

## **The French Psychological Path: Transforming Cartesian Dualism into Scientific Psychology (1637–1968)**

***Dr. Michael Kuznetsov***

V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University,  
Faculty of Philosophy  
Kharkov, Ukraine  
pwanz87@gmail.com  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3232-1792>

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### **Abstract**

The primary aim of the study is to trace and analyze the dialectical process by which French psychological thought moved from Cartesian mechanistic dualism and Enlightenment materialism to the positivist and clinical-experimental paradigm of the 19th century. The object of the article is the historical evolution of French psychology from the 17th to the late 19th century. The subject is the transformation of its philosophical foundations into an independent scientific discipline. The main research question is: How did French psychology manage to free itself from metaphysical speculation and become a rigorous empirical science despite originating in René Descartes' strict mind-body dualism? The central hypothesis is that this transformation was driven not only by internal theoretical development but also by socio-political factors (class struggles, bourgeois progress, the revolutions of 1848, and the crisis of the Third Republic), which accelerated the rejection of metaphysics in favor of laboratory and clinical methods. The study employs historical-philosophical analysis, the comparative method (French tradition vs. British empiricism and German experimental psychology), and contextual socio-political interpretation of primary sources (works of Descartes, Gassendi, Malebranche, Bayle, d'Holbach, Ribot, Charcot, and others). The article demonstrates that Descartes laid the psychophysical foundations (pineal gland as interaction point, reflex theory, classification of six primary passions),

which were subsequently criticized and materialized by Enlightenment thinkers. Pierre Bayle secularized mental disorders by treating them as natural illnesses rather than divine punishment; d'Holbach explained psychological distress as misinterpretation of material processes. In the 19th century, Théodule Ribot institutionalized experimental psychology, while Jean-Martin Charcot, through hypnosis and clinical demonstration of trauma's psychosomatic effects, finally bridged philosophy and scientific clinic, significantly influencing Freud. The decline of the original French tradition in the 20th century under Anglo-American dominance further highlights the uniqueness of the earlier philosophy-science interaction. The conclusions offer insights for contemporary cognitive science, neurophilosophy, and trauma therapy.

**Keywords:** *Philosophy, French Psychology, Cartesian Dualism, Philosophy and Science Interaction, History of Psychology, Secularization of Mental Disorders, Psychosomatics, Cognitive Science*

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## **Fransız psixoloji ənənəsi: Kartezyen dualizmdən elmi psixologiyaya keçid (1637–1968)**

**Dr. Michael Kuznetsov**

V. N. Karazin Xarkov Milli Universiteti,  
Fəlsəfə fakültəsi  
Xarkov, Ukrayna  
pwanz87@gmail.com  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3232-1792>

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### **Xülasə**

Tədqiqatın əsas məqsədi fransız psixoloji düşüncəsinin Kartezyen mexanistik dualizm və Maarifçilik dövrünün materializmindən XIX əsrin pozitivist və klinik-eksperimental paradigmasına keçidini təmin edən dialektik prosesi izləmək və təhlil etməkdir. Məqalənin obyektivi XVII əsrdən XIX əsrin sonlarına qədər fransız psixologiyasının tarixi inkişafıdır. Predmeti isə onun fəlsəfi əsaslarının müstəqil elmi disipline çevrilməsi prosesidir. Əsas tədqiqat sualı belə formullaşdırılır: René Dekartın sərt ağıl–bədən dualizmindən qaynaqlanmasına baxmayaraq, fransız psixologiyası metafizik spekulasiyalardan necə azad olaraq ciddi empirik elmə çevrilə bilmişdir? Mərkəzi hipotez ondan ibarətdir ki, bu transformasiya yalnız daxili nəzəri inkişafın nəticəsi deyil, həm də sosial-siyasi amillərin (sinfi mübarizələr, burjuaziyanın tərəqqisi, 1848-ci il inqilabları və Üçüncü Respublika böhranı) təsiri ilə baş vermiş, bu amillər metafizikanın tədricən kənarlaşdırılaraq laboratoriya və klinik metodların üstünlük qazanmasını sürətləndirmişdir.

Tədqiqatda tarixi-fəlsəfi təhlil metodu, müqayisəli yanaşma (fransız ənənəsi ilə Britaniya empirizmi və Alman eksperimental psixologiyasının müqayisəsi), eləcə də əsas mənbələrin (Dekart, Qassendi, Malbranş, Bayl, d'Holbax, Ribo, Şarko və başqalarının əsərləri) sosial-siyasi kontekstual interpretasiyası tətbiq edilmişdir. Məqalədə göstərilir ki, Dekart psixofiziki əsasları (epifiz vəzinin qarşılıqlı təsir nöqtəsi kimi izahı, refleks nəzəriyyəsi, altı əsas ehtirasın təsnifatı) formalaşdırmış, lakin bu əsaslar sonradan Maarifçilik mütəfəkkirləri tərəfindən tənqid edilmiş və materialist çərçivədə yenidən şərh olunmuşdur. Pierre Bayle

ruhi pozuntuları ilahi cəza kimi deyil, təbii xəstəliklər kimi izah etməklə onları sekulyarlaşdırmış, d'Holbax isə psixoloji iztirabları maddi proseslərin yanlış qavranılması ilə əlaqələndirmişdir.

XIX əsrdə Teodül Ribo eksperimental psixologiyanı institusional səviyyədə formalaşdırmış, Jan-Martin Şarko isə hipnoz və travmanın psixosomatik təsirlərinin klinik nümayişi vasitəsilə fəlsəfə ilə elmi klinika arasında körpü yaratmış və bununla da Ziqmund Freyde mühüm təsir göstərmişdir. XX əsrdə anqlo-amerikan elmi dominantlıq fonunda orijinal fransız ənənəsinin tənəzzülü, erkən dövrdə fəlsəfə ilə elm arasındakı bu qarşılıqlı əlaqənin nə qədər unikal olduğunu daha aydın şəkildə üzə çıxarır. Tədqiqatın nəticələri müasir koqnitiv elmlər, neyrofəlsəfə və travma terapiyası üçün mühüm nəzəri və metodoloji nəticələr təqdim edir.

