

Europe in Front of its Colonial Past The Question of Historiography

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This paper employs Paul Ricoeur's insights to examine how European states should approach their colonial past. First, I explore the significance of historical knowledge for people from formerly colonized countries through the views of several anti-colonial thinkers. Then, referring to Ricoeur's analyses in *History and Truth*, *Time and Narrative* and *Memory, History, Forgetting*, I examine the grounds and the legitimacy, of a historiography of colonization. I argue that European states should make the history of colonization part of their school curricula, as an expression of Europeans' debt to the victims of the colonial past, and as a way to prevent the repetition of the colonial crimes.

Keywords: Ricoeur; Historiography; Colonization; Injustice.

Résumé

Cet article fait appel aux idées de Paul Ricoeur pour examiner comment les États européens devraient aborder leur passé colonial. Premièrement, j'examine l'importance de la connaissance historique pour les peuples des pays anciennement colonisés, à travers l'examen des points de vue de plusieurs penseurs anticoloniaux. Ensuite, m'appuyant sur les analyses de Ricoeur dans *Histoire et vérité*, *Temps et récit* et *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, je mets en avant le fondement philosophique et la légitimité d'une historiographie de la colonisation. Je soutiens que les États européens devraient inclure cette historiographie dans leurs programmes scolaires, non seulement comme expression de leur dette envers les victimes du passé, mais aussi pour prévenir la répétition des crimes coloniaux.

Mots-clés: Ricoeur; historiographie; colonisation; injustice.

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The Question of Historiography

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I. Introduction

In February 2005, a law was passed in France “regarding the Nation’s gratitude and the national contribution toward repatriated French citizens” [loi n° 2005-158 du 23 février 2005 portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés], i.e., the former French inhabitants of the French colonies that were relocated to France after the end of colonization.² In its 4th article, this law stated that school programs should “recognize in particular the positive role of the French presence abroad, especially in North Africa, and award to the history and sacrifices of the French army soldiers sent to these territories the eminent place to which they are entitled.” The reference to the positive consequences of colonization, as well as the imposition of an obligation that they be taught as part of the school curriculum, raised great opposition in the public sphere and strained France’s international relations with its ex-colonies.³ Historians publicly opposed the law, arguing that its aim was to impose an official history and thus violated freedom of thought. Even worse, this official history was considered to falsify the past, by disregarding the colonial crimes and massacres.⁴

Due to strong reactions, the contested article was finally repealed in February 2006. However, the questions it gave rise to remain largely unresolved. How should European states deal with their colonial past? Is the insufficient presence – if not absence – of the history of colonization in the school curricula of many European states problematic?⁵ To what extent should there be an official historical discourse on colonization? In this paper, I employ Paul Ricœur’s insights on historiography, historical truth, and debt in order to examine these questions. In this task, I draw inspiration from Ernst Wolff’s recent work *Lire Ricœur depuis la périphérie. Décolonisation, modernité, herméneutique*.⁶ Tracing a series of relatively neglected texts written by Ricœur during the two decades after the end of the Second World War, and confronting them with texts written by African anti-colonial thinkers, Wolff suggests that Ricœur’s analyses provide valuable insight into the themes of decolonization, modernity, and cultural pluralism. Taking this work as my point of departure, I will suggest that Ricœur’s approach could serve as a paradigm for European states trying to deal with their colonial past, through an argument for including the history of colonization in the school curricula.

First, drawing inspiration from Wolff’s work, I will refer to the positions expressed by scholars from formerly colonized countries regarding history and their relationship with their past. Starting from the era of the anti-colonial struggle, I will appeal to the writings of Alioune Diop, Aimé Césaire, and Sékou Touré. Then, I will refer to the contemporary philosopher Olúfémi Táíwò, as well as the social theorist Elísio Macamo, to demonstrate that the issues around history which were raised during and after the struggle for decolonization remain open.⁷

The constant reappearance of the question of history demonstrates its significance for the people of the formerly colonized countries and supports the argument that the Europeans' reluctance to examine their colonial past perpetuates the injustice towards them.

As a potential answer to this injustice, I will engage with Ricoeur's analyses in *History and Truth, Time and Narrative (Volume 3)*, and *Memory, History, Forgetting* and demonstrate the importance of a historiography of colonization, bringing to the fore its legitimacy as well as its limits. I will argue that states should make the history of colonization part of the school curricula of European countries, formulating an "official historiography" with epistemological credentials and open to critical review. This official acknowledgment of the colonial past is necessary as an expression of Europeans' debt to the victims of the colonial past, as a duty to people from formerly colonized countries living in Europe, and as an attempt to prevent future mass crimes.⁸

II. The Colonized People's Quest for History

Concerns of history have always been prominent in discourses about colonization. History is crucial for the construction of national identities, but also for the justification of power. According to Ana Maria Alonso, "national histories are key to the imagining of community and to the constitution of social identity."⁹ However, there is a darker side to this. Historical discourse can be used by those in power to legitimize the status quo through the imposition of hegemonic narratives. In the context of colonization, the European narrative employed racial stereotypes about the colonized in order to justify the colonial regimes, which were presented in terms of a civilizing mission. As Alonso remarks, "the stakes in the struggle to define the past are indeed great: thus, social memory is a central site of political contest."¹⁰

