The Plastic Self and the Prescription of Psychology: Ethnopsychology, Crowd Psychology, and Psychotechnics, 1890–1920

Stefanos Geroulanos
New York University

1. THE SCOPE AND PRACTICE OF PSYCHOLOGY

Perhaps no social science in the process of establishing itself in the nineteenth century claimed as wide a scope for research and intervention as psychology. A discipline aiming to correctly understand and prescribe even the totality of human behavior, spanning from a minute neurological scale to a comparison of cultures, psychology in its formative years as a science used terms that borrowed from and also pushed into the domains of biology (including evolutionary biology), physiology and neurology, and mechanics, but also sociology, philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, and mythology. Porous and unclear as the boundaries between these different sciences may have been, psychologists nevertheless demanded and used conceptual frameworks that traversed deep into these other domains of inquiry, all the while declaring their work irreducible to any of these alternatives.

The self-assertion of psychology as an experimental discipline, and the problems and difficulties that came with it, are clearest in the conceptualization of the relations between its new and growing experimental practices and its social or cultural dimension. As Jacqueline Carroy and Henning Schmidgen argue, the turn into the twentieth century marked the attempt in both the United States and Europe to ground psychology in its experimental variation, to establish it positively...
teenth century, psychology had of course been a fundamentally social discipline, one concerned with moral phenomena, the “history of humankind,” and the relations of the mind or soul to its exterior. But the “new psychology” begun in the 1870s and spread as an experimental discipline also had a fundamentally social dimension—one obsessed with psychology’s social life, that is, not only its social applicability, or its relation to other social sciences, but indeed its very status and capacity as a social science. Writing in a Foucauldian vein, Nikolas Rose has argued that more than any of the other human sciences, “psychology” at once served as an umbrella term for a group of frequently very different academic and social practices, presented itself as a technique, and laid claim to understanding and affecting society as a whole. Yet even as a specifically academic or institutional discipline, psychology articulated as an essential component of its practice a realm that today we would call external, interpersonal, or “social” (the term “social psychology” postdates the varieties under consideration here), a realm crucial for its self-construction as an experimental discipline in contrast to others and to the internal debates and competing tendencies between different schools.

Even some of the most committed experimentalists and reductionists—psychologists committed to the priority of physiology over mental phenomena—insisted that the scope of their study was far wider than psychological experimentation allowed. The need for experimentation to be coupled with an understanding of this “social” domain is evident in famous examples from its practitioners. Gustav Theodor Fechner, who established psychophysics as the foundation of any psychology, was as comfortable (so to speak) in writing a speculative work, *Life after Death* (1835), in which he proposed that individuals, after dying, had a “third life” (the “first” having been in utero), a sort of posthumous intellectual presence among the living that amounted to their social influence. Wilhelm Wundt, famous for founding the first psychophysiological laboratory in Leipzig and for his volumes on physiological psychology, wrote no fewer than eleven 400+ page volumes of *Völkerpsychologie* (spanning language, myth and culture, law, and history), a project through which he sought the basic “laws” of social and historical life. Hugo Münsterberg, who began his work under Wundt, moved to Harvard University in 1892 and again in 1897 and became the chief proponent of “psychotechnics” as a motor of industrial reform and also the chief inspiration of *Arbeitswissenschaft*, the “European science of work”; but he also wrote extensively on psychotherapy, hypnosis, spiritualism, film, jury psychology, and trial evidence, as we shall see, identifying a nearly direct applicability of psychological methods to social problems and

---


3 As Nikolas Rose has argued about the emergence of psychology, “this is not ‘applied psychology’—the vectors did not go from knowledge formed in the academy to a range of applications, but the reverse.” See Rose, “Psychology as a Social Science,” *Subjectivity* 25 (2008): 448.

4 This is a central argument in Nikolas Rose’s *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

planning a “causal social psychology” as an essential part of his project. In France, meanwhile, where psychophysical and experimental practices had far narrower appeal, crowd psychology became at the turn of the century a fundamental political technology for research and a powerful argument for “psychology’s” role in social life. In America, John B. Watson, whose highly experimental practices, psychological reductionism, and elaborate conceptual critique of theories of consciousness gained his behaviorism a lasting influence, also expanded the field of inquiry from minor everyday behavioral practices to a vast scale:

[P]roblems similar in kind, but requiring more knowledge to make serviceable answers, are constantly confronting psychologists. Why do men go to war? Why do some men fight evolution? Why did George Smith leave his wife? Why do employees leave my organization after one or two months of service? Why does Henry Doe live in the gutter when he is strong and has a good technical education? Why will a democratic nation every now and then elect a lion-entity for a president?8

What did declarations of such astounding scope mean for the junge Wissenschaft in its relations with other sciences and in terms of its self-construction as a conceptual laboratory and a positive science? If the establishment of psychology as an experimental practice and as a technique for governing people marked a break with earlier figures of the science who relied on exactly such a broad scope, what was new about these practices and what effect did they have on its status as a system of ideas?

The thesis of this paper is that with the advent of experimental psychology, this “social” or “cultural” dimension, long a central component of psychological research, was transformed into a declaration and analysis of the scope of the self: this self was plastic, not only comprehensible from both experimental and social viewpoints but also the intended target of sociocultural and even psychological reform. Because psychology spanned that far, it was the discipline through which rational and positive comprehension and reform could occur, in ways other sciences could not match. Such reform was not merely social reform—it promised to affect the “individual” himself.

First, by suggesting that scientific and experimental study could extend from the study of reflexes and mental (conscious, unconscious, or biological) activity to that of interpersonal human behavior and social practices, psychology carved out a vast domain for research, interpretation, and potential intervention. Through this scope, the discipline bound itself to rationality and scientificity while at the same time making diagnostic, therapeutic, and social claims based on the plasticity of this self. Rethinking a self and reinterpreting society on the basis of a newly declared self was already one mode of intervening; actual intervention emphasized this point. Second, this approach effectively provided a domain that both paralleled and competed (a) with literary, philosophical, and other discourses, for example, around the will (à la Schopenhauer, Wagner, Nietzsche); (b) with biological and social theories of development, evolution, and/or

---

6 Hugo Münsterberg, Grundzüge der Psychotechnik, 2nd ed. (reprint; Leipzig: J. A. Barth, 1928), viii. For his industrial reform work, see his Psychology and Industrial Efficiency (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), to which we will return. For his works on social questions, see his Psychology and Social Sanity (New York: Doubleday, 1914); and Psychology and Life (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1899).

7 On the reasons for the foundering of the Leipzig school of experimental psychology in Paris (specifically because of Alfred Binet), and its implications for the Wurzburg school, see Carroy and Schmidgen, “Psychologies expérimentales,” 171–204.

degeneration, as well as theories and practices of social hygiene; and (c) with anthropological-ethnological theories comparing peoples and national “characters.” While psychology’s often-explicit purpose was precisely to appropriately dismantle some of these languages (particularly that of the will), in the popular and even much of the scientific imagination, it coexisted with, complemented, and reframed them. Third, through these parallels, and because of psychology’s position as a bridge between biological life and society, different psychological schools established specific principles for the possibility of progress, education, and social transformation. In this fashion, they became a kind of connecting link between evolutionary-biological and social-speculative theories regarding human existence and society at the turn of the century.9

The pages that follow cover the period between the establishment of experimental and psychophysical priorities (1880–90) and the rather widespread conviction that psychology had entered a period of “crisis” (around 1920, and hence prior to the work of, e.g., William Stern, Lev Vygotsky, Kurt Lewin); they focus on three broad aspects of the relationship between individual and social psychology:

1. psychological conceptions of the relationship between the individual and the social in *Völkerpsychologie*, crowd psychology, and psychotechnics;
2. the realms that psychologists treated as available to them for purposes of prescription, social reform, and social transformation; and
3. the rhetorical and institutional emphasis on psychology’s rights over social problems, its capacity to handle them at a superior level than either natural sciences or social, political, and philosophical attempts.

Specifically, I will begin by considering the work of Wilhelm Wundt on *Völkerpsychologie*. I will then move in two directions: first toward the use of “psychology” as a practice in the work of Gabriel Tarde and Gustave Le Bon, and then toward Hugo Münsterberg’s psychotechnics. The first case may be peculiar: neither of these authors was a psychologist in the experimental sense, yet both claimed to rely on the reception of English and German experimental psychologies, and each developed a variety of *Völkerpsychologie* with elaborate political and social implications—indeed, a *Völkerpsychologie* in which, as in Wundt, psychology formed the basis for sociological or ethnological interpretation. Münsterberg’s psychotechnics specifically cast the human being as always in a process of formation and reform.

Of course, the point is not to undermine the extent to which “psychology” was a particularly fraught discipline, in which different schools and national traditions competed for conceptual and experimental influence. Instead, what I focus on is a psychology that aimed outward from behavior and mental phenomena at the individual level (the sites of experimentation), and I consider cases where psychology’s relation to its central object was defined with little precision yet apparent ease, granting it metaphysical and experimental foundations that remained unclear, as well as historical origins and institutional bases that differed according to national traditions and different schools.10

---

9 It may be important to emphasize that the plasticity that psychologists accorded to human society and behavior was by no means unlimited, whereas physiological, evolutionary, and eugenicist approaches generally allowed for fantasies of a broader scope.

