

Note about certain “**Words of Prisoners**”

October 17, 1994

Mr. Jean-Michel OLLE has had access through the Institute of Contemporary History to three texts that are attributed to me. These texts are part of a collection of articles titled “Words of Prisoners,” that were published by Jean Rivain in the April-June 1941 and the July-September 1941 issues of *Unité Française*, “Notebooks of the Studies of the Federation of the Circles of Young France.” In a letter addressed July 11, 1994 to Olivier Mongin, Jean-Michel Ollé observes that “these texts are not in the systematic bibliography [of Paul Ricoeur] published by the University of Louvain-la-Neuve, and he asks, “What is the nature of this omission?” In addition, he asks Olivier Mongin, and me through Mongin, about the “necessity to make these texts available to researchers.”

I will be brief about the second point: This researcher having had access to these texts at the Institute of Contemporary History shows that they are already effectively available to researchers.

I will give a longer explanation about the first point, restricting myself to certain formal considerations, before expounding later on the more interesting question of the memory of the main issue. With respect to the form, my response has two parts: The first is about

the texts in question, the second, about other texts published during my youth and which are not included in the bibliography.

With respect to the texts read by Jean-Michel Ollé, I declare that I was unaware until today of their publication in Vichy under the title, “Words of Prisoners.” As for the original, I have no idea where it is: missing pages? Journal of the POW camp Oflag IIB? The “Commander Jean Rivain,” repatriated at the latest in the spring of 1941, took upon himself the right of reporter of the Camps in assembling these “Words of Prisoners,” editing them and publishing them without the authorization of their alleged authors and in a journal which was not of their choosing. In this respect, a researcher worthy of the name would not speak of “forgetting,” a term intended to raise the suspicion of a deliberate dissimulation. I resent this insinuation.

What’s more, the three texts in question are very different from one another. The one titled, “The Risk,” was just “stuck” by Rivain in *Confluences* (July, 1941), a review that I did not know even existed until today. In any case, it was not “Pétinist” according to an authoritative opinion. This review planted that article in a review before the war called *Etre*. This article is in my bibliography with the date 1936 and under the heading 1b in the “*Complements [Up-date] of February, 1968*.” The first text is purely and simply twisted and displaced from its original context, a context that has nothing to do with Vichy. This text, in the main, expresses a voluntarist and heroic ideology that Vichy was able to put to its uses, but it was not written for Vichy. As to the text, “Youth and the Meaning of Social Service,” and bearing the common signature of Louis Estrangin and

Paul Ricoeur, it appears to me today as very suspect. Besides sensing a kind of manipulation, I am incapable of untangling my contribution. Here, again, the call for an ethics of service, which is the main point of the article, was convenient to the ideologues of Vichy who were experts in mixing things together for their purposes. Only the text titled, "Propaganda and Culture," is worthy of careful consideration, which I will give it a little later. Restricting myself for the moment to the form, I declare that I cannot assure that this text has not been cut short, nor had additions, nor in any way been manipulated. In any case, I did not publish it.

The second part of my response: There are other texts I wrote when I was young that are not in my bibliography and which, however, I did publish in the legal sense of the term as I am using it here. They were published in revues, papers, local newsletters of my period as a militant socialist (Saint-Brieuc, 1933-34; Colmar, 1935-36; Lorient, 1937-39). I did not keep any of them and I would have no idea how to find them. The only ones that are in my bibliography are three texts of 1936, 1937, 1938 which appeared in *Etre*, No. 1, No. 4, No. 5. The "researcher" Jean-Michel Ollé, anxious to complete my bibliography, should set himself to finding them so he can have a complete set. I say that seriously, to the extent that these reflections touch the heart of the matter to which I am now going to address: The conditions in which a young militant socialist of the pre-war was able to become a speaker in the "Petain Circle" of his Oflag in 1940-41.

I come then to several considerations, which touch the main point.

To suppose that the text, “Propaganda and Culture” faithfully reflects views held at the latest in the Spring 1941, invites me to a self-examination equally distant from self-justification and from self-flagellation, and turned toward an acceptance of myself as being he who passed by a certain phase of his life, his thought, and his action.

What may seem unusual in my case—although it seems to have been that of many of my comrades whose names are next to mine in the “Words of Prisoners,”—is that I did not come from the trend of opinion which Sternhell stigmatizes as viscerally an enemy of the Enlightenment and the Republic, but from the socialist antimilitarist and pacifist left. This previous engagement calls for a preliminary explanation: I was a war orphan, my father having been killed on the front lines in Champagne in 1915. I had learned early on the idea that his death was in vain, given the enormous injustice of the Treaty of Versailles. Like the majority of Germans, I saw in the diplomatic and military maneuvering of Hitler, up to Munich, as a just revenge for the excessive humiliation inflicted on Germany in 1919. What is more, participating in the blindness of the socialist left, I was one of those who placed the “fascist” target in Paris and not in Berlin. Finally, these non-violent impulses, which have arisen many times in the course of my life, fed the emotional core of my partisan affiliations. This extreme engagement of the years 1934-39, which are found expressed in the publications mentioned above, constitute one of the keys to the revulsion attested by the beliefs I held just after the defeat.