Given these remarks, it is not surprising that since the start of the anti-colonial struggle, intellectuals from colonized countries have been defending the history of their nations, underscoring how it had been overlooked and falsified by a colonial regime aiming to justify itself. In "Cultural colonialism and nationalism,"¹¹ an article written in the same year as the Bandung Conference, while Senegal was still under colonial rule, Alioune Diop accuses European colonizers of representing themselves as the only ones with a memorable history, and of "wounding and hunting down" the cultures of the colonized people. He exposes the colonizers' attack on the history of the colonized as a strategy of domination, as "people cornered between a past now almost without vestiges and a future without horizon" would easily admire their colonizers.¹² Diop also underscores the colonial practice of denying the African people an education that would free them from ignorance and render them independent. Looking for a solution, Diop stresses that it is crucial for Africans to re-evaluate their history, viewing it from an African perspective. Regaining their agency and self-esteem through the knowledge of their history, the Africans will be able "not only to receive, but also to give."¹³ For that, education is indispensable: "The African child will never be a complete man if education, the school, does not recognize (and make the child familiar with) all the horizons of his past."¹⁴

In the same year, Aimé Césaire republished an edited version of his famous *Discourse on Colonialism*, in which he denounced the European narrative on colonialism as a civilizing mission. Like Diop, Césaire emphasizes the role of historical education in overcoming the effects of colonization. The moment that Africans rediscovered their past is identified as crucial for the

formation of their identity and, consequently, for their fight against colonialism. As Césaire puts it, “if what we want is to establish this [black] identity, then we must have a concrete consciousness of what we are - that is, of the first fact of our lives: that we are black; that we were black and have a history, a history that contains certain cultural elements of great value; and that Negroes were not, as you put it, born yesterday, because there have been beautiful and important black civilizations.”¹⁵ Like Diop, he accuses the colonizers of presenting Africa in their historiographies as if it were “some sort of blank page in the history of humanity,” thus denying the contribution of the African values and civilization to humanity.¹⁶ The concern not to forget the colonizers’ crimes against the colonized is also salient in Césaire’s *Discourse*. With this, the importance of historical knowledge is amplified: from the knowledge of the colonized people’s precolonial past, it expands to the knowledge of the historical facts around colonization.

The colonized people’s quest for their history did not end with decolonization. Just after Guinea’s independence, and in his capacity as its first President, Sékou Touré participated in the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists. In his presentation, titled “The Political Leader Considered as the Representative of a Culture,” Touré insists that “decolonization does not consist merely in liberating oneself from the presence of the colonizers: it must necessarily be completed by total liberation from the spirit of the ‘colonized,’ that is to say, from all the evil consequences, moral, intellectual and cultural, of the colonial system.”¹⁷ One such consequence, which impedes the efforts of the formerly colonized to become truly independent is the negation of their historical past. Touré blames the colonizers for teaching only European history to the African children, “as though Africa had never had any history, any past, any geographical existence, any cultural life.”¹⁸ The consequences are grave: Africans learn to evaluate their lives according to European standards, which leads to their cultural assimilation and the perpetuation of their feelings of inferiority. Once again, knowledge of history is identified as necessary for the formerly colonized people to reclaim control over their destinies and assume responsibility for their futures. Without this, colonial and neocolonial relations of power will be continuously reproduced.

As is the case with many of the long-lasting effects of colonization, this strained relationship with their past is still considered a persistent problem for the formerly colonized people by contemporary thinkers. Writing in 2010, Olúfémi Taiwò insists that Africans should improve their knowledge of past events, in order to understand both their colonial past and their present. His main argument is that despite decolonization, Africans still operate under an inaccurate historical narrative of their past. This problematizes their relationship to modernity, preventing them from enjoying any of its benefits while bearing all of its burdens. Taiwò suggests that this situation is particularly difficult to overcome since it applies even to the most educated Africans. As he claims, “evidence of the disabled agency can be discerned in the amnesia of much of the African intelligentsia, outside of the disciplines of history and (possibly) literature, regarding how their forebears engaged with modernity before the imposition of formal colonialism.”¹⁹ In the same vein, Elísio Macamo contends that historical knowledge of colonization is necessary, for Africans to understand their agency and ability for action, overcoming their victimization.²⁰ Once again, knowledge of one’s past is linked to shaping one’s future: only the knowledge of their own past action and struggles would affirm that the African people are not passive victims of history, but play an important role in the constitution of their social reality.

Overall, since the beginning of the anti-colonial struggle, the formerly colonized people have been arguing that knowledge of their past is necessary in order for them to move beyond the effects of colonization, understand their present and shape their futures. In the next two sections, I will demonstrate that Ricœur's philosophy provides a strong theoretical framework to approach these claims. Moreover, as I will show in section 5, Ricœur's approach to history can point to the duty of the former colonizer states to include a history of colonization in their school curricula.

