

**SELF-RESPONSIBILITY:  
ON PAUL RICOEUR'S "FLUENT AFFAIR WITH PÉTAINISM"**

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**Abstract**

*In 1994, three articles from the Pétainist magazine L'Unité française were discovered by chance. They were allegedly written by Paul Ricoeur in 1941-1942. This sparked a debate in which Ricoeur himself spoke up. Criticism of Ricoeur intensified after the publication of *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Raynova reconstructs the various positions to demonstrate the extent to which Ricoeur took responsibility for his past, as well as to show that some of the accusations against him were unfounded. She also emphasizes that everyone is responsible for what they write about others and that calumny and self-righteousness cannot be justified as a "right to one's own opinion." Rather, they should be condemned in the spirit of Levinas.*

**Keywords:** Paul Ricoeur; pétainism; history; political fallacy; ideological error; feelings of guilt; self-responsibility; self-criticism.

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**Preliminary note**

The following article was originally published in German in the multi-volume work *Grundfragen hermeneutischer Anthropologie. Paul Ricoeur's Work in Historical Context: Existence, Interpretation, Practice, History*, edited by Burkhard Liebsch (cf. Raynova 2024, 201–218)<sup>1</sup>. I have decided to reproduce it here in English for several reasons related indirectly to Levinas's ethics. First, I want to show that "responsibility for the other" (Levinas) only makes sense if one can first take responsibility for their own positions and actions, and if one has the courage to further develop this ability. This includes

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<sup>1</sup> There is hardly any difference from the German text except for the brief preliminary remark and footnote 4, which I added as explanations, as well as the additions to the bibliography including the English translations. All translations from German and French are mine, Y.R.

admitting one's errors and mistakes. Second, as philosophers, we are responsible for how we evaluate the ideas and actions of other philosophers and authors. Having one's "own opinion" and cultivating critical thinking are welcome in themselves, but not if they lead to unproven accusations that cause harm to others, whether consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally. In this context, I would like to draw attention to Burkhardt Liebsch's essay in this issue of *Labyrinth*, which addresses the rarely discussed topic of self-righteousness. Furthermore, I would like to recall Levinas's Talmudic interpretation of calumny:

Calumny is reprehensible. How do we know this? Thanks to a passage from the Book of Numbers, of course. Moses sent explorers to survey the land into which the people of Israel were to enter. However, the explorers defamed the land. According to the text, they were punished with death. Then, the Talmud asks: 'What can we learn from the condemnation and punishment of the scouts who defamed the land?' Above all, it teaches us about the seriousness of calumny against people. If calumny against 'only stones and trees' deserves death, then how much more serious must calumny against human beings be? (Levinas/Finkielkraut, 1982, 7-8)<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Early political statements of the 1930s: In "ideological discontinuity"

In early 1994, Robert Lévy, a philosophy professor, stumbled upon three articles in Jean Rivain's Pétainist magazine *L'Unité française : cahiers d'études de la Fédération des cercles Jeune France* (1941/1 and 1942/2), which were supposedly written by Ricœur: "Le risque", "La Jeunesse et le sens du service social", and "Propagande et culture". Through his publisher, Jean-Michel Ollé, Lévy sent Ricœur photocopies of the articles. (Cf. Lévy 2008) Ollé asked why these publications were missing from Ricœur's official bibliography, why they had been forgotten, and whether or not they should be made available at the Institute for Contemporary History. In a letter to the director of the Institute of Contemporary History, Henri Rousso, entitled "NOTE sur

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<sup>2</sup> The French text reads: "La calomnie est condamnable. Comment le sait-on ? On le sait, bien entendu, par le Livre, par un passage des Nombres : Moïse envoie des explorateurs reconnaître la terre où Israël doit entrer. Mais ces explorateurs calomnient cette terre. Ils sont, d'après le texte, punis de mort. Et voilà que le Talmud demande encore : 'Que nous enseignent cette condamnation et cette punition des explorateurs qui ont calomnié la terre ?' Cela nous enseignerait surtout la gravité de la calomnie qui concerne les personnes. Car si la calomnie de ce qui 'n'est que pierres et arbres' mérite déjà la mort, combien doit être grave, a fortiori, la calomnie relative à des personnes humaines."

certaines "PAROLES DE PRISONNIERS" dated October 17, 1994, Ricœur responded to these questions. (Cf. Ricoeur 1994) This document is particularly important because it reveals the motives and axiological reason that led to Ricœur's participation in the Pétain circle, and because these motives were not taken seriously or dismissed as implausible by Ricœur's critics.

