

Georges Politzer's "brilliant errors"
Concrete psychology in France (1930-1980)

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This essay assesses the importance of Georges Politzer's (1903-1942) work in French philosophy and psychology. It proceeds by dividing his reception into four distinct moments, the features of which derive from the interconnected mutations of the scientific field in its relation with the transformation of the political field. In the first moment, the *Critique of the Foundations of Psychology* (1928), Politzer's most important work, played an essential role in introducing psychoanalysis into philosophy, psychology and psychiatry, also sketching the path of a possible encounter between psychoanalysis and Marxism. In the second moment, during the 1940s and the 1950s, following Politzer's Marxist auto-critique French communists widely rejected psychoanalysis as a dangerous ideology. In the third moment, during the 1960s in a context marked by structuralism, both the psychoanalysts and the Marxists addressed to Politzer's humanism a new, theoretical, critique. Finally, at the end of the 1960s and even more after May 68, Politzer's works had been republished and re-evaluated, and new transformations taking place in the intellectual and political field during the 1970s contributed to a better understanding of Politzer's essential role in French philosophy, psychology and psychoanalysis.

KEYWORDS: Politzer, Lacan, Althusser, Freud, Marx, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, Sartre.

In this article I evaluate Georges Politzer's (1903-1942) importance in French psychology and philosophy by reconstructing his reception between 1930 and 1980.¹ I claim that his legacy could be better understood if this long period is divided into four distinct moments, the conflicting dynamics of which derive from the interconnected mutations of the scientific field and the political field.

In the first part of the article I treat the 1930s and the 1940s, explaining how the *Critique of the Foundations of Psychology* (1928),² Politzer's most important work, played a crucial role in introducing psychoanalysis to France and in sketching the outlines of a reform of psychology. During this period the book also inspired many young academics in their critique of their mentors, and in the attempt to enact a new synthesis of Freudian psychology and Marxist sociology. Nonetheless, because Politzer's iconoclastic writing had made of him a *persona non grata* inside academia, his peers rarely mentioned his name. In the second part I focus on the period spanning roughly from 1948 until 1961, marked by the Communist Party's politics of "class against class" and by the condemnation of psychoanalysis. In 1930, when he became a member of the Communist Party, Politzer had to reject, as ideological, all of his previous writings, including the *Critique*; after his death in 1942 he came to be seen as an example for all communist intellectuals, as the paradigm of the Marxist hero who performed an intellectual auto-critique and sacrificed his life to the Party. In the third part I treat the 1960s, a period marked by the success of linguistic structuralism inside the human sciences. Structuralism's anti-humanism was incompatible with the project of an empirical psychology focussing on the "concrete man." In this period Politzer's work came to be compared to that of other scholars of his generation, and stigmatized as humanist, naïve, ideological and non-scientific. The philosopher Louis Althusser (1917-1990) and the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), along with their close collaborators, played an important role in this regard, condemning Politzer. Finally, in the fourth part of the article I focus on the 1970s. In this period, on the one hand the consequences of May 68 provided the conditions for a new encounter between psychoanalysis and Marxism. On the other hand, following the republication of the *Critique of the Foundations of Psychology* in 1967, Lacan underlined the importance of this book for his work, despite the objections he and his school had addressed to it. The result was a small rediscovery of Politzer's work, and a more serious historical assessment of his importance in France.

¹ For a reconstruction of Politzer's trajectory, see Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co. A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985*. Translated by Jeffrey Mehlman, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990; Bud Burkhardt, *French Marxism Between the Wars: Henri Lefebvre and the "Philosophies"*. New York, Humanities Books, 2000 p. 81-104; Michel Politzer, *Les trois morts de Georges Politzer*, Paris, Flammarion, 2013; Giuseppe Bianco (ed.), *Georges Politzer, le concret et sa signification. Psychologie, philosophie et politique*, Paris, Hermann, 2016. Finally, for an alternative history of psychoanalysis to Roudinesco's, see Jacqueline Carroy, Annick Ohayon, Régine Plas, *Histoire de la psychologie en France. XIXe-XXe siècles*. Paris: La Découverte 2006 and Annick Ohayon *Psychologie et psychanalyse en France. L'impossible rencontre (1919-1969)*. Paris : La Découverte, 2006.

² Georges Politzer, *Critique of the Foundations of Psychology: The Psychology of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Maurice Apprey (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1994).

Obliteration through incorporation

World War I was followed by a generational break between, on the one hand, scholars born after 1900 and educated during the 1920s, and, on the other, their mentors, whose intellectual framework was shaped during the *Belle Époque*. Philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), Jean Hyppolite (1907-1968), Georges Canguilhem (1904-1995), Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991), Paul Nizan (1905-1940) and Georges Politzer himself accused their masters of having produced abstract and ideological theories unable to grasp the complexity of the world in which they were living. Philosophers like Henri Bergson (1859-1941), Léon Brunschvicg (1869-1944) and André Lalande (1869-1964), sociologists like Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and Céléstin Bouglé (1870-1940) and psychologists like Théodule Ribot (1876-1916) and Georges Dumas (1866-1946) were criticized for having being unable to understand the “concreteness” of man, neglecting the social, affective and bodily dimensions making up the complexity of human reality. While neo-Kantianism had reduced man to a disincarnated mind, sociology and psychology transformed it into a thing, analysed from the third-person perspective proper to the natural sciences. This reification was often interpreted as an alienating ideology, aiming at exploiting men. The ultimate proof that these theories were misleading was found in the fact that these intellectuals born during the 19th century did not hesitate in participating in war propaganda.

As a reaction to this situation, a generation of young philosophers and psychologists started importing into France texts of foreign authors, especially German authors. A new theoretical arsenal was constructed using concepts taken from Freud, Marx, Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger. Freud’s major texts had already been translated into French during the 1920s, but his work was still understood according to the categories of classic French psychology and psychopathology. On the one hand, notions such as the unconscious, the super-ego and the drives were completely misunderstood or conceived starting from a physiological standpoint. On the other hand, the Freudian fashion in literature and in popular culture made the new orientation look unscientific. The vast majority of French philosophers and psychologists, who had a strong neo-Kantian training, considered psychoanalysis as a dogmatic form of realism or as a simple mystification. Charles Blondel (1876-1939), a psychologist with two PhDs, one in medicine and one in philosophy, published a pamphlet, *La psychoanalyse* (1924), vigorously attacking Freud. As for Marxism, while the large majority of communist militants were treating Engels’, Marx’s and Lenin’s writings as sacred texts, most philosophers considered historical materialism as a determinist economicism.

In the articles he published in ephemeral journals such as *L’Esprit* and *La Revue marxiste*, Politzer, along with his friends and collaborators Henri Lefebvre, Georges Friedmann (1902-1977) and Norbert Gutermann (1900-1984), contributed to changing Marx’s image, privileging his first writings, such as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, considered as a legacy of post-Kantian idealism. In

the articles he published between 1928 and 1929 in his journal *Revue de psychologie concrète* and in the *Critique*, which was meant to be part of a larger project likely to be entitled *Matériaux pour une critique des fondements de la psychologie*, Politzer sketched the structure of an epistemological reform in psychology guided by a neo-Kantian framework. He extracted from the latest psychological approaches, namely behaviourism, *Gestalt* and psychoanalysis, the elements useful for creating a “concrete psychology,” a type of psychology intended to provide a better understanding of human subjectivity by focussing on its active features.