III. Ricœur's View on Colonization

Despite taking a strong anti-colonial stance in the aftermath of the Second World War with the article "The Colonial Question,"²¹ Ricœur did not focus on colonization in any of his major works. However, many scholars have related parts of his work to issues raised by colonization. Ernst Wolff recently explored the affinities between Ricœur's early thought and anti-colonial thinkers of that era, among whom are Diop, Césaire, and Touré.²² Focusing on Ricœur's later work, Sebastian Purcell complements Ricœur's theory of narrative and identity with a spatial dimension that corresponds to the division of the world into a center and periphery.²³ Robert Savage appeals to Ricœur's political philosophy to account for the struggle of marginalized groups to escape the effects of colonization.²⁴

Ricœur's focus on questions related to identity, otherness, and recognition explains these appeals to his philosophy. As Wolff points out, from a political perspective, Ricœur is deeply concerned with the geopolitical issues that arise in a post-colonial world, trying to define the conditions of political autonomy in a world divided by national and cultural difference.²⁵ Moreover, from a philosophical and critical perspective, Ricœur's analyses on universalism and national cultures demonstrate extensive preoccupation with the challenges of decolonization.²⁶ Even though Wolff focuses on Ricœur's earlier texts, these remarks illuminate aspects of his better-known works, such as *Oneself as Another* or *The Course of Recognition*, opening up further possibilities of reading them in relation to the challenges of decolonization.²⁷

More generally, the endorsement of a critical hermeneutical approach, which is a prominent feature in Ricœur's work, expresses an exemplary consideration of the subject's position towards otherness. Explaining this critical hermeneutics in the introduction of *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricœur refers to the contingent and limited viewpoint of the subject who, situated in a specific culture, finds herself confronted with cultural otherness. According to Ricœur, the symbols that individuals use to orient themselves in the world also limit their horizons. In the conclusion of the same work, Ricœur returns to this issue and suggests that the task of philosophers is, first, to try to understand their own presuppositions and expand their viewpoint and, second, to continue seeking the truth, entering into a critical relation with the world, while still recognizing the contingency of their point of departure. In the context of decolonization, this understanding of the limited horizons of our worldviews is particularly significant to Europeans, who find themselves wondering about the proper institutional response of their states to people from the formerly colonized countries who come to Europe. The distance that separates Europeans from these people is not only the distance separating different cultures but also the distance created between the perpetrators of injustice and those who endure it.

Accepting the fact that we only have a situated perspective, Ricœur's critical hermeneutics urges us to demonstrate consideration for the cultural others and the potential injustice that they have suffered. Instead of considering communication as impossible, Europeans should take into account the distance that separates them from the cultural others but still aim at reaching them. As I will argue, accommodating the history of colonization in the school curricula is a step in this direction.

IV. Ricœur's Analysis of History and the Role of Historiography

The examination of a number of anti-colonial thinkers revealed how crucial it is for the formerly colonized people to regain a balanced knowledge of their past, in order to overcome the effects of colonization. We can relate these claims to Ricœur's reflections on questions of history and historiography. Referring to Ricœur's examinations of history in *History and Truth, Time and Narrative (Volume 3)*, and *Memory, History, Forgetting*, I will indicate that knowledge of the past is crucial for agents who act in the present aspiring to influence their future. This will in turn provide us with some insight into what European states could do, when dealing with their colonial history, in order to address the injustices caused by colonization.

In the third volume of *Time and Narrative*, Ricœur suggests that our understanding of history is based on "a network of interweaving perspectives of the expectation of the future, the reception of the past, and the experience of the present."²⁸ In this scheme, where the past, the present, and the future are unequivocally related, the present stands out as the time of initiative: humans, in their capacity of acting and suffering, act in ways that move beyond determinism and try to shape their future through the making of responsible decisions about themselves and the others. Ricœur employs Reinhart Koselleck's categories of the "space of experiences" and the "horizon of expectations" to demonstrate that agency in the present presupposes knowledge of one's past, which opens up possibilities of future action, indicating the various forms that one's action can take.²⁹ The space of experiences, which also contains the experiences of previous generations transmitted through memory or history, defines our relationship with the past as a set of appropriated itineraries of past action. The horizon of expectation refers to all our projections of the future, either hoped or feared. While not deriving from one another, the space of experiences and the horizon of expectations "mutually condition each other";³⁰ their dialectical relation means that "we are affected by history and that we affect ourselves by the history we make."³¹

Ricœur stresses the importance of maintaining the relationship between the space of experiences and the horizon of expectations. If expectations are not anchored in concrete experiences, people cannot take up strategic action to ameliorate their life and plans of the future give way to utopian aspirations incapable of offering any practical guidance to present action.³² This analysis elucidates the danger that the formerly colonized peoples are facing if they are cut off from their past. One by one, the aforementioned discourses on colonialism reflect this concern. It is difficult not to parallel Ricœur's analysis with Alioune Diop's words about the colonized being "cornered between a past now almost without vestiges and a future without horizon." Without proper knowledge of their past, the people from formerly colonized countries cannot

control their future, since they lack the tools that would enable them to affect their present in a way that truly matters.

Moreover, Ricœur's analysis of history reveals another aspect of our relation to the past, this time with regard to the formerly colonizing states. Ricœur points out that, caught between the horizon of expectations and the space of experiences, we are not only innovators but, first and foremost, heirs of a past that endows our present with meaning.³³ On an ethical level, this heritage means that, in our relation to the past, we are indebted: we owe "a debt to the past, a debt of recognition to the dead" without whom our present would lack any meaning.³⁴ Instead of shying away from our past's unfavorable aspects, we should face them as realities that brought us to our present and influence our future actions. Creating a historiographical account of the past and remembering its injustices is, for Ricœur, part of this debt. Europeans have to confront and address their own colonial past.