Ricœur begins his "NOTE" with the unequivocal statement that he knew nothing about these publications. The former commander, Jean Rivain, who left the officers' camp in the spring of 1941, took the liberty of writing down discussions among prisoners, editing them, and publishing them without the permission of their presumed authors under the heading "Paroles de Prisonniers" ("Words of Prisoners") in *L'Unité française*.

Of the three texts, Ricœur acknowledges only "Le risque" as his own work because it was published in the philosophy journal *Être* in 1936, before the war. Rivain republished the article, removing it from its original context, which had nothing to do with the ideas of Vichy. The second text, "La Jeunesse et le sens du service social", published under the names Louis Estrangin and Paul Ricoeur, seems manipulative to him. He does not recognize his contribution to it. In other words, he does not see himself as a co-author of this text. According to Ricœur, only the article "Propagande et culture" deserves attention, although it is unclear whether Rivain reproduced his words exactly or omitted or added something, thus manipulating the text. Nevertheless, Ricœur believes it is important to understand how this "ideological discontinuity" occurred, specifically his participation in the Pétain circle from 1940 to 1941 and some of his former political views, which he now deems indefensible.

Ricœur begins with a preliminary explanation, pointing out that, as an orphan, he perceived his father's death at the front in 1915 very early on as a futile death in an unjust war. For this reason, he – like the majority of Germans – considered Hitler's diplomatic and military actions up to the Munich Agreement to be just revenge for the excessive humiliation of Germany in 1919. In addition to the blindness of the socialist left, to which he belonged, there was his pacifism, which often accompanied him throughout his life and formed the emotional core of his political positions. However, the decisive factors were the exaggerated feelings of guilt and responsibility that had tormented him before and during his imprisonment. As a reserve officer, he had been confronted with the total defeat of the army at the front in June 1940 and felt responsible for it. Added to this oppressive feeling was the shame and despair that he and his surrounded comrades had surrendered instead of dying. When he learned of the collapse

of the Third Republic after his imprisonment, he blamed the Republic entirely for the defeat. This was his ideological error's real blind spot. His advocacy for the political outlines of a strong state, the will to serve, and the role of propaganda was a response to the self-accusations and negative attitudes toward the institutions of the Republic in the camp. He aimed to put an end to the whining and find ways to rebuild France.

The text "'Propagande et culture'" should be viewed in this context. Ricœur explicitly adds: "Allow me to point out that there can be no question of collaboration here, and even less of anti-Semitism: the Jewish question was not on the agenda; our Jewish comrades were among us, including dear Ikor, one of my closest friends" (Ricœur 1994). The Pétain circle was created as a kind of "camp university" without any political orientation, with the aim not only of engaging in intellectual activity, but also of restoring the prisoners' self-confidence. With "Propagande et culture", he wanted to offer a way out of defeat. To support this, he references the following text from the article: "If there is one political lesson from our defeat that no one can dispute, it is the fact that today we no longer have a choice between an authoritarian regime and a parliamentary regime. The only question is what authority we need, what authority we want. It is this principle that brings us together today." (Ricœur 1994).

Ricœur, who clearly had a penchant for utopias<sup>3</sup> and for mediating opposing positions from very early on, attempts here to offer an imaginary alternative, a figure of thought that unites opposites such as freedom and authority in a social hierarchy. He admits that his vision in this text was a tribute to a state-led culture and state propaganda, but immediately adds that his "plea for a free culture" subsequently gained the upper hand, illustrating this with the following quote: "All experiments to control culture have failed so far. The result has always been intellectual inertia. A state that does not control the valve of self-criticism and free research at the top of the social machine is doomed to decadence: academicism in art, philistinism in morals, militarism in thought are the signs of this. The state must purify the eruptive forces, filter them through the top of the building; without a certain effervescence, without a certain clash of ideas, there is no creativity. Creativity is a function of freedom." (Ricœur 1994) Thus, while he legitimized state propaganda at the bottom of the pyramid of state power, Ricoeur empowered culture and placed it at the top.