Politzer focused especially on psychoanalysis, with the aim of isolating its scientific and revolutionary intuitions and liberating it from all traces of realism, such as those present in Freud’s metapsychology. In doing so Politzer had the courage of going against the grain, taking distance from the older generation of French anti-psychoanalytical psychologists, such as Blondel, and from the first generation of French psychoanalysts, namely Rudolph Loewenstein (1898-1976), Marie Bonaparte (1882-1962), René Laforgue (1894-1962), Eugénie Sokolnicka (1884-1934) and Edouard Pichon (1890-1940), who created, in 1926, the *Société psychanalytique de Paris* and, in 1927, the *Revue française de psychanalyse*.

Influenced by behaviourism, Politzer claimed that psychology, guided by psychoanalysis, should get rid of introspection and start from the observation of human behaviour. Following *Gestalt* theory, this behaviour, the patient’s speech, had to be fragmented into meaningful “dramatic sequences.” Their meaning had to be considered in relation to the *Je*, or the ego. According to Politzer, a dream, a complex, a parapraxis, or a neurosis had to be considered from a teleological standpoint. They are all *acts* to be understood in relation to the subject’s intentions, which give them their meaning. Because of his focus on the *Je*, the ego, on the “first person,” Politzer criticised the notion of the unconscious, which he understood as a realist residue of the old psychology’s use of a “third person” perspective, a type of psychology that Freud tried to criticize. According to Politzer, what Freud called the “unconscious,” was nothing but the result of the act of repression. With this interpretation of psychoanalysis Politzer was able to save the unity of mind, essential to neo-Kantian philosophy, from the fragmentation introduced by Freud. He was able as to show how, starting from a subjective perspective, one could produce a synthesis of psychoanalysis and Marxism. He argued that it was by the act of repressing that the subject became fragmented and alienated, and that the task of the psychoanalyst was to help the patient in overcoming the pathologies related to this alienation. Politzer was finally able to criticise most of psychology, based on the “third person” perspective for being part of bourgeois ideology, aiming at alienating and disempowering men.

During the 1930 and the 1940s Politzer’s effect was important, but almost invisible. The *Critique*’s influence on the human sciences can be read through the sociological notion of “obliteration by incorporation,” according to which certain ideas become so

common and “incorporated” that their creators are forgotten, therefore “obliterated.”³ Because of his irreverent tone his writing was well received by avant-gardist and Marxist journals, but, with the exception of a few cases, such as that of the Marxist psychologist Henri Wallon (1879-1962), established academics responded with either scepticism or hostility.⁴ After the publication of the *Revue de psychanalyse concrète* and of the violent pamphlet *La Fin d’une parade philosophique: le bergsonisme* (1929), Politzer’s intransigent radicalism was stigmatized.⁵ The following year, when he was finally accepted as member of the Communist Party, Politzer agreed to publicly reject, as ideological, all of his previous writings, included the *Critique*, and with this became a dogmatic communist. He criticised and even derided psychoanalysis, behaviourism, neo-Kantianism and phenomenology. Even if Politzer’s peers shared his theoretical issues and agreed with his criticisms of their older colleagues, this situation invited them to prudence. As a result Politzer’s intellectual peers avoided mentioning his name and appropriated his ideas without acknowledging their origin.

The most striking example is that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. On June 1945, in the essay “The War Took Place,” published in the first issue of *Temps Modernes*, the philosopher assessed the difficult past five years. According to him the communists had both misunderstood the meaning of the war, which they considered as essentially “imperialist,” and underestimated the importance of the superstructure, namely of ideology, since they considered it as a simple effect of the economic structure. Merleau-Ponty did not mention Politzer, who, nonetheless, was one of the rare communists who explicitly opposed the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. Politzer had also insisted on the importance of the superstructure, publishing, during the 1930s, several essays criticizing the ideology behind German and French philosophy. Merleau-Ponty knew Politzer’s work very well: his *Structure of Behaviour*, published in 1943 but completed in 1938, may be considered as a development of some of Politzer’s intuitions, interpreted through the lenses of phenomenology and Hegelian dialectic. Merleau-Ponty’s critique of psychology’s “realism,” his interpretation of behaviourism, psychoanalysis and the *Gestalt*, his obsessive call for the elaboration of a “concrete” psychology, and the usage of the notion of “human drama” were all inherited from Politzer, who received no more than a brief mention in the bibliography. The same applies to Sartre. Sartre’s project of a phenomenological reform of psychology as presented in *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1936) and *Sketch for a Theory of Emotions* (1939), as well as the important concept of “bad faith,” presented in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) as a non-realist alternative to the notion of the unconscious, would have not been possible without the work of Politzer, whose name is mentioned briefly in just two footnotes. Just like Merleau-Ponty, both

³ Robert King Merton (1910-2003) developed the concept of obliteration by incorporation (OBI) in *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York, Free Press, 1968).

⁴ For a complete list of reviews the *Critique*, *Revue de psychologie concrète* and *La Fin d’une parade philosophique*, see Bud Burkhard, *French Marxism Between the Wars*.

⁵ Politzer’s writings were clearly influenced by the surrealist manifestos. His 1929 pamphlet inspired those that were published in the following few years, such as Emmanuel Berl’s *Mort de la morale bourgeoise* (Paris, Gallimard, 1930) and Paul Nizan’s *Les chiens de garde* (Paris, Rieder, 1932).

Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir knew Politzer's writings well, and they had even met him.⁶ In an article originally published in 1956, the psychoanalyst Jean-Bertrand Pontalis (1924-2013), Sartre's former pupil, claimed: "unconsciousness does not have a good reputation. Our philosophers especially don't like it at all."⁷ Once again, if Sartre and Merleau-Ponty were mentioned, Politzer wasn't.

Daniel Lagache (1903-1972), Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's schoolmate, PhD in both philosophy and medicine, French psychology's godfather since he created the first graduate degree in this discipline in 1947, and the first to ever teach psychoanalysis in an academic environment, never mentions Politzer, not even in a footnote or bibliography. Nonetheless, the *Critique* had influenced his work since his PhD dissertation *Les Hallucinations verbales* (1934). In the 1938 essay "Note sur le langage et la personne" ["Notes on language and the person"], Lagache opposed the "new" "concrete" and "holistic" psychology he was promoting to the "older," "elementary" and "abstract" one.⁸ In these writings and in his famous *L'unité de la psychologie*, the first lecture he gave at the Sorbonne in 1947 that he published in the form of a book two years later,⁹ Lagache followed in Politzer's footsteps. Lagache tried to ground psychology as a science, but his work did not have any of Politzer's original rigour and courage. In fact Lagache, essentially a diplomat and a go-getter, put into the same eclectic basket Bergsonism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, *Gestalt* and behaviourism. While his student Juliette Favez-Boutonnier (1903-1994), one of the forgotten women who carved out the the history of French psychology, spoke about the *Critique* during the lectures she delivered at the Sorbonne, such as the *Problèmes de psychologie générale* (1956), the name of Politzer is absent even in Lagache's introduction to psychoanalysis *La Psychanalyse* (1956), printed in thousands of copies. This was one the reasons why the philosopher and doctor Georges Canguilhem (1904-1995), who since 1929 had publicly praised Politzer's theoretical and political courage,¹⁰ did not miss the opportunity, in his caustic essay "What is psychology?" (1957),¹¹ to deride Lagache's *Unité de la psychologie*, leaving a mark on several generations of philosophers and producing a widespread, and partly unjust, disdain for psychology.

The psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan was more honest than Lagache, who had been his colleague at the *Société française de psychanalyse* from 1953 until

⁶ See Simone de Beauvoir, *Cahiers de jeunesse. 1926-1930*, Paris, Gallimard, 2008; *Journal de guerre: Septembre 1939-Janvier 1941* (Paris, Gallimard, 1990), *Mémoires d'une jeune fille range* (Paris, Gallimard, 1958), *Force de l'âge* (Paris, Gallimard, 1960).

⁷ Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, "La découverte freudienne," in *Après Freud*, Paris: Gallimard, 1993, p. 44.

⁸ Daniel Lagache, "Notes sur le Langage et la Personne," in *Les Hallucinations verbales et travaux cliniques. 1932-1946*, Paris, PUF, 1977, pp. 258-259.

⁹ For Lagache's itinerary, see Alejandro Dagfal "La psychanalyse à l'intérieur de la psychologie : les avatars du projet de Daniel Lagache." *Essaim*, t. 1, n. 9, 2002, p. 33-51.

¹⁰ See Georges Canguilhem, "Quelques livres : La fin d'une parade philosophique : le bergsonisme." (1929), in *Œuvres complètes. Ecrits philosophiques et politiques 1926-1939*, Paris, Vrin, 2011, pp. 221-228,

¹¹ Georges Canguilhem, "What is Psychology?," trans. Howard Davies, *Ideology and Consciousness*, vol. 7, Autumn 1980, 46-50. For Canguilhem's critique of psychology, see Jean-François Braunstein, "La critique canguilhemienne de la psychologie," *Bulletin de psychologie*, t. 52, n. 2, 1999, p.181-190.

1963. In the important paper “Presentation on Psychological Causality,”¹² presented on the 28th of September, 1946, at a conference organised by his colleague Henri Ey (1900-1977), he paid tribute to Politzer. He considered him to be the first and only French scholar who tried to lay out the guidelines for grounding psychology as a solid science. Lacan regretted Politzer’s death and the general abandonment of his project by the scientific community. Since the early 1930s, when he read the *Critique*, probably under the suggestion of his analyst, Rudolph Loewenstein (1898-1976),¹³ Lacan had been inspired by Politzer’s project of a concrete psychology guided by psychoanalysis, and, partially, by behaviourism,¹⁴ two approaches freed from the abstraction and realism proper to academic psychopathology. He considered psychoanalysis to be the first psychological approach to consider mental pathology not as a deficit, but as a meaningful act, as a “phenomenon related to thought.”¹⁵ Politzer influenced Lacan’s 1932 PhD in medicine, *La Psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité* [*Paranoid Psychosis Considered in Relation to the Personality*]. In this study he considered a clinical case, that of “Aimée,” starting from the “concrete significations” and intentions structuring her personality. According to Lacan, the task of the psychologist was the one of understanding the “meaning” of “human behaviour.” “Concrete psychology” was considered as “the genetic study of intentional functions,”¹⁶ and only psychoanalysis provided the tools to make this inquiry possible. Following the *Critique*, Lacan distinguished between the ego [*Je*], namely, the intentional subject of desire, and the imaginary me [*moi*], resulting from the social relations. He criticized the notion of the unconscious and, more generally, Freud’s meta-psychology. In an essay from 1933 Lacan borrowed from Politzer’s vitriolic Marxist tones, opposing psychoanalysis to a “school psychology” based on a “naïve confidence in mechanist thinking,” an ideological form that appeared at the “peak of bourgeois civilization.”¹⁷ It is in this regard that in the essay “Beyond *The Principle of Reality*” (1936)¹⁸ Lacan spoke of psychoanalysis as a real “revolution.” This revolution was based on Freud’s technique, aiming at localising in the patient’s speech, considered as an act, a hidden meaning, tied to her intentions. Nonetheless, despite the crucial importance of Politzer in this theorization, Lacan had never explicitly mentioned his name before 1946.

¹² Jacques Lacan, “Presentation on Psychological Causality,” in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, New York: W. W. Norton, 2007, 123-60.

¹³ Loewenstein had reviewed the book in his *Revue française de psychanalyse* (n. 3, 1928, p. 578-587): noticing Politzer’s Kantian approach, he praised his good will, but criticised him for not having acquired a sufficient knowledge of Freud’s works.

¹⁴ See the essay “La famille: le complexe, facteur concret de la psychologie familiale. Les complexes familiaux en pathologie,” published in the *Encyclopédie française* (t. VIII, 1938, p. 103).

¹⁵ “Presentation on psychic causality,” p. 131-2.

¹⁶ Jacques Lacan, *La psychose paranoïaque et ses rapports avec la personnalité* (1932), Paris, Seuil, 1998, p. 315.

¹⁷ Jacques Lacan, “Le problème du style et la conception psychiatrique des formes paranoïaques de l’expérience” (1933) in *Psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité*, p. 69.

¹⁸ Now republished in *Ecrits*.

The cult of personality

In May 1942, because of his role in the Communist Party and in anti-German propaganda, Politzer, along with his wife and other militant friends, was captured, tortured and executed by the Nazis. He quickly became a national martyr and, inside the Communist Party, the object of a cult of personality similar to the one reserved for Stalin and to the Communist heroes. While France was still occupied Charles de Gaulle (1890-1970) had already saluted his heroism, during a speech given in Alger on the 30th of October, 1943.¹⁹ A few months later, in the clandestine pamphlet *Le crime contre l'esprit: les martyrs* [*Crime against the Spirit: the Martyrs*], Louis Aragon (1897-1982), one of the most prominent intellectuals to be a member of the Communist Party, sketched his life and heroic death, making of him the paradigm of the “communist man,” the one “who does not ask anything for himself, but wants humanity to have everything;” Politzer was the one who sacrificed “his work to the Party, before falling, shot by the Nazis.”²⁰ At the end of the war, in 1944, in the first issue of the Communist Party’s journal *La Pensée*, Lefebvre, one of Politzer’s oldest friends, recalled again his “philosophical and patriotic heroism.”²¹ In 1945 the Marxist sociologist Pierre Naville (1903-1993), who had helped bring behaviourism to France during the 1930s, also paid tribute to his colleague.²² The following year Lefebvre, who had become the Party’s most prominent philosopher, published *L’existentialisme* (1946), in which he attacked this intellectual current, considered as ideological, and even “excrementalist,” because of its obsession with the most abject and hopeless aspects of human existence. He despised Sartre’s opportunism and praised the courage and intellectual dedication that drove Politzer to sacrifice his psychological research and instead to study economics, a science he considered of more use in understanding the macrostructural transformations of society.²³ In fact, between 1932 and 1939, Politzer had written around thirty essays on economic issues for the *Cahiers du bolchevisme* and, in 1938, he signed the pamphlet *Les trusts contre la France*. With two friends and Party comrades, Jacques Duclos (1886-1975) and Jacques Solomon (1908-1942), he tried to sketch a fiscal reform to be proposed to the government.

