

CONCRETE PSYCHOLOGY: THE WORK OF GEORGES POLITZER

A SPECIAL REVIEW¹

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Forty years after its first publication, a book by Georges Politzer criticizing the foundations of psychology is again available on the French book market. This Marxist philosopher, hardly known outside France, seemed to be forgotten; in recent years, however, he has been rediscovered by an increasing number of psychologists (5, 7, 14, 17, 18). Three years earlier the present book appeared also in Spanish (13).

When these prolegomena of a "concrete psychology" first appeared in 1928 they were no academic success; they were considered too radical and revolutionary. But today they apparently have wider appeal and one only regrets that this new edition has neither a new introduction nor an index. The volume remains a fragment which was to have been followed by one on Gestalt psychology and one on behaviorism, the two modern trends besides psychoanalysis. These were to have led to the fourth, the crowning volume, dealing with Concrete Psychology, the new psychology Politzer had in mind. However, they were never written.

THE DRAMA OF AN ACTUAL HUMAN LIFE

In the introduction Politzer deals sharply with those psychologists who are strangers to life as well as to truth. Looking in their existential insecurity for the protection given by officially accepted principles, they study "psychological processes." In their treatment of isolated parts, i.e. faculties, factors, functions, they take abstractions for realities. A scientific psychologist of this type "knows nothing and is not able to do anything" (p. 29).² For academic psychologists, "the understanding of man is relegated to either the field of fictitious problems, or that of distant hope."

What then should psychologists study? Politzer says it is *le drame vécu*, the drama of a person's actual life, in the Greek sense of doing and acting; this drama is to become the essential subject matter of a

¹Politzer, Georges. *Critique des Fondements de la Psychologie: La Psychologie et la Psychanalyse*. Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1967. Pp. 262. Ffr. 9.00 (10).

²Where only a page reference is given this refers to the book under review.

true psychology. "The concept of life means both a biological fact and actual human life, man's drama. This dramatic life possesses all the characteristics which would constitute a field to be worked over scientifically. If psychology did not yet exist, one would have to invent it in the name of this possibility" (p. 12).

Politzer finds that so far real psychology which deals with this "drama" has been left to creative writers. But he also complains that many men of letters "ended by being subdued by a false psychology. In their naivety and ignorance, novelists and dramatists believed that they had to take this 'science' of the psyche seriously" (pp. 11-12). Politzer considers it a "theology" in so far as it is introspective and dualistic, the "double nature of man" being a myth (p. 7).

When Politzer distinguishes between "concrete" and "abstract," he brings to mind the distinction between *Verstehen* and *Erklären* (understanding and explaining) of Driesch and Spranger. Allport's distinction, going back to Windelband, between idiographic and nomothetic laws is, of course, also relevant here (4, pp. 19-23), as is the further development of this concept in Rosenzweig's "idiodynamics" (16). Today, many readers will more readily accept Politzer's emphasis on the concrete since Sartre pronounced what one may say has become the existentialist credo: "existence precedes essence" (8, p. 17). But in 1928 Politzer's brilliant essay burst upon the field like a comet.

CRITIQUE OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

Politzer appreciates that Freud's method of an individual's report and free association in contrast to the old introspection was a revolutionary step towards a concrete psychology. Data so gathered "constitute objective material which one can study from the outside" (p. 81). It is by studying the dreams of particular individuals that Freud differed from the classical approach which "by abstraction eliminates the dreamer, and assimilates the psychological facts to objective ones, i.e., to facts in the third person" (p. 38). Psychology, however, must be essentially a science of events "in the first person."

But it is different with Freud's theoretical formulations. "Indeed, everything happens as if in his explanations Freud wanted to go back on the way which the concrete inspiration of psychoanalysis had led him to go and, as it were, to be forgiven his concrete discoveries, by giving explanations to please the taste of classical psychology" (p. 111).

Speaking to readers who know psychoanalysis, Politzer exposes Freud's theses with much discernment and vigor. At the end Politzer

considers it perfectly clear that Freud's hypotheses of the unconscious, pre-conscious, the censor, etc. have an abstract character. "Freud speaks in a language which lets the concrete disappear" (p. 129). Politzer is grateful to Freud for a lesson which, though negative, is valuable: "We learn to recognize that certain concepts which first appeared to derive essentially from concrete experience, are essentially abstract" (p. 115).