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<sup>3</sup> In contrast to Marxism, which rejects utopias, Ricœur repeatedly emphasized the creative aspect of utopia. "The task of the educator is to be a utopian and to maintain a constant tension between perspective and prospect within society." (Ricœur 1965, 20)

## 2. Ricoeur's later self-criticism

Ricoeur is aware that the text "Propagande et culture" is not only ambiguous, but also unacceptable from today's perspective, regardless of how one might interpret it. He therefore explains:

Whatever ambiguities this text may have, and regardless of who is responsible for them – me, the transcriber, or the manipulator – I understand that, fifty years later, this experiment can be attributed to a lack of political discernment, or even a betrayal of the ideals of the Enlightenment, for the benefit of a few qualified scholars of philosophy, history, literature, and so on. [...] I have nothing to say to the censors except that my subsequent work constitutes a rejection of this text (Ricoeur 1994).

Ricoeur's letter ends with the remark that his explanations are intended solely to facilitate an understanding of his ideological discontinuity and his participation in the "Pétain circle" in the period 1940–1941, without leading to accusations or excuses. In this sense, he emphasizes: "I do not wish to accuse or exonerate myself. I am more interested in understanding and accepting myself. At the end of one's life, a person must accept their life as a whole." (Ricoeur 1994) To some, this view of the end will seem like a refusal to declare oneself guilty and take responsibility. However, it should be noted that Ricoeur does not equate "understanding" with "exoneration" here. As he later pointed out: To explain something is not to excuse it, to understand something is not to forgive it, because "the moral judgment that is entangled with the historical one belongs to a different layer of historical meaning than that of description and explanation." (Ricoeur 2000, 335)

While Ricoeur deliberately excludes the question of guilt and responsibility in his note to Russo, he unambiguously takes on the burden of responsibility in other places. The most well-known confession of his guilt, to which most people refer, can be found in his conversation with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay, *La critique et la conviction* (cf. Ricoeur 1998). Ricoeur explains there that, due to massive propaganda and a lack of information – facts that his biographer François Dosse later confirmed through various sources – he had been seduced by certain aspects of Pétainism until 1941. It was his feelings of guilt that led him to want to participate in the reconstruction of a strong France:

I experienced the defeat in 1940 against the backdrop of personal guilt. I still keep the memory of the unbearable images of the flight of the armies in the North; [...] I could not help but say to myself: 'So here is what I have brought about through political mistakes, through passivity, for not having understood that, in the face of

Hitlerism, France should not have been disarmed.' This reproach has stayed with me and has led me always to be wary of my political judgment. Even though I have kept allegiances with socialism, and do not deny certain of its presuppositions, I think that political positions I took in those days were mistaken and even culpable. (Ricoeur 1998, 16)

It should be noted here that Ricoeur is talking about erroneous political positions, not political actions. This is not only because he never "engaged in politics" (see Conseil Scientifique du Fonds Ricoeur, 2017), but also because he draws a clear line between intellectual activities in the camp and any form of collaboration:

It was a matter of putting France back on her feet, and we thought that this involved the Vichy conceptions as the government representatives presented them to us. The pamphlets they distributed to us revolved around this idea: the Republic had been weak, a strong France had to be remade, and this meant with the Germans. And yet I don't think any of us capitulated on the question of collaboration. The idea that guided us was more that of an inner renewal, along the lines of the youth movements, in a kind of continuity with what the Scouts had been before the war. And this is what we believed during the first year, when we were broken and cut off from the outside. The manner in which we contributed, positively, to this renewal within the camp consisted in rapidly establishing an intellectual life so as not to continue to suffer from the defeat. With Mikel Dufrenne, Roger Ikor, Paul-Andre Lesort, and others who had set up a theater, we reconstructed an institutionalized cultural life – a somewhat curious phenomenon, one no doubt peculiar to life in captivity, which is to try to create a replica of free society within the camp. (Ricoeur 1998, 17)