Historiography is the epistemological operation that examines the past in terms of truth. According to Ricœur, while it is ultimately founded on memory, historiography aims to critically explore it, through the adoption of a scientific methodology.³⁵ The reason for this is that memory is fragile and susceptible to abuse. It can be easily manipulated, leading to a distorted relationship with one's past.³⁶ The task of historiography is exactly to criticize and correct these abuses of memory.

Once again, the relevance of Ricœur's philosophy to colonization could be easily demonstrated. Colonization is part of Europe's past; it has affected Europeans as much as the colonized. Colonization's inheritance is evident in Europe's present, from its international relations to its wealth and to the influx of immigrants from the former colonies. Given this inheritance, Europe owes a debt to the dead of the colonial past, a debt that commands that Europe should include colonization in its historiographical accounts. The advent of immigrants from the ex-colonized countries to Europe accentuates that debt since it brings Europeans and immigrants into close coexistence. In this condition of coexistence, the lack of a historiographical account of the colonial European past not only violates Europeans' debt to their past, but also tears immigrants' relationship with their own past apart, affecting their horizon of expectations and their present possibilities for action.

Moreover, without the historical knowledge that would elucidate the conditions of their coexistence, the communication among Europeans and immigrants is bound to happen in terms that are easily manipulated. Taiwò's and Macamo's remarks about the problematic relationship of formerly colonized people with their past underscore this risk. Ricœur's warning against abuses of memory is pertinent to this. Given that states tend to overemphasize the commemoration of certain glorious historical events while attempting to conceal other disgraceful ones, a historiography of colonization should be particularly attentive to abuses of the colonial memories. However vulnerable this historiography would be to potential abuses, it is also indispensable for overcoming these abuses.

At this point, however, a crucial question arises. Even the best-intentioned historian will come from a specific cultural and educational background and will have a limited understanding of the struggles related to the colonial past. Is it possible to provide a just historiographical account of colonization from a European perspective? Are not such narratives necessarily flawed, depicting the perspective of the historian and silencing others? Ricœur reflects on this already in

his earlier analyses in *History and Truth*. There, he captures the intricate nature of this problem, suggesting that the alterity of the historical past is more profound than it appears at first sight. What separates the historian from the past is not only the time that has passed, the different conditions that prevailed and the information she has no access to. More importantly, the past has an “inexhaustible human character;”³⁷ it is the past of other people, different from us. How can the historian approach this past, and provide an account of the actions of the past people, without imposing on them her own perspective? In the case of the European historian who aspires to provide a historiographical account of colonization while being herself part of its history and shaped by its legacy, the question is germane.

However, Ricœur insists that the historian has the potential to overcome this. What is crucial is her disposition, her will to make the “sympathetic effort” to understand the past. Employing her imagination, the historian starts from a projection of the past into the present of another time and renders this into a “real projection into another human life,” understanding the past not just as past events but also as the present of past people.³⁸ This will for an encounter with the people from another era makes it possible to access the values of other people and times. At the heart of Ricœur’s argument lies the idea that the encounter with the otherness of the past is possible, because the historian “is a part of history not only in the trite sense that the past is the past of his present, but also in the sense that the men of the past are part of the same humanity.”³⁹ Accordingly, the historiography of the colonial past is possible to the extent that the historian expresses a will to encounter the people of that era. This has an ethical anti-racist implication: it marks the historical past as the past of the historian’s present and designates the people of that past, colonizers and colonized, as part of the same humanity.⁴⁰ While this will for an encounter is certainly not enough to guarantee that the historian does not reproduce power relationships in her account of the past, it opens up the possibility of breaking through such relationships.

In *Time and Narrative*, Ricœur criticizes the attitude of totalizing a specific historical narrative, blind to the perspectives of other people. He explicitly relates this attitude to the history of European colonization: “In the twentieth century,” he suggests, “we have seen Europe’s claim to totalize the history of the world come undone.” For Ricœur, this Eurocentrism has died, and a sign of this death is Europe’s withdrawal from the world scene, as well as the facts of decolonization and unequal development, which cannot support totalizing narratives.⁴¹ This, however, does not imply a sterile relativism. Despite the plurality of history, historiographical discourse “stands-for” a refiguration of the past, which cannot be re-presented, brought to the present, as such.⁴² Moreover, the past is accessible only through historiographical discourse, which constitutes a form of narrative. The symbolic articulation of any narrative entails that its meaning can never be exhausted; it is always open to new readings and interpretations.

In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricœur further explains historiography’s claims to truth despite the plurality of history. There, Ricœur differentiates between “confirmed facts” and “past events.”⁴³ Historiography refers to “facts” as a reminder of the constructed character of its refiguration of past events. Derived from the historiographical operation, facts are propositions of what happened in the past, remaining valid until a better proposition is put forth. History is always contestable, open to critical examination and reinterpretation. All phases of the historiographical operation contain some critical moment, in which the historian decides what is

to be included in the historical narrative. Taking, for example, the documentary phase, the historian proceeds to a selection of the documents which she considers as relevant to the case, as well as to an evaluation of their reliability. In the phase of explanation/understanding, she makes once again a choice from among the different explanatory models and scales of interpretation that are available to her. Last, in the phase of the representation, the narrative nature of the historiographical discourse collides with her intention to reconstruct the past as “real.” Writing a history of colonization, the historian would go through all these phases, proposing an account of the historical facts with a claim to truth but open to critical reexamination.⁴⁴

