

## Presentation: Paul Ricœur, "The Question of the Colonies"

Ernst Wolff

KU Leuven

### Abstract

This presentation serves as an introduction to Paul Ricœur's essay "The Question of the Colonies" (1947). The essay is contextualized in relation to other contemporary anti-colonial writings and to Ricœur's own later philosophy. The argumentative structure of the essay is clarified, while identifying some difficulties in evaluating it today.

*Keywords: Ricœur; Colonialism; Decolonization; Nation-state; Violence; Nazism; Responsibility; Guilt.*

### Résumé

Cette présentation sert d'introduction à l'essai de Paul Ricœur "La question coloniale" (1947). L'essai est contextualisé par rapport à d'autres écrits anticoloniaux contemporains et à la philosophie ultérieure de Ricœur. La structure argumentative de l'essai est clarifiée, tout en identifiant certaines difficultés à l'évaluer aujourd'hui.

*Mots-clefs: Ricœur; colonialisme; décolonisation; État-nation; violence; nazisme; responsabilité; culpabilité.*

### Resumen

Esta presentación sirve de introducción al tratado anticolonialista de Paul Ricoeur "La cuestión colonial" (1947), que se contextualiza en relación con otros escritos anticoloniales contemporáneos y con la filosofía posterior de Ricoeur. Se aclara la estructura argumentativa del texto, al tiempo que se identifican algunas dificultades para evaluarlo en la actualidad.

*Palabras clave: Ricœur; colonialismo; descolonización; Estado-nación; violencia; nazismo; responsabilidad; culpa.*

Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies, Vol 12, No 1 (2021), pp. 21-25

ISSN 2156-7808 (online) DOI 10.5195/errs.2021.549

<http://ricœur.pitt.edu>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

## Presentation: Paul Ricœur, “The Question of the Colonies”

Ernst Wolff

KU Leuven

A month after India’s independence on 15 August 1947 and on the day of commemoration of the Battle of Valmy, the Protestant newspaper *Réforme* published Ricœur’s anticolonial tract, “La question coloniale.”<sup>1,2</sup> The newspaper sheds no light on why it chose to place the article, or on the circumstances that led to the article’s publication. Three months later, it was republished, without any changes, in an edition of *Le Semeur*<sup>3</sup> devoted to the theme “What do the students in the colonies think?” [“Que pensent les étudiants coloniaux?”]. The introductory section of this edition of *Le Semeur* consists of André Dumas’s general orientation to debates on the colonies at that time, followed by the “Declaration of the French Delegation to the World Conference of Christian Youth in Oslo on the Colonial Question” [“Déclaration de la délégation française à la conférence mondiale de la jeunesse chrétienne d’Oslo sur la question coloniale”], to which Ricœur’s essay is added as a commentary.

Indeed, he refers to this declaration<sup>4</sup> in the very first sentence of the essay. Nevertheless, from the remainder of the text, one gathers not only that his view of the problem of colonies diverges from that of the “Declaration,”<sup>5</sup> but that his essay is an attempt to reflect – to form and consolidate his own view – on the colonies after reading standpoints and debates in the intellectual journals *Esprit* and *Les Temps modernes*.<sup>6</sup>

This setting in the debate suggests already that one has to understand the title of the text in a dual sense. “La question coloniale,” literally “the colonial question,” refers to the question or questions regarding what one is to think of the colonies, their justification (that of the colonial enterprise), their future, the independence movements against colonization, the policies to be adopted by colonial rule, etc. But the “colonial question” also implies the questioning elicited by the realities of the colonies among the citizens of colonizing empires. Thence comes my decision to render the French title as “The question of the colonies.”

Two factors add intensity and urgency to Ricœur’s articulation of this question. On the one hand, the realities on the ground, notably the fact that “the revolt of the indigenous people has now begun” [“maintenant que la révolte indigène est ouverte”], disqualifies espousing the luxury of postponing an assessment of the situation. Besides, these struggles for liberation resonate with France’s own recent striving for liberation during the German Occupation (a period during which Ricœur himself was a prisoner of war). On the other hand, guilt (“culpabilité”) had become an important theme in popular discourse, in the form of accusations addressed by French people to German citizens regarding war atrocities. Ricœur also had the opportunity to study German guilt as a philosophical problem from the perspective of Karl Jaspers.<sup>7</sup> Understanding these two issues combined opened Ricœur’s perspective on the nasty performative self-contradiction of accusing Germans for their violence, racism and conquest, while defending (or not actively opposing) the continuation of the colonies.