### **3. François Dosses' clarification of the facts in question and the criticism he received**

All of these details came to light through Ricoeur's conversations with Azouvi and de Launay, and in particular through François Dosse's comprehensive biography Paul Ricoeur, *Les sens d'une vie* (1997), in which an entire chapter is devoted to Ricoeur's participation in the Pétain circle (cf. Dosse 2001, 85-91). Some critics of Ricoeur have accused Dosse of merely repeating Ricoeur's version in order to portray him in a favorable light. (cf. Lévy 2008; Kleiser 2010, 353) However, Dosse examined Ricoeur's account of events in depth by interviewing some of his fellow camp inmates (Lesort, Desbiez, Dufrenne, and others) and also quoting written testimonies from prisoners, such as Roger Ikor, who explained: "Pétain's prestige at that time was enormous, at least in our camp"

(Dosse 2001, 85). Based on these interviews and written testimonies, Dosse concludes that, in addition to propagating the ideas of the National Revolution, Pétain's circle also had the task of organizing the various activities of the camp, such as the fair distribution of parcels received by the prisoners. But this had nothing to do with collaboration:

In this camp, which retained the military character of a captive and suspended army, any form of collaboration was the subject of general indignation. This was the case when a French prisoner who had gone to work for the Germans in civilian jobs was sentenced to a month in prison after his return to the camp because he had slept with a German woman. When his sentence was served, he returned to his roommates, but they did not accept him. He was considered a traitor and had to set up his bed in the hallway. (Dosse 2001, 87)

Dosse takes a clear stance on the articles published by Jean Rivain under Ricœur's name in *L'Unité française*. Having presented Ricœur's first publications from the 1930s in previous chapters, he had no doubt that Rivain had manipulated the text, for no one would believe that Ricœur, a Protestant, would describe France as "the elder daughter of the Church" or defend feudal values. Nevertheless, according to Dosse, Ricœur felt guilty about the mistakes he had made and regretted them (Dosse 2001, 89). The most important information Dosse provides is the date Ricœur broke with Pétain's circle. After placing his hopes for the liberation of France on Charles de Gaulle in May, Ricœur wrote the following in his diary on July 12, 1942:

An important event: I have broken with the P. circle. I do not want to become entangled in something that is so confusing, shrouded in such obscure ambitions, and which is ultimately completely contrary to my deepest feelings about the government of a country. I am too liberal, deeply democratic, and deeply committed to the peaceful functioning of the law to compromise myself with great adventurers and men with great personal ambitions. [...] I would add that, above all, I hope never to bind myself to a movement again and to detoxify myself from politics (Dosse 2001, 90).

The fact that Dosse does not portray Ricœur exclusively "in a favorable light" is particularly evident in his reference to a quote from Ricœur's article "Où va la France. Perte de Vitesse", which was published in *Terre nouvelle* in 1939. According to Dosse, this text testifies to the confusion and discontent surrounding the failure of the *Front populaire*, which plunged the country into despair. For this reason, Ricœur "attacked democratic hypocrisy and almost confirmed Hitler's accusations and repeated violations of the law" (Dosse 2001, 61). Dosse quotes Ricœur as saying:

Democracies are plutocracies [...]. I admit that I became genuinely afraid when I read Hitler's speech. Not because I consider his intentions to be pure, but in a language of beautiful harshness [*belle dureté*] – I almost wrote beautiful purity [*belle pureté*] – he reminds democracies of their hypocritical identification of the law with the system of their own interests and their harshness toward disarmed Germany (Ricoeur, in Dosse 2001, 61).

This is certainly one of the most problematic text passages, to which Ricoeur's above-mentioned description of his feelings of guilt also indirectly refers: 'See what you have done through political mistakes, through passivity, because you did not understand that France should not be disarmed in the face of Hitlerism.' It is also the passage that his critics have repeatedly placed at the center of their accusations.