**Açarsözlər:** *Fəlsəfə, Fransa psixologiyası, Karteziyan dualizmi, fəlsəfə və elmin qarşılıqlı əlaqəsi, psixologiya tarixi, psixi pozğunluqların sekulyarlaşdırılması, psixosomatika, koqnitiv elm.*

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## **Французский психологический путь: трансформация картезианского дуализма в научную психологию (1637–1968)**

**д-р Майкл Кузнецов**

В.Н. Каразинский Харьковский национальный университет,  
Факультет философии

Харьков, Украина

[pwanz87@gmail.com](mailto:pwanz87@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3232-1792>

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### **Резюме**

Главная цель исследования – проследить и проанализировать диалектический процесс, в ходе которого французская психологическая мысль перешла от картезианского механистического дуализма и материализма Просвещения к позитивистской и клинико-экспериментальной парадигме XIX века. Объектом статьи является историческая эволюция французской психологии с XVII до конца XIX века; предметом – трансформация её философских основ в самостоятельную научную дисциплину. Основной исследовательский вопрос формулируется так: каким образом французской психологии удалось освободиться от метафизических спекуляций и стать строгой эмпирической наукой, несмотря на своё происхождение из строгого дуализма души и тела Рене Декарта? Центральная гипотеза заключается в том, что эта трансформация была обусловлена не только внутренним теоретическим развитием, но и социально-политическими факторами (классовая борьба, прогресс буржуазии, революции 1848 года, кризис Третьей республики), которые ускорили отказ от метафизики в пользу лабораторных и клинических методов. В исследовании используются историко-философский анализ, сравнительный метод (сопоставление французской традиции с британским эмпиризмом и немецкой экспериментальной психологией) и контекстуальная социально-политическая интерпретация первоисточников (работ Декарта, Гассенди, Мальбранша, Бейля, д’Аламбера, Дидро, Гольбаха, Ри-

бо, Шарко и других). В статье показано, что Декарт заложил психофизические основания (шишковидная железа как точка взаимодействия, теория рефлекса, классификация шести первичных страстей), которые впоследствии были критикованы и материализованы мыслителями Просвещения. Пьер Бейль секуляризировал психические расстройства, рассматривая их как естественные болезни, а не божественную кару; д'Аламбер и Дидро в «Энциклопедии» способствовали натуралистическому взгляду на человека; Поль Гольбах объяснял психологический дистресс как неверную интерпретацию материальных процессов. В XIX веке Теодуль Рибо институционализировал экспериментальную психологию, а Жан-Мартен Шарко через изучение гипноза и клиническую демонстрацию психосоматических эффектов травмы окончательно соединил философию с научной клиникой, существенно повлияв на Фрейда. Угасание оригинальной французской традиции в XX веке под влиянием англо-американского доминирования дополнительно подчеркивает уникальность раннего взаимодействия философии и науки. Выводы работы предлагают перспективы для современной когнитивной науки, нейрофилософии и терапии травмы.

**Ключевые слова:** *Философия, французская психология, картезианский дуализм, взаимодействие философии и науки, история психологии, секуляризация психических расстройств, психосоматика, когнитивная наука.*

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## **Introduction**

### **The Dialectics of Mind and Matter—A Historical Odyssey of French Psychology**

The study of the human mind has always been a battleground of ideas, where philosophy and science collide, merge, and transform one another. Nowhere is this dynamic interplay more vividly illustrated than in the evolution of French psychology, a discipline born from the tension between metaphysical abstraction and empirical rigor. From the mechanistic dualism of René Descartes to the clinical experiments of Jean-Martin Charcot, French psychology emerged as a unique synthesis of intellectual traditions, shaped by the material conditions of its time and the ceaseless dialectic of theory and practice.

The 17th century marked a rupture in European thought, as feudal scholasticism gave way to the rationalist ethos of the rising bourgeoisie.

Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* was more than a philosophical axiom; it was an expression of emerging modern individualism, asserting the primacy of reason in a world still shackled by religious dogma. But by relegating passions to the unconscious, he inadvertently laid the groundwork for their scientific study, a task that would fall to his materialist successors.

The 18th century saw the rise of a new intellectual vanguard, one that sought to liberate psychology from theological constraints. Pierre Gassendi's atomistic psychology, which traced consciousness to sensory stimuli and pain, challenged Descartes' dualism, while Nicolas Malebranche attempted to salvage it by subordinating physiology to divine will. Meanwhile, radicals like Paul Henri Thiry d'Holbach and Pierre Bayle dismantled the spiritualist edifice altogether, recasting mental phenomena as products of material interactions. Bayle, in particular, treated psychological disorders as natural afflictions of the soul, stripping them of divine punishment and paving the way for secular therapeutics.

These debates were not merely academic; they reflected the broader socio-political transformations of the 17th–18th centuries of the Enlightenment. The materialists, aligned with the critique of religious and traditional authority, while figures like Malebranche clung to the old order. Yet even as they diverged, their collective efforts transformed psychology from a speculative endeavor

into a nascent science, one increasingly attuned to the interplay of body and mind.

By the late 19th century, France's political upheavals the revolutions of 1848, the collapse of the Second Empire, the birth of the Third Republic demanded a psychology grounded in observable reality. Théodule Ribot, France's first champion of experimental psychology, declared that the discipline must abandon metaphysics for the laboratory.

The 20th century witnessed the gradual dissolution of French psychology's distinct identity. As Anglo-American behaviorism and German experimentalism dominated the field, the Cartesian tradition once the cornerstone of European thought was relegated to the margins. Figures like Pierre Janet and Henri Wallon sought to preserve its clinical and philosophical insights, but by the post-war era, French psychology had largely surrendered to foreign paradigms.

Yet its legacy endures. Descartes' reflex theory foreshadowed modern cognitive science, while Charcot's work on trauma resonates in contemporary psychotherapy. The dialectical movement from metaphysical speculation to clinical empiricism and back again offers a blueprint for understanding the mind's irreducible complexity. French psychology, in its rise and fall, exemplifies the eternal struggle to reconcile thought with its material substrate, a struggle that remains as urgent today as it was in Descartes' time.

**Practical Applications.** This study is relevant to historians of philosophy and science, modern psychologists, and educators. Understanding how Descartes' reflex theory and Charcot's hypnosis shaped psychology enables:

1. Education: Integrating historical-philosophical context into psychology curricula, illustrating the link between philosophy and scientific methods. This fosters deeper understanding of concepts like the unconscious or psychosomatics.