In 1947, the author of an anonymous article published in the Trotskyist journal *Octobre* regretted precisely this turn, and with it Politzer’s Marxist dogmatism. Jean Kanapa (1921-1978), a member of the Party and a former student of Sartre, reacted immediately in an article in *La Pensée*,²⁴ and in his *L’existentialisme n’est pas un*

¹⁹ Charles de Gaulle, “Discours prononcé à Alger à l’occasion du 60e anniversaire de l’Alliance française, le 30 octobre 1943.” *Discours et Messages*, Paris, Plon, 1970, v. 1, p. 334-335.

²⁰ See Louis Aragon, *L’Homme communiste*, Paris, Gallimard, 1946, p. 41-42.

²¹ Henri Lefebvre, “Georges Politzer,” *La Pensée*, n. 1, octobre 1944.

²² Pierre Naville, “Itinéraire de Georges Politzer.” in *Psychologie, marxisme, matérialisme*, Paris, Marcel Rivière, 1948.

²³ The fact that Politzer abandoned psychology for economics is underlined again by Sartre in 1950 (Jean-Paul Sartre, “Portrait de l’aventurier, introduction,” in *Situations VI*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, p. 27) and then again, in 1959, by Lefebvre (*La Somme et le reste*, Paris, Anthropos, 2008).

²⁴ Cf. Jean Kanapa, “Georges Politzer et la Calomnie.” *La pensée*, n. 10, 1947, p. 106-109.

humanisme (1947). The book opened with a long homage to Politzer, and presented him as the first French philosopher to have the courage to analyse and criticise, as ideology, Bergsonism, existentialism and psychoanalysis. Much like Lefebvre, the young communist philosopher considered existentialism as the last and most dangerous ideological avatar of the necrotic bourgeoisie. At the same time Kanapa edited a series of books under Politzer's name, published by the *Éditions sociales*: the pamphlet against Bergson, renamed *Le bergsonisme: une mystification philosophique* (1947), a selection of his essays on psychology, entitled *La crise de la psychologie contemporaine* (1947), and a series of lectures in philosophy that Politzer gave to the Folk University during the 1930s, published as *Principes élémentaires de philosophie* (1948). With the publication of this work the French Communist Party could canonize Politzer's works published after 1930 and hide the importance of the *Critique*. On each and every anniversary of Politzer's death, all of the journals and newspapers related to the Communist Party celebrated his political and theoretical courage.

On the 30th of September, 1947, the Party adopted the Soviet Zhdanov Doctrine, which was to divide the world into two camps: the "imperialistic" and "inhuman," headed by the United States, and the "democratic" and "humanist," headed by the Soviet Union. Inside French-style Zhdanovism Politzer became a fundamental figure, on account of both his actions and his writings. Starting from that moment the intellectuals tied to the Party denounced any intellectual currents that provoked a deviation from the ideological lines dictated from the Komintern as ideological mystifications: phenomenology and neo-Hegelianism, functionalist sociology and behaviourism, existentialism and psychoanalysis were all attacked and discredited. Psychoanalysis received a particularly harsh treatment: its alleged paternalism and individualism were considered as mischievous ways for the bourgeois ideologists to anesthetize the proletariat. In 1949, a campaign of denunciation began with a manifesto entitled "Self-Criticism. Psychoanalyse, une idéologie réactionnaires," published in the 7th issue of the Kanapa-direct communist journal *La Nouvelle Critique*²⁵ and signed by dozens of communist psychologists and psychiatrists. From that moment, until the 1960s, Freud and his followers were excluded from the corpus that communist scholars should refer to,²⁶ and Politzer's anti-psychoanalytical essays from the 1930s played an essential role as an example.²⁷

French Zhdanovism determined a change in the intellectual trajectory of the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, who, at the end of the war, had started showing interest in psychoanalysis. While in a note in his 1947 dissertation, *On Content in the Thought of G.W.F. Hegel*,²⁸ he had praised the "Freudian dialectic" and especially Politzer's interpretation, starting from 1948 he stopped mentioning psychoanalysis, and

²⁵ An entire section of the journal was dedicated to the theme "La psychanalyse, idéologie réactionnaire", *La Nouvelle Critique*, n. 7 juin 1949, p. 57-72.

²⁶ On this point, see Bernard Foutrier, *L'identité communiste : La psychanalyse, la psychiatrie, la psychologie*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2000, p. 388.

²⁷ On this aspect, see Bernard Muldworf, "Georges Politzer et la psychanalyse," *La Pensée*, n. 318, 1999.

²⁸ Louis Althusser, "On Content in the Thought of G.W.F. Hegel," translated by G.M. Goshgarian. In *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings*. London, NY: Verso, 1997.

criticized the ahistorical approach to man found in most mainstream psychology.²⁹ In this period Althusser created the “Georges Politzer Circle” at the *Ecole normale*, an institution training a significant part of the French intelligentsia and where he was working as a lecturer. The aim of this circle was to bring communist intellectuals to the school in order to educate the students in Marxism and attract them to the Communist Party. At this time, in fact, a quarter of the students of the *Ecole* had joined the Party.³⁰ Almost twenty years later, in his book *For Marx* (1966), Althusser recalled that during this period Politzer, along with the historian of philosophy Auguste Cornu (1888-1981), was the only intellectual providing him with the inspiration he needed.³¹

Despite the Party’s hard-line stance many of Althusser’s students were enthusiastic readers of the *Critique*, and they were contending for the only copy available in the *Ecole*’s library; the book, which had never been republished since 1928, was very hard to find. One of these youngsters was Althusser’s student Michel Foucault (1926-1984), at the time member of the Communist Party.³² In 1951, after having completed his studies in philosophy and psychology, Foucault started lecturing in psychology at Lille University and at the *École normale*. Under Althusser’s invitation he authored a Marxist manual of psychology, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*. This book followed the Party’s ideological lines: Pavlov’s reflex psychology was highly praised, while psychoanalysis was accused of masking the real causes of mental illness. Foucault argued that mental pathology had to be treated historically, namely dialectically, as the result of social conflicts. Nonetheless, throughout the book, Foucault constantly used, without mentioning his name, notions coined by Politzer, such as those of the “concrete” and “human drama.”³³

A series of “brilliant errors”

Seven years later, in 1960, Jean Laplanche (1924-2012), one of Foucault’s schoolmates at the *Ecole normale* during the late 1940s, authored the most important theoretical attack addressed to the *Critique* from a psychoanalytical standpoint. Laplanche, who, in the meantime, had become a psychiatrist, wrote the first part of a paper co-authored with his colleague Serge Leclaire (1924-1994), “The Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Study.”³⁴ In the section “Meaning and Letter. An Examination of Politzer’s *Critique*,” Laplanche aligned himself with the latest developments of Lacan’s thought, Lacan having been his and Leclaire’s analyst and intellectual guide.

²⁹ See, for example, Louis Althusser, *Lettres à Hélène*, Paris, Grasset, 2011, p. 160-162.