#### **4. On the intensified criticism of Ricoeur following the publication of *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli***

Following the publication of *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* in 2000, criticism of Ricoeur intensified. He was accused of failing to mention his Pétainist past and other errors in this seminal work or of repressing and even deliberately "forgetting" them. One of the first to accuse Ricoeur was Levinas's grandson, physicist David Hansel. Hansel wrote that he could not shake the impression that the book was intended to develop a theoretical framework that would justify concealing its author's past. After quoting a problematic passage from the mentioned 1939 article, Hansel complains that Ricoeur did not speak out against the Nazi regime's anti-Semitic crimes<sup>4</sup>. Hansel's main thesis

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<sup>4</sup> One might immediately ask why Levinas hardly ever spoke about the Holocaust, but that is not my concern here. The atrocities of the Nazis and the Shoah/Holocaust are found in various works by Ricoeur. This is evident even from an article by Robert Lévy from 2017, in which he summarized and commented on everything he found by Ricoeur on the subject. (Cf. Lévy 2017) The article's clear intention was to take a few swipes at Ricoeur. Ricoeur's reappraisal of the past was reduced to "a feeling of shame and guilt," and he was accused of never apologizing, similar to Heidegger (!). Ricoeur's public expression of remorse ("I regret my error in judgment during the first year," [cf. Ricoeur 1998, 17]) was obviously insufficient for him and was disregarded. What's missing from Lévy's article even as reference is that, in 1947, Ricoeur published an article in the Protestant weekly newspaper *Réforme*, sharply criticizing French colonialism and comparing it to Nazi atrocities. In it, Ricoeur also raised the question of what was known about the concentration camps during World War II and what is or isn't known about colonialism today. In this context, Ricoeur makes a remarkable statement about the fear of ignorance – the lack of accurate information about

is that there is continuity in Ricœur's thinking. For example, he points to Ricœur's friendship with the pro-Nazi Mircea Eliade as evidence of this continuity. Therefore, it is absurd that "an admirer of 'German ideas' and Pétainist [...] should have become the 'moral authority of French philosophy'" (Cf. Hansel 2000).

Three years after Ricœur's death and fourteen years after he stumbled upon the three articles in *L'Unité française*, Robert Lévy published the critical essay "Sur la pas-sade pétainiste de Paul Ricoeur: un bref épisode?" ("On Ricœur's Fleeting Pétainist Affair: A Brief Episode?"). Without mentioning Hansel, Lévy adopts his thesis regarding the continuity of Ricœur's misguided political ideas and criticizes Dosse's accounts as "mere literal repetitions" of what Ricœur said about himself in *La Critique et la conviction*. Lévy's goal is to correct the chronology of events and thus prove that Ricœur's ideological confusion did not last only one year, from the fall of 1940 to the end of 1941. He therefore attempts to extend the period before and after by presenting various arguments. Like Hansel, he refers to the 1939 article in *Terre Nouvelle*, but presents a longer quotation with the aim of drawing a parallel between Ricœur's and Hitler's views. Furthermore, since Lévy assumes that Ricœur's text refers to Hitler's speech to the Reichstag in 1939, in which the extermination of the Jews in Europe was announced, he insinuates – albeit cautiously rather than directly – that Ricœur was complicit in the Holocaust.

From 1939 onwards, alongside the Protestant, Marxist, and revolutionary Ricœur, there is also a Ricœur who is certainly critical of fascism, but nevertheless fascinated by some of its aspects [...]. Ricœur uses the words 'harshness' (*dureté*) and 'purity' (*pureté*) in relation to Hitler's way of speaking and employs two of the central concepts of Nazi language. We know about 'purity', but less about 'harshness', which 'formed Hitler's ideal'" (Lévy 2008, 10-11).

Furthermore, Lévy points out that the texts were published in *L'Unité française* in 1940, whereas Pétain's circle did not emerge until late 1941. He argues that this proves that the debates did not take place within Pétain's circle. The fact that Rivain took the prisoners' texts and words out of context and published them for his own purposes without their knowledge seems to be of no consequence to Lévy. The crux of his argument consists of two quotations from Georges Gusdorf's memoirs, in which Gusdorf recounts his meeting with Ricœur at the camp at the end of May 1944. Ricœur confessed to him at the time that

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conditions in the colonies – which could prove fatal: "Je crains d'être nazi sans le savoir" ("I fear I am a Nazi without knowing it" [Ricœur 2021, 16]).

he had been involved in Pétainism and tearfully assured him that he would never again engage in politics, as he had been betrayed by all sides. The most important piece of evidence for Lévy is GUSDORF's description of the prisoners: "We were astonished to discover that this amorphous mass, trapped in the snare of collaboration, was stagnating in the rotten waters of Vichy conformism and the cult of the marshal, whose iconic images adorned every corner" (Lévy 2008, 13).