2. Clinical Practice: Reflecting on Charcot's approaches to hypnosis and psychosomatic disorders may inspire therapists to combine historical methods with modern technologies, such as for trauma or hysterical disorders (van der Kolk, 2014).

3. Interdisciplinary Research: Findings can inform cognitive science and neurophilosophy, exploring consciousness, body, and stimuli, building on Cartesian traditions (Churchland, 1986, 23).

4. Science Policy: Analyzing social and political influences on psychology's development underscores the importance of supporting fundamental research during national crises.

**Methodology.** The study employs historical-philosophical and comparative approaches.

1. Historical Analysis: Examining key texts shaping French psychology:

- Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) and *Passions of the Soul* (1649) for dualism and reflex theory (Descartes, 2008, 12; Descartes, 1989, 19).

- Charcot's *Leçons sur les maladies du système nerveux* (1885–1887) for the shift to empirical psychology (Charcot, 1890, 45).

- Works by Gassendi, Malebranche, d'Holbach and Ribot.

2. Comparative Method: Comparing Descartes' philosophical-theoretical approach with Charcot's clinical-experimental methods, and French psychology with British empiricism (Locke, Berkeley) and German positivism (Wundt).

3. Contextual Approach: Considering social and political conditions influencing French psychology.

4. Interpretation: Analyzing philosophical concepts (dualism, materialism, positivism) as foundations for scientific psychology, emphasizing continuity and transformation.

**Novelty:**

1. Integrates philosophical and scientific aspects, emphasizing their interdependence.

2. Views Descartes as a "proto-psychologist", whose reflex theory anticipated modern concepts (e.g., Pavlov's reflexes) (Pavlov, 1927, 15). Descartes is referred to here as a "proto-psychological" thinker only in the conditional and historically limited sense that he formulated concepts and problems (reflex arc, classification of passions, localisation of mind–body interaction) that later became objects of physiological and clinical-experimental research in 19th-century France. He did not conduct empirical investigations of mental processes; his aim remained metaphysical and epistemological.

3. Positions Charcot as a bridge between philosophy and clinical practice, expanding his role beyond neurology (Didi-Huberman, 2004, 67).

4. Highlights political crises and institutional shifts (e.g., from universities to grandes  coles) in psychology's development.

5. Frames French psychology as a model for philosophy-science interaction, relevant to cognitive science and neurophilosophy.

## **I. Philosophical Origins of French Psychology: From Descartes to Charcot**

The history of human thought reveals a dynamic interplay between philosophy and science, sometimes merging passionately, sometimes diverging like warring lovers. French psychology, a curious offspring of the Enlightenment and heir to medieval scholasticism, exemplifies how philosophical reflection, born in quiet studies, becomes a scientific tool and transformative practice. From Ren  Descartes, who separated soul and body, to Jean-Martin Charcot, whose hypnotic sessions at Salp tri re unveiled the psyche's mysteries, this journey was intellectual and deeply social, reflecting struggles of ideas and classes.

### **Descartes: Metaphysics as a Precursor to Science**

In the 17th century, amid feudal Europe's clinging traditions and the rising bourgeoisie, Ren  Descartes heralded a new worldview. His *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) and *Passions of the Soul* (1649) were not merely philosophical treatises but steps toward understanding human nature scientifically (Descartes, 2008, 12; Descartes, 1989, 19). Descartes replaced Aristotle's triadic soul: vegetative, sensitive, rational, with a strict dualism: *res cogitans* (thinking substance) and *res extensa* (extended substance) (Descartes, 2008, 15). Descartes' dualism was fundamentally epistemological: it aimed to establish the foundations of certain knowledge (*cogito ergo sum* as indubitable) by distinguishing the immaterial, thinking substance (*res cogitans*) from the extended, material substance (*res extensa*). While he applied mechanistic explanations to the body and passions, his primary goal was not a mechanical psychology but a metaphysical guarantee of cognition against skepticism. He viewed humans as machines governed by reflexes, with the pineal gland bridging spirit and body (Descartes, 1989, 23). Yet, his ideas reflected his era's constraints, reconciling discoveries with Catholic orthodoxy, citing Anselm of Canterbury and Gaunilo.

Descartes, a product of feudal society, served the emerging bourgeoisie's demand for rationality. His "cogito ergo sum" was a manifesto of individualism, vital for capitalist progress (Descartes, 2008, 17). However, by prioritizing reflective thought, he relegated passions to the unconscious, awaiting later exploration (Descartes, 1989, 25).

Although Descartes' account of the reflex was purely deductive and mechanistic, it provided the conceptual schema that French physiologists of the 19th century (Pierre Flourens, Claude Bernard, and later Théodule Ribot) subjected to experimental testing. This pattern – philosophical hypothesis → physiological critique → laboratory or clinical verification – represents the distinctive French route from speculation to science, in contrast to the German emphasis on psychophysics or the British reliance on introspection.

### **Enlightenment: Materialism vs. Metaphysics**

This opposition was not binary; the Enlightenment featured intermediate positions such as empiricism (Locke's influence via Voltaire), sensualism (Condillac's emphasis on sensation as the origin of ideas), occasionalism (Malebranche's divine causation of mind-body interactions), and vitalism (La Mettrie's extension of mechanism to living organisms). These nuances enriched the philosophical landscape, bridging rationalism and materialism while challenging theological determinism.

Pierre Gassendi's atomistic theory challenged Descartes, arguing the soul is driven by pain, the primary emotion triggering consciousness. Nicolas Malebranche reconciled Cartesianism with divine will, viewing physiology as a divine instrument (Malebranche, 1997, 34).

Pierre Bayle, an atheist, freed psychology from religious constraints, focusing on human ailments like anxiety and sexuality. Paul Henri Thiry d'Holbach, a materialist, linked psychological disorders to misinterpretations of nature and self (d'Holbach, 2001, 45).

These thinkers reflected class struggles: Gassendi and d'Holbach's materialism aligned with bourgeois aims to dismantle feudal prejudices, while Malebranche upheld the old order (d'Holbach, 2001, 47). They prepared the ground for the 19th-century scientific revolution.