³⁰ On this see Jean-François Sirinelli, “Les normaliens de la rue d’Ulm après 1945: une génération communiste?” *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, n. 32, oct.-déc. 1986, p. 569-588.

³¹ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*. Translated by Ben Brewster, London: Verso, 2010, p. 26.

³² Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, translation by Betsy Wing, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1991, p. 30.

³³ Michel Foucault, *Maladie mentale et personnalité*, Paris, PUF, 1953, p. 123.

³⁴ Jean Laplanche and Serge Leclaire, “The Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Study,” translated by Patrick Coleman, *Yale French Studies* No. 48, *French Freud: Structural Studies in Psychoanalysis* (1972), pp. 118-175.

Since the mid-fifties, influenced by linguistic structuralism and, more secretly, by Martin Heidegger's (1889-1976) writings on language and ontology, Lacan had undertaken a radical change: he corrected his initial criticism of the idea of the unconscious, and now presented it as the key notion in psychoanalysis. This notion had to be considered as a symbolic structure similar to that organising a language. He used the distinction, established by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), between *parole*, namely what is said, and *langue*, the structure making possible what is said, in order to oppose *letter* and *meaning* [*sense*].

Laplanche used this new approach in order to criticize Politzer's idea of the unconscious as the result of the act of repressing. But more than this, by naming Politzer, Laplanche wanted to attack French existential phenomenology's appropriation of Freud.³⁵ Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, inspired by Politzer, did not only reject the notion of the unconscious, but also appropriated and disarmed some of Freud's most important concepts. Laplanche presented his paper during the sixth psychiatry conference organised by Henri Ey in Bonneval, in a conference section devoted precisely to "Inconscient et pensée philosophique." On the same panel the phenomenologist philosopher Paul Ricœur (1913-2005) spoke about "Le conscient et l'inconscient," the Heideggerian historian of philosophy Alfred de Waelhens (1911-1981) presented the paper "Sur l'inconscient et la pensée philosophique," and the phenomenologist, philosopher and psychiatrist Georges Lanteri-Laura (1930-2004) discussed "Les problèmes de l'inconscient et la pensée phénoménologique." Merleau-Ponty, along with the Hegelian philosopher Jean Hyppolite, who had also shown interest in Lacan's work since the 1950s,³⁶ joined the discussions.

Laplanche's main argument was addressed against Politzer's notion that the psychoanalyst's task was one of treating human behaviour as a series of meaningful acts attached to the ego [*Je*]. Latent meaning would thus be found in the ego's intentions, in a meaning she was ignoring. According to Laplanche, this ingenious interpretation was nonetheless unable to account for the conflicting dialectic between the latent and the manifest meaning. In getting rid of the unconscious it became impossible to provide univocal criteria for treating the analytical material, and the patient's speech was thus open to multiple readings. Despite his good intentions Politzer ended up promoting relativism, which was one of the features of the phenomenologists' interpretations of Freud. According to Laplanche, if psychoanalysis wanted to be rigorous, it had to give the analyst the means to localize the objective "nodal points" structuring the patient's speech; these points were essential in order to grasp the meaning of what was said. Lacan's idea of an unconscious structured as a language offered exactly this possibility of making the narrative intelligible. Laplanche concluded his paper by neatly separating "real" psychoanalysis, i.e. Lacan's, from the interpretations of Freud formulated in psychology or phenomenology.

³⁵ For the polemics between Lacan and Laplanche, see *Jacques Lacan & Co.*

³⁶ Hyppolite followed Lacan's seminar at Sainte-Anne hospital, and even presented a paper on Freud and Hegel. See Jean Hyppolite, "Spoken Commentary on Freud's 'Verneinung,'" in Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 746-754.

Despite the resistance of Merleau-Ponty, who expressed his perplexities during the conference,³⁷ Laplanche's critique had important repercussions in French philosophy and psychoanalysis. In 1962, in the *Revue de l'enseignement philosophique*, Althusser published "Philosophie et sciences humaines,"³⁸ an essay in which he tried to assess, from the perspective of a Marxist philosopher, the debates related to the rise of the human sciences, and, more specifically, that of linguistic structuralism. According to Althusser communist philosophers had to be vigilant, since they were facing new ideological enemies. "We are no longer," Althusser argued, "at the time when Politzer caused a scandal by denouncing [in the *Critique*] Bergsonian mystifications and psychological abstractions."³⁹ The enemies were no longer spiritualism and empirical psychology, but Skinnerian behaviourism and especially ego-psychology, a vulgarization of psychoanalysis promoted by Lowenstein and other European psychoanalysts who emigrated to the United States during the 1930s and 1940s. Althusser considered these North American intellectual currents as fearful enemies, since they contained the most up-to-date techniques aiming at adapting the individual to the needs of a capitalist society. These theories were based on an imposture, an ahistorical concept of "man," likely to be analysed empirically. At the end of this essay, Althusser praised Lacan⁴⁰ for having been the only psychoanalyst who had the courage to criticize them.⁴¹ In fact in the first version of the important paper that marked his "structuralist" turn, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," published in 1956 in the journal *La Psychanalyse* after being presented in Rome in 1953, Lacan had treated these currents as a "new obscurantism," aiming at "the adaptation of the individual to the social environment."

During the academic year 1963-64, Althusser devoted one of his seminars to psychoanalysis.⁴² Under Althusser's invitation his students Michel Tort and Jacques-Alain Miller (1944-), who would later become one of Lacan's most dogmatic pupils, gave a presentation on Politzer,⁴³ which was nothing but a commentary on Laplanche's paper.⁴⁴ A year later, Althusser published a long and important essay,

³⁷ See *L'inconscient. VIe colloque de Bonneval*, Paris, Desclée De Brouwer, 1966, p. 14. For a commentary on these issues, see Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, "La position du problème de l'inconscient chez Merleau-Ponty," (1961), in *Après Freud*, Paris, Gallimard, 1993, p. 76-97.

³⁸ Louis Althusser, "Philosophie et sciences humaines," *Solitude de Machiavel*, Paris, PUF, 1998.

³⁹ "Philosophie et sciences humaines," p. 47.

⁴⁰ In his "Introduction" to Althusser's *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan* (translated by Jeffrey Mehlman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 1-7) François Matheron situates the context of this and previous seminars (from 1959) during which Althusser, along with his students Emmanuel Terray and Alain Badiou, discussed texts by Leclaire and Lacan.

⁴¹ "Philosophie et sciences humaines," p. 53.

⁴² For Althusser's relation to psychoanalysis, see Pascale Gillot, *Althusser et la psychanalyse*, Paris, PUF, 2009.

⁴³ Louis Althusser, Etienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey, Jacques Rancière, *Reading Capital*, translated by Ben Brewster, London: Verso, 2009, p. 96 et p. 133.