Yet, I have to mention here that GUSDORF's criticism was not directed at Ricœur personally. It concerned all prisoners, including those of Jewish origin. If you read his memoirs more closely, you will see that he distinguishes between intellectuals who collaborated out of conviction, bearing the weight of human lives, and those who had been mistaken in their judgment. He writes: "BRASILLACH had devoted himself body and soul to the enemy cause. His murderous pen celebrated Hitler's victories and led to the cruelest persecution of his own countrymen. He denied others the compassion he demanded for himself. Such unscrupulousness is a mystery to me. The right to make mistakes has its limits" (GUSDORF 2002, 209). It is debatable whether everyone in the officers' camp was a Pétainist at that time since, according to DOSSE's sources, the Pétain circle had fallen into lethargy by 1944, and groups of the Resistance had formed in the camp (DOSSE, 2001, p. 91). One thing is clear, however: for Lévy, who spent years searching for evidence of collaboration, GUSDORF's descriptions of the camp were enough to incriminate Ricœur directly.

Lévy ends his article with the rhetorical question of whether Ricœur knew about the existence of the articles in *L'Unité française* before sending them to him, and how likely it is that he ignored them for more than fifty-three years. Why did these texts have to surface before Ricœur remembered that he owed it to the truth to acknowledge his Pétainist past? This suggests that Ricœur stylized his past, concealed certain things, and possibly even lied. But one could also ask the opposite question: Why didn't Lévy confront Ricœur himself with these issues while he was still alive, especially in 2002 when GUSDORF's memoirs were published? Why did he wait a full fourteen years?

Lévy's contribution was received in different ways. The Ricœur Fund and its chairman Oliver Abel took a critical stance (cf. Abel 2009), as did David Kaplan. (Kaplan 2007, 219-236) Geneviève Baudet-Drillat, daughter of Lieutenant Eugène Drillat, who was together with Ricœur in the prison camp, published a book about her father in 2020 in which she describes the polemic against Ricœur as "as misplaced as it is absurd." (Baudet-Drillat 2020, 86, fn. 383) Others, such as Richard Wolin (Wolin 2005) and Nicolas Weill (Weill 2012 and 2013), sought explanations for Ricœur's political mistakes or their suppression. Of particular interest in this regard is Christina Kleiser's extensive study –

"Autobiografie, Geschichtspolitik und die Pflicht zur Gerechtigkeit. Zur historischen Bedingtheit von Paul Ricœur's Alterswerk *Gedächtnis, Geschichte, Vergessen*" ("Autobiography, historical politics, and the duty of justice. On the historical conditionality of Paul Ricœur's late work *Memory, History, Forgetting*," Kleiser 2010). She sides with Lévy but expands on his argument by linking Ricœur's early political views (namely, his Pétainism) with his later work, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*.

Kleiser's main thesis is that Ricœur's reflections on "history" and "memory" contain an ambivalence that reflects his approach to his Vichy past (Ricoeur 2004, 86-92). She bases her argument on Ricœur's juxtaposition of the duty to remember and the work of memory, as well as his concern about the abuse of memory and the duty to remember, which he expresses as follows:

I remain concerned about the spectacle created by too much memory here and too much forgetting there, not to mention the influence of various forms of commemoration and the abuse of memory – and forgetting. The idea of a policy of moderate and just memory [*juste mémoire*] is therefore one of the topics I would like to bring into the public debate. (Ricoeur 2004, XV)

The "rhetorical vehemence" of this concern, according to Kleiser, led to public criticism to the effect "that the actual subject to which Ricœur's 'excess of memory' refers is the Nazi mass murder, which could not have been carried out to the extent that it was in France without the collaboration of the Vichy regime and the population that supported the government" (Kleiser 2010, 335).