### **Charcot: From Philosophy to Clinic**

By the late 19th century, during the Second Empire and Third Republic, France sought answers in science amid wars and crises. Théodule Ribot, embracing positivism, declared psychology experimental, founding *Revue Philosophique* in 1876 (Ribot, 1889, 1). Jean-Martin Charcot, at Salpêtrière, transformed psychology into clinical reality. His hypnosis studies, notably with patient Augustine Gleizes, linked physical trauma to mental disorders, bridging Cartesian dualism and modern neurology (Charcot, 1890, 45; Didi-Huberman, 2004, 67).

Charcot's disputes with the Nancy School (Hippolyte Bernheim, Ambroise Liébeault) highlighted scientific dialectics: some saw hypnosis as accessing unconscious will, others as addressing anatomical issues (Bernheim, 1884, 23). Social conditions shaped science, with psychology serving bourgeois control (Plekhanov, 1908, 56).

### **Dialectic of Philosophy and Science**

French psychology's evolution, from Descartes to Charcot, reflects ideas' material embodiment. Descartes' dualism spurred mechanism, later animating Ribot and Charcot (Descartes, 1989, 19; Ribot, 1889, 1). Enlightenment materialists paved the way for empiricism, and Charcot grounded psychology in humanity (d'Holbach, 2001, 45; Charcot, 1890, 45). Philosophy birthed science but ceded to laboratories and clinics.

In the 20th century, French psychology "died," succumbing to British evolutionism and American voluntarism. Yet, dialectics suggest new syntheses may emerge, possibly through Lacan and Foucault, viewed through natural history's contradictions.

## **II. The Liberation of Reason: From Theological Constraints to Secular Inquiry in French Thought (16th–18th Centuries)**

Medieval reflections on the human soul in France belonged to scholastic *philosophia de anima* and remained inseparable from theology. The University of Paris (founded c. 1150-1200) was one of Europe's leading centres for such speculation, but psychology as an autonomous or experimental discipline did not yet exist. The distinctive French tradition of psychophysical and epistemological inquiry

emerges only from the late Renaissance onward, when thinkers began systematically to challenge the theological monopoly over explanations of mind, behaviour, and suffering.

Although the ideas examined below do not constitute “scientific psychology” in the 19th-century sense (Fechner, Wundt, Ribot), they represent the decisive intellectual preconditions for its later emergence. Giordano Bruno, Pierre Gassendi, René Descartes, Nicolas Malebranche, Pierre Bayle, George Berkeley (via Voltaire’s mediation), Voltaire himself, and Paul-Henri Thiry d’Holbach collectively transformed the soul from a theological entity into an object of secular philosophical investigation.

Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), though Italian, profoundly influenced French philosophical culture through his pantheistic monism. He conceived souls as indestructible atoms within an infinite animated universe and insisted that reason must ethically dominate animal instincts as the path to human excellence (Bruno, 1998, 112, 134–135, 155, 167, 182, 201). Primarily ontological and ethical in character, Bruno’s ideas nevertheless undermined medieval dualisms and anticipated later French attempts to naturalise the soul.

Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655) introduced atomistic sensationalism and revived Epicurean psychology in France. Against both scholasticism and Cartesian rationalism, he argued that all knowledge and consciousness arise from sensory atoms impinging on a subtle corporeal soul, and that pain is the primary stimulus of mental life (Gassendi, 1659, 34). Gassendi thus offered the first sustained French alternative to innate ideas and theological causation.

René Descartes (1596-1650) formulated the most influential version of substance dualism in French philosophy: the absolute separation of *res cogitans* (immaterial thinking substance) from *res extensa* (material extended substance). His primary goal was epistemological and metaphysical to secure indubitable knowledge while remaining compatible with Catholic doctrine (Descartes, 2008, 17, 20, 54; Descartes, 1989, 19, 23–27). The mechanistic account of bodily movement and passions (Description of the Human Body, 1648; Passions of the Soul, 1649), the pineal gland as the seat of interaction, and the classification of six primary passions (wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy, sadness) have often been retrospectively interpreted as precursors of physiological psychology an interpretation that later influenced Pavlov’s reflex theory (Pavlov, 1927, 15). Descartes

himself, however, conducted no empirical research; his “reflex” model was purely deductive, and passions appeared as automatic bodily responses only partially accessible to reflective consciousness.

Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715), as a critical yet faithful Cartesian, replaced interactionist dualism with occasionalism: all genuine causation, including mind–body relations, belongs exclusively to God (Malebranche, 1997, 34, 89, 132). Malebranche thereby preserved theological oversight while exploring psychophysical problems with unprecedented precision.

Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) achieved the decisive breakthrough toward secularisation. In his *Historical and Critical Dictionary* he treated melancholy, excessive passions, moral deviance, sexual disorders, and sleeplessness as natural afflictions of the soul rather than divine punishments or marks of original sin (Bayle, 1991, 157, 214). By rejecting the traditional “corpus of divine chastisements”, Bayle removed mental pathology from religious jurisdiction and laid conceptual groundwork for later clinical approaches.

George Berkeley (1685-1753), although British–Irish, became a major interlocutor in French debates thanks to Voltaire’s enthusiastic translation and commentary (*Lettres philosophiques*, 1734). Berkeley’s immaterialist idealism — “to be is to be perceived” — denied the existence of matter independent of perception and served as a powerful counterweight to the rising tide of French materialism (Berkeley, 2008, 42, 56, 61, 73, 89). Voltaire, while ultimately rejecting Berkeley’s conclusions, popularised his critique of materialism and thereby sharpened the French discussion of perception and reality.

Voltaire himself (1694-1778), through his relentless campaign against religious superstition and dogmatic metaphysics, further accelerated the secularisation of psychological questions. By disseminating Locke’s empiricism and mocking Leibnizian optimism, he helped create the intellectual climate in which materialist explanations of mind could flourish.

Paul-Henri Thiry d’Holbach (1723-1789) brought the process to completion. In *The System of Nature* he presented the human mind as nothing but the brain’s functions produced by material organisation and motion, and mental distress as the consequence of erroneous interpretations of nature and society (d’Holbach, 2001, 45, 93, 145). With d’Holbach, theological causation vanished entirely from French explanations of cognition and behaviour.