2. INDIVIDUAL AND ETHNOPSYCHOLOGY: WILHELM WUNDT’S VÖLKERPSYCHOLOGIE

In 1913, following more than half a century of work in physiology and psychology, thirty-five years as the director of the University of Leipzig laboratory in experimental psychology, and over a decade of writing on Völkerpsychologie, Wilhelm Wundt identified the task of psychology as follows:

It is psychology’s task to . . . retrace these relations to the most general principles that occur in the most fundamental phenomena of the life of the individual soul [Seelenleben, “life of the psyche”]. Such principles force themselves upon everyone who views the “life of the soul” in an unprejudiced manner and uninfluenced by metaphysical or one-sided physiological hypotheses; the experimental analysis of complex phenomena only deepens this insight, which, due to its general character, already presents itself to a superficial glance. [Experimental analysis does so] by not stopping at the general impression but substantiating the regular relations that exist between the constitutive parts of psychic processes and psychic processes themselves.11

The definition appears in Sinnliche und übersinnliche Welt, a book that bridges science and the history of philosophy through a proclamation (resembling as much an encyclopedia as a manifesto) of the spaces proper to the different domains of scientific and humanistic inquiry. Wundt, who had offered similar definitions in his earlier work, was entirely typical here in offering a psychologists’ argument that, as Lorraine Daston has argued apropos of Anglo-American psychology, envisioned psychology as undermining the self-sufficiency of not only classical naturalism but the premises of the natural sciences more generally.12 Two points are central in the above passage. First, the focus on the “fundamental phenomena of the life of the individual soul,” which appears as the conceptual ground of Wundt’s thought, is the mark of psychology’s specific domain. Second, against both speculative/metaphysical and “biased” physiological hypotheses, psychological experimentation allows for an ostensibly proper sense of the basic components of this psychic life: the task of psychology is specifically to identify and work with these components for the express purpose of understanding the life of the soul—a life that, as he noted here as elsewhere, could not be merely metaphysical or physiologically attributed.

Parallel to his effort to construct a fundamentally experimental, physiological introspective psychology,13 Wundt began a multivolume Völkerpsychologie aimed at explaining the situatedness of the individual and the multiple roles of cultural and historical factors on the life of the individual soul (Seelenleben). That the two psychological projects belonged together was essential to


13 See Wundt’s Grundzüge der physiologische Psychologie, which went through six editions until 1911 and grew from two volumes in the 1874 edition to three considerably larger ones by 1908 (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1874, 1880, 1887, 1893, 1903, 1908–11).
Wundt’s oeuvre as well as to his critique of rival theories: he charged associationism, for example, with artificially separating individual and social psychology and thus failing in an understanding of both. Centered on reaction-time experiments, Wundt’s individual psychology resided in and focused on an examination of subjective introspection, theorizing the place of “apperception” (a near-automatic subjective response that stood at the basis of the “creative synthesis” of external stimuli) and a series of theoretical systems to explain emotion and volition. Meanwhile, his *Völkerpsychologie* constituted an effort to explain and structure what he considered to be the laws of social forms and historical development. It was a massive, almost ever-expanding effort to articulate the significance of language (vols. 1 and 2), art (vol. 3), myth (vols. 4–6), society (vols. 7 and 8), law (*Das Recht*, vol. 9), and culture and history (vol. 10) in human life—a life that, as in his separate *Probleme der Völkerpsychologie* (1911), spanned from primitive societies and the origins of man to modern European society. His goal in the *Völkerpsychologie* was Hegelian in style and scope, a profound effort to construct, from a perspective at once philosophical and psychological, a broad understanding of human life and the place of the *Seelenleben* in it, and above all to ground this entire system on ostensibly psychological laws.

The project had its origins in, and in many respects competed with, Moritz Lazarus and Heymann Steinthal’s *Völkerpsychologie*, developed from the 1850s onward in their lectures in Berlin and the journal *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*. Lazarus and Steinthal cast their own project as an effort “to study the relationship between the individual and the community,” and they understood the spirit of the *Volk* (*Volksgeist*) as living only within the individual—in Laura Otis’s terms, a kind of cultural, nonbiological organic memory, inheritable from generation to generation. Taking over the principal impulse, the term, and certain of their premises—such as the emphasis on the cultural/spiritual rather than the racial or evolutionary development of man—Wundt’s own *Völkerpsychologie* expanded and rearticulated these premises away from a generalized and progressive-liberal theory of the development of nations and toward a sense of the multipronged development of cultural and social forms, a development that to him conditioned existence in particular societies and largely offered the structure for modern experience.


17  Laura Otis, *Organic Memory: History and the Body in the Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Centuries* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

not be willed or conscious but was, as it were, already present before consciousness, conditioned by the Volk itself. In his case, as Kurt Danziger notes, “mental or cultural communities were not formed through deliberate decision-making but through spontaneous forms of interaction at a pre-rational level.” Just as importantly, Wundt framed his own project as a reinsertion of psychology into Völkerpsychologie (translated as “folk psychology” in the quotations below):

In the works of Lazarus and Steinthal and in the Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft edited by them and appearing in twenty volumes from 1860 on, the conception had not as yet, it is true, received the precise definition that we must give it to-day. Nevertheless, a beginning was made, and the new venture was successfully launched along several different lines. Some uncertainty still prevailed, especially with regard to the relation of these studies to philosophy, and as to the method which psychology must follow when thus carried over into a new field. It was only gradually, as the psychological point of view gained ground in the special fields of research, that this condition was improved. To-day, doubtless, folk psychology may be regarded as a branch of psychology concerning whose justification and problem there can no longer be dispute. Its problem relates to those mental products which are created by a community of human life and are, therefore, inexplicable in terms merely of individual consciousness, since they presuppose the reciprocal action of many. This will be for us the criterion of that which belongs to the consideration of folk psychology.

In intervening in Völkerpsychologie in this particular way, Wundt was at once rearticulating its positions, and thus grounding the Lazarus/Steinthal episteme in psychology “proper,” and arguing against other conceptions of society and community present or prevalent at the time: ethnology or linguistics, for example. Ethnology—“the science of peoples … the science of the origin of peoples, of their characteristics, and of their distribution over the earth”—provided only the raw data for psychology to examine mental phenomena:

It must be borne in mind that the greatly enlarged scope of modern ethnology, together with the increased number and the deepened character of its problems, necessarily precludes such a psychological investigation as falls to the task of folk psychology. … The central problem of ethnology concerns not only the present condition of peoples, but the way in which they originated, changed, and became differentiated. Folk psychology must be based on the results of ethnology; its own psychological interest, however, inclines it to the problem of mental development. Thus, folk psychology draws upon ethnology, while the latter, in turn, must invoke the aid of the former in investigating mental characteristics. The problems of the two sciences, however, are fundamentally different.

---

19 To my knowledge, historians of Völkerpsychologie have not explicitly contrasted Lazarus/Steinthal and Wundt on this point. Kurt Danziger, for example, in “Origins and Basic Principles of Wundt’s Völkerpsychologie,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 22 (1983): 305–8, compares the two Völkerpsychologien on an institutional basis as well as on the grounds of Wundt’s criticism of Lazarus’s effort to join Herbart and Hegel. Klautke pretty much repeats Danziger on these points (“Mind of the Nation,” 8–9).


22 Ibid., S.

23 Ibid.
“Fundamentally different”—except ethnology should nevertheless cease its claim to understanding “peoples” of its own accord; any true knowledge remained derivative of the psychological. 24

Despite describing philosophy’s place as that of a bridge between the sciences,25 Wundt also understood it—through its history—as one to be superseded by psychology. As Mitchell G. Ash has argued (and as Husserl of course also showed26), German psychologists at the turn of the century increasingly chafed at the institutional and philosophical limitations imposed on them by the philosophy departments within which their subdiscipline was housed.27 Wundt’s two psychological projects were co-implicated in a reading of the philosophical tradition, most significantly of Kant (whose understanding of the transcendental apperception Wundt worked to critically retheorize, and whose influence Wundt wished to supersede28) and Hegel (whose conception of history, spirit, and culture Wundt worked extensively to criticize and reformulate29). At the same time, they were involved in establishing a ground for interpreting the place of the Seelenleben, the life of the soul, which would reground philosophy. Now, in not asserting a psychophysical or a sociopsychological parallelism, and in not simply suggesting that physiological psychology concerned a kind of bodily ground for the social life of the soul, Wundt was consciously offering his alternative to Kant and Hegel by way of the dual pull (toward physiology and society) of the individual.

Wundt’s two projects—the more influential experimental project and the Völkerpsychologie— are almost always seen as separate and complementary endeavors, the first of which did not quite expand into the far less “scientific” second.30 (Wundt himself insisted, time and again, that the two projects were complementary, and he spoke of Völkerpsychologie as addressing concepts and questions too complex for individual psychology.31) But this approach is misguided, insofar as it accentuates the difference with the history of psychology, especially as regards Völkerpsychologie.32 What Wundt’s Völkerpsychologie offered was a particular relationship of the individual (or, rather, the physiologically based individual), whose psychology would be experimentally studied, with the community (or the communal individual), which could not. The two projects can instead be understood as woven into one another.

24 A similar engagement with language follows (ibid., 6–7).
26 Of course, Husserl’s opposition to psychologism, most famously in “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science” (1911), is testimony to the impact psychologists made by their rejection of the preeminence of logic.
28 Wundt, Sinnliche und übersinnliche Welt, iii–iv.
29 Wundt insisted on psychology as grounding—but not limiting—philosophy. “In my opinion, the basis of a philosophy of history should henceforth be a psychological history of development, though the latter should not intrude upon the particular problems of the former. The concluding remarks of our final chapter attempt, in a few sentences, to indicate this connection of a psychological history of development with a philosophy of historical development, as it appears from the point of view of the general relation of psychology to philosophical problems.” Wundt, Elements of Folk Psychology, xvi.
32 See, e.g., Vidal, Sciences of the Soul, 241.
First, it bears emphasis that Wundt’s *Völkerpsychologie*—both the systematic ten-volume and the more “evolutionary” or “historical” *Probleme der Völkerpsychologie* (*Elements of Folk Psychology*, 1911)—extended the long eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tradition of psychology as capable of interpreting the history of humanity and as involved in a project of interpreting the totality of such mental phenomena. In this context, Wundt was using his physiological psychology to base and authorize his *Völkerpsychologie*, assert its priority, and grant authority to the lawfulness, so to speak, of the laws of *Völkerpsychologie* he was proclaiming. This is particularly evident in the first volume of the *Völkerpsychologie*, where Wundt frequently resorted to a psychology or psychophysics, for example, in discussing the “psychophysics of word formation” or the “psychophysical meanings of the individual’s development of language.” The purpose was to reconstitute *Völkerpsychologie* within the scope and on the basis of the achievements of psychology:

*Völkerpsychologie* would remain, as such, a part of psychology. For, if the philologist is certainly right when he argues that only those who have mastered the philological method can successfully penetrate the culture of the ancient world, so the psychologist has to hold on to the conviction that in order to unravel the intricate phenomena of *Völkerpsychologie*, one must have first practiced the exact analysis of elementary processes of consciousness by way of the methods of experimental psychology, which sharpen the eye and the ability to think psychologically.