Three powerful considerations arose between my pre-war positions and those at the beginning of my imprisonment: First, as a young reserve officer in his unit of Breton zealots, I found myself confronted, on the Marne Front in June 1940, with the debacle of the total defeat of our armies. I felt then a shame for having contributed to the defeat by my political choices before this total military collapse.

Second: Adding to the shame was my choice, in the dawn of despair for me and my worn out, isolated, surrounded men, of surrender rather than death.

Third: After learning, at the beginning of my imprisonment, of the collapse of the Third Republic, I transferred on the Republic itself the responsibility for the defeat for which, a few weeks earlier, I had accused myself. This transfer, which I rejected later, constituted for me the blind point of my ideological turn about.

But that was not even the reverse of my new position. The point is this: The political outlines of a strong state, vigorous public spirit, the sense of service, and the role granted, unfortunately, to propaganda, taken together were a response to the auto-accusation and the negative attitude with respect to the institutions of the Republic, which was running rampant in the camp. It was precisely a matter of stopping the groaning and complaining and start the rebuilding. That is how the “Pétain circles” were constituted on the margins of the principal activities of the group of comrades solicited like me by the “commander Rivain” (and “published” like me in *Unité Française*). It was put on the structure of a “University of the Camp” which was without political orientation and intended not only

to occupy the time of our comrades, but also to give them confidence in themselves by allowing them to take charge of an exercise of intellectual discipline, strict in respect to hours, themes, and to the high level of the teaching.

It is in this context that the text titled, "Propaganda and Culture," should be placed. Let me point out that there is no question of collaboration and even less of anti-Semitism. The Jewish question was not the order of the day. Our Jewish colleagues were mixed in with us, including my friend, Roger Ikor, with whom I was very close. Two things surprise me in this text (whatever the manipulations in the published text): First, the brutality of the beginning (which should not be minimized): "If there is a political lesson in our defeat that no one can contest, it is that today we do not have the choice between an authoritarian regime and a parliamentary regime. The only question is to know what authority we need, what authority we wish for. This is the basic affirmation which reunites us" (there follows a sentence to which I will come back later).

It is then a eulogy to directed culture, the propaganda of the State. But what must not pass in silence is the "plea for a free culture" which prevails in the following: "Attempts at a directed culture have always failed. An intellectual emptiness is usually the result. A State which does not arrange at the top of the social machine an opening for auto criticism and free research is condemned to decadence: Academism in art, Philistinism in customs, and militarism of thought are the precursors. The State has a need to manage its eruptive forces, to allow to them to pass by the top of the structure. Without a certain boiling over, without a certain shock of ideas, there can be no creation. Creation is a

function of liberty.” From which the final exercise of equilibrium, in favor of propaganda justified at the base of the pyramid of power and free culture at the top. The article ends with a poor attempt at eloquence: “On the base of this pyramid can and should stand the free arrow of culture of which the sharp point is the battle of man with his gods” (Salute to Bergson!).

Thus, it is during the winter 1940 that I integrated the condemnation of the Third Republic with exercises more or less utopian of reconstruction, combining liberty and authority with a certain bad conscience (speaking of bad conscience, a sentence intrigues me, perhaps poorly transmitted and in any case poorly written. It comes just after the “exorde” mentioned above. “...These lines where I make heard sometimes different voices, but nothing discordant with the scruples I feel particularly driven to deliver ” (?). Whatever the case of the equivocations of this text, whether they are due to me, to the transcriber, or to the manipulator, I understand that 50 years later this attempt could be charged to a lack of political understanding, even a betrayal of the ideals of the Enlightenment, charged to a handful of professors of philosophy, history, humanities. I have no answer to these censors, if not that my later orientation counts as a disavowal.

It is important, in fact, for understanding this ideological episode to remember that from my return from the POW Camp in 1945, I was directed by my friend Andre Philip to the Collège Cévenol, which is known for its saving of Jewish children. It is there that I passed three wonderful years, gnawed by doubt, torn between my old attraction to non-violence and my growing sense of the institution taken with its residues of violence. This

was a hesitation and doubt that found their most significant prolonging in my participation in the Events of 1968.

It is in relation to this “before” and this “after” that I have tried to understand the ideological discontinuity that constituted my participation in the “Pétain Circles” in 1940-41.

But, I said it previously, I neither accuse myself nor excuse myself, I am more interested in understanding myself and in accepting myself. At the end of his life, a man should take his life as a whole, as they say of the French Revolution.

Paul Ricoeur

Translated by Charles Reagan