⁴⁴ In the interview "Strong structuralism, Weak Subject", in Peter Hallward et Know Peden (ed.) *Concept and Form, Volume 2: Interviews and Essays on Cahiers Pour L'Analyse* (London, Verso, 2013, p. 1), Yves Dureux affirms that it had been Laplanche's paper that made Althusser change his ideas concerning psychoanalysis.

simply entitled “Freud and Lacan.”⁴⁵ On the one hand, against the troika of the Communist Party, the philosopher recognized Freud as the one and only founder of a new science, a science that could provide Marxism with important critical tools. On the other hand, he considered Lacan as Freud’s best French reader, dethroning Politzer from his position. Althusser then invited Lacan to hold his weekly public seminar at the *Ecole normale*. At the same time, during the conference “The Place of Psychoanalysis in the Human Sciences” (1964),⁴⁶ Althusser underlined Politzer’s importance as one who introduced psychoanalysis into philosophy, but criticized him for his errors. In his “fundamental” *Critique*, Politzer denounced “psychology’s abstractions” and “announced the advent of new times,” namely “concrete psychology,” a “psychology without a soul,” based on psychoanalysis. Nonetheless, insofar as Politzer wanted at any cost to get rid of Freud’s “abstract” concepts, he criticized the notion of the unconscious, ending up being left without anything. According to Althusser, who was strongly influenced by Gaston Bachelard’s (1884-1962) philosophy of knowledge, science was impossible without abstract concepts; therefore one should not oppose “non-abstract concepts” to “abstract concepts,” but rather “scientific abstract concepts” to “non-scientific abstract concepts.”⁴⁷ Politzer’s concepts were all abstractions, but, since he wanted them to be “concrete” at any cost, he had to condemn them as “bad abstractions.” This is the reason why these notions led psychoanalysis to ideological relativism, namely “to nothing else, but to Merleau-Ponty and to Sartre.”⁴⁸ Althusser agreed with Politzer that psychoanalysis *was* a science, but, against him, and following Laplanche, he argued that Freud’s object was not “meaning,” and therefore the ego, but the “letter,” the structural unconscious, an objective reality.

In 1965, one year before the publication of Lacan’s ground-breaking *Ecrits*, in the “Preface” to *For Marx*⁴⁹ and in a note in *Reading Capital*⁵⁰ Althusser spoke again of the *Critique*, defining it as a series of “brilliant errors” which did not lead to any concrete results.⁵¹ Behind this theoretical failure there was the “ideological function of the un-criticized concept of concreteness,” which was unable to provide a foundation for science. Althusser compared Politzer’s and the phenomenologist’s humanism and empiricism to Ludwig Feuerbach’s (1804-1872). Feuerbach, who had influenced the young Marx, had spent his entire life trying “desperately to free himself from ideology,” but did not manage to do so because he based his critique on humanism and on the naïve faith in concreteness.⁵² In 1969, during the conference

⁴⁵ The text is now published in Louis Althusser, *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan*, translated by Jeffrey Mehlman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, 7-33.

⁴⁶ Louis Althusser, “The Place of Psychoanalysis in the Human Sciences.” In *Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences* (translated by Stephen Randall, New York, Columbia, 2016), 49-178.

⁴⁷ “The Place of Psychoanalysis in the Human Sciences,” p. 73. This observation is also present in the essay “Freud and Lacan.”

⁴⁸ “The Place of Psychoanalysis in the Human Sciences,” p. 74.

⁴⁹ *For Marx*, p. 26. The translator transforms the French “*erreurs géniales*” into “genius of errors.”

⁵⁰ *Reading Capital*, n. 15, p. 388

⁵¹ Other Marxists strongly opposed this reading (see for instance Ovsienne Tutundjian, “La psychologie de Georges Politzer.” *Recherches internationales à la lumière du marxisme*, n. 51, 1966, p. 104-129).

⁵² *Reading Capital*, n. 15, p. 388-389.

“Lenin and Philosophy,” Althusser confirmed his position. He depicted Politzer as “the Feuerbach of modern times.” whose “critique of speculative psychology in the name of a concrete psychology” could be compared to Feuerbach’s attempt to criticize Hegel’s speculative philosophy from the standpoint of a humanist and concrete philosophy. Politzer provided phenomenology and existentialism with the means to appropriate psychoanalysis, and to transform a science into ideological relativism.⁵³

More generally, Politzer’s “concrete psychology” was incompatible with the state of the art in the human and social sciences. In Claude Lévi-Strauss’ (1908-2009) *The Savage Mind* (1962), where the anthropologist had directly attacked Sartre’s humanism and naïve teleological historicism, Lévi-Strauss, who had been an admiring reader of Politzer during the 1930s, proclaimed that the aim of the human sciences was not one of grasping empirically all the aspects of man, but, through structural linguistics, of “dissolving” the very concept of man. Against phenomenology, which affirmed that the human subject was able to attribute meaning to its objects, structuralism claimed that meaning appeared as an effect of a symbolic structure in which the concept of man was simply occupying a place. At the same time historians of philosophy specialising in German philosophy, such as Henri Birault (1918-1990) and Jean Beaufret (1909-1982), underlined that existentialism and phenomenology completely misunderstood their main theoretical source, Heidegger’s philosophy. The humanism that Sartre thought was evident in *Being and Time* only made sense if it was inscribed inside the totality of Heidegger’s ontological project, which was a harsh critique addressed to humanism and subjective philosophy.

In 1965, in an interview with the young philosopher Alain Badiou (1937-),⁵⁴ Foucault, who had left the Communist Party in 1953, briefly mentioned Politzer as an important intellectual figure, having being the first to introduce psychoanalysis in France. However he immediately added that, since the 1950s, Lacan had rightly rehabilitated the notion of the unconscious that Politzer had criticised. In 1961 Foucault had defended two PhD dissertations in philosophy. In his first work, a “Preface” to a new translation of Kant’s *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Standpoint*, he anticipated the conclusion of *The Order of Things* (1966): he claimed that now the very notion of man was doomed to disappear from Western Culture. The second dissertation, *The History of Madness in the Classical Age*, was strongly influenced by Heidegger’s anti-humanism, in complete contradiction with the teleological and humanistic histories of psychology proposed by the Marxists and therefore in contradiction with Foucault’s earlier *Mental Illness and Personality*. In 1964, he decided to modify this earlier book and published it with a new title, *Mental Illness and Psychology*.

⁵³ *Reading Capital*, n. 15, p. 388-389. At the same moment, in a text not yet translated into English (“Trois notes sur la théorie des discours,” in *Écrits sur la psychanalyse*, in *Écrits sur la psychanalyse*, Paris, Stock, 2010, p. 136), Althusser denounced the “philosophers of consciousness (Politzer, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty) who wanted to appropriate Freud.”

⁵⁴ Michel Foucault, “Philosophy and psychology” (1966), in Giuseppe Bianco and Tzuchien Tho (ed.), *Badiou and the Philosophers: Interrogating 1960s French Philosophy*, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 54.

Do the *egos* come down to the streets?

As early as 1955 Althusser had proposed to the communist *Editions sociales* to republish the *Critique*. This project developed and in 1965 he was willing add to the book a “theoretical preface” in which he would have explained the importance of a text that was “brilliant, yet false and profoundly idealistic.”⁵⁵ This project never saw the light of day. Two years later the *Critique* was republished without Althusser’s preface by the academic *Presses universitaires françaises*. The same year the editor Jean-Jacques Pauvert republished, in Jean-François Revel’s (1904-1996) collection “Libertés,” Politzer’s other book, the pamphlet *The End of a Philosophical Parade*. The book had originally been published under the pseudonym of François Arouet by the small publisher *Les Revues*, and then in 1947, in a reduced form and with another title, by the *Editions sociales*. Revel was a philosopher and a journalist who authored the best-selling anti-philosophical pamphlet *Pourquoi des philosophes?* (1957), and who wanted to promote, in his collection, manifestos, pamphlets and critical essays.