But, second, *Völkerpsychologie* also served to ground the subject of physiological psychology—for two reasons. On the one hand, the conceptual framework of Wundt’s physiological psychology specifically allowed for the participation of culture in the development and organization of the self. Physiological psychology relied on an engagement with the limits of introspection, and especially with apperception—the assumption and organization of psychological responses into a consistent and whole, conscious reaction. Apperception here was specifically not Kantian—not transcendental: it developed out of physiological and psychological responses; it belonged to the empirical order of things—an empirical order that may have been physiologically founded but was not limited to physiology. Apperception, like other concepts, was instead culturally constructed, and the central idea of *Völkerpsychologie*, that the cultural domain needed to be understood by way of a set of psychological laws of its own, dovetails precisely with the sense that one could, by studying it, also guide and explain its force in the formation of the individual. In this sense, *Völkerpsychologie* was essential as a study of social and human life that could itself ground the psychological practice, even prepare the psychologist for the reasonable limits of his practice.

---

33 See the excellent account of psychology’s use as a tool and discipline for the study of the “history of humanity,” in ibid., chap. 6.


35 “Gleichwohl wird die Völkerpsychologie als solche ein Teil der Psychologie bleiben. Denn wenn der Philologe gewiss mit Recht geltend macht, daß nur der mit Erfolg in die Kulturwelt des Altertums einzudringen vermag, der die Elemente der philologischen Methode beherrscht, so wird doch wohl auch der Psychologe daran festhalten müssen, daß man, um die verwirkelten Erscheinungen der Völkerpsychologie zu entwirren, zuerst durch die exakte Analyse der elementaren Bewußtseinsvorgänge, wie sie die Methoden der experimentellen Psychologie vermitteln, den Blick geschärft und die Fähigkeit psychologisch zu denken geübt haben muß” (ibid., vi).
On the other hand, the specific attempt to render psychologically precise the broader worldview of *Völkerpsychologie* as determined up to that point by Hegelian and Herbartian tendencies (in Lazarus and Steinthal’s work) specifically suggests this reverse argument: that experimental physiological psychology which grounded *Völkerpsychologie* was also possible only under the “right” philosophical and metaexperimental assumptions. For both of the above reasons, *Völkerpsychologie* can and should be understood as an examination of the metaphysics that underwrote the experimental project. This becomes clearest perhaps in Wundt’s discussion of the “psychophysics of the language of gestures” in the second chapter of the first volume (on language), where, in anticipation of Marcel Mauss’s “techniques of the body” (though of course prioritizing psychology and not sociology), Wundt would compare systems or local styles of face and hand gestures, concentrating on the “Neapolitan gestural system” and the “North American Indian gestural system.”

---

38 Ibid., 173.
Attempting to distinguish and categorize “descriptive,” “demonstrative,” and “symbolic” gestures, and to explain how symbolic expression comes about, Wundt emphasized their role in instituting the cultural particularity and comparability of gestures and, in other words, also the universal reach of psychology. In George Hebert Mead’s expression, in Wundt “the gesture is that phase of the individual act to which adjustment takes place on the part of other individuals in the social process of behavior.” Here, any psychophysical experimentation comes to be preceded by cultural (or völker-) metapsychology: “the origin of gestures from expressive motions provides a firm foundation from which the psychological analysis must proceed”—not specifically experimental analysis but all psychological analysis.

And third, Völkerpsychologie was a fundamentally political and metapolitical practice: it harkened back at once to the (largely left-leaning) politics of Wundt’s early years, but it also offered a metapolitics of the Volk and of humanity’s relation to it. Importantly, Wundt’s work veered between a cosmopolitan understanding of the nation and a more ardently nationalist one—but in each case, the Volk was the foundation of the individual subject, of community, of society:

---

39 Ibid., 175.
In many respects, Wundt’s was an emphatically universalistic set of expectations for human history, for the progress, in modernity, toward a universal humanity. Yet at the same time, Wundt clearly placed the German Volk at the head of all others, increasingly seeing “German youth” and its culture as having led the way out of the major catastrophes of modernity: first, following the Thirty Years’ War; second, during the crisis inaugurated by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, which Wundt saw as giving birth to German Idealism and Romanticism and praised the grandeur of the latter as central to the well-being of European modernity; and third, the crisis of the postwar Neureordnung, which only a German state (implicitly founded on his notion of the Volk) could overcome. This was the case especially in his very last writings, in the tenth and final volume of the Völkerpsychologie, which appeared in 1920, and which took on the Treaty of Versailles as based on a failed version of the principle of self-determination that demonstrated the principle’s intentional abusiveness and thus resulted in a failed conception of national unities. This conception in turn resulted in a political tearing and mutilation of the German Volk and the Volksseele that fundamentally interfered with the well-being of individuals within it. This argument, interestingly, was coextensive with a sense of the “correct” system of nation and humanity within which modern men and women were supposed to live: the triumph of the Allied powers was, Wundt argued, a triumph of utilitarianism (Utilitätsprinzip), which misconstrued the capacities and place of the human being; as utilitarianism was also a psychology Wundt had argued against in his psychological thought, it became clear that not only was the entirety of modernity now being threatened (together with the individual’s place within it),

---

43 Wundt, Elements of Folk Psychology, 4, italics mine.
44 Ibid., 523ff.
but the very premises of a proper physiological psychology were being undermined. In sum, the unity of a Volk, the assumption of its history—something that could be politically altered—was as essential to the well-being of individuals within the Volk as it was to the community of Völker. The return of a “proper” German state could, thanks to Wundt’s ideas and in typical post–World War I nationalist fashion, heal the German Volk and its members and provide a path toward a “proper” universality.

It is at the intersection of these problems that a concept of the individual emerges. The persistence of the effort toward a Völkerpsychologie, from Wundt’s earliest work on,48 betrays the conscious limitations of the capacities of experimental psychology and the need for psychology to be able to bridge the experimental and theoretical work on the individual with a broader sense of society’s structure. “To attribute to all valuable or meaningful creation an individual author is a tendency that corresponds to a natural, even naïve worldview,” he noted in 1908, emphasizing that this naive worldview allows a theory of individuality that belonged to hero myths and messianic cults to carry over to scientific research.49 Individuals did not invent languages, nor did they found religions out of nothing;50 they do not operate either as complete individuals or as independent of a multitude of social forms;51 instead, social forms themselves depend to a degree on psychophysical developments (e.g., language on differentiation attributable to sound and vocal functions52). At the same time, apperception and other central categories—even individuality itself—depend fundamentally on the place of the individual in the Volk and his assumption of its various ethnopsychological categories. A Völkerpsychologie was thus essential for locating a subject at the intersection of psychophysical and social factors. Within a framework centered on psychology’s task (such as the one proposed in the passage quoted above from Wundt’s Sinnliche und übersinnliche Welt), the soul-life of the individual offered the site of the bridge—as well as of all tension—between physiological psychology and Völkerpsychologie. The life of the mind was fundamentally a joining of these two aspects, individual (including physiological) and social; it was also fundamentally involved in the history of social elements, and Wundt had no difficulty writing, to give but two examples, that art served as a representation of the “human development of the psychology of mythological thinking” or, in his volume on right and law (vol. 9), that his effort constituted a “psychologische Entwicklungsgeschichte des Rechts.”53 Wundt’s theorization of the individual as based on a shared system of cultural values was not uncommon given the premises of nationalism at his time; for example, see the work of Renan and Taine (Renan

48 Wilhelm Wundt, Erlebtes und Erkanntes (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1920), 201; Wilhelm Wundt, Grundriss der Psychologie (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1896), 11. In Grundriss der Psychologie, 28, Wundt describes the two branches of experimental and völk-psychology as two branches with merely different methods and different scientific directions, the former toward the natural sciences, the latter toward the human sciences. See also Danziger, “Origins and Basic Principles of Wundt’s Völkerpsychologie,” 306. Danziger also cites the second volume of Wundt’s Vorlesungen über die Menschen- und Tiersseele (Leipzig: Voss, 1963).

49 Wilhelm Wundt, Probleme der Völkerpsychologie (Leipzig: E. Wiegand, 1911), 51.

50 Wundt, Elements of Folk Psychology, 3.

51 On the individual, see also Wilhelm Wundt, Eine Untersuchung der Thatsachen und Gesetze des sittlichen Lebens (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1886), 384–97.

52 Wundt, Probleme der Völkerpsychologie, 82–83.

writing, in “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?,” that the nation is “a soul, a spiritual principle” \(^{54}\) and, in the German context, Lazarus and Steinthal’s “subjective” self-identification in the Volk. What was significant about Wundt’s approach was (a) the utter systematization that he relied on and (b) the emphasis on pulling the Seelenleben in both the direction of physiologically conceived nature and that of nonbiological culture.