After this critique of the epistemology of historiography, Ricœur sets out to examine the conditions of legitimacy of the historiographical discourse. Not any such discourse is legitimate: once again, Ricœur refutes a Hegelian view of history as singular and universal, encompassing the various historical narratives. He insists that “there is such a thing as humanity, but there are also peoples [...], that is to say, languages, mores, cultures, religions, and, on the properly political level, nations framed by states.”⁴⁵ The quest for a universal history, either as a regulative idea aiming at a cosmopolitan unification of the various forms of life and their histories, or as a constitutive idea of a unified historical reality, goes against the plurality of human cultures, histories, and ways of life. As Ricœur claims, “in both cases, the resistance of human plurality constitutes a paradox and, ultimately, even a scandal.”⁴⁶

In the face of this paradox, Ricœur rejects a historiography that would regard our present as a privileged modernity, from which it would be possible to judge all history, as was the European pretension during colonial rule. The contingency of our historical perspective renders this aspiration void. However, while acknowledging this contingency is his point of departure, Ricœur defends the possibility of justified historical judgments against the relativist claims of postmodernity, whose ultimate consequence would be a complete inability to make any historical claims at all. As he maintains, “if the historical present can claim to think itself by itself, this can only be as a nodal point of the universal and the historical.”⁴⁷ Historiography should aim at understanding history without disregarding the partiality from which it departs. It may legitimately try to understand the past others, who could also be cultural others, as in the case of colonization. However, its legitimacy relies on accepting that it remains one particular historical narrative among others, situated in time and expressing one particular cultural viewpoint. Any other historiographical approach is illegitimate.

Thus, despite the situatedness of the historian’s point of departure, Ricœur’s analysis indicates that historiography is both epistemologically and morally legitimate, provided that it does not claim to be an absolute, privileged account of the past, and respects the particularities of the cultural and the historical other. The contingent legitimacy of historiography is crucial. Comparing the historian and the judge, Ricœur accentuates the commitment of both figures to impartiality, despite the impossibility of acting from the position of an absolute third party.⁴⁸ He notices that decisions of judges may refer to historical facts, which are judged definitively in the juridical context. Given the difference between the roles of the historian and the judge, Ricœur maintains that it is imperative for historians to reopen “the circles that the judge closes,”⁴⁹ making the writing of history “a perpetual rewriting” under the aspiration of impartiality.⁵⁰

This point, which Ricœur relates to the historiography of the Holocaust, is also of interest regarding colonization. Both historical events have marked the 20th century in Europe and have

been the object of official regulations and judgments. Comparisons between the Nazi crimes and the crimes of colonization have been made since the time of the decolonial struggle. Indicatively, in his *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire draws a parallel between colonization and Nazism. From a European perspective, in “The Colonial Question” Ricœur himself exclaims “I fear that I may be a Nazi without knowing it,” suggesting that the citizens of colonizer states may be accountable to the colonized in the same way that German citizens were accountable for the concentration camps, irrespective of the level of their knowledge of what was going on. Furthermore, formerly colonized people have expressed the demand that the crimes of colonization be recognized as a second Holocaust, deserving reparations similar to those claimed at the end of the Second World War.⁵¹

In *Memory History, Forgetting*, Ricœur is insistent that any judicial judgment regarding crimes against humanity should be open to historiography’s critical re-examination. He is especially careful to distinguish this position from negationism; the epistemological standards of historiography and the historian’s commitment to the truth define the direction of historical revision. Moreover, Ricœur emphasizes that historical explanations do not constitute justifications for the examined crimes. On the contrary, the historian’s motivation is to “condemn and comprehend.”⁵² At this point, Ricœur deepens his earlier claim about the debt to the past, which now goes beyond the appeal to remember its victims. The unjustifiability of past crimes demands that they not be repeated in the future. Historiography’s aspiration to comprehend these crimes contributes to this demand, rendering the historiographical operation not only justified but also morally requested. Comprehending the past is pivotal in order to make sure that its injustices do not happen again. A historiography of colonization would thus “condemn and comprehend” its injustices, contributing to the prevention of similar events.

V. An Official Historiography of Colonization?

So far, I have examined the discourse of several anti-colonial thinkers from Africa, who underscore the importance of historical knowledge in order for formerly colonized people to overcome the lasting effects of colonization. To better understand these claims, I turned to Ricœur’s analysis of the categories of the space of experiences and the horizon of expectations, which influence our present ability to initiate action. I then argued that European states, which partake of this colonial past, also bear an obligation towards the people from formerly colonized countries to account for this colonial past through its historiographical examination.⁵³ This historiography of colonization should critically preserve the historical memory related to colonialism and contribute to the prevention of its repetition.

How do these insights orient us in relation to our initial question, regarding the promotion of an official historiography in schools? The work of the historiographer differs from that of the history teacher. Going through the respective stages of the historiographical operation, the former is in search of truth. She aims to provide an assessment of what happened in the past, an assessment which has epistemological credentials but remains open to critical reexamination. The history teacher, instead, has a double role with regard to history. First, she aims to transfer to the students knowledge about past historical events, through a historiographical narrative. Second, the history teacher aims to raise critical awareness among students about the ways in

which an account of the past is elaborated, through the presentation of different debates among historians regarding the interpretation of certain historical events. As I suggested, however, this critical attitude toward historiography does not undermine the legitimacy of holding a specific historiographical discourse as valid.

