



“The Damned Behaviorist” Versus French Phenomenologists: Pierre Naville and the French Indigenization of Watson’s Behaviorism

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What do we know about the history of John Broadus Watson’s behaviorism outside of its American context of production? In this article, using the French example, we propose a study of some of the actors and debates that structured this history. Strangely enough, it was not a “classic” experimental psychologist, but Pierre Naville (1904–1993), a former surrealist, Marxist philosopher, and sociologist, who can be identified as the initial promoter of Watson’s ideas in France. However, despite Naville’s unwavering commitment to behaviorism, his weak position in the French intellectual community, combined with his idiosyncratic view of Watson’s work, led him to embody, as he once described himself, the figure of “the damned behaviorist.” Indeed, when Naville was unsuccessfully trying to introduce behaviorism into France, alternative theories defended by philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty explicitly condemned Watson’s theory and met with rapid and major success. Both existentialism and phenomenology were more in line than behaviorism with what could be called the “French national narrative” of the immediate postwar. After the humiliation of the occupation by the Nazis, the French audience was especially critical of any deterministic view of behavior that could be seen as a justification for collaboration. By contrast, Sartre’s ideas about absolute freedom and Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to preserve subjectivity were far more acceptable at the time.

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“You know, I never go to the restroom without Sartre!”¹ So said Joseph Wolpe, the South African pioneer of behavior therapy, to Jacques Rognant, the first French psychiatrist to practice behavior therapy. However, although some behavior therapists like Wolpe were

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¹ French original: “Vous savez, je ne vais jamais aux waters sans Jean-Paul Sartre!” (Jacques Rognant, personal communication, July 15, 2015).

enthusiastic about French culture,² the reverse is certainly not true. It is indeed well known that the French audience was particularly reluctant to adopt behaviorist ideas and was extremely critical of them (Richelle, 1977, 2003). As a result, the first French translation of Watson was not published until 1972 (Watson, 1972). It is worth mentioning that, in comparison, the first German translation of Watson was released in 1930 (Watson, 1930). This French lack of interest in, and reluctance toward, the field had remarkable effects on the “psy” field in France in general and, more specifically, on the acceptance of behavior therapy in the French-speaking context (Amouroux, 2017). Even nowadays, there is still a “French exception” in the field of psychotherapy, which is notably characterized by a disdain toward behaviorism’s legacy.³ Of course, behaviorist theories also triggered criticism from outside French-speaking circles (Mills, 1998; Rutherford, 2009; Staub, 2011), but what is characteristic of the French context is that its criticisms of behaviorism have been strong enough to significantly impact francophone psychological knowledge and practices by dismissing behaviorism as an irrelevant and possibly suspicious set of ideas.

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In order to provide a better understanding of the specific fate of behaviorism in the French context, we propose to study those who, despite the aforementioned widespread disdain for behaviorism, were still interested in Watson’s work. Strangely enough, even though French experimental psychologists, such as Henri Piéron, were interested in the psychology of behavior (Frisse, 1970; Littman, 1971), it was actually Pierre Naville (1904–1993), a Marxist philosopher close to Russian revolutionary Léon Trotsky, actor in the cultural movement of surrealism, and pioneer of the French Sociology of Work, who can be identified as the initial promoter of Watson’s ideas in France. This could appear surprising, especially when one recalls that behaviorism is neither usually associated with any artistic connotation, nor deemed to encompass any theoretical connection with Marxism, nor usually seen as a useful framework to understand the evolution of the labor market.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that Naville was centrally involved in a vigorous public and private debate with philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and yet has since been almost completely forgotten by the French psychology community. Conversely, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty are still internationally well known as intellectuals nowadays and regarded as the two main initiators of French existentialism and phenomenology.⁴ We contend that these two matters of fact—Naville’s oblivion and Sartre’s and Merleau-Ponty’s celebrity—are interrelated. More specifically, in this article, we argue that the difficult reception of behaviorism in the French context could be seen as the consequence of the success of French phenomenology. Overall, we show that Naville’s original approach to Watson’s work, combined with the sudden rise and rapid success of existentialism and phenomenology, as well as the very specific political and philosophical

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² In his correspondence with Rognant, Wolpe often tried to write in French and confessed his interest in French literature. For instance, about Sartre’s novel *Les jeux sont faits* [The Chips Are Down] (Sartre, 1947b), he expressed his admiration towards Sartre’s “clear and beautiful writing” (French original: “son écriture est si belle et claire”) (Wolpe, 1972). Wolpe also published an article in which he claimed that 19th-century French psychiatrist François Leuret could be seen as a “progenitor” of behavior therapy (Wolpe & Theriault, 1971).

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³ Notable examples being the INSERM report on psychotherapies, which supported cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) and led to a media debate (INSERM, 2004); the publication of the scandalous *Livre noir de la psychanalyse* [The Black Book of Psychoanalysis] (Meyer, 2005), which strengthened this media debate and led to the so-called “psy war” (Nathan, 2006); the release of the film *Le mur* [The Wall] (Robert, 2011), which criticized psychoanalytical theories of autism, supported CBT, and led to a trial with wide media coverage; or even the more recent *Autisme* [Autism] plan of 2013 (Carlotti, 2013), which once again brought to attention francophone particularities regarding the management of autism.