3. TARDE AND LE BON: INDIVIDUALITY, SOCIETY, RACE

I noted earlier that a fundamental argument of experimental and systematic psychology from Wundt’s time onward was the emphasis on overcoming “metaphysical” psychologies in favor of scientific ones. This argument frequently operated as a logic for criticizing competing schools and practitioners (as ostensibly metaphysical rather than scientific), and it organized the expectations of psychologists in the 1880–1930 period. Wundt’s experimental effort in many ways offers a useful, because median, case for understanding this problem. Systematic from his perspective, and certainly “scientific” in the sense of “experimental” by comparison to many contemporaries, it quickly came to appear to others as metaphysical. As has been noted, his Völkerpsychologie did not make explicit, strong claims on scientificity except insofar as it relied on the authority of the physiological and experimental component of his work. It is a “median,” in relation to two parallel trends developing at the same time. On the one hand, we find efforts toward social psychology—or psychologie des peuples in French—that, using evolutionary-biological or metaphysical grounds, proclaimed the insufficiency of existing individual psychology for understanding social behavior and appealed to a (biological, evolutionary, or sociopsychological) un- or preconscious to offer precisely the grounds for that behavior. On the other hand, we find efforts toward empirical aptitude testing as a premise of social and industrial reform (an issue we will return to in the next section, on Münsterberg and psychotechnics). What is most interesting about both psychologie des peuples and psychotechnics is that, like Wundt’s Voelkerpsychologie, they essentially locate the self and subject at the same place, torn toward both biological and social directions at once, yet serving as a psychological center, as the ground of the psychological promise for social reform.\(^{55}\)

The first of these options, French “crowd” psychology, is best known through Gabriel Tarde’s argument on imitation and Gustave Le Bon’s theory of the crowd. Crowd psychology also relied on direct or indirect claims of scientifcicy, its claim being that it was a social science and more specifically an effort to claim sociology itself as fundamentally metaphysical, and to advocate instead its “psychologization” as a way of rendering sociology scientific. Tarde and Le Bon, frequently considered the architects of crowd psychology, are curious cases: first, because they are routinely left out of psychological histories (e.g., Edwin G. Boring’s and Kurt Danziger’s\(^\text{56}\)) or relegated to the outskirts and, second, because they are generally interpreted as speculative metaphysical thinkers who participated in the “discovery of the unconscious” and contributed to Sigmund Freud’s social thought, but who did not seriously influence psychology, especially of

---

\(^54\) Ernest Renan, Qu’est-ce qu’une nation? (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1882), 26.

\(^55\) Obviously, this resonates well with Jerrold Seigel’s overarching argument in The Idea of the Self on the triple direction of “the self” in modern social and philosophical thought; I will not concentrate on these, as they do not concern psychology, but see Seigel, The Idea of the Self (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). See also, in this context, H. Stuart Hughes, Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890–1930, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

\(^56\) Neither of these authors even cites Tarde or Le Bon.
the empirical or experimental kind. More regularly, and more correctly, they appear as reactionary political thinkers who advanced theories of irrational sociopolitical influence, responding to a crisis of democracy and society in Third Republic France and to a theoretical set of concerns between biology, especially racial biology, and society. Indeed, as is well known thanks to a long series of studies of fin de siècle France since Robert S. Nye’s The Origins of Crowd Psychology (1975), their sense of the relationship between the individual and the social came to be central to the overall purpose of the savoir they promoted, as well as the social theory they are seen to have advocated. Looking at their work through this political lens (and in light of experimental and empirical work in Germany and Britain), Tarde and Le Bon seem to offer a psychology that, were it considered a psychology at all, would be politically motivated, and scientifically “old” and speculative at best.

Nevertheless, both of these thinkers relied on and contributed to a logic that saw psychology (and particularly the individual subject within psychology) as providing the ground for a bridging of biology and sociology. In particular, both relied on Théodule Ribot’s thought on heredity, and both understood their work as scientific at least in part thanks to Ribot’s organization of the field of psychology. Ribot was central to the development of French psychology in at least three ways. First, his two early works La psychologie anglaise contemporaine (École expérimentale) of 1870 and La psychologie allemande contemporaine (École expérimentale) of 1879 summarized developments in experimental psychology in England and Germany. The latter of these two began with an account of Johann Friedrich Herbart’s placement of psychology as a discipline that can be rendered scientific to a degree somewhere between biology and mathematics, and it culminated in a long, eighty-page chapter on Wundt's then-nascent laboratory. When Ribot moved on to his own, influential writings, he proceeded to synthesize experimental and theoretical contributions into a broad system of his own that spanned heredity, the “diseases of the will,” memory, sensations, and attention. Second, as the editor and animator of the Revue philosophique, Ribot served as a host for the publications and a guide in the development of psychology in France and also abroad. From the 1890s on, he became a collaborator of Le Bon and published Tarde’s writings in the Revue philosophique. Third, and most significantly, Ribot specifically emphasized the influence of biological, hereditary factors on psychology and society. This was his most consequential and influential contribution, because by locating memory at the biological level (and thus seeing the inheritance of memory as not only possible but a given), it redeployed a Lamarckian argument that saw psychology as effecting an “accidental” passage of events from social and individual circumstances to the biological level. By grounding this argument in both his institutional power and his historical commitment to experimentalism, Ribot managed to decisively influence a generation of French thinkers, from Tarde to Le Bon to Pierre Janet and even Henri Bergson, providing a specific space for psychology and its claims on philosophy and the human sciences.

59 Théodule Ribot, La psychologie allemande contemporaine (École expérimentale) (Paris: Germer Bailliére, 1879).
60 On Ribot’s influence, see Otis, Organic Memory, 14–15.
62 Otis, Organic Memory, 14–17.
Tarde remains best known for his theorization of society as based on the principles underlying “invention,” notably the principle of imitation. He is also remembered for his arguments with Cesare Lombroso and Émile Durkheim in the 1890s, in which he insisted on the value of the individual as the foundational unit of social inquiry. This focus on the individual organized Tarde’s work as less a sociology (which is what he explicitly claimed it to be in the early works, for example, in the original edition of his Les lois de l’imitation) than as something between psychology and sociology. In Les lois de l’imitation, Tarde argued against a sociology whose scientifc would be grounded in biology, and specifically in favor of a psychology. “Qu’est-ce que la société? Nous avons répondu: c’est l’imitation. Il nous reste à nous demander: Qu’est-ce que l’imitation? Ici le sociologue doit céder la parole au psychologue.” Working with a comparative argument that had grounded his early work in criminology (La criminalité comparée), Tarde began to write for Ribot’s Revue philosophique in the early 1890s, and by 1905 he came to argue that psychology is the proper scientific premise and discipline underlying sociology:

The comparative method is necessary for the compilation of documents. Through it, linguists, mythologists, jurists, economists, ethnologists, aestheticians … have accumulated precious materials, innumerable and more or less similar facts, which the rapprochement of languages, religions, and rights has helped us to discover, and which have made possible provisional generalizations and rules always riddled with exceptions. Yet what matters is to interpret these materials and their digests, to use them scientifiilly, and it is for this task that psychology becomes a necessity. I do not mean “current psychology”—of which we can speak with fairly justified contempt—but rather what I prefer to call “interpsychology” (a brief word that I will explain). This brings together, or is called in to bring together, the immense labors of pathological psychology, psychophysics even, infantile psychology, and comparative animal psychology.

In other words, psychology appeared to offer a solution to sociological and broader metaphysical concerns, allowing Tarde a scientifi c yet not biological or physical basis for sociological inquiry. The central themes of Tarde’s Les lois de l’imitation are well known: aiming to explain social continuity and cohesion, Tarde postulated the existence of “laws” of “Universal Repetition”: across history, continuity is guaranteed by repetitions, which in turn may occur for either physical, biological, or social reasons. As a result, (biological) heredity and (social) imitation constitute the central reasons underlying “invention” and “the laws of history.” What was at stake for Tarde

63 This was not the case with other (especially later) works, such as the Psychologie économique (1902), where he presented studies of economic sociology as studies in “economic psychology.” See Gabriel Tarde, Psychologie économique, 2 vols. (Paris: F. Alcan, 1903).
65 Ibid., 1–2.
66 Ibid., 80.
68 In Les lois de l’imitation, Tarde also cites Ribot approvingly: “Si, comme la croit Ribot, la mémoire n’est que la forme cérébrale de la nutrition,—si, d’autre part, la nutrition n’est qu’une génération interne,—si, enfin, l’Imitation n’est qu’une mémoire sociale (V. notre Logique sociale à ce sujet)—il suit de là qu’entre la Génération et l’Imitation, il y a non seulement analogie, comme je l’ai montré, mais identité fondamentale. L’Imitation, phénomène social élémentaire et continu, serait la suite et l’équivalent social de la Génération, entendue au sens vaste, y compris la Nutrition” (37n1).
is the capacity of individuals and societies for invention, and hence also self-transformation and progress. Tarde’s individual subject was biologically grounded: in a vague reprise of Galton’s argument on hereditary genius, Tarde sought to suggest that biological underpinnings only allow for this genius to become available. But society mattered: imitation was still essential, and indeed became the only truly social basis, for invention.70

In reading this work, [the reader] will come perhaps to understand that the social being, insofar as it is social, is by its essence an imitator, and that imitation plays a role in society that is analogous to that of heredity in organisms.71

In his most memorable definition of imitation, Tarde claimed it could be glimpsed in “every action at a distance of one spirit on another, an action that consists in the quasi-photographic reproduction of a cerebral image (cliché cerebral) by the sensible plate of another brain.”72 Imitation subordinated opposition: one imitates by repeating or by opposing.73 Invention, the basis of all human progress,74 was thus fundamentally a result of imitation, the result of a shared, indeed guided sense of interests and priorities, society, and possibilities. Invention truly appeared only thanks to the winnowing down of the various social tendencies and thanks to individuals who, instinctively grasping the work of imitation better than others, managed to guide imitation toward progress and thus “invent.” Seeking to offer a rigorous understanding of human progress, and specifically targeting Condorcet and Idealist theories of history for having too “vague” a theory of “indefinite progress,”75 Tarde argued that it was incumbent upon sociology to look to psychology, which offered a more proper understanding of at once the conscious, rational premises of society and the not always conscious, not always rational role of imitation in it, as this helped ground and explain the actions of social agents and groups.