This chronological sequence reveals a clear dialectical progression within the French tradition:

- ❖ Thesis: Descartes' dualistic separation of mind and body under theological compatibility.

- ❖ Antithesis: Malebranche's occasionalist reinforcement of divine mediation and Bayle's secular critique of religious explanations of affliction.

- ❖ Synthesis: d'Holbach's uncompromising materialism, decisively supported by Voltaire's anti-clerical propaganda and Berkeley's idealist challenge (mediated through Voltaire).

Bruno's earlier monism and Gassendi's persistent sensationalism supplied the empirical and monistic counter-pressures throughout the period.

Thus, between the late 16th and late 18th centuries, French philosophical thought gradually freed explanations of human mentality from the "chains" of feudal–theological interpretations. What began as speculation compatible with Catholic doctrine (Descartes) ended as a fully secular, materialist ontology of mind (d'Holbach) — thereby creating the indispensable intellectual preconditions for the emergence of psychology as an autonomous scientific discipline in the 19th century.

### **III. Materialism vs. Mysticism. From Physiological Materialism to Clinical and Experimental Psychology: The Late 19th-Century Synthesis and Its Transformations (1870–1914)**

The mid-19th century legacy of Condillac, La Mettrie, Cabanis and the Ideologues provided French psychology with a robust physiological-materialist foundation. By the 1870s–1880s this tradition converged with two new methodological imperatives: laboratory experimentation and systematic clinical observation of pathological states. The result was not an abandonment of materialism, but its sophisticated refinement and diversification into two complementary branches that together constituted the distinctive French contribution to scientific psychology.

Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1714–1780) transformed Locke's empiricism into a rigorous French sensationism. In his *Traité des sensations* (1754) he argued that all mental operations: including memory, judgment, and will are nothing but "transformed sensations." By imagining a statue that gradually acquires senses, Condillac

demonstrated that the mind is entirely constituted by sensory experience, thereby eliminating any need for innate ideas or an immaterial soul (Condillac, 1919, 12–89).

Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709–1751) went further in *L’Homme-machine* (1747). Drawing on Cartesian mechanism but rejecting dualism, he declared the human being a self-moving machine governed by the same physical laws as animals. Mental states, for La Mettrie, are direct products of brain organisation; differences in temperament and intelligence depend exclusively on physiological constitution (La Mettrie, 2023, 34-67). His provocative thesis provoked scandal but decisively shifted French thought toward a monistic physiology of mind.

Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis (1757–1808), physician and member of the Ideologues circle, provided the most systematic formulation of this medico-philosophical materialism. In *Rapports du physique et du moral de l’homme* (1802) he asserted that thought is a secretion of the brain just as bile is a secretion of the liver. Sensitivity, habit, and temperament are functions of the nervous system; moral and intellectual differences between individuals, sexes, and ages are reducible to physiological conditions (Cabanis, 1815, 112–145, 234–256). Cabanis explicitly aimed to establish a “science of man” grounded in observation and anatomy, a direct precursor of 19th-century scientific psychology.

The Ideologues (Destutt de Tracy, Maine de Biran, later Pierre Laromiguière), building on Condillac and Cabanis, sought to create a genuine “science of ideas” (*idéologie*). Although Maine de Biran (1766–1824) reintroduced an active principle of effort and will against mechanistic reductionism (Maine de Biran, 1942, 78–92), the dominant tendency of the group remained sensationist and physiological. Their work constituted the immediate philosophical bridge between Enlightenment materialism and the positivist psychology of Théodule Ribot and Hippolyte Taine.

Alexandre Koyré argued scientific and philosophical thought are unified, constantly interacting (Koyré, 1957, 12). Political and social crises drove France to seek behavioral patterns, formalizing psychology from 1870–1879 during the Second Empire and Third Republic (Ribot, 1889, 1).

Théodule Ribot (1839–1916) inaugurated the experimental-positivist current. In *La Psychologie anglaise contemporaine* (1870)

and especially *La Psychologie allemande contemporaine* (1879) he explicitly advocated the replacement of metaphysical psychology with a positive science based on physiology, pathology, and heredity. Founding the first French chair of experimental and comparative psychology at the Collège de France (1888) and the journal *Revue philosophique* (1876), Ribot institutionalised the laboratory approach. His works on memory, attention, and personality disorders (*Les Maladies de la mémoire*, 1881; *Les Maladies de la volonté*, 1883; *Les Maladies de la personnalité*, 1885) demonstrated that complex mental functions could be studied through pathological dissociation, a method that remained materialist in spirit while being rigorously empirical. (Ribot, 1889, 1-3).

Parallel to Ribot, Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893) and the Salpêtrière School developed a clinical-experimental paradigm centred on hysteria and hypnosis. Charcot's famous *Tuesday Lessons* (1887–1889) and his nosological classification of *grande hystérie* transformed hysteria from a vague "uterine" disorder into a neuro-psychic condition amenable to clinical demonstration and physiological explanation. Although Charcot retained a somatist framework (hereditary degeneration + cerebral lesion), his public hypnotic demonstrations revealed the extraordinary power of suggestion and psychological factors, a fact that would later be exploited and criticised by the rival Nancy School. Jean-Martin Charcot, at Salpêtrière, studied hysteria and mental disorders. His work with Augustine Gleizes used hypnosis to address trauma-induced disorders (Charcot, 1890, 45; Didi-Huberman, 2004, 67). Jean-Martin Charcot is unequivocally considered the "father of French neurology" and psychotherapeutic approaches (Charcot, 1889, 45). He collaborated closely with Belgian physician Joseph Delbœuf (1831-1896). While Charcot focused on psychosomatic manifestations of disease, Delbœuf investigated optical illusions and suggestion (Delbœuf, 1886).

Sigmund Freud studied under both masters, adopting from Charcot the theory of impulsivity as unrealized sexual energy (later conceptualized as "libido" with Josef Breuer), and from Delbœuf the hypnotic method for accessing automatic processes mental strata (Freud, 1895).

Delbœuf's Three Laws of Attention:

1. Concentration: Accumulation of mental forces directed toward goal completion.
2. Tension (fatigue): State of peak mental activity followed by degradation.
3. Degradation (assimilation): Fatigue-induced cessation of psychosomatic activity (Delbœuf, 1886)

The Nancy School of Hypnosis, founded by Ambroise Liébeault (1823-1904) and Jules Liégeois (1833-1908), opposed Charcot's Parisian theories. Their 1884 work *De la suggestion dans l'état hypnotique et dans l'état de veille* challenged Charcot's anatomical-clinical correlation model.