⁴ For a theoretical examination of the potential relationships between phenomenology, existentialism, and behaviorism, see Kvale and Grenness (1967), Corriveau (1972), and Morf (1998). About the theoretical relationship between phenomenology and existentialism, we choose not to distinguish between them in this article, even if this is questionable; see Bayer (1962) and Stewart (1998).

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context of postwar France, played a major role in the difficult indigenization of behaviorism in the French context.

There currently exists no research providing an overview of the history of the reception of Watson's work in the French context. Our work aims at filling this historiographical gap. We achieve this by adopting a decentered view of behaviorism, for we explore its diffusion outside its original context of production (Pickren, 2009). Our aim is therefore not only to build up a history of the French reception of behaviorism but also to clarify the history of Watson's theory itself by exposing particular francophone features. We are also mindful of the philosophical issues raised by the introduction of behaviorism in the French context. Indeed, as recently proposed by Shamdasani (2017), "in the twentieth century, psychotherapy has been an ontology-making practice" (p. 367), in which behaviorism can be seen as an "optional ontology,"⁵ among others possibilities.

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We first introduce Pierre Naville by giving a brief overview of his career, and demonstrate that Watson's behaviorism is the common theme among his eclectic interests. Then, we describe the debate about behavior between Naville, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. As we outline, French phenomenologists explicitly condemned Watson's theory from not only from a philosophical but also, and most importantly, from a political point of view. Finally, in a broader perspective, we explore the French specificity of the reception and indigenization of Watson's behaviorism. We pay particular attention to the crucial role of the academic and political contexts and outline the unexpected literary fate of behaviorism in France.

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The Strange Career of Pierre Naville

Finding the "Supreme Science"

Briefly recounting Naville's career and finding a logic accounting for his eclectic choices or interests might appear difficult.⁶ Nevertheless, when one carefully considers his career as well as his allegedly dispersed writings, one will actually encounter behaviorism as the common theme always structuring his work and, therefore, hopefully providing us with a reliable logic able to account for Naville's erratic career. Interestingly enough, although every biographical work about Naville explicitly mentions his continuous interest in Watson, most of these works interpret this very interest as an oddity. For instance, Cuenot (2017a) claimed that the reasons for Naville's behaviorist thinking are ideological rather than scientific. In line with Cuenot, Huteau (1997) explicitly stated that Naville's behaviorism is mainly of a metaphorical species rather than an indication of rigorous intellectual work. As a result of such a widespread preconceived view, Naville's behaviorism is hardly ever understood as a stepping-stone of his intellectual career but rather as a sign of his eccentricity. By contrast, like the sociologist and Naville's former colleague Pierre Rolle, we think that there actually are good reasons to claim that Watson's behaviorism was the major influence on Naville's work (Rolle, 1997b) and that, far from being a sign of alleged eccentricity, this influence actually encompasses genuine intellectual and anthropological stakes. One should indeed not forget that Naville himself

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⁵ Shamdasani (2017) defined *optional ontology* as follows: "conceptions not only of the reasons for one's maladies and how to be cured of them, but of how to be well and take up one's place in society and the world" (p. 375).

⁶ For more details about Naville's work and career, see Cuenot (2017a, 2017b), Blum and Le Dantec (2007), and Eliard (1996).

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once wrote that “behaviorism can then, in the end, be considered as the supreme science of Man”⁷ (Naville, 1963a, p. 367), and he considered behaviorism as encompassing a rigorous epistemological potential. At the end of his career, Naville stated his position as follows: “My adherence to behavior analysis dates from 1922, when I met the work of Watson. And my adherence to the surrealist movement’s practices and to Marx’s social analysis did not alter my original behaviorism”⁸ (Bienaimé, 2010, p. 384; letter from P. Naville to D. Bienaimé, May 6, 1991).

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In this short biographical sketch, we consequently explore the role played by behaviorism in what may otherwise appear as a “strange,” or at least erratic, career: Naville was successively a philosopher, a poet, a politician, a psychologist, and ended up a sociologist.

Acting as a Revolutionary

Pierre Naville was born in 1903 in Paris to a family of Swiss Protestant bankers with personal connections within the literary world (Cuenot, 2017a). His father was notably a close friend of André Gide, a French author and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1947. On April 6, 1922, while still a student in philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris, Naville was a direct witness to the famous debate between Albert Einstein and Henri Bergson about the nature of time. Until then, Naville had always been fascinated by the philosophy of Bergson. However, the disarray provoked by the scientific theory of relativity on Bergson’s spiritualism convinced Naville that philosophy must be challenged by science to prevent it from becoming mere mysticism. As a result, he decided to start studying natural sciences and mathematics. It is presumably while studying biology that he became acquainted with the work of John Watson for the first time. This encounter with behaviorism changed his mind to the extent that Naville ended up being a straightforward critic of Bergson’s philosophy and even plainly and simply abandoned the concept of spirit. Disappointed with