In dealing with these difficult issues, Ricœur self-identifies as a Christian, writing for Christians. This is evident from the phraseology by which he engages the students' declaration, but also the theological phrasing of the concluding paragraph. However, this reflects more the context in which the argument is articulated than its basis or general reach. Ricœur's fundamental point is the responsibility of every French<sup>8</sup> citizen as a citizen of a colonial power, or simply as a human being. He aspires to general validity, independent of a particular religious conviction.

Motivated by these concerns, Ricœur has the courage to offer a perspective (a "climate" as he calls it) from which to assess the difficult problem of responsibility for the colonies. This perspective consists of five principles which he summarizes as follows:

[T]he end of colonization is the freedom of the indigenous people; the original fault of colonization precedes all unilateral aggressions by the indigenous people; the demand for freedom, even if it is premature, has more moral weight than all the civilising work of the colonising countries; racism is the vice of the French in the colonies; it is minorities who represent the emerging conscience of the colonised peoples.

As he develops these five points, Ricœur makes a number of claims, which may – and should – be qualified or challenged (for instance the claim that colonization established in many cases a *pax romana*, the mention of the "good" or "better" work of civilizing, or the proposition that the moment of independence may offer an appropriate time for a treatise of friendship). However, Ricœur himself openly acknowledges his limited knowledge and understanding of colonial matters and explicitly writes from the position of a non-expert. His point is that not being an expert on the colonies is insufficient reason to abdicate one's responsibility as a citizen for the violent initiative of the colonial state.

At the same time, Ricœur overturns ready-made prejudices of that time. Opposing the biased view of the colonized peoples and independence movements as violent, Ricœur argues that the colonial state's violence is primary. To those who proudly claim the moral high ground of universal values, Ricœur points out the particularistic reality of colonial racism and affirms the universal validity of the freedom claimed by indigenous populations. When people said striving for independence is premature, Ricœur responds by illustrating the absurdity of this assertion, by recalling episodes of the striving for independence throughout French history. And to those who would liken the colonized peoples to adolescents who rashly desire to break free, Ricœur feeds back their own paternalistic image, arguing that this desire demonstrates that their self-imposed colonial guardians no longer have the authority to oppose that urgent call for independence.

Ricœur's argument culminates in unambiguous support for the termination of the colonies and movements of liberation. He considers the very substantial difficulties regarding the processes of negotiation, policies for transition and the role of nationalism as a force of liberation to be subordinate issues.

Determining the significance of Ricœur's article today is not easy. I have not been able to find evidence of noteworthy reception of the article immediately after its publication, at least not in print. Judging the article on the merits of the argument, Ricœur's relatively early perceptiveness on the questions he raises has to be located, as he does, in relation to the contemporary debates which he drew on, and these should be read in turn in a longer historical context of debates on the

colonies.<sup>9</sup> Then one could confirm its relevance and Ricœur's perspicacity in its historical context.<sup>10</sup> One could also consider the extent to which Ricœur's position has been confirmed by later publications in the francophone world – more substantial publications which enjoyed wider public reception, associated with names such as Césaire, Fanon, Sartre or Lévi-Strauss.<sup>11</sup>

Recent scholarship usually does not cite Ricœur among the anticolonial philosophers.<sup>12</sup> The question to ask, then, is whether "The question of the colonies" is a once-off foray into a domain, really nothing more than a "minor publication."<sup>13</sup> Ricœur never (explicitly) elaborated on these arguments to develop them into a larger academic publication. Nor did he provide any other formulations of his anticolonial stance. Nevertheless, continuities from this essay in his subsequent publications can be traced in respect of numerous themes: his reflection on the conditions for a decolonized postindependence world, his critique of nationalism, his reflection on cultural plurality, on the violent foundation of states, on violence as an ethico-political question, and on notions such as freedom, guilt and responsibility.<sup>14</sup> Clearly, this point should not be exaggerated, but one cannot miss the echo of his position here when, decades later, he writes, in a critical rejection of Hegel's philosophy of history:

Eurocentrism died with the political suicide of Europe in the First World War, with the ideological rending produced by the October Revolution, and with the withdrawal of Europe from the world scene, along with the fact of decolonization and the unequal – and probably antagonistic – development that opposes the industrialized nations to the rest of the world.<sup>15</sup>

This is equally evidenced, even later, when he returns to idea of guilt through ignorance:

[I]gnorance of the facts is not always accepted as an excuse either: the agent perhaps did not want to know, or avoided informing himself, when he could have, etc. The idea of culpable negligence is of great importance in this type of debate, as has been resoundingly echoed by the tragic events of World War II.<sup>16</sup>

These two points – the historical relevance of the article and the continuities from the article to his later work – are sufficient grounds to challenge scholars to reconsider Ricœur's work from this perspective. This is especially relevant if one is to enquire into the guidance and insight that can be drawn from Ricœur's work for an era in which decolonization, antiracism, politics of memory, etc. have gained new momentum.