Still, the question of “official histories” is much-contested and one should be particularly careful to avoid the pitfalls involved in any official account of history. In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricœur warns against the politics of memory which replace historiography and can easily result in memory abuses. He also defends the legitimacy of historiography’s critical re-examination of the past, which is and should always remain open to reinterpretations. These considerations imply the rejection of various memorial laws that limit the historian’s freedom. The French law which dictated that school programs should “recognize in particular the positive role of the French presence abroad [...] and award to the history and sacrifices of the French army soldiers sent to these territories the eminent place to which they are entitled” was one such case of unacceptable memorial law, since it infringed upon the historian’s freedom to judge the effects of colonization. It is for historiography to decide what the consequences of colonialism were, and this cannot be determined by law.

However, this should not lead to the quick dismissal of the quest of people from the formerly colonized countries for the official recognition of the colonizers’ crimes. Examining the possibilities of repairing the wrongs of history, among which is colonization, Antoine Garapon observes that monetary reparations are not enough to repair the wrongs of the past; some symbolic recognition appears necessary for the victims.⁵⁴ In this context, the way in which the history of colonization is presented in the school curricula of several European countries accentuates this lack of symbolic recognition of the colonizers’ wrongs on the part of European states. The case of France is indicative. While colonization is present in the school curricula, limited space is dedicated to its darkest sides, or to the formation of a colonial culture in metropolitan France. Generally, colonization is presented as distinct from the evolution of France’s national history, as well as from the major historical events in Europe, and disassociated from migration.⁵⁵ Striking is the absence of the perspective of the colonized people, who are presented as anonymous masses and largely victimized. As Sandrine Lemaire remarks, “the curriculum still makes no room for the Other, the one who shared this history, unless it is as an anonymous ‘victim,’ a charismatic ‘leader’ like Gandhi, or an ‘enemy’.”⁵⁶

Similar critiques have been made regarding school curricula in several European states. A recent survey exposes this: “In some cases, European governments even produce a top down cultural memory that presents a celebratory representation of the colonial past [...] Other governments – for instance in Belgium – have also encouraged educators to ignore the colonial past.” There is also a tendency among European states “to look back in nostalgia at their ‘ages of empires’, as with the United Kingdom, or put the colonial past into service as a form of remembrance education to draw lessons from the past for the future.” This is problematic because “both strategies are inherently uncritical.”⁵⁷ References to the perspectives of the colonized are also missing from most history books taught at schools.

Ricœur’s analyses elucidate the many ways in which the inadequate presence of colonization in the school curricula of European states is wrong. A good history teacher can partly overcome this, giving to the students extra material and taking a critical stance toward the

existing curricula. Still, this does not amend the insufficiencies in the curricula. As Ricœur suggests in *Time and Narrative*, Europeans have a duty to create a historiography of the past events to which they owe their present. Despite the fact that many people would prefer to forget the darker aspects of their history, colonization did shape Europe's present. It is part of the Europeans' debt to their past, as well as to the victims of colonial injustices –including the colonized people - to account for these events, instead of letting them fall into oblivion. An adequate account of colonization in the school curricula is part of responding to this debt; creating a historiographical account is not sufficient if people do not have access to it. Moreover, including an adequate historiographical account of colonization in the curricula would contribute to dismantling neocolonial relations of power and preventing the repetition of the colonial crimes.

Furthermore, regarding what Europeans may owe to formerly colonized people, Ricœur's hermeneutical approach urges us to pay attention to these people's claims. As demonstrated through the examination of a series of African thinkers, historical knowledge appears to be particularly important for overcoming the effects of colonization. Ricœur offers his own view on why this is important: detached from their space of experiences, the formerly colonized people lack the tools which would enable them to affect their present and control their future. Given the presence of pupils from formerly colonized states in Europe, the absence of an appropriate historiographical account of colonization in the school curricula means that these pupils cannot fully understand their presence in Europe, nor engage in debates around them. This has severe implications for their horizons of expectations, affecting their ability to understand their present and control their future. Thus, Europeans owe this historiography of colonization not only to the victims of past injustice but also to people from formerly colonized countries who currently live in Europe.

Including the most valid historiographical account of colonization, as proposed by the historians, in the school curricula could also serve as some form of official recognition of the crimes of colonization. The historiography of colonization becomes official, in the sense that it binds the state's approach to history. It reflects an acceptance of the injustice that occurred during colonization and contributes to overcoming its lasting effects and preventing its repetition. This official status is not problematic, since it does not bind historians to some predefined national historical narrative. Historiography's epistemological status, explored by Ricœur in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, entails that historiography should not have fixed content, but be informed and revised through the progress of historiographical research. While historical narratives are inevitably partial and incomplete, Ricœur defends the possibility of discerning which narrative, at a time, is more valid. Examining, for example, Mark Osiel's refutation of "official histories," Ricœur remarks that "Osiel [...] has to admit that all the narratives are not equivalent, that it is possible to provide, at least provisionally, a more plausible, more likely version."⁵⁸ Official histories and memorial policies become problematic when they lose this element of provisionality, thus undermining historiography as a quest of truth.

