Paul Ricoeur and the Nazis

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Abstract
Richard Wolin questions the connection between the philosophy and politics of Paul Ricoeur to make three charges: 1) Ricoeur’s version of hermeneutics slides into a relativism of incommensurable perspectives; 2) Ricoeur’s “covert agenda” in his recent work, Memory, History, Forgetting is to come to terms with the regrettable choices he made in his youth; 3) Ricoeur left us a written record of his pro-Vichy sympathies that raise questions about the political implications of hermeneutics. Each claim is, however, far from true. Ricoeur’s hermeneutics is particularly sensitive to the charge of relativistic incommensurability and avoids it assiduously; his philosophical motivations in writing Memory, History, Forgetting are well known and are more important with respect to the work’s merit than his personal motivations; and his early political writings need to be read in light of a broader, life-long attempt to find a balance between the universal and particular in hermeneutics, ethics, and politics.

Keywords
Ricoeur, Wolin, hermeneutics, National Socialism, Christian-Socialism

Paul Ricoeur was many things in his life: Christian pacifist, prisoner of war, acclaimed professor of philosophy, author of over five hundred articles and thirty books, recipient of honorary degrees from thirty universities, and winner of dozens of international awards and prizes, including the Kyoto Prize in Arts and Philosophy and the John W. Kluge Prize, sometimes known as the “Nobel Prize for humanists.” Yet, according to Richard Wolin, Ricoeur deserves a far more dubious distinction. He should also be thought of as a former pro-Vichy, Nazi apologist whose hermeneutic philosophy is—not coincidentally—incapable of evaluating morally objectionable interpretations. Wolin’s article, “Paul Ricoeur as Another: How a Great Philosopher Wrestled with His Younger Self,” appeared in the October 14, 2005, edition of The Chronicle of Higher Education. ¹ In it he claims that Ricoeur’s “covert agenda”

in his recent work, *Memory, History, Forgetting* is to come to terms with the regrettable choices he made in his youth. Wolin links Ricoeur’s “youthful political transgressions” with “questions about the ethical adequacy of hermeneutics.” These charges about Ricoeur’s philosophy and politics are not new.

In the late 1990s a controversy emerged in France surrounding Ricoeur’s pre-war political writings following the publication of François Dosse’s intellectual biography, *Paul Ricoeur: Les sens d’une vie.* Dosse unearthed damning evidence of Ricoeur’s politics from a little-known Protestant-socialist journal, *Terre Nouvelle.* In the March 1939 edition we find Ricoeur publicly expressing admiration for some of Hitler’s speeches.

> I confess to feeling a genuine anguish in reading Hitler’s speech: not that I believe his intentions are pure, but in a language of a beautiful firmness—I was going to write a beautiful purity—he reminds the democracies of their hypocritical identification of law with the system of their interests, their harsh treatment of a disarmed Germany. . . .

And further on:

> This reason seems . . . in favor of a politics of conciliation: I believe that the German ideas of dynamism, of the vital energy of peoples, have more sense than our empty and hypocritical idea of law.

Such praise and willingness to make peace goes well beyond the typical silence and acquiescence shown by pacifists before the war even in the face the Nazi’s stated political designs. Ricoeur’s appreciation for the “dynamism” of German ideas is troubling since by 1939 the Nuremberg Laws were several years old and the National Socialists had already annexed the Rhineland, Austria, the Sudetenland, and were on their way to conquering Czechoslovakia. One French commentator wrote in 2000 of Ricoeur’s *Terre Nouvelle* article that he “was in a stupor when he discovered these remarks.”

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3) “Paul Ricoeur as Another,” 11.