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## **The Substitute Testimony**

In this paper we will attempt to read the theory of testimony (*témoignage*) proposed by Paul Ricoeur in his work *Memory, History, Forgetting*<sup>1</sup>. However, our aim is not to first of all reconstruct the way of understanding this notion elaborated by the author or to read its role in his interpretation of relations between the title memory, history and modes of forgetting the past. Actions and structures of sense co-creating the phenomenon of giving a testimony analyzed by Ricoeur are of interest here to an extent of their usefulness in enriching the reflection upon the possibility of historiography performing a function of a testimony to the past where there is no or there can be no testimony given by witnesses of past events.

Ricoeur's theory of testimony considers it to be one of many possible modes of presenting the past. It is, however, a special mode because of, among other things, the influence its giving has, in Ricoeur's opinion, on the shape of social bonds creating communicative community within the limits of which it takes place. The influence consists in, speaking very generally, creating trust and sense of security. In our opinion, the indicated type of social bonds, created thanks to giving a testimony, has a consequence for the shape of relations between the community of communication within which giving a testimony occurs and the past it presents. Giving a testimony may have a positive bearing on the character of a relation between the contemporaneousness and the past, i.e. the shape of historical bonds.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Ricoeur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Seuil, Paris 2000, p. 201-208; P. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, translated by Kathleen Blamey, David Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago — London 2004, p. 161-166.

Yet, we do not and cannot have testimonies of victims or eye witnesses of many aspects of the past, many acts of violence, abuse, crimes. There are no traces, ashes. No voice comes confirming what it has seen. Does historiography have to limit itself in this situation to making hypothetical attempts on the basis of the remains of the past to present it with the use of the modes of representation elaborated in the course of its history which, looking from our current perspective, may be defined as non-testifying modes? It seems to be settled that giving a testimony to something one has witnessed cannot belong to the repertoire of historiographic representation forms because a historian in general has not been a witness of what he describes; he learns about past events in an indirect way, through its relicts (sources).

Our own intention is to reflect upon the possibility of such historical cognition and such modes of historiographic representation which in a situation of a lack of witnesses' of the past testimony would be able to contribute to the creation of this special kind of a social bond and a bond with the past that come into existence as a result of giving a testimony. This would be fulfilled thanks to the creation of a historiographic representation of the past which could serve as a substitute testimony introduced into communication where there are no witnesses who could speak today. We are executing this intention wondering which of the structures creating the notion of a testimony indicated by Ricoeur may be executed by a certain type of a historiographic representation of the past and we infer it may serve as a historiographic substitute testimony postulated by us.

The theory of a historiographic substitute testimony could continue and develop the strategy of differentiating notions undertaken by Ricoeur in his theory of a testimony of a witness of the past. In the latter he informs of the consequences of differentiating in the act of giving a testimony by a witness between an aspect of ascertaining (*assertion*) the existence of given events in the past and an aspect of certifying (*certification*), also called authenticating (*authentication*) of this statement's veracity through a witness's reference to personal experience (*experience*) of the past events related by him. Let us notice that a historian cannot meet the criteria of an act of giving a testimony understood in the above way because, putting aside special cases, he cannot authenticate (certify) his statements' veracity with personal experience. The roles of a historian and of a witness seem to be separate.

It seems to us, however, that after making an attempt to further differentiate notions in question and after a reconstruction to some extent of relations between them, one can imagine an action of stating the past which, retaining an even minute link with giving a testimony understood in Ricoeur's way, could belong to a repertoire of historiographic research-narrative operations and, as a result, perform in social reception a function

similar to a role played by witnesses' of the past testimonies. This status would enable us to use in reference to products of the above action an expression: "substitute testimony".

The starting points for the proposed reconceptualization are the following: (A) the decomposition of a category not differentiated enough by Ricoeur of experiencing events by a spectator/participant (*la scène vécue*); (B) accentuation of consequences, not emphasized by the author, of the difference between the time of experiencing events by a spectator/participant and the moment of stating them by a witness through giving a testimony. The consequence of these changes is (1) a separation of the notions of certification (*certification*) and experience (*experience*) which Ricoeur links; in a substitute testimony the aspect of certification is not based on experience; and (2) different than Ricoeur's shape of the relation of involvement (*implication*) of a narrator of the tale having a status of a substitute testimony in past events certified by this testimony.

The decomposition we have undertaken of the category of experiencing events by a person who will be able to give a testimony to them in future is implanted on an inner tension of Ricoeur's expression "experienced scene" (*vecue*). A human being, as we guess, would be at the same time a spectator of events external to themselves (spectator of a scene) and would interiorize them in an inner experience which he cannot, without interpretational work (in many cases without a difficult therapeutic effort), relate to like to an object external to itself. In the expression "experienced scene" we perceive a prolific tension between the distance of an observer (who may become a witness in future) towards the events seen and its neutralization thanks to participation in them or their interiorization through "experiencing" them in a way different than participation.