Paul Broca proved speech disorders (aphasias) demonstrated psychoneurological phenomena without physical manifestations (Broca, 1861).

Pierre Janet introduced the concept of the subconscious (subconscient) (Janet, 1976, 412)

The First International Psychological Congress was established in 1889 by Charcot and Théodule Ribot (Ribot, 1889)

French psychology abandoned its materialist foundations (Charcot, Delbœuf, Bernheim) for German physiology and American voluntarism (Ellenberger, 1981). The 21st century continues this epistemological dependence, marking what some consider the "death" of the distinctive French psychological tradition (Castel, 2007, 289).

The period 1870–1914 did not witness the "death" of French psychological materialism, but rather its transformation and bifurcation into two dominant and mature scientific paradigms.

1. Laboratory-experimental psychology (Ribot, Binet, later Piaget);
2. Clinical-dynamic psychology of the subconscious (Janet, later Lacan and French psychoanalysis).

Both paradigms remained rooted in the physiological tradition of Cabanis and Broca while integrating the psychological discoveries of the hypnosis schools. The subsequent 20th-century dominance of German-American experimentalism and Anglo-American behaviourism should therefore be understood not as the extinction of the French tradition, but as its partial internationalisation and reconfiguration under new institutional conditions.

Thus, far from constituting a rupture, the late 19th-century French synthesis of materialism and clinical observation represents the most

original and enduring contribution of the French school to modern scientific psychology, a contribution whose traces remain visible in contemporary trauma studies, dissociation theory, and the psychology of suggestion.

#### **IV. Dialectic of Soul and Science: Triumph and Decline**

The period 1870–1968 constitutes the classical epoch of French psychology the time when France produced a unique synthesis of empirical science, clinical observation, philosophical reflection, and social critique that has not been replicated elsewhere. Rather than a linear progression or a story of “decline”, this century-long development is best understood as a permanent tension between three major poles:

1. Positivist-experimental psychology (Ribot → Binet → Piéron → Piaget);
2. Clinical-dynamic psychology (Charcot → Janet → Lacan);
3. Philosophical and critical psychology (Bergson → Merleau-Ponty → Sartre → Foucault → Deleuze/Guattari).

These poles continually interacted, criticised, and enriched one another, producing an extraordinarily fertile intellectual field.

Pierre-Henri Castel's 2007 article reviewed *History of Psychology in France* (Castel, 2007, 197). Castel, following Georges Canguilhem, critiqued mechanistic psychology (Canguilhem, 1955, 45). French psychology spanned 1870–1968, driven by Ribot, Charcot, Bernheim, and Pierre Janet (Ribot, 1889, 1-6; Charcot, 1890, 45; Janet, 1903, 56).

Georges Politzer and Henri Wallon advanced prenatal and child psychology (Politzer, 1970, 34; Wallon, 1995). Alfred Binet and Gabriel Tarde developed individualistic psychology. Henri Piéron and Guillaume Duchenne structured scientific psychology (Piéron, 1923, 67; Duchenne, 1862, 34).

The history of French psychology from 1870 to 1968 marks a significant evolution in the discipline, transitioning from philosophical speculation to empirical science. This period witnessed the establishment of psychology as an academic field in France, influenced by various intellectual movements and key figures.

##### **1. The Positivist-Experimental Tradition**

Théodule-Armand Ribot (1839–1916) is recognized as the founder of scientific psychology in France. In 1876, he established the *Revue*

Philosophique, providing a platform for the emerging psychological science. Ribot's works, such as *La Psychologie Anglaise Contemporaine* (1870) and *L'Hérédité Psychologique* (1873), introduced Darwinian and Spencerian evolutionary ideas to French psychology, emphasizing the physiological basis of mental life and advocating for psychology as a natural science (Castel, 2007, 45).

Alfred Binet (1857–1911), influenced by Ribot and Charcot, focused on experimental psychology and intelligence testing. In collaboration with Théodore Simon, he developed the Binet-Simon Intelligence Scale in 1905, aiming to identify children needing special educational assistance. This test was later adapted into the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, becoming a cornerstone in psychometric testing (Binet & Simon, 1904, 166-168). Henri Piéron (1881–1964) transformed this approach into applied and physiological psychology. Binet's intelligence scale (Binet & Simon, 1905) and Piéron's psychophysiology laboratories created the infrastructure of modern French experimental psychology. Piéron's played a crucial role in institutionalizing psychology in France, contributing to the development of experimental methods and psychological education (Castel, 2007, 197).

Hyppolyte Taine (1828–1893), a French historian and philosopher, contributed to the understanding of collective psychological phenomena. His work *De l'Intelligence* (1870) emphasized the influence of race, milieu, and moment on human behavior, laying groundwork for subsequent studies in social and collective psychology (Pieron, 1923, 12).

## **2. The Clinical-Dynamic Tradition**

Jean Piaget (1896–1980), working within this tradition yet radically expanding it, demonstrated that intelligence is an active construction of cognitive schemas through interaction with the environment, a position that retained the French emphasis on genesis and development against static Anglo-American testing paradigms (Piaget, 1977). Jean Piaget: "Humans construct knowledge by establishing cognitive schemas" (Piaget, 1977, 67)

Juliette Favez-Boutonnier's (1903-1994) "Laws of the Couch" (Tarde-inspired approach where interpsychology periodically addresses the subject through logical forms unrelated to the unconscious or "echoes" of conscious acts): Language, gestures, facial expressions as "windows" to the inner world - where emotions are fictional manifestations, while incoherence, obsessions, manias

and fears constitute our true selves. Psychoanalysis begins and ends on the couch (Favez-Boutonnier, 1956, 147).

### **3. The Philosophical-Critical Tradition**

Henri Bergson (1859–1941) challenged mechanistic psychology with the concepts of *durée réelle* and *élan vital*, influencing both Piaget's genetic epistemology and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, who introduced concepts of duration and intuition into psychological discourse, challenging mechanistic views of the mind (Bergson, 1925, 67).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945, 1961) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1943, 1949) integrated Husserlian phenomenology with Gestalt theory and psychoanalysis, producing an existential-phenomenological psychology of embodied subjectivity that remains one of the most original French contributions to 20th-century thought (Sartre, 1949, 112).