RELATIONSHIP TO INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY

The life drama as the proper subject matter for a concrete psychology is, of course, closely paralleled by Adler's concept of the life style including the individual's law of movement. Adler actually had arrived at a formulation very similar to that of Politzer when he said: "Styles of life are the proper subject-matter of psychology and the material for investigation; and schools which take any other subject-matter are occupied, in the main part, with physiology or biology" (3, p. 48). And like Politzer, Adler also credits the creative writers for having advanced this kind of psychology up to now. "Our veneration for the poets can hardly reach a higher degree than in our admiration for their perfect understanding of human nature" (2, p. 189). And he adds that he has learned much from the great writers such as Shakespeare and Goethe.

Yet despite these and numerous further similarities, and despite the fact that Politzer, when he started a journal, included a paper by Adler (see below), Politzer did not quite understand Adler and considered his theory too idealistic. One main difference between the two theories is Adler's concept of the goal. Politzer does not see the unity of the individual brought about by his goal. Thus his criticism of Spranger as another modern abstractionist, and his description of the phenomenologists as not being able to bring about a true synthesis of the facts they observe, may be applied against Politzer himself. "Indeed, since psychology insists that its field are the events in the life of the individual, it does not know what to do, and really does not do anything, with it. Since the ruin of rational psychology, psychology has become phenomenological and studies nothing but multitudes of phenomena" (p. 47). Actually, Adler, through his concepts of life style and goal, together with techniques to grasp and transform these, gave the means not only for understanding concrete individual behavior, but also for redirecting it by suggesting another more socially useful goal (*Umfinalisierung*, refinalization).

THE AUTHOR

Little is known about the life of Georges Politzer. According to one account,³ his family, of whom a son still survives, never permitted the publication of a biography of him. Politzer was born in Hungary in 1903, and was executed by the Nazis in 1942 during their occupation of France, for communist activities. Simone de Beauvoir mentioned him as a Sorbonne co-student whose "shock of red hair glowed flame-like," and who labeled Jean-Paul Sartre "a petit bourgeois at heart" (5, p. 22). Mlle. de Beauvoir met Politzer occasionally when they were both provincial high school teachers.

While still working for his *agrégation* (a competitive state examination) in 1927 he published, under the pen-name of François Arouet (9), alluding to Voltaire, a pamphlet against Henri Bergson, the fashionable philosopher of the day. Politzer accused him of only pretending to be a "concrete psychologist."

In 1929, Politzer edited in Paris a periodical, the *Revue de Psychologie Concrète*, with the magnificently bold purpose to overcome the crisis in psychology and to provide a medium for a unified concrete psychology which he alternately also called "positive" psychology. Among the contributors were F. Giese, Otto Rank, Pichon, Prinzhorn, Utitz, Myers, J. R. Kantor, and also Adler (1). After two issues Politzer realized that his periodical could not become the means he had intended for overcoming the barren classical teaching of most of his contemporaries, and gave it up—and with it, concrete psychology altogether. After the war, in 1947, Politzer's two main contributions to this periodical, "Mythological versus scientific psychology" and "Whither Concrete Psychology?" were republished in the form of a small volume (12) which was reviewed in detail by the present writer (15).

In 1936, in the Marxian review, *Commune*, Politzer opposed attempts to make a doctrinal synthesis of psychoanalysis and Marxism, and in 1939 he published, under the pen-name of T. W. Morris (11) a paper in which he saluted the end of psychoanalysis, the theoretical framework of which he calls "a very heteroclitic eclecticism."

CONCLUSION

Even though numerous authors have, during the last decades, in numerous ways, opposed abstract classical psychology as well as

³M. P. Garcin, literary director, Presses Universitaires de France, personal communication.

psychoanalysis, the fundamental and decisive critique by a dialectical materialist contained in the volume discussed here is still admirable as a work of great clarity and conviction. It arrived at formulating the conditions which every true psychology must fulfill, be it labeled concrete, positive, individual, or existential-phenomenological. A positive psychology, according to Politzer is (a) a science a posteriori, i.e., an adequate study of a group of facts; (b) original, i.e., studies facts which cannot be reduced to the objects of the other sciences; and (c) objective, i.e., defines psychological facts and methods in a manner that is universally accessible and verifiable (p. 248).

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