeneutical philosophy provides a solid framework to conceive of a "decolonial notion of coexistent knowledges" rooted in intercultural communication. In an attempt to address some of the issues mentioned above, Anna Milioni draws insights from Alioune Diop, Aimé Césaire, Sékou Touré, as well as Olúfémi Taiwò, and theorist Elísio Macamo, to explore Ricoeur's philosophy of history. She clarifies the conditions for truly postcolonial historical inquiries, i.e., accounts of the past freed from any

colonial ideology. As shown in her article, whether in *Time and Narrative* or in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricœur provides a useful framework to sketch such a history, in which thinkers from former colonies can be centered and the epistemological and ethical role of the European historian can be determined fairly. Milioni further argues that such a history may not avoid the call for a politics of memory, as we always find ourselves “heirs of a past that endows our present with meaning.” At the heart of this politics of memory, we find educational institutions, whose role is always caught between the necessity of raising awareness and the duty of memory. She therefore calls for a thoughtful re-examination of the importance of colonization within school curricula.

Considering the wide range of questions identified by the problem statement of this issue and the large international reception of Ricœur’s work, it is no surprise to find antecedents in the published scholarship. Indeed, we hope to see future studies of this chapter in the history of Ricœur scholarship. In addition, recent conferences and panels have provided a platform for advancing research into the questions of this issue. For example, in May 2018, the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa hosted a Ricœur Studies Conference on the topic “From Where Do You Speak?” where postcolonial questions were central. In October 2019, a panel entitled “Ricœur et la question (post)coloniale” was organized at the Ricœur Studies Conference that took place at McGill University, in Montréal, Canada. In November 2020, the KU Leuven in Belgium hosted a conference entirely devoted to “Ricœur as World Heritage.” This issue intends to extend the debates launched by these initiatives among others, and to maintain an ongoing discussion of Ricœur’s potential contribution to postcolonial studies and the ways in which the extensive literature in this field can shed new light on his work.

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- ¹ Cited by Yves Bénot, *Massacres coloniaux. 1944-1950: la IV^e République et la mise au pas des colonies françaises* (Paris: La Découverte, 1994), 141. See also François Dosse, *Paul Ricoeur. Les sens d'une vie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1997), 301.
- ² Paul Ricoeur, "Pour la coexistence pacifique des civilisations," *Esprit*, vol. 177/3 (1951), 417.
- ³ Paul Ricoeur, "Vraie et fausse paix" (1955), *Autres temps. Cahiers d'éthique sociale et politique*, vol. 76-77 (2003), 60.
- ⁴ Paul Ricoeur, "Avant la justice violente, la justice non violente," *Le genre humain*, vol. 2/43 (2004), 157-72.
- ⁵ Paul Ricoeur, "Avant la justice violente, la justice non violente," 170.
- ⁶ Paul Ricoeur, "Civilisation universelle et cultures nationales," *Esprit*, vol. 299/10 (1961), 439-53 / "Universal Civilization and National Cultures," in *History and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 271-84.
- ⁷ Paul Ricoeur, "Le paradigme de la traduction," *Esprit*, vol. 253/6 (1999), 8-19 / "The Paradigm of Translation," in *Reflections on the Just*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 106-20.
- ⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
- ⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- ¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *The Just*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000) and Paul Ricoeur, *Reflections on the Just*.