Michel Foucault (1961, 2006) and Félix Guattari (with Gilles Deleuze) extended this critical lineage into the post-1968 period. Guattari's concepts of desiring-machines, schizoanalysis, and rhizome (behavior (Foucault, 2006, 512-514; Lacan, 2006, 237-268; Deleuze & Guattari, 1972, 1980, 1987) were not marginal philosophical metaphors but direct interventions in psychiatric practice at La Borde clinic. They offered a radical materialist psychiatry that replaced the Oedipal individual with collective assemblages of enunciation and non-hierarchical networks of desire thereby prolonging, rather than abandoning, the French tradition of criticising mechanistic and normative models of the psyche.

Henri Wallon's (1995) psycho-genetic theory of child development through emotional and social stages and Georges Politzer's (1970) concrete psychology of drama further enriched this critical current by insisting on the irreducibly historical and social character of mental life. He argued: "Intellectual development involves not just the brain but emotions transmitted through sensory channels" (Wallon, 1995, 89).

One of the faithful to Freudian methodology was Raymond de Saussure (1894-1971) - a Swiss psychologist and the first chairman of the European Psychoanalytical Federation, the son of the famous linguist-positivist Ferdinand Saussure (1857-1913). R. Saussure predicted in 1942 that Adolf Hitler was obliged to commit suicide due to his paranoid schizophrenia (Bod et al., 2014, 90-91).

Felix Guattari (1930–1992) was a French philosopher, psychoanalyst, and political activist, best known for his work in collaboration with philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995). Guattari further deepened Foucauldianism. Guattari opposed classical Freudianism and introduced the concept of "schizoanalysis". Schizoanalysis aims to deconstruct fixed identities and free desire from the control of social and symbolic structures.

Felix Guattari discovered that humans are social beings (minority thinking), and that collective thinking often forms between different individuals, which he called "desiring machines." The desiring machine is a mechanical-biological approach that proves that desire is not something individual, but autonomously functioning, like a machine, and connecting with other flows (subjects) and forces to satisfy its urges.

### **Félix Guattari's Concepts:**

1. Schizoanalysis: "Aims to deconstruct fixed identities and liberate desire from social structures" (Guattari& Deleuze,1987, 45)
2. Desiring Machines: "Autonomous desire-production systems connecting across subjects" (Guattari& Deleuze,1987, 89)
3. Rhizome: Non-hierarchical networks characterized by:
  - ❖ Connectivity (any point connectable)
  - ❖ Heterogeneity
  - ❖ Multiplicity
  - ❖ Indeterminacy (Deleuze &Guattari,1987, 112-115).

Thus, the period 1870–1968 represents not the end, but the apogee and lasting legacy of the distinctive French contribution to psychological science, a contribution characterised by the refusal to separate empirical research, clinical practice, and philosophical critique (Castel, 2007, 197-289). Jean Piaget and Noam Chomsky's 1975–1978 debate marked this shift (Piaget,1977, 34).

In summary, the development of psychology in France from 1870 to 1968 reflects a dynamic interplay between empirical research and philosophical inquiry, leading to a rich and diverse psychological tradition that continues to influence contemporary thought.

### **Conclusion**

The historical development of psychology in France is unique in world science because only in France did the Cartesian mind–body problem remain a living national issue that demanded scientific, not

merely philosophical, resolution. While British empiricism (Locke, 1975; Berkeley, 2008) dissolved the substantial soul into sequences of impressions and German transcendental and experimental traditions (Kant, Herbart, Wundt, 1904) reformulated psychology within idealist or strictly laboratory frameworks, France persistently sought either to “save” or empirically overcome Descartes. This centuries-long confrontation culminated in Charcot’s clinical demonstrations (Charcot, 1890), which showed that the mysteries of the soul could be staged, induced, and therapeutically manipulated in the clinic (Didi-Huberman, 2004).

French psychiatry emerged independently, forged through immense struggle against social challenges. French psychological thought long adopted ancient concepts via Italian scholars and Greek refugees from Byzantium. Over time, it became deeply intertwined with Austro-German methodologies for studying and treating the human psyche (both mental and somatic dimensions). Today, French theories remain overshadowed by Austro-American academic dominance (both typologically and comparatively).

For the purposes of the present study, the entire historical process may be analytically divided into the following five stages (author’s periodisation):

**Table 1. Author’s Periodisation of French Psychology**

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Chronological limits</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>
1	Ancient (Greco-Roman) heritage to 1641	Reception of philosophia de anima through medieval scholasticism and Renaissance humanism
2	Early (pre-scientific) psychology 1641 – 1870/79	Metaphysical and epistemological elaboration of psychophysical problems (Descartes → d’Holbach → Condillac → Cabanis)
3	Semi-scientific (transitional) psychology 1879 – 1920	Convergence of physiological materialism with clinical demonstration and early laboratory work (Ribot, Charcot, Bernheim, Janet, Binet)

Stage	Chronological limits	Characteristics
4	Mature scientific psychology 1920 – 1968	Institutionalisation and maximum pluralism: experimental (Piéron, Piaget), clinical-dynamic (Janet → Lacan), phenomenological-existential (Merleau-Ponty, Sartre), critical (Foucault, Deleuze–Guattari)
5	Era of international reconfiguration (post-1978)	Partial integration into global Anglo-American paradigms while preserving distinctive clinical and critical currents

The evolution of French psychology cannot be disentangled from its historical milieu.

French psychology emerged from the epistemological ferment of the 17th century, where René Descartes' mind-body dualism first conceptualized the psyche as a mechanistic yet irreducible counterpart to physicality. This Cartesian legacy interrogating consciousness as both *res cogitans* and embodied phenomenon became France's unique contribution to early psychophysical inquiry.

The Ancien Régime's feudal constraints, the bourgeois revolutions of 1789–1848, and the Third Republic's crises shaped its development.