This possibility of discerning among the various historical narratives opens the way for an official historiography that could address the historical injustice of colonization. Leaving it to historians to determine the precise content of this historiography of colonization and keeping this content open to critical revision provide some protection against the always present risk of

simplifying the past or silencing certain oppressions. By officially recognizing the colonial past through its inclusion in the school curricula, and allowing for its critical reappraisal, historiography would, once again, play its critical role regarding memory's abuses and ensure that European states, instead of concealing the crimes of their pasts, account for them and take measures to prevent their future repetition.

In view of immigration and the rise of racism in the European countries, the appropriate inclusion of colonization in the school curricula of European states appears necessary for Europe, in order to better understand its present and redefine its future.⁵⁹ Referring to the colonial question, Ricœur admitted: "I fear that I may be a Nazi without knowing it." This statement has two sides. First, it suggests that lack of knowledge does not exempt anyone from the responsibility of her actions towards others. Given that, facing their history would only benefit Europeans, who would better understand the consequences of their actions. From a second viewpoint, Ricœur's statement reveals a hope: that if we knew better, we would not repeat the crimes of the past. Once again, the importance of historiography stands out.

- ¹ I am very grateful to Ernst Wolff, Damien Tissot, Nick Johnston, Willa Saadat, and the two anonymous reviewers for their generous and helpful comments on my paper.
- ² See the online version of this legal text:
<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000444898&categorieLien=id>.
- ³ Indicatively, see Canute Tangwa, "French Revisionism: Case of Positive Role of French Colonisation," *The Cameroun Post*, December 18, 2005: https://www.postnewsline.com/2005/12/french_revision.html.
- ⁴ See Pierre Boilley, "Loi du 23 février 2005, colonisation, indigènes, victimisations. Évocations binaires, représentations primaires," *Politique africaine*, vol. 98/2 (2005), 131-40.
- ⁵ For an account of the insufficient presence of colonization in European education, see Uta Fenske, Daniel Groth, Klaus-Michael Guse, and Bärbel Kuhn, *Colonialism and Decolonization in National Historical Cultures and Memory Politics in Europe* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2015). For the French system, see Sébastien Ledoux, "'Devoir de mémoire': The Post-colonial Path of a Post-national Memory in France. A Study of the Development of 'Taubira Law'," *National Identities*, vol. 15/3 (2013), 239-56.
- ⁶ Ernst Wolff, *Lire Ricœur depuis la périphérie. Décolonisation, modernité, herméneutique* (Bruxelles: Éditions de l'université de Bruxelles, 2021).
- ⁷ I owe to Wolff my acquaintance with the work of Touré, Taiwò, and Macamo, as well as the idea of juxtaposing their analyses with Ricœur's philosophy. However, the focus of this juxtaposition and the conclusions that I draw are mine.
- ⁸ This does not mean that there may not be other reasons to provide this acknowledgment as well, such as out of care for the children and descendants of colonial empires.
- ⁹ Ana Maria Alonso, "The Effects of Truth: Re-Presentations of the Past and the Imagining of Community," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 1 (1988), 50.
- ¹⁰ Alonso, "The Effects of Truth," 50-51.
- ¹¹ Alioune Diop, "Colonialisme et nationalisme culturels," *Présence africaine*, vol. 4 (1955), 13, my translation.
- ¹² Diop, "Colonialisme et nationalisme culturels," 8, my translation.
- ¹³ Diop, "Colonialisme et nationalisme culturels," 13, my translation.
- ¹⁴ Diop, "Colonialisme et nationalisme culturels," 15, my translation.
- ¹⁵ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 30.
- ¹⁶ Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 30.
- ¹⁷ Sékou Touré, "The Political Leader Considered as the Representative of a Culture," *Présence africaine*, vol. 24-25 (1959), 114.

- ¹⁸ Touré, "The Political Leader Considered as the Representative of a Culture," 115.
- ¹⁹ Olúfémi Táíwò, *How Colonialism Preempted Modernity in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).
- ²⁰ Elísio Macamo, "Negotiating Modernity: From Colonialism to Globalization," in *Negotiating Modernity: Africa's Ambivalent Experience, Africa in the New Millennium*, ed. Elísio Macamo (Dakar: Codesria Books, 2005), 1-16.
- ²¹ Paul Ricœur, "La question coloniale," *La réforme*, vol. 3 (1947). For online versions of this text, see the present issue of *Études ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies* and the website of the Fonds Ricœur (Ernst Wolff edition, 2018), <http://www.fondsRicœur.fr/>. See also Wolff, *Lire Ricœur depuis la périphérie*, chap. 1.
- ²² Wolff, *Lire Ricœur depuis la périphérie*. See also "Of What Is 'Ricœur' the Name? Or, Philosophising at the Edge", in *Between Daily Routine and Violent Protest. Interpreting the Technicity of Action* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).
- ²³ Sebastian Purcell, "Space and Narrative. Enrique Dussel and Paul Ricœur: The Missed Encounter," *Philosophy Today*, vol. 54/3 (2010), 289-98, and "Recognition and Exteriority: Towards a Recognition-Theoretic Account of Globalization," *Études ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies*, vol. 12/1 (2011), 51-69.
- ²⁴ Roger Savage, "Colonialist Ruinations and the Logic of Hope," in *Paul Ricœur and the Task of Political Philosophy*, eds Greg S. Johnson and Dan R. Stiver (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 201-20.
- ²⁵ See, for example, Ricœur's considerations for the possibility of a true peace among states in the post-colonial world in Paul Ricœur, "Vraie et fausse paix," *Autres temps. Cahiers d'éthique sociale et politique*, vol. 76-77 (2003), 51-65.
- ²⁶ See, for example, Paul Ricœur, *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965).
- ²⁷ See respectively Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and *The Course of Recognition*, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).
- ²⁸ Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 207.
- ²⁹ See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* [1979], trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985).
- ³⁰ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 209.
- ³¹ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 213.