In an article published in the journal *Critique* at the end of 1967, the psychiatrist Lanteri-Laura warmly welcomed the republication of Politzer’s books, which he said had suffered forty years of “complete silence.”⁵⁶ Two years later the philosopher Lucien Sève (1926-2020), a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party who was opposed to Althusser’s “anti-humanist” interpretation of Marx, authored a book deeply influenced by Politzer, *Marxisme et théorie de la personnalité*,⁵⁷ in which he claimed that psychoanalysis had to be integrated into historical materialism. These books provoked some reactions in the press,⁵⁸ and, in order to respond to this new wave of interest in Politzer, the *Editions sociales* decided to publish two tomes, the *Ecrits* (1973), that gathered the rest of his writings.

Meanwhile, the intellectual protagonists of May 1968 had been promoting two features which were at the centre of Politzer’s work: a violent critique addressed to the academic mode of production and transmission of knowledge, and a new alliance of Marxism and psychoanalysis. Before and after 1968 the texts of a heretical branch of the Frankfurt School, Freudo-Marxism, began spreading massively in France. This current claimed that neurosis had a social root and that there was a correlation between, on the one hand, the social conditions of life, and, on the other hand, the disorder of the genital functions, and, more generally, psychic disorders. Herbert Marcuse’s (1898-1979) *One-Dimensional Man* was translated into French in 1968, followed by a second edition of *Eros and Civilisation* and then by Wilhelm Reich’s

⁵⁵ See Matheron’s footnote (p. 182-183) to Althusser’s “The Place of Psychoanalysis in the Human Sciences.”

⁵⁶ Georges. Lanteri-Lara, “Nizan et Politzer quarante ans après,” *Critique*, n. 255-256, 1968, p. 773.

⁵⁷ Lucien Sève, *Marxisme et théorie de la personnalité* (1969), Paris, Editions sociales, 1972, p. 206. An excerpt of this book, entitled *Marxism and the theory of human personality*, was published in English in 1975 (translation by David Pavett, London : Lawrence and Wishart, 1975).

⁵⁸ See: Jean-François Revel, “Le Pascal du matérialisme,” *L’Express*, 15-21 of May 1967. D. Voutsinas, “Psychologie abstraite et psychologie concrète : en relisant Georges Politzer,” *Bulletin psychologique*, 1967, XXI, p. 67-120 ; J.M., “Georges Politzer, la *Critique des fondements de la psychologie*,” *La Nouvelle Critique*, n. 32, 1967 ; Georges Lanteri-Laura, “Nizan et Politzer quarante ans après.”

(1897-1957) *Sexual Revolution* (1969). Some surrealist circles had already introduced this current into France at the beginning of the 1930s.⁵⁹ Yet its diffusion had been stopped by the critiques put forward by the Communist Party and, in France, by Politzer himself, who, in the sulphurous article “Psychoanalysis and Marxism” (1933), had stigmatized this work as a “counter-revolutionary attack on Marxism.”⁶⁰ As a result, Freudo-Marxism was almost unknown in France until the mid-1960s, and became suddenly popular after May 68, when thousands of militants found in Reich and Marcuse an ethics of personal transformation that could go hand in hand with the promise of a social revolution.

The events of May could not but impact Lacan. A few months after the events, fearing the turmoil that a part of his audience could cause, the *Ecole normale*’s dean decided against renewing the contract allowing Lacan to hold his seminar at that institution. At the end of 1969, invited by Foucault, Lacan moved his seminar to the brand-new University of Vincennes, located in Paris’ outskirts. The teaching body was composed of left-wing philosophers and sociologists of many orientations. They were either part of the Communist Party, Trotskyists, Maoists or heretical Marxists. Many of these were interested in psychoanalysis, between them Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998), Robert Castel (1933-2013) and Foucault himself. In the same university, Serge Leclaire, one of Lacan’s pupils, was directing a department of advanced studies in psychoanalysis. At that time, in opposition to the thesis proposed by his friend Michel de Certeau (1925-1986), according to which the events of May were characterized by a “capture of speech,”⁶¹ Lacan had started formulating a theory opposing the discourse of the analyst to three other discourses: the discourse of the hysteric, the discourse of the master and the discourse of the university. Lacan claimed the absolute singularity of psychoanalysis, incompatible with the discourse of the university, and asserted the impossibility of an academic psychoanalytical training. Despite his fascination with the events of May, Lacan also showed an extreme scepticism towards the humanistic romanticism of some of the left-wing political movements. According to some of them, the alleged spontaneity of the masses constituted the proof that structuralism, and its alleged intransigent scientism, had been proven wrong. Lacan mocked the idea, popularized by much graffiti, that “structures do not come down to the streets,” i.e., he was opposed to the hypothesis that only concrete men were able to bring about the revolution, changing the bourgeois structures, both symbolic and real, such as the university, the State and the family.

Once in Vincennes Lacan was brutally opposed by the students, and had to move his seminar to the Sorbonne. During the first lecture, on the 21st of January, 1970, he used the example of Politzer in order to read the ambiguous situation in which he found

⁵⁹ Jean Audard, “Du caractère matérialiste de la psychanalyse,” *Cahiers du Sud*, n. 154, 1933, p. 317-328

⁶⁰ Georges Politzer, “Psychanalyse et marxisme: un faux contre-révolutionnaire: le freudo-marxisme” (1933), in *Ecrits*, Paris, Editions Sociales, 1969, 252-281.

⁶¹ Michel De Certeau, *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings* (1969). Translated by Tom Conley: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

himself. He told his audience that they should read the fundamental *Critique*,⁶² and criticized the fact that an academic press republished, without Politzer's agreement, such an anti-conformist book.⁶³ According to Lacan, the *Critique* was a heroic effort performed in order "to get out of the discourse of the university,"⁶⁴ an effort that tragically failed as Politzer decided to include psychoanalysis inside psychology, namely, inside the discourse of the university. A month before this lesson, just after having been contested by the students in Vincennes, Lacan had written a preface for the book *Jacques Lacan*, originally a PhD dissertation authored by the Belgian scholar Anika Rifflet-Lemaire. The book was the first academic study of his work. In the preface Lacan marked, once again, the difference between the discourse of the analyst and the discourse of the university, underlining the ambiguous place occupied by the *Critique*.⁶⁵ According to Lacan, Politzer was torn between two discourses. The fact that he had been recaptured by the discourse of the university was apparent in his interpretation of Freud, whose most important postulate was "the continuity of the ego" based on "an act having human form."⁶⁶

Just as Laplanche did ten years before, Lacan had a hidden agenda. By mentioning Politzer, Lacan wanted to discredit his pupil Laplanche, with whom he broke in 1964, when Laplanche participated to the creation of the "Association psychanalytique de France" and when he contributed to Lacan's expulsion from the order of the French psychoanalysts. Laplanche had been one of the main protagonists in the promotion of psychoanalysis inside academia: since 1962 he had taught at the Sorbonne under the invitation of Lagache and, in collaboration with Lagache and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, he published the academic reference work *Vocabulaire de Psychoanalyse* (1967).