Tarde’s imitation is all too often remembered as a convenient antecedent and parallel to Le Bon’s premising of crowd psychology on contagion and hypnosis. Yet Tarde’s argument has rather different targets and ends than Le Bon’s anxiety over the loss of sovereignty and subjectivity to the regression that occurs with participation in a crowd. First, it is not the case that, as one would expect from the foregrounding of imitation (and as Le Bon would come to argue), a surfeit of imitation implies and results in loss of individuality. On the contrary, though it does involve a certain homogenization, imitation contributes to a sort of civilizing process that refines contrasts and oppositions and results in a better understanding among people and hence a more refined individuality.76 It is on this basis that society can become more complex and develop specific associations and systems of organization and governance. Though Tarde remained suspicious of individualism,77 he insisted that society was composed of “distinct individuals”78 and claimed that the forms of imitation that underlay a particular society were essential to the development

70 Tarde, Les lois de l’imitation, viii–ix.
71 Ibid., 12.
72 Ibid., viii.
73 Ibid., 27–28.
74 See, e.g., ibid., 405 and 405n1.
75 Ibid., xix, 2–3.
76 Ibid., 366, also xxiv, 382, 373; on homogeneity, 19–20, 78.
77 Ibid., 2.
78 Ibid., 64, xx. It matters that the point about “distinct individuals” is the only point of this straw-man definition of traditional sociology that does not become the subject of criticism.
and character of the individuality and inventiveness of that particular society’s members. As Wundt’s Völkerpsychologie offered a cultural approach that grounded the individual and psychophysical experimentation, Tarde’s social psychology offered him a ground for the concept of “the individual” on the basis of which he could turn back to justify its social endeavor.

Second, Tarde’s aim in this project was at once historical and “predictive.” His “predictive” work had begun in 1879 with a utopian fantasy, Fragment d’histoire future (published in 1896). Tarde returned to it in the very last pages of Les lois de l’imitation, in an effort to provide a systematic understanding of progress and even utopia. Today, Tarde insisted, the “supreme” law of imitation resided in the “tendency toward infinite progression.” Insofar as for him imitation was the essential form underlying an individual’s connection to other individuals, it was also a crucial part of the progress toward that goal, and he denied that this progress was merely a matter of heredity or biology or that it was a (Condorcetian or Comtian) matter of social mathematics or sociology. In turning the relationship between multiple individuals into an object of psychological study, determining that sociology needed to listen to psychology, Tarde also rendered imitation into a domain for action: imitation became the basis for a competitor to Comte’s and Condorcet’s schemes for progress in world history, indeed the logical ground for such a competing scheme, but at the same time it proposed that at the nebulous core of his scheme lay the individual as he stood psychically connected to others.

For his part, Gustave Le Bon came to psychology from physiology and anthropology, and though he never engaged in psychology “proper,” he can at once be seen as participating in its claims to serving the government of social affairs and as insisting on its place vis-à-vis the other social sciences. His early works were in physical and racial anthropology, and by 1880 he had come to consider psychology as no less racial a matter than biology itself: studying the population of the town of Podhale in Habsburg Galicia, Le Bon argued that its inhabitants constituted a separate and original race in the process of being formed, something that he asserted on the basis of not only skeletal and cranial size but psychological attitudes:

The description of the intellectual and moral aptitudes of a race providing, in our judgment, information substantially more important than that furnished by the description of some skeletons, we have tried to thoroughly investigate the psychological state of the Podhaleans.

As the “Podhaleans”—classic Eastern European peasants that they were—had no history to speak of and belonged to no larger group, such psychology, Le Bon argued, had to be found in their ostensibly highly specific myths, and it spoke directly of their particular racial constitution. Le Bon’s early career in physical and psychological anthropology established principles that he would adhere to, even regurgitate, throughout his later intellectual life, particularly in his famous Psychologie des foules (The Crowd, 1895), but also in Les lois psychologiques de l’évolution des peuples (1894), the work in which he expounded his theory of the “soul of the race” and of racial

80 Tarde, Les lois de l’imitation, 395.
83 On Habsburg and Western European intellectuals’ invention of Galicia as a place and nation of its own, with a capacity to be enlightened and brought to modernity, see Larry Wolff, The Idea of Galicia (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).
hierarchy, in *Psychologie de l’éducation* (1902), and in *Psychologie des temps nouveaux* (1920). From the very first page of *The Crowd*, for example, Le Bon suggested that crowds involved a *psychological* transformation—in some cases a deformation—of the racial composition of particular human beings:

> The whole of the common characteristics with which heredity endows the individuals of a race constitute the genius of the race. When, however, a certain number of these individuals are gathered together in a crowd for purposes of action, observation proves that, from the mere fact of their being assembled, there result certain new psychological characteristics, which are added to the racial characteristics and differ from them at times to a very considerable degree.\(^8^4\)

It is these characteristics that Le Bon famously sought to consider through an interpretation of *hypnosis* and *contagion*.\(^8^5\) Hypnosis and contagion, Le Bon wrote, are the definitive forces by which “psychological crowds”\(^8^6\) move individuals beside themselves, deprive them of self-sovereignty, and induce them to acts they would otherwise not commit. In the crowd there is no individual, no subject, but only the bearers of hypnotic suggestion who are faced with and believe in hallucinations: this is what grants a crowd the “divine right of the masses.”\(^8^7\) A man in the crowd is “an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will”;\(^8^8\) he loses his individual background, education, and character and gets swept up in a collective mind in which shared and instinctive characteristics dominate thanks to the propensity of ideas, especially images, to sweep “contagiously” like an infection through the “hypnotized” crowd and via its (also hypnotized) leader.\(^8^9\) The crowd, Le Bon argued, is “particularly open to the impressions produced by images”\(^9^0\) and becomes best organized when it is presented with ideas in the form of images:

> Whatever be the ideas suggested to crowds, they can only exercise effective influence on condition that they assume a very absolute, uncompromising and simple state. They present themselves then in the guise of images, and are only accessible to the masses under this form. These imagelike ideas are not connected by any logical bond of analogy or succession.\(^9^1\)

The most convincing ideas, moreover, emerge according to Le Bon not from contemporary fashions but from the crowd’s *racial heritage*—and the best orators and crowd leaders are those who, swept up in their midst, can raise and voice images deeply ingrained in the history and organic memory of the crowd, whose anxieties and hypnotized being they express:

> [I]t is only hereditary ideas that have sufficient influence over the isolated individual to become motives of conduct. It is only when, as the result of the intermingling of different races, a man is placed between different hereditary tendencies that his acts from one moment to another may be really entirely contradictory.\(^9^2\)

---


\(^8^5\) Ibid., 10–11, 20, 26, and bk. 1, chap. 2, §2, more generally.

\(^8^6\) Ibid., 6.

\(^8^7\) Ibid., xvi.

\(^8^8\) Ibid., 12

\(^8^9\) Ibid., 10–11, 20, 23, 26, 33–34, 113, 123.

\(^9^0\) Ibid., 95.


Le Bon in this argument situates the individual between the two ends of society and biology, but in a very different way from Tarde or Wundt. In a crucial temporal argument, because the era of crowds has at once arrived and is also still in the making, Le Bon posits that the individual is as if on both sides of a historical precipice: he is at once already fallen off it and subsumed by the crowd, and not yet at the precipice itself, still able to be defended from the crowd. Le Bon’s rhetoric of urgency uses both positions: it’s too late, history has moved from the individual to the crowd, and the long disaster has begun; yet there’s still time, and all action must be taken right now, as if this disaster might be averted. While Le Bon is not about to advocate for individualism, he emphasizes the urgency of this coming and yet arrived stage as one of a collapse of modern civilization (“the destruction of religious, political and social beliefs that ground our civilization”), whose general frame is already here, even as its consequences and new forms are still to be seen. With respect to civilization, he writes that the crowd itself has become one of “those microbes which hasten the dissolution of enfeebled or dead bodies.” From his historical and political vantage point, Le Bon establishes the individual in two ways:

(a) in the negative, as it were, as something lacking in “primitive” cultures, whose alpha and omega is their racial heritage, and as something that is again lost in the postsovereignty era of the crowd (he calls it the “last sovereign force” after the French Revolution’s destruction of the monarchy); and

(b) as something that can be tentatively identified with the tenuous era of modern civilization: much as Le Bon mistrusts reason and disdains modern secular democratic life, his individual, threatened by the crowd, is something he clearly cherishes and clearly attempts, in The Crowd, to safeguard, even though he recognizes the relative futility of this effort.

The importance of psychology is thus conditioned by its status as mediator between racial foundations and crumbling civilization. Le Bon’s is a psychology insofar as it runs parallel to the destruction of civilization and the return to the racial biological origins of man. In other words, the leader is invited here to lead through the use of images that highlight the racial background of individuals in social life and thus to reconstruct society racially in a manner that can offer a kind of harmony from contradictions—hence a society of individuals proper. Opposing at once mere biological reduction and the continuation of a civilization in which individuals are “entirely contradictory,” psychology becomes a domain for harmonizing, if not healing, society and even the individual in it: without this crowd, or ethno-, psychology the individual is doomed. But starting from psychology the crowds might become peoples that are biologically and socially harmonious. The Podhaleans offer here the near-crystalline community that could serve as the foundation for the goals of psychology.