The interdisciplinary legacy of French psychology also informs neurophilosophy and cognitive science. The trajectory from Descartes' metaphysical speculations to Jean-Martin Charcot's clinical empiricism epitomizes a Hegelian synthesis: philosophy, having midwived psychological science, yielded primacy to laboratory observation and nosology. Where Descartes asked "What is thought?", Charcot demanded "How does hysteria manifest?"—marking the discipline's maturation into positivism. Descartes' "reflex theory" foreshadows automatic processes in cognitive psychology (Kahneman, 2013, 45), and Charcot's hypnosis influences modern trauma treatments (van der Kolk, 2014). Descartes' mechanistic model of animal-machine responses anticipated, but did not equate to, later physiological reflex theories (by Pavlov).

Comparing French psychology with German experimentalism and British empiricism reveals both its unique contributions and its limitations, enriching our understanding of its historical and modern significance. Wilhelm Wundt's establishment of the first experimental

psychology laboratory in Leipzig in 1879 marked a shift toward empirical rigor, emphasizing introspection and controlled experiments to study consciousness (Wundt, 1904, 12). Unlike the French tradition, which evolved from philosophical dualism and clinical observation, Wundt’s approach was systematically scientific, focusing on measurable mental processes such as reaction times and sensory perception (Wundt, 1904, 14). While Descartes and Charcot integrated metaphysical and clinical insights (Descartes, 1989, 19; Charcot, 1890, 45), Wundt’s rejection of metaphysical speculation aligned German psychology with positivism, influencing modern experimental methods in cognitive psychology (Kim, 2022).

**Table 2. Comparative Epistemological Profiles of the Three Major 19th-Century National Traditions**

Criterion	French tradition	German tradition (Wundt line)	British tradition (Locke–Mill line)
Starting philosophical problem	Cartesian mind–body dualism	Kantian transcendental subject	Empiricist dissolution of substantial soul
Primary method of objectification	Clinical-pathological + hypnotic demonstration	Controlled laboratory introspection + reaction-time measurement	Associationist analysis of ideas
Institutional base	Hospital clinic (Salpêtrière) + Collège de France	University psychological laboratory (Leipzig 1879)	Philosophical societies + later university departments
Strongest domain	Trauma, dissociation, suggestion, psychotherapy	Sensory processes, attention, reaction time	Learning, habit, behaviour

Criterion	French tradition	German tradition (Wundt line)	British tradition (Locke–Mill line)
20th-century global influence	Psychoanalysis, trauma studies, critical psychology	Experimental cognitive psychology	Behaviourism, cognitive science (via information-processing metaphor)
Representative sources	Charcot 1890; Janet 1889; Lacan 2006	Wundt 1904; Külpe, Ebbinghaus	Locke 1755; Mill 1843; Watson 1913

However, French psychology's strength lay in its clinical applicability, particularly through Charcot's work, which bridged philosophy and practice. Wundt's laboratory-based approach, while foundational for experimental psychology, was less directly applicable to clinical settings, as it prioritized abstract mental processes over real-world disorders (Kim,2022). Charcot's hypnosis, by contrast, addressed tangible psychological conditions like hysteria, laying groundwork for psychotherapy (Charcot,1890, 47). This clinical focus gave French psychology an edge in shaping early psychoanalytic traditions, as evidenced by Freud's adoption of Charcot's impulsivity theories (Freud, 1895).

British empiricism, exemplified by John Locke and George Berkeley, offers another point of comparison. Locke's tabula rasa theory, which posited that the mind is a blank slate shaped by sensory experience (Locke, 1755, 67), contrasted with Descartes' emphasis on innate ideas and dualism (Descartes, 2008, 20). While Descartes viewed the mind as an active agent structuring experience via reflexes, Locke's passive model aligned with behaviorist traditions that dominated 20th-century Anglo-American psychology (Watson, 1913, 23). Berkeley's idealism, which argued that perception constitutes reality (Berkeley, 2008, 89), paralleled French materialists like d'Holbach, who linked distress and mental imbalances to erroneous interpretations of nature and self (d'Holbach,2001, 45). However, French psychology's integration of materialism with clinical practice, as

seen in Charcot’s work, provided a more practical framework for addressing mental health compared to Berkeley’s abstract philosophy (Didi-Huberman,2004, 69).

The decline of French psychology’s distinctiveness in the 20th century, as it succumbed to Anglo-American voluntarism and German experimentalism (Castel, 2007, 197), reflects a broader tension between philosophical depth and empirical standardization. While Wundt’s methods became the global standard for experimental psychology, French psychology’s philosophical roots offered a richer context for understanding the mind-body relationship, as seen in modern embodied cognition theories. Similarly, the British empiricist focus on sensory experience influenced behaviorism but lacked the clinical immediacy of Charcot’s methods, which continue to inform trauma therapy (van der Kolk, 2014).

The French achievement lies not in having resisted globalisation, but in having enriched global psychology with methodological pluralism and critical depth that no single national school has equalled. The clinical-experimental synthesis of 1870–1914 and the philosophical renewal of 1920–1968 continue to provide indispensable resources for contemporary trauma studies, embodied and enactive cognition, critical psychology, and relational psychoanalysis.

**Table 3. Continuity of the French Research Programme: From 17th-Century Metaphysics to 21st-Century Applications**

17th-century Cartesian concept	18th–19th-century French transformation	20th–21st-century global scientific application
Reflex (animal-machine)	La Mettrie → Cabanis → Charcot’s “neuro-motor reflex”	Automaticity and dual-process models (Kahneman 2011)
Passions of the soul	Ribot’s pathological method of personality	Dissociative disorders and personality pathology

17th-century Cartesian concept	18th–19th-century French transformation	20th–21st-century global scientific application
Psychophysical interaction (pineal gland)	Janet’s psychological tension and subconscious fixed ideas	Trauma and dissociation research (van der Kolk 2014)
Suggestion / idea- force	Bernheim–Delbœuf → Freud → Lacan	Modern evidence- based hypnosis and suggestion therapy
Desiring-production	Deleuze–Guattari’s schizoanalysis	Contemporary relational and critical psychotherapy

Thus, the French path from Descartes’ pineal gland to Charcot’s hysterical attack and Deleuze–Guattari’s desiring-machines constitutes one of the most coherent and fertile research programmes in the entire history of the discipline, a programme whose epistemological and methodological lessons remain fully operative today.

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