While mentioning Politzer Lacan elliptically mentioned and criticised "Meaning and Letter." According to Lacan, Laplanche's paper was entirely academic, and not psychoanalytical, and his critique of Politzer was based on nothing but on the "nominalism essential to the modern university."⁶⁷ Lacan reproached his old pupil for having criticised Politzer only in order to attack some academics who had been inspired by the *Critique* but who had "nothing to do with psychoanalysis." The implicit targets were, in Lacan's words, philosophers, specifically those philosophers practicing the "phenomenology of forms,"⁶⁸ and "the Marxism of the CNRS", namely the academic Marxists.⁶⁹ More generally Laplanche was not addressing the psychoanalytic community, but rather the "readers of *Les temps modernes*," the

⁶² Lacan was echoing Althusser who, during 1964, told his students they "should read" the *Critique*, a "fundamental text" (Louis Althusser, « La place de la psychanalyse dans les sciences humaines », in *Psychanalyse et sciences humaines deux conférences (1963-1964)*, Paris: Librairie générale, 1996, p. 35).

⁶³ For a history of anti-institutional philosophers in France, see Jean-Luc Levent, *Les Ânes rouges. Généalogie des figures critiques de l'institution philosophique en France*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2003.

⁶⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar, Book XVII. The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, translated Russell Grigg, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 2007, p. 64-65.

⁶⁵ Anika Rifflet-Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, Bruxelles, Madraga, 1970, 1997.

⁶⁶ Jacques Lacan, "Préface à une these" (1970), in *Autres écrits*, Paris, Seuil, 2001, p. 396.

⁶⁷ Lacan, "Préface à une these", p. 396.

⁶⁸ Lacan, "Préface à une these", p. 397.

⁶⁹ CNRS was the main research institution in France. Lacan was probably referring to Henri Lefebvre, who had presented, in Bonneval, a paper entitled "Modèles sociologiques de l'inconscient."

journal created by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, where the psychoanalyst originally published his paper in 1961. According to Lacan, Laplanche was right in following his teaching, conceiving the unconscious as a structure and freeing it from ego, namely, using Politzer's terms, from the "first person." Nonetheless, he also noted, using an elliptic formula, that Laplanche was wrong, since "the truth," namely the unconscious, always says, "*I speak*." Laplanche's "demonstration" failed, since it was still possible, by pushing Politzer's intuitions to their limits, to conceive of the unconscious as "the innumerable I."⁷⁰

While Lacan was settling the score with his pupils, in January 1970 the Communist journal *La Nouvelle Critique*⁷¹ decided to publish "Psychoanalyses et Communistes," an article in which Bernard Muldworf (1923-2019), a psychiatrist member of the Centre for Marxist Studies and Research (CERM) close to Sève, tried to integrate psychoanalysis into Marxism. A few months later, in October 1970, the same journal published the transcription of a debate on "Marxism and psychoanalysis" organized by Cathérine Clément (1937-), which engaged two psychoanalysts, Leclaire and André Green (1927-2012), and two communists, Sève and the historian Antoine Casanova (1935-2017), *Nouvelle Critique*'s editor in chief. In 1973 two other books concerning psychoanalysis and Marxism were published: *Pour une critique marxiste de la théorie psychanalytique*, authored by Clément, Sève and the Lacanian Pierre Bruno (1941-), and *Un discours au réel. Théorie de l'inconscient et politique* by the philosopher Elisabeth Roudinesco (1944-). In a context marked by the new debates concerning anti-psychiatry, all of these authors tried to propose an articulation of psychoanalysis and Marxism alternative to the one proposed by Freudo-Marxism. Roudinesco's book opened with a chapter entitled "Reich and Politzer, the fantasy of the self," in which she praised the heroic figure of Georges Politzer, "excluded from the academic discourse, forgotten by the analytical circles," and Lacan, for having discovered Politzer's "fascinating experience;" she added that "Politzer was right. He was even right in his errors."⁷² As Roudinesco would later recall, at that moment the debate between psychoanalysts and Marxist militants was still taking place in terms of positioning with regard to the *Critique*.⁷³

The same year in which Roudinesco's first book came out, the sociologist Robert Castel published the violent book *Psychoanalysisism*, in which he purported, from a sociological perspective, to unveil the unconscious of psychoanalysis; specifically, to show the extent to which the practice of psychoanalysis was based on profit and was, therefore, essentially alienating. The book, which was an implicit attack addressed to Lacan and the wealth he built thanks to his practice, was ignored by the psychoanalytical community, or, in the case of Roudinesco's *Pour une politique de la*

⁷⁰ "Préface à une these," p. 397.

⁷¹ For the debates about psychoanalysis in the *La Nouvelle Critique* and Politzer's role, see Frédérique Matonti, *Intellectuels communistes: Essai sur l'obéissance politique. La Nouvelle Critique (1967-1980)*, Paris, La Découverte, 2005.

⁷² Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Un Discours au réel. Théorie de l'inconscient et politique de la psychanalyse*, Paris, Mame, 1973, p. 21.

⁷³ Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co*, p. 479.

psychoanalyse (1975), was derided. In 1975 a Maoist group, led by the philosopher Alain Badiou and by the anthropologist Sylvan Lazarus (1943-), both based at Vincennes, published the first issue of the journal *Cahiers Yenan*, devoted to “Marxisme-Léninisme et Psychoanalyse,” in which all psychoanalytical approaches were brutally rejected as ideological. Meanwhile, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1930-1992), in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), and Jean-François Lyotard, in *Libidinal Economy* (1973), tried to propose a new “Nietzschean” synthesis of Marxism and psychoanalysis which was incompatible with both Sève’s and Althusser’s interpretations of Marx and with both Politzer’s and Lacan’s interpretations of Freud. Finally, in 1976, Michel Foucault, in the first volume of the *History of Sexuality, The Will to Know*, took a distance from all of these approaches and focused on a critique of the “repressive hypothesis” proper to Freudo-Marxism and, more generally, of psychoanalysis. At the end of this conflicting period, the work of Politzer started being resituated within the history of psychology and the human sciences. The result of this long process was the publication in two volumes, in 1982 and then in 1986, of Roudinesco’s reference book, *History of Psychoanalysis*.⁷⁴

Conclusion

By retracing this long and conflicting history, it becomes evident that it would be difficult to understand Deleuze and Guattari’s “schizo-analysis,” as well the different attempts at producing a synthesis of Marxism and psychoanalysis, such as Alain Badiou’s and even Slavoj Žižek’s, without considering the shifting legacy of Politzer. Though, thanks to essays and critical editions, Politzer’s work is better known today, its incorporation into French human and social sciences still suffers from an unjust process of obliteration.

⁷⁴ One should also mention the publication, in 1982, of the volume *Politzer* by the *Cahiers de l’Institut de recherches marxistes individus et société* and, two years later, the inclusion of Politzer in the reference book *Dictionnaire des philosophes* (Paris, PUF, 1984 – the article was written by Jean-François Braunstein).