Le Bon links psychology and individuality in a different way. Though it is, as he says, “dangerous to meddle with [the crowd’s] organization,” he does proffer, in Psychologie de l’éduca-

93 Le Bon writes: “The age we are about to enter will in truth be the ERA OF CROWDS” (italics mine, capitals GLB’s); and at the same time: “Organised crowds have always played an important part in the life of peoples, but this part has never been of such moment as at present. The substitution of the unconscious activity of crowds for the conscious activity of individuals is one of the principal characteristics of the present age” (ibid., xv, v).
94 Ibid., xviii.
95 Ibid., vi.
tion (1902), what he considers a specific and easily applicable way out of the loss of subjectivity, sovereignty, and individuality. *Psychologie de l’éducation* is for the most part a tirade against the pedagogical and university establishments in France—the latter of which had repeatedly rejected Le Bon’s efforts to become a professor. Le Bon here returns the favor: attacking contemporary education from early childhood to the university as an abject failure supposedly admitted by every professor, politician, and administrator in France, he instead offers a system of “psychological” principles for the establishment of a different and more transformative educational practice. Under the motto “Toute éducation consiste dans l’art de faire passer le conscient dans l’inconscient” (clumsily translated as “Education is the art of getting the conscious to pass into the unconscious”), 96 Le Bon proposed treating the school as a kind of laboratory in which a professor could transform pupils through “diverse means taught to him by psychology,” 97 such as imitation, suggestion, and prestige. Specifically, Le Bon claimed, it was possible to generate new reflexes through repetition of appointed tasks:

Reflexes can be opposed by reflexes. A strong will often suffices to dominate them.98

Methods for engendering these reflexes vary, naturally, depending on the things to be taught, but the fundamental principle is always the same: to repeat the task until its execution is perfected. Only thus are the necessary reflexes created and, one might add, durably fixed.99

In an argument whose crudeness would, by 1902, come as quite a surprise to experimental psychologists in both continental Europe and the English-speaking world, Le Bon endorsed a kind of crude associationism as a way of refashioning “unconscious reflexes” and generating habits that he expected would undermine or redirect already-existing unconscious, hereditary habits:

Modern psychology has shown that the role of the unconscious in everyday life is immensely superior to the role of conscious reasoning. The unconscious is developed through the artificial formation of reflexes that results from the repetition of certain associations. Once they have been sufficiently repeated, these associations create unconscious reflex acts, that is to say, habits. Once these habits have been repeated over several generations, they become hereditary and constitute the character of a race. The role of the educators is to create or modify these reflexes. You must cultivate the innate and useful reflexes, try to annul or at least weaken the harmful ones. Up to a certain point, we may form our unconscious, but once it has been formed, it is now the master and directs us in turn. These artificial reflexes, modifiers of the unconscious, are always created by at first conscious associations. A child’s learning to walk, like that of the piano or of some handiwork in the adult, shows the results of these associations.100

Le Bon was not merely acting out Pavlovianism avant la lettre here, even though the popularization of Pavlov’s work on digestion and conditioned reflexes would soon be popularized as a rather similar paradigm for intervention. Le Bon went a step further, proposing that these newly acquired reflexes could “become hereditary and constitute racial characteristics.” Just when French education had been recently reorganized around secular principles, a certain speculative

---

97 Ibid., 182 (“par des moyens divers, que la psychologie lui enseigne”).
98 “Les réflexes peuvent être opposés aux réflexes. Une volonté forte suffit souvent à les dominer” (ibid., 180).
99 Ibid., 182. The first edition (also published in 1904) has “fixés pour longtemps.”
100 Le Bon, *Psychologie de l’éducation*, 179.
and social psychology became, in Le Bon’s hands, the basis for a broad social reorganization on the basis of a process of “transforming” biology and physiology. Thus, unlike Wundt, who figured the subject as torn between biological life and society, and Tarde, who established the individual as subject, Le Bon located the individual at once negatively and as the result of experimental pedagogical practice, as a kind of being that can be reprogrammed directly. In doing so, Le Bon was offering a radical approach that was one of the logical possibilities of crowd psychology and its effect on society. The consequences of this approach—and especially of his all-too-direct link between biology and society at the near-expense of any well-constituted individual—were several: a rejection of his writing within the psychological field; an outsized cultural and political presence and influence; and a general rendition of his work into a psychologically inflected political moralism. Le Bon was largely ignored by psychologists, especially outside France: not only was his work dependent on an eclectic, school-crossing mixture of politically convenient arguments ranging from associationism to physiological psychology to evolutionary racism, but it was positively useless to experimentalists. But this rejection, which he felt most strongly as an academic rejection, made him more politically available and rendered him into a kind of conservative cultural beacon. Le Bon’s salon, as is well known, was well attended: Herman Keyserling (who noted that The Crowd had been read “by all those who have contributed or are contributing to world revolution”101) and Marie Bonaparte but also Henri Bergson and Paul Valéry are only some of the famous figures to have attended; similarly his influence on political figures— extending to Clemenceau and especially Mussolini—was remarkable.102 This imbalance between scientific and cultural influence established him as a kind of aesthetician of society and a moralist, offering near-mythical status to The Crowd and some of his later works, which often went through a printing per year. In a sense, Le Bon’s work came to shadow Pavlov’s, in 1910s and 1920s fantasies of total social regeneration.

4. HUGO MÜNSTERBERG AND THE PRESCRIPTION OF PSYCHOLOGY

Wundt’s Völkerpsychologie was also rejected and ignored by his successors in psychology, but for different reasons than Le Bon’s work;103 its influence in the human sciences, by contrast, was considerable, and Boas, Saussure, Mead, and others are now regularly described as inheritors of parts of the Völkerpsychologie project. Paradoxically, his very success in articulating and grounding an experimental psychology—and the positivistic influence, reception, and critique of his experimental work—contributed to the sense that psychology’s domain extended from a subject that could now be studied psychophysically, within specific laboratory relations and in a considerably “narrowed” space of empirical and experimental work possible in psychology.104 The

101 Michaud, The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany, 18.
102 See Nye, Origins of Crowd Psychology, 86, 178.
general logic that Wundt developed for experimental psychology was radicalized in the generations that followed—particularly by Edward Titchener, Emil Kraepelin, and Hugo Münsterberg, who were influenced by his work, but also thanks to the persistence and success of Ernst Mach’s and Richard Avenarius’s more traditional psychological positivisms, the tremendously influential argument on conditioned reflexes after Pavlov, and the eventual behaviorist repudiation of introspection and consciousness.\footnote{Farr, “Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920),” 292; Danziger, “Positivist Repudiation of Wundt.” See also Watson, \textit{Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist}, 3: “The psychology begun by Wundt has thus failed to become a science and has still more deplorably failed in contributing anything of a scientifically usable kind to human nature.”}

By attending to both aspects of Wundt’s work, we get a sense of the place and promise of psychology as a science that can elucidate the place of the individual as torn between his body and his society; the rejection of this practice led rather easily to a logic that utilized the individual as a site for psychological study and intervention. Instead of a justification of experimental practices as a way for locating, diagnosing, and controlling the individual’s place within social forms, experimental practices could now serve as a way of addressing the individual’s behavior, and they allowed the possibility of affecting it directly. Wundt’s followers extended his work and took it in the direction of not only nonintrospective physiological psychology but also theoretical engagement with and an understanding of the laboratory as a space for studying, and perhaps affecting, individual selves.

Of particular importance in this development was \textit{Psychotechnik} (psychotechnics) as promoted first and foremost by Hugo Münsterberg and also by others in Europe and the United States: psychotechnics cast the individual not merely as shaped by cultural and linguistic forces and laws but as constantly available to reform—especially to the psychological rationalization of all areas of work and life. Psychotechnics became a quite broad practice (better known in English as “applied psychology”), focused on industrial reform and reliant on experimental work. As Anson Rabinbach has notably argued, the efforts of psychologists like Münsterberg, physiologists like Emil Kraepelin, and sociologists such as Max Weber to establish psychophysics as a source for “social energeticism” were crucial to the development of a conception of the body as a “human motor,” a conception that bridged natural and social science in order to advocate for industrial and labor reform and social progress more generally.\footnote{Anson Rabinbach, \textit{The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue and the Origins of Modernity} (New York: Basic Books, 1992), notably chap. 7.} If Wundt, in his \textit{Völkerpsychologie}, structures the self as a culturally based unit, Münsterberg casts it throughout his work as already in the process of formation, shaping, and reform.

Two months before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, Münsterberg published his \textit{Psychology: General and Applied},\footnote{Hugo Münsterberg, \textit{Psychology: General and Applied} (New York: D. Appleton, 1914).} a summation of his theoretical and “psychotechnical” work. The book was a translation of the thoroughly revised 1913 edition of his 1900 \textit{Grundzüge der Psychotechnik}, titled after Wundt’s own \textit{Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie}, and it articulated a path and a more exact goal for psychology’s social presence and potential effect. Together with the 1913 \textit{Psychologie und Wirtschaftsleben} (translated as \textit{Psychology and Industrial Efficiency}), where he argued in great detail about the benefits of laboratory psychology for industry, labor, and commerce, this second edition of the \textit{Grundzüge} constituted the pinnacle of his career.
The 1900 edition, appearing shortly after the psychologist’s second, permanent move from Berlin to Harvard, had made a first careful effort to locate psychology in relation to ethics, aesthetics, logic, religion, mysticism, society, jurisprudence, and pedagogy. But between the first and the second (1913/14) edition, Münsterberg expanded his overall approach to psychology quite considerably and settled on the principal areas (and also on the social limitations) of “applied psychology” (Münsterberg’s anglicization of Psychotechnik). This second edition was now divided into theoretical and “applied” sections; because of Münsterberg’s extensive publications in the intervening years on hypnotic suggestion, art, education, history, and especially “industrial efficacy,” as domains in fundamental conversation with theoretical psychology and psychotechnics, the applied psychology section was now restricted to two principal sections: psychology of education and psychology of law, including criminology. (Crucially, he had already addressed working power [Arbeitskraft], advertising, and commercial relations in Psychologie und Wirtschaftsleben.) Münsterberg’s body of work became the broadest, most systematic psychological engagement with fields of human economy and life.