- <sup>1</sup> *Réforme*, 3, vol. 131/3 (20 September 1947), 2-3. The current presentation draws from research which was first briefly outlined as the introduction to the online version of "La question coloniale" (<https://bibnum.explore.psl.eu/s/psl/ark:/18469/1z0z0#?c=&m=&s=&cv=>), and was then discussed as part of "Of What Is "Ricœur" the Name? Or, Philosophising at the Edge", Chapter 6 of Ernst Wolff, *Between Daily Routine and Violent Protest. Interpreting the Technicity of Action* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 167-190, here 168-170, and fully elaborated in "La question coloniale", Chapter 1 of Ernst Wolff, *Lire Ricœur depuis la périphérie. Décolonisation, modernité, herméneutique* (Bruxelles: Éditions de l'université de Bruxelles, 2021), 15-38.
- <sup>2</sup> Postindependence violence in India and the battle of Valmy (20 September 1792) are evoked in the essay.
- <sup>3</sup> *Le Semeur*, vol. 46/2-3 (December-January 1947-48), 137-41.
- <sup>4</sup> Which he names "Colonial Memorandum Submitted to the Representatives of Asia and Africa by the French Delegation in Oslo" ["Mémorandum colonial remis aux représentants d'Asie et d'Afrique par la délégation française à Oslo"] in the article.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Wolff, *Lire Ricœur depuis la périphérie*, 23-24.
- <sup>6</sup> The bibliographical information of the texts which he cites explicitly has been added to the reedition and translation of "La question coloniale" published in this volume of *Études Ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies*. These texts and other significant contemporary contributions are discussed in Wolff, *Lire Ricœur depuis la périphérie*, 16-21.
- <sup>7</sup> Karl Jaspers's book, *Die Schuldfrage* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1946), translated as *The Question of German Guilt* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1961) is not cited in "The question of the colonies," but the publication chronology allows us to confirm that Ricœur studied it before submitting this article – see the discussion of *Die Schuldfrage* in Mikel Dufrenne and Paul Ricœur, *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l'existence* (Paris: Seuil, 1947), 394-99.
- <sup>8</sup> But the argument, as it unfolds, also holds for the citizens of other colonial powers.
- <sup>9</sup> For this longer historical view, see, for example, Saïd Bouamama, *Figures de la révolution africaine. De Kenyatta à Sankara* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014); Claude Liauzu, *Histoire de l'anticolonialisme en France, du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2007); Benedikt Stuchtey, *Die Europäische Expansion und ihre Feinde. Kolonialismuskritik vom 18. bis in das 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010).
- <sup>10</sup> As has been affirmed, for instance, by Yves Bénot, "La décolonisation de l'Afrique française (1943-1962)," in Marc Ferro (éd.), *Le livre noir du colonialisme. XVI<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle, de l'extermination à la repentance* (Paris: Fayard/Pluriel, [2003] 2010), 689-741, here 701.
- <sup>11</sup> See, for example, Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1955); Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, [1952] 1971); Jean-Paul Sartre, "Orphée noir," in

Léopold Sédar Senghor (éd.), *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, (Paris: PUF, 1948), ix-xliv; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race et histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, [1952] 2007).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Robert Young, *Postcolonialism. An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2016, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Interestingly, when Ricœur had an excellent opportunity to come back to this contribution at a conference celebrating the fifty-year anniversary of the newspaper *Réforme*, he did not do so – see Paul Ricœur, “Envoi,” in *Les protestants face aux défis du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Actes du colloque du cinquantenaire de l’hebdomadaire “Réforme”* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1995), 146-52.

<sup>13</sup> As is claimed in Frans Vansina and Pieter Vandecasteele, *Paul Ricœur. Bibliographie primaire et secondaire/Primary and Secondary Bibliography 1935-2008* (Louvain: Peeters, 2008), 296. François Dosse situates the article in Ricœur’s biography in *Paul Ricœur. Les sens d’une vie (1913-2005)* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008), 267-68.

<sup>14</sup> I have demonstrated how the concerns of this short essay could be traced throughout Ricœur’s early philosophy in *Lire Ricœur depuis la périphérie*, and have approached the question from a somewhat different angle in “Of What Is ‘Ricœur’ the Name? Or, Philosophising at the Edge.”

<sup>15</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 3*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 204.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 292-93, n. 89.