In Ricoeur's depiction, the involvement of a narrator of a story having a status of a testimony in the certification of the content is a derivative of earlier involvement of a spectator and participant of events authenticated in the testimony who later assumes a status of a witness (narrator). Such origin of narrator's involvement is not, in general, possible in the case of a historian.

We would like to transform to some degree the above arrangement of categories thanks to a notion *la réceptivité* adopted from French, which may be translated in an approximate way with the use of an expression "receptivity ability", ability of "reception"<sup>2</sup>. This notion may serve as an outline of such understanding of experience where what a spectator or a

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. B. Jewsiewicki, *Doświadczenie, pamięć, wyobrażenia społeczne*, [trans.] M. Bugajewski, [in:] *Inscenizacje pamięci*, red. I. Skórzyńska, Ch. Lavrence, C. Pépin, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2007, s. 7.

participant experiences in what surrounds him and what he participates in depends on his receptivity ability, on his endowment (language, emotional, most generally: cultural) deciding which way the experienced, i.e. subject to reception, content is filtered in the reception.

Despite all differences, which one may and should emphasize, the cultural filtering of the content received in experience is a structure the spectator/participant's experience and the historian's experience have in common. Moreover, perceiving a threat of a witness's testimony being incomprehensible for a historian we can, anticipating further exposition, emphasize that the condition for communication between a witness and a historian is the existence of common for them structures filtering experience. Overlapping, at least to some degree, of cultural continuity conditions the reception of a witness's of the past testimony by a historian.

Making a spectator/participant's (who may later become a witness) experiencing events belonging to a situation surrounding him dependant on his reception abilities enables us to take note of the fact that all aspects of experienced events and of the process of experiencing them appear in the field of vision of a future witness as filtered by his own structures conditioning the reception (interpretation) of surrounding events.

A historian cannot assume a position of a spectator/participant of events, he can, however, try to build a historiographic representation which would be based on those types of interpretative categories (creating *the interpretans* of interpretation) which condition and facilitate the reception of events performed by their spectator/participant. A historian may try to create a sight (/an image) of the past applying category measures determining the shape of events' reception in vivid experience of their spectator/participant, not necessarily linking these category measures with an imagined by him character with a status of a spectator/participant.

Experience depends on the one who experiences and the way he habitually experiences; it is individual and it is shaped specifically for every human individual. It is also true that the unique specificity of our experiencing is formed in the course of a human individual's history of life on the basis of universal, cultural codes of reception. It is the latter universal structures determining experiencing that can be imitated to some extent in a historiographic representation. A historian may presume which way the surrounding events and the involvement in them itself could be seen by a hypothetical subject spectator/participant or he can build a historical narration structured by categories managing reception by human subjects, without forming presumptions of this kind concerning the hypothetical subject of reception. He cannot, however, critically reconstruct a given experiencing of a situation by a given human subject if there is no source

basis for such reconstruction. A historiographic testimony would function in a sphere of presumptions concerning the possibility of experiencing and not in a sphere of critical reconstruction of given human experiences.

The basic structures conditioning experiencing by a spectator/participant are indicated by categories of an event and everyday life used by Ricoeur. Events are created by individuals and they are also subject to their influence. Our everyday life is composed of a stream of such events connected with one another.

We would like to complicate this simple picture by making two remarks. Firstly, the process of experiencing events, thus the process of experiencing the everyday life, creates in a spectator/participant: (a) the picture of events and a picture of a relation between these events and himself; (b) the valuing of these events and of this relation (the pragmatic, ethical, aesthetic or other valuing); (c) the attitude of certain engagement (e.g. emotional, political, moral, religious or other) of a subject experiencing into what he experiences. In experiencing intermingle cognition, valuing and involvement.

Secondly, the outlined structure of experiencing everyday life is extremely simplified; we imagine such spectators/participants who may in many situations experience social situations in a way which is not made to measure for an individual, understood as an atom of social life, and in a non-event way. Making experience dependant on reception abilities does not result in the fact that we always have to experience the world as composed of individuals and their actions and of events: consequences of these actions.

Conclusions of the present phase of reflections are the following:

(1) the experiencing of events by a witness, taken into consideration by Ricoeur, depends on his receptive structures and has as a result the creation of events in the figure of a spectator/participant — i.e. the one who can in future become a witness of the past — cognitive and valuing representations of these events and of himself, and an attitude of certain engagement in relation to what is being presented as well. All these effects of experience are built as more or less developed modifications of a basic model of interpreting everyday life, constructed from categories of an individual, an action, an event.

(2) A historian can, without breaking the rules of historiographic criticism, cautiously seek a possibility of writing a historiographic representation which would imitate the way of interpreting the world (i.e. the structures conditioning experience) by its spectator/participant. We will frame here a working hypothesis that a historiographic imitation may concern in particular (a) a perspective of looking at the world highlighting every time unique involvement of individuals in events, (b) valuing of what is experienced (/

historiographically represented ) performed from an individual perspective, (c) engagement in what is experienced (/historiographically presented).