In the Grundzüge, Münsterberg’s theoretical psychology began with physiological and psychological experiments. Münsterberg established his theoretical psychology as a mixture of psychophysics (deriving in part from Fechner and Wundt) with arguments drawn from different schools (associationism, self-observation, experimental psychology, a frequent but not absolute psychophysical parallelism,108 and even a critical but not altogether dismissive engagement with the unconscious). This was all part of what Münsterberg referred to as the maturation of “individual psychology,” to which he sought to add a social, or applied, dimension: “If we are to draw one decisive frontier line between two large groups in human psychology, it ought to be between the mental life of the individuals and that of the social groups. Of course, there is no mental process in the social group which is not contained in individual minds.”109 Lorraine Daston reads Münsterberg’s theoretical project as attempting to “account for all psychological phenomena in terms of mechanistic laws,” a practice that Münsterberg extended to spiritualism (which he denied) and hypnotic suggestion (which he practiced but deemed merely a stronger version of “normal” suggestion).110 Daston continues:

Münsterberg’s psychology became the most daring statement of the new science of mind. Münsterberg’s views are especially interesting, since although he was the foremost spokesman for a reduction of volition to a complex of sensation and of Wundt’s apperception to reflex action, he also considered himself to be a champion of Fichtean idealism against scientific naturalism.111

In his theoretical (“causal”) work, Münsterberg indeed aimed at a mechanistic grounding of the systems underlying feelings, the will, ideas, apperception, and perceptions. He argued that experimentation does not allow for such unities to be maintained as such, yet nevertheless the psychologist cannot fully reduce these to their mechanical underpinnings (this is what Daston

108 Ibid., 39.
109 Ibid., 43–44.
110 Münsterberg, Psychology and Life, 239–44, esp. 242; Münsterberg, Psychology: General and Applied, 408. Wundt was in agreement on this point: see his Hypnotismus und Suggestion (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1892).
111 Daston, “The Theory of Will versus the Science of Mind,” 98. Daston reads Münsterberg as attempting to update associationism, which I do not find quite convincing, insofar as associations and introspection form a rather minor part of his argument.
refers to as Fichtean idealism). Popular-turned-scientific concepts remain in operation, in other words, even though and even as they are experimentally undermined. This point was essential for Münsterberg, for in the part of the book on applied psychology (Psychotechnik), it allowed him leeway with theoretical points he himself was making in the very same book. For example, though Münsterberg rejected apperception in his “causal” psychology, 112 he then turned around to insist that a minimum of apperception is essential in psychotechnics and particularly in education, where teachers need its “services.” 113 Similarly, “the will” was a term that Münsterberg usually sought to dismantle, yet at the same time maintained. 114 This dual conceptual practice was essential. Psychotechnics was now possible, according to Münsterberg, because of profound transformations in psychology, which allowed for the study of individuals and individual differences within broader categories: where theoretical psychology had required normative cases and aimed at laws, psychotechnics could be applicable to particular situations. Offering a tentative history of his discipline, Münsterberg writes (the lengthy passage deserves full quotation):

[T]he development of psychology itself favors this new trend toward applied psychology [Psychotechnik]. One characteristic change in the recent interests of the psychologists proved of especial significance: the long disregard for individual differences in experimental psychology has ceased. When psychology emancipated itself from philosophy, the fundamental aim was to study the mental facts in the same way in which the naturalist studies the physical facts. The general emphasis, therefore, was laid on the search for general laws. The mental curiosities and surprising happenings in individual cases had too long held the interest of the psychologists of previous times. The new psychology was to get rid of this anecdotal kind of unscientific observation. The result was an instinctive suppression of all the facts which characterize the individual differences of man and an overemphasis on the common laws of the mind. Yet it is evident that this condition works directly against the practical application of psychology. The physician, the lawyer, the educator, the minister or the business man who neglects the individual differences of the patients, witnesses, pupils, parishioners, or customers, loses his chief opportunity to touch the levers of the mind. The abstract mind, common to all, is a fiction which is necessary for the development of theoretical psychology, but utterly unfit for practical achievement. Since the beginning of the new century the interest of psychologists has shifted more and more from these general laws to the study of those factors which determine the individual variations. The personal characteristics which at the beginning of experimental psychology were treated more or less as a disturbance which only obscured the general laws are now the material for most careful examination. This new turn in the scientific theoretic interest most naturally brings a turn in the practical attitude. Moreover, the work of the

112  Münsterberg, Psychology: General and Applied, 141, 163.
113  Ibid., 372–74, also 390–91, 394.
114  “The word ‘will’ has become rather colorless in causal psychology, but after all it serves best to suggest the common factor in all the inner activities. There is a will factor in attention and thought and constructive imagination as well as in desire and impulse, decision and choice…. Wherever the self-observer stops his introspective analysis with the belief that he can discover a special will element in all or some of these processes, he is misled by an illusion which can easily be understood. He has not freed himself from the first demand of purposive psychology. The unity of the meaning of will and the incomparable character of the will act in real life exert a spell on his power of introspection. He does not analyze the will, because he does not take it as an object in consciousness; but he experiences the will by feeling it instead of by observing it. As soon as the will is looked on as an objective process it can and must be resolved into elements each of which in itself is without will character.” Münsterberg, Psychology: General and Applied, 176–77.
psychologist has reached today a high degree of consolidation. The best interests of a young science demand that a certain stage of development be reached before the results are carried to the marketplace. It is dangerous for the scientist, if he is disturbed in the quiet elaboration of his theories by impatient demands of the outer world. A few decades of seclusion behind laboratory doors was most desirable for experimental psychology. This first period, however, may be acknowledged to be closed.115

The claims of this passage are especially far-reaching: psychotechnics is essential to “the physician, the lawyer, the educator, the minister or the business man” (note the singular and the definite articles); general psychology has come into its own, and psychotechnics is now not only possible but imperative; moreover, the junge Wissenschaft has advanced to a privileged position in that it can now for the first time offer practical guidance to a wide array of disciplines and practices; the individual is, once again, the subject of study and (quite explicitly) intervention, though this time it is not merely the individual as subject but ostensibly even each individual.

Münsterberg accordingly proceeded to offer applications of psychotechnics to education, criminology and jurisprudence, industrial efficiency, labor relations, vocational advice and fitness, commerce, and advertising, and he attempted experiments affecting all these fields (including, e.g., "Experiments in the Service of the Railway Service"116) but focused in particular on vocational aptitude testing. Vocational guidance was a way of linking an individual’s natural aptitude to social function, to capacity for work (and type of work), to the dream of socioeconomic harmony. Like Wundt and Le Bon, he specifically considered his psychological work to be a way of bridging biological life and society, but he went a step further, considering it as work that might even help overcome biological premises and aim toward greater social harmony. Regarding biology, Münsterberg recognized the significance of biological hereditary laws and endorsed the potential of eugenics, but at the same time he found eugenics profoundly insufficient for psychological problems that he did not deem innate.117 Similarly, physiology (particularly ergonomic physiology) was an important part of his laboratory work, but it could not account for all psychological dispositions (e.g., the imagination118). And of inborn instincts, he wrote:

The fact that animal and man are born with inherited dispositions through which such automatic and volitional reactions are favored as serve the conservation of the individual and of the species is strictly biological. The instincts do not introduce any new type of psychological experience.119

Society, at the other end of the spectrum, while significant, was principally a space for greater efficiency, a realm that psychological work could transform, a world that remained largely

115 Ibid., 343–44.
116 Münsterberg, Psychology and Industrial Efficiency, 63–82.
117 Münsterberg, Psychology: General and Applied, 410, 448–49.
118 "Mind and body are connected wherever an action is performed. I have the will to grasp for the book before me and obediently my arm performs the movement. The muscles contract, the whole physical apparatus comes into motion through the preceding mental process of volition. The same holds true where no special will act arouses the muscles. If a thought is in my mind and it discharges itself in appropriate words, those words are first of all movements of lips and tongue and vocal chords and chest, physical processes which have followed the mental experience. The ideas and feelings may also be the starting points for other bodily changes" (ibid., 35–36).
119 Ibid., 186
unenlightened and was in dire need of psychology’s help. Like Wundt, Münsterberg spoke, for the most part, not of “society,” but rather of its participating and interwoven components. Except for the realm of art, Münsterberg was not willing to compromise as regards the power of psychology, even traveling to investigate and write about mediums and either unmask their charlatancy or explain the psychological dynamics that made them appear to have superior capacities. Ultimately, the goal of psychology was now total: it could affect society as a whole, and it could even guarantee psychology’s own well-being. On the one hand, psychology promised “overflowing joy and perfect inner harmony” for workers and employers:

[A]bove all, still more important than the naked commercial profit on both sides, is the cultural gain which will come to the total economic life of the nation, as soon as everyone can be brought to the place where his best energies may be unfolded and his greatest personal satisfaction secured. The economic experimental psychology offers no more inspiring idea than this adjustment of work and psyche by which mental dissatisfaction in the work, mental depression and discouragement, may be replaced in our social community by overflowing joy and perfect inner harmony.120

On the other hand, even the psychologist himself would benefit from psychotechnics: without a hint of irony regarding his hopes for the discipline, Münsterberg concluded Psychology: General and Applied by mentioning that the psychologist’s work “may have too much disturbed the processes in his consciousness,” and he recommended that to avoid such disturbance, “the investigator in the psychological laboratory must train himself systematically in the introspective methods and this training must be controlled by psychotechnical knowledge.” 121

Münsterberg’s American career would be troubled shortly after the publication of Psychology: General and Applied because of his pronounced support for Germany’s wartime effort and would end with his death in 1916. Following the end of the war, psychotechnical conferences (eventually to be renamed conferences in “applied psychology”) began to be held on a semiregular, almost biannual basis, and his work came to be seen as an important (if gradually superseded) inspiration and guide for the various psychotechnical schools in Europe.122

5. THE PLASTIC SELF, BETWEEN CULTURE AND EXPERIMENT

In the preceding pages, I have emphasized two arguments. First, that psychology offers a rather new conception of the human being and its plasticity; in particular, it allows for the coalescence of a series of problems: a claim to concrete, scientific theorization of biological and social problems, which promises to affect society; a theory of time, particularly of the rise to modernity and the potential for further change; the potential for modifying individuals. Second, psychology prescribes itself as the only or principal systematic solution to problems that have been theoretical, metaphysical, and speculative, as well as to significant social problems; it claims to be able to do better than biology, sociology, anthropology, or philosophy, because it is centered on, and frames, the individual in a particular way.

120  Münsterberg, Psychology and Industrial Efficiency, 309.
121  Münsterberg, Psychology: General and Applied, 470.
Both arguments—on human plasticity and on psychology as the science that can facilitate and carry out social reform—emerged not only from within the psychology “proper” of figures like Wundt and Münsterberg but also from the more speculative or metaphysical accounts that grabbed intellectual headlines in France.