This criticism leads Kleiser to seek the deeper reason for Ricœur's unease in his life story, namely in his ideological commitment between 1933 and 1945. By comparing Ricœur's early texts from the 1930s with the articles from 1940 in *L'Unité française*, Kleiser attempts to establish an ideological continuity in Ricœur's thinking:

The inclusion of the 1939 text and the fact that 'Le Risque' was first published in 1936, allows us to discern a certain ideological continuity beyond the military defeats that are often described as 'shocking' or 'traumatic' and in any case experienced as a turning point, for example with regard to the concepts of 'authority' and the 'strong state' that underlie all the texts discussed to a greater or lesser extent. This continuity in the author's thinking, which contrasts with Ricœur's later justification of the 1941 texts as an 'ideological episode', has so far been ignored or denied. (Kleiser 2010, 353)

Well, Kleiser's last assertion may be true with regard to Dosse's biography, but continuity was certainly "observed." As previously demonstrated, Hansel first proposed

this thesis, which Lévy later expanded upon. In this context, Kleiser's accusations against Ricœur are not new; perhaps they are only more pointed than those made by Lévy. As mentioned earlier, Ricœur denies in his note to Rousso that he was co-author of the article "La jeunesse et le sens du service social" because he found the text too suspicious and could not recognize his contribution to it. However, Kleiser insists that the text was written by Ricœur and that it is of particular importance.

The argument that the text is irrelevant and should therefore be dismissed quickly is countered by the fact that it was written and published at a time when Ricœur was moving and working in an environment entirely focused on realizing the authoritarian ideals of the 'national revolution': Both the 'camp university' established in the prison camp for French officers in Pomerania, which Ricœur described with no small amount of pride, and the 'cercles Pétain' that existed there, in which Ricœur claimed to have actively participated, were ultimately dictated and controlled by the Germans and served the purpose of propaganda influence. (Kleiser 2010, 351)

Thus, in addition to Ricoeur, all the other participants in the camp university and the Pétain circle are accused, or at least suspected, of collaborating with the Germans. Kleiser adds a second allusion to this one: Ricœur's failure to explicitly oppose the Vichy regime's anti-Semitism, which was no secret, meant that he accepted it. She writes:

When Ricœur emphasizes that 'Propagande et culture' had nothing to do with collaboration and even less with anti-Semitism, it is equally essential to place the ideological elements Ricœur employs in this text in the broader historical context of 'Vichy'. From such a contextualizing perspective [...] the question arises: Does supporting the idea of a 'strong state' propagated by the Vichy regime, without explicitly speaking out against its collaboration with the German Reich and against the anti-Semitic attitude that characterized the regime, mean accepting, if not endorsing, both? (Kleiser 2010, 355)

## 5. Critical assessment

What remains unclear here is what Kleiser and other critics of Ricœur mean by "collaboration." In his incisive work, *Dimensions of Complicity. The European Collaboration with the Third Reich* (2019), Klaus Kellmann demonstrates the problematic nature of the term itself. Kellmann emphasizes that there are no adequate scientific criteria, let alone an official and binding definition of what collaboration is. He explains:

The artificial and false dichotomy between collaboration and resistance has long prevented objective and professional research into the phenomenon. In reality, a

wide range of behavioral stereotypes existed between these two extremes, predominantly characterized by forms of wait-and-see attitudes, accommodation, and *modus vivendi*. [...] To this day, no one knows where collaboration begins and where it ends. The boundaries are fluid [...]. The collaborator chooses a role in order to retain a minimum of freedom of choice. Since he never fully identifies with the occupier, he is much more than a mere puppet. He tries to save and defend the interests of his country in his own way. In other words, he wants something that everyone wants, which is why the spectrum of collaboration is not limited to a single party, group, or movement. It ranged from pre-fascist parties to social democracy, with highly differentiated and differentiable motives, expectations, goals, calculations, and hopes, but also constraints and determinants, as well as varying foundations, supporters, functions, and effects from case to case. The profile of specific collaboration activities was characterized by enormous heterogeneity and breadth, ranging from the voluntary, hired, or paid betrayal of resistance fighters, who were thus delivered to their deaths, to housewives who earned a few francs, zlotys, or dinars by washing the laundry of Wehrmacht soldiers. (Kellmann 2019, 11-13)

Kleiser's analysis of Ricoeur's "NOTE" concludes with the observation that this text does not live up to the standards of Enlightenment, because it oscillates "between distancing, euphemistic justification, and a guilty conscience," with Ricoeur relativizing his participation by employing various classic topoi of justification, such as that he was one of many, that he was naive and blind, that he lacked judgment, and that the situation had been misjudged.