- ³² Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 215-16, 235.
- ³³ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 221-35.
- ³⁴ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 143.
- ³⁵ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, and *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
- ³⁶ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 68-92.
- ³⁷ Ricœur, *History and Truth*, 27-8.
- ³⁸ Ricœur, *History and Truth*, 28.
- ³⁹ Ricœur, *History and Truth*, 29.
- ⁴⁰ It is interesting that in *History and Truth* Ricœur already refers to the future in terms of human expectations, and to the past as the memory of past men. The conception of the historiographer's work as an encounter with men from the past is further elaborated in *Time and Narrative* and in *Memory, History, Forgetting*.
- ⁴¹ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 204
- ⁴² In the French original, Ricœur uses the term *représentance*. For an analysis of this term, see Olivier Abel and Jérôme Porée, *Le vocabulaire de Paul Ricœur* (Paris: Ellipses, 2007), 71-3. See also Ricœur's extensive commentary in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 565-67.
- ⁴³ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 178.
- ⁴⁴ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 146-280.
- ⁴⁵ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 301.
- ⁴⁶ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 302. An earlier elaboration of this theme can be found in Ricœur's introduction to Unesco's volume *Cultures and Time*, where Ricœur insists that "history has created us many and various" and proceeds to analyze the various levels of this diversity. The distinctiveness of cultures ultimately goes back to the mythical foundation of their beginnings. As cultures communicate, this cultural distance is diminished. See Paul Ricœur, "Introduction," in *Cultures and Time* (Paris: Unesco Press, 1976), 13-33. Similar points are made in Ricœur's introduction in *Time and the Philosophies*, ed. Honorat Aguessy (Paris: Unesco Press, 1977), 13-30.
- ⁴⁷ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 313.
- ⁴⁸ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 314-33.
- ⁴⁹ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 321.
- ⁵⁰ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 320. The interrelation of historiography with the historical refiguration of the past that arises from judicial judgments is particularly interesting. Apart from

judicial judgments being informed by historiography, Mark Osiel makes the interesting comment that the first historical accounts of Nazism were heavily influenced by the relevant trials, during which the judges fully understood their history-making, in the double sense of the term, role. See Mark Osiel, *Mass Atrocity, Collective Memory, and the Law* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 142-65.

- ⁵¹ See Antoine Garapon, *Peut-on réparer l'histoire? Colonisation, esclavage, Shoah* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2008), 237-43. For a critical approach based on Ricœur's philosophy, see François Dosse, "L'histoire entre la guerre des mémoires et la Justice," *Études ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies*, vol. 8/1 (2017), 67-82. On the singular and historical uniqueness of the Holocaust in relation to other crimes, see also Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 187-89, and *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 322-33.
- ⁵² Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 327.
- ⁵³ Of course, this does not exclude that the European states have the same obligation towards their own citizens as well. Actually, Ricœur's analysis indicates so. However, given the injustices that the formerly colonized people suffered from the colonizers, their claims are much more pressing. Ricœur insists: the moral priority belongs to the other victim, the other than us. See *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 89. This, however, should not be conceived as a victimization of the ex-colonized, as Macamo and Taiwò would warn us against. Europe's obligation to pay its debt to the ex-colonized does not deprive them of their agency, nor does it entail their self-victimization. Ricœur's remarks against self-victimization stand for them as well.
- ⁵⁴ Garapon, *Peut-on réparer l'histoire?*
- ⁵⁵ Sandrine Lemaire, "National History and Colonial History Parallel Histories (1961-2006)," in Pascal Blanchard et al. (eds), *Colonial Culture in France since the Revolution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 426-28.
- ⁵⁶ Lemaire, "National History and Colonial History Parallel Histories (1961-2006)," 426. A recent survey demonstrates the impact of the lack of a historical examination of colonization on children of immigrants from formerly colonized states, in terms of the construction of their self-identities. See Mathilde Lambert, Jonathan Lachal, Marie Rose Moro and Malika Mansouri, "Identité postcoloniale et rapport à l'école," *L'autre*, vol. 20/3 (2019), 311-22.
- ⁵⁷ Fenske, Groth, Guse, and Kuhn, *Colonialism and Decolonization in National Historical Cultures and Memory Politics in Europe*, 202.
- ⁵⁸ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 325.
- ⁵⁹ In the context of multicultural education, Sebastian Purcell and Marianne Moyaert examine the use of Ricœur's philosophy in the communication with students. See Sebastian Purcell, "Multicultural Education: The Translation Model," *Studia Paedagogica Ignatiana*, vol. 18/1 (2015), 129-48; Marianne Moyaert, "Interreligious Learning, Ricœur, and the Problem of Testimonial and Hermeneutical Injustice," *Journal of Nationalism Memory and Language Politics*, vol. 13/2 (2019), 205-23.