A participant sees individuals, and himself, involved in events, judges all this from his own individual perspective, gets involved personally. A historian — being placed in another way — can (a) build a narration about what is individual, (b) judge what he writes about from his own, individual perspective, and (c) express in this narration personal engagement in described events. However, he should never obliterate the difference between his own role and the role of a spectator/participant.

A testimony is a certification of a former spectator/participant; a substitute testimony would be a statement by a historian engaged with his own person from a time distance and expressing this engagement, not necessarily in very prominent rhetorical expressions, in a historiographic representation.

Because there exists a time distance between the moment of experiencing events by a spectator/participant and the moment of their certification by a witness of the past one should distinguish between the spectator/participant's involvement in experienced events and the involvement of a narrator (witness) of a story springing into existence in the course of giving a testimony.

The identity of a witness giving a testimony is an identity structure, placed outside the story which is a testimony, of a subject creating the testimony (narrator) and giving it to another subject. A narrator's identity differs from an identity of a character whose fate is described by a testimony, involved relatively directly in the past (from the perspective of the time of giving the testimony) events, and also differs from a narrative identity of a character who is the structure of a story/testimony.

Between these types of identity exists an indirect bond which is formed thanks to an action undertaken by a narrator of recognizing himself (identifying himself) with the character whose fate the testimony concerns<sup>3</sup>. By his decision about identifying himself to a definite degree with the identity structures configured by him in a story (testimony) and related to the identity of a spectator/participant, the narrator settles in what way, particular to his own life, the dilemmas of the continuity of identity structures indicated by a theoretical consideration upon personal identity will be defined.

The involvement of a testimony's narrator in events described in it is a derivative of (a) the spectator/participant's involvement in events

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<sup>3</sup> P. Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. by D. Pellauer, Harvard University Press, 2005, pp. 297.

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surrounding him and (b) the mode of a narrator's recognizing himself in the identity structures configured in a testimony related to a former spectator/participant. A narrator is not involved in the certified world directly — here mediate the narrative structures produced by him and his own attitude towards them.

The above indicated — in a highly sketchy way — differences concerning the mode of involvement in certified events of a spectator/participant and of a witness/narrator warrant developing our argumentation hitherto in favor of the leading hypothesis of this text claiming that historiography could make attempts at formulating substitute testimonies. The latter could be put forward where there is a lack of statement — and here we introduce a consequence of the distinction introduced a moment ago — not so much of spectators/participants as of witnesses/narrators. A testimony is given by a narrator who at the moment of its formulating is no longer a participant, although he identifies himself with the latter in a given way, has a sense of continuity with the figure of a spectator/participant.

The key term of this scheme is the notion of recognition, identifying oneself. At the moment, we will not indicate all planes of meaning where it resonates. We will only emphasize the fact that recognizing (identifying) oneself is a construction of a relation (bond) with what presents itself as own and different at the same time. In recognizing himself the subject builds a bond with what is different making it — to some extent — his own by recognizing it as such. Let us add that one could indicate many degrees of intensity of the bond created as a result of identifying oneself and many modes of these bonds.

The most crucial thing is that the notion of recognizing oneself is voluminous enough to mean at the same time recognizing oneself and recognizing what is regarded as own — it is of interest for the recognizing one, it engages him, it is the way that he feels a strong bond with it, although he knows that the object of this bond remains something different than he himself. In recognizing himself that a narrator/ witness performs occurs simultaneously recognizing oneself and recognizing what is own — objects recognized in these dissimilar modes are the same object.

A historian wishing to formulate a substitute testimony finds himself in a situation different but similar to that of a narrator/witness. Different — because he cannot recognize himself in narrative structures; similar — because he can express in them his engagement in nourishing the bond which is created as a result of the accessible to a historian recognition of what he acknowledges as his own (and not as himself) in what he describes. Particularly to this extent a historian can, as we imagine, imitate a witness/narrator's structures of engagement (involvement) in past events.

Imitations of this kind, based on personal engagement, join the possibilities of imitating by a historian structures of experiencing events by a spectator/participant shown in the previous point.

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*by Maciej Bugajewski*

#### **A b s t r a c t**

In this article I argue that what could contribute to creating trust today are historiographic forms of narrations that resemble testimonies made by witnesses of the past, which I have defined as the “substitute testimony”. The focal point of my considerations is, firstly, the difference between a substitute testimony and a testimony given by a witness of the epoch, and secondly, its attitude to philosophical criticism that analyses the issue of giving a testimony. My propositions are based on the theory of testimony by Ricoeur. According to it, a testimony is a narration created through communicating everyday reality. Building a substitute testimony means formulating suppositions with respect to the possibility of experiencing past events by their participants as well as historian’s creation of a personal, subjective involvement in the difficult historical issues.

**K e y w o r d s :** testimony, substitute testimony, Paul Ricoeur, narration.