Confronted with the question of what the Pétainist content of the 1941 texts was all about, Ricoeur gives the impression of a seeker – determined by the poles of an 'obligation to remember' imposed on him from outside and the inner necessity to face this part of his past: to do 'memory work.' When reading this statement, an ambivalence becomes apparent that points back to the problem of unease in Ricoeur's reflections on 'history' and 'memory.' (Kleiser 2010, 355)

If Kleiser perceives the note as a "euphemistic justification," that is her prerogative, but for the sake of truth it should be mentioned that Ricoeur nowhere in the text claims to have been "naive" or to have lacked judgment. Rather, he acknowledges that, from today's perspective, one might accuse him of this or that:

[...] I understand that fifty years later, this experiment can be attributed to a lack of political discernment, even to a betrayal of the ideals of the Enlightenment [...]. I have nothing to say to the censors except that my later orientation can be regarded as a rejection [of this text]. (Ricoeur 1994).

Precisely because he does not want to justify himself, Ricoeur also refuses to accuse or exonerate himself. Instead, he takes a hermeneutic position: that of wanting to understand, of explaining, and of narrative identity (Ricoeur 1994, 4). In her conclusion, Kleiser declares:

In the review of the three autobiographical texts, the detailed conversation that Ricoeur had with Azouvi and de Launy in 1994 and 1995 occupies a special position. It is noteworthy that *only in this conversation* [emphasis mine – Y.R.] are there passages in which Ricoeur is able to express his regret about his behavior at the time and his attitude towards Vichy" (Kleiser 2010, 356).

Kleiser is not alone in making this claim, but it is untenable. In a conversation I had with Ricoeur in Italy in June 1996, he accused himself without my asking him about his past, of which I knew nothing. By doing this, he not only admitted his ideological errors, but also took responsibility for his anti-Semitic views.

**Yvanka Raynova:** But there are irreparable injustices. [...] On the other hand, we can make a mistake and support a regime or a leader whom we perceive as just, but who turns out to be monstrous.

**Paul Ricoeur:** I say, in my chapter on forgiveness, that it is also necessary to accept the insolvent debt. I agree that I am an insolvent person, a debtor. To want to arrive at a clear conscience is a great aim; but I very much like Luther's word: "*simul iustus et peccator*."

**Yvanka Raynova:** No, it is not a question of having a "clear conscience" – who could claim to have never "sinned"? But that is exactly why we should not judge too severely people who had to live through circumstances which we did not ourselves have to endure.

**Paul Ricoeur:** Yes, but I judge myself. At the beginning of the conversations that I published under the title *Critique and Conviction*, I passed a very austere judgment on my own political opinions. I do not want to leave it to others to accuse me by saying: 'For a whole year, Ricoeur was a follower of Pétain (pétiniste).' Yes, for a year I was a follower of Pétain. Moreover, I was a pacifist at a time when one should not be. [...] I feel responsible for what, in my tradition, fed anti-Semitism. There is a whole part of Christianity which is responsible, and in that I feel responsible too. I am not responsible for the gas chambers, but I am responsible for having authorized theological arguments to encourage political anti-Semitism. For that, I am responsible in an on-going self-criticism concerning this involvement. Consequently, it is not others, but myself that I accuse. (Raynova 2003, 670-696; cf. Raynova 2009, 101-104)

Unlike Martin Heidegger, who only offered a loud silence about his collaboration with the Nazis, or Julia Kristeva, who flatly denied her collaboration with the Bulgarian secret service, Ricœur, as painful as it may have been for him, faced up to his past – in an "unfinished self-criticism" and with the clear awareness of being an insolvent debtor.

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