That the individual came to be the privileged site for the psychological diagnosis of social questions and, just as importantly, for a psychological intervention aiming as much at social as at biological life may appear as a less-than-significant argument to conclude with. Yet in many ways, the individual—by himself and in social formations—already constituted a part of psychiatric and psychotherapeutic engagements, but not of biological or social ones. Psychological experimentation transferred a certain realm of human comportment bridging biology and society into the subject of psychology, but it was at the same time because of Völkerpsychologie and the other varieties of “social” psychology and psychotechnics that guiding and intervening in the individual through an ostensibly scientific psychology became a scientific priority and a social possibility. It was these varieties that provided the frame for defining experimental psychology as the science of individual behavior within society, that provided at once a strong link and an intermediate space between society and biological life, and that promised—in both liberal regimes and “totalitarian” Italian, Soviet, and German ones—to help shift, adapt, or create a “new man.” Prior to 1890, the study and education of the child were, in Britain as well as on the Continent, a matter not of psychological organization but of classical education and social economics. By the late 1920s, pedology had become a privileged mode of study and intervention in the Soviet Union,\textsuperscript{123} Piaget was becoming something of a celebrity as the director of the International Bureau of Education, and psychoanalysis offered a psychopathological theory of childhood development (from Freud’s \textit{Three Essays on}). In the 1890s, the workplace had begun to be considered a place where greater efficiency could be sought; by the 1920s, an entire field of an \textit{Arbeitskraft} based on physiology, ergonomics, and industrial psychology had become standard.

More broadly, though psychology had long served—in its capacity as the study of moral phenomena—as a study of the metahistory and diversity of humanity,\textsuperscript{124} the “new” psychology that began with Wundt and others in the 1870s led to a transformation of the field of psychology such that its very notion of society had to be developed anew.\textsuperscript{125} Though debates in the field led to no definitive approach throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the idea of an ethnopsychology, attempting to reduce other sciences (anthropology, sociology) and to institute itself as the correct interpretation of the social life of mental phenomena, came to motivate both a sociological or cultural analysis and the very foundations of experimentation and

\textsuperscript{123}See Alexei Lunacharsky’s proclamation at the First All-Union Congress of Pedology (December 1927): “When pedology has learned the nature of the child and the laws by which children develop,” he declared, “it will have illuminated the most important question: how to produce a new man that will parallel the production of new equipment in the economic sphere.” Quoted in Alexander Etkind, \textit{Eros of the Impossible: The History of Psychoanalysis in Russia}, trans. Noah Rubins and Maria Rubins (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 265. My thanks to Jamie Phillips for this reference.


\textsuperscript{125}It is worth noting here that Münsterberg, for example, in his chapter on social psychology, cites no pre-1893 work (and the earliest works he does cite are Le Bon’s and Tarde’s).
reform proposals. The parallel development of psychological criminology, Pavlovian physiology, psychoanalysis, and even psychologies of habits made advances in similar directions, expanding psychology as broadly as possible while claiming for it the ability to work at a minute level in its experimental research. After the Great War, the political consequences of Versailles, and the rise of European fascism, an ethnocomparative psychology, which included discussion of the Volksseele as well as of a collective unconscious (especially by Jung), would become a central site for the development of a newer and quite different social psychology. While it would be silly to consider the attempts of psychology to handle society the sole or even the principal motor for these developments, they formed an essential part. They rendered notions and problems such as the will, the soul, the mind, social behavior, and psychological normativity essential components of the study of humanity and the human individual. Most significantly, while psychologists denied that these essential components (which had a considerable life of their own in contemporary politics and culture) were singular, self-sufficient units of human activity and inner life, psychologists never quite decisively undermined their position in contemporary aesthetics and politics. The will, thus, could at once be the object of minute study concerning the laws that underwrite it and also survive as an aesthetico-political concept to be invoked where and when it was supposedly necessary to do so, whether by Münsterberg or in a more philosophical approach. Paradoxically, thus, this prescription of psychology only served to give a second life to notions such as the will, the soul, etc as social ideas: the will, for example, a concept so systematically dismantled within psychology, became at the same time—among voluntarist ideologies in particular something all the more present when it was proclaimed as supposedly superior to scientific investigation. The prescription of psychology here was, of course, more psychology, an enhanced realm and greater chance at experimentation and intervention, a deeper knowledge and control of the laws of mental life, a further opening of realms to psychology itself. But at the same time, in becoming social, psychology managed at once a task of disassembling the individual, a task of rendering him plastic, and an unassigned task of keeping alive, as aesthetic and moral mythologies, the same aesthetico-political and speculative languages that it targeted.

Is it possible to describe these strands of psychology—as well as the scope of social study—as having become, during the period 1890–1920, a political technology of subjectivity? In order to emphasize the ethnopsychological, psychotechnical, and speculative “crowd”-psychological attempts at a definition and reform of the individual, this essay has avoided putting in place a Foucauldian framework, which runs the danger of identifying political technologies too easily. Wundt, Le Bon, Tarde, and Münsterberg were explicit and specific as to the cultural and reform promises of their work while emphasizing this work as traditionally psychological: as a result, their sense of human plasticity offers a technology of subjectivity that was fully attached to the development of the science itself—both in competition with other sciences and in terms of the purpose of psychology itself. For psychology, a culturally identifiable and reformable self was identical with itself.

To conclude on that point, it is worth attempting a twofold reading of the contribution of psychology in this notion of the self and adjacent notions. The first part of this reading would attend to a classic intellectual-historical focus, which would in turn highlight the transformation of the languages of freedom, individuality, the will—languages that in the 1850s had been allied with a naturalist rhetoric (Schopenhauer, Michelet, Tocqueville, even Wagner) and that, by the turn of the century and thanks to the rise of the biological and especially the evolutionary-biological
focus on society, had both lost credibility and come to play a role as myth. When we approach psychology against the background of evolutionary and degeneration theories in biology and sociology, the psychologists’ prescription of psychology—indeed, always at the defense of their notion of individuality—comes to appear as a clear argument for the precarious position of the individual in modernity, “his” dismantling in scientific thought, and his veritable suspension from various political points and perspectives. Psychology would in this regard offer a different approach for handling the relationship of “Consciousness and Society,” whose fin de siècle crisis H. Stuart Hughes studied in his 1958 book of the same name. Where evolutionary biology and anthropology add to that crisis, psychology offers something closer to a halting attempt at, if not a resolution, then a redeployment of available scientific and conceptual resources for such a resolution.

The second part of this reading is offered by Georges Canguilhem in his now-classic essay “The Living and Its Milieu.” Canguilhem proposed that the turn into the twentieth century was characterized by an effort to interpret the living organism as defined almost entirely by its milieu, an effort that reduced organisms—especially human beings—to mechanical bundles of responses to an environment. This effort was the result of a long accumulation of theoretical and scientific work: in biology and behaviorist psychology, as in Taylorist industrial thought and reform (Canguilhem reads Jacques Loeb and John B. Watson just beside Alfred E. Taylor, though he does not add Ivan Pavlov here). In this argument, any autonomy of the organism was erased, to the benefit of theories and practices of conditioning. Canguilhem’s emphasis on the milieu determining the individual works rather well in the present context, whether from the perspective of Wundtian *Völkerpsychologie*, that of a racial and social convergence at the expense of classical individuality (Le Bon), that of individual psychology within society and the capacity for “interpsychic” connections, notably imitation (Tarde), or that of physiological experiments and psychotechnical advocacy in Münsterberg and post–World War I applied psychology. But the Canguilhemian approach is also perhaps limited in that the quite plastic concept of the individual imagined and advocated by psychology saw this individual, not merely as one conditioned by his milieu, but often also as the force through whose transformation the milieu itself might be transformed. In other words, the codependence of the individual and the milieu in some cases (notably Münsterberg’s) allowed diagnosis and action on the individual on the principle that it would also transform a society that was mired in or even halted by both biological theories and modernity’s course to the present.

Unlike clinical, psychotherapeutic, and psychiatric writings, and unlike the classificatory and statistical writings of other sciences, psychology of the *Völker*, crowd, and psychotechnic varieties offered a place for the individual that not only emerged between but also bridged “nature” and “society” in such a way as to render individuals and populations available for further research, judgment, and government. In this sense, psychology offered individuals up to forms of governmentality in a way that was not unparalleled but was certainly concentrated and would come to be utilized in the interwar period. Psychologists understood their work as readily applicable in the social realm and described their subdiscipline as the principal socially applicable science of


their time: to them, psychology was the principal vector for addressing, if not curing, a long series of social, educational, philosophical, and even political issues, disharmonies, and “diseases.” At the same time, the diagnostic effort, together with the attempts at pedagogy and intervention, rendered psychology into a useful ground for social reform in a way that was unavailable at the biological level of evolution and cell theory. Psychology could thus also be subject to trends—from degeneration theory after Nordau, through social hygiene projects, education theories, and even up to socialism—in a way that grounded social projects, something rendered a priority in trends of the 1910s and 1920s such as industrial psychotechnics, behaviorism, Soviet theories of cognitive development, pedology, and education theory. Psychology’s ground could be at once experimental and speculative, insofar as each of these tendencies had its utility and contributed to the normative and highly political judgments of clinical, statistical, and criminological theories. In Lev Vygotsky’s words from “The Crisis in Psychology” (1929):

[O]ur science [psychology] could not and cannot develop in the old society. We cannot master the truth about personality and personality itself so long as mankind has not mastered the truth about society and society itself. In contrast, in the new society our science will take a central place in life. “The leap from the kingdom of necessity into the kingdom of freedom” inevitably puts the question of the mastery of our own being, of its subjection to the self, on the agenda. In this sense Pavlov is right when he calls our science the last science about man himself. It will indeed be the last science in the historical or pre-historical period of mankind. The new society will create the new man. When one mentions the remolding of man as an indisputable trait of the new mankind and the artificial creation of a new biological type, then this will be the only and first species in biology which will create itself…. In the future society, psychology will indeed be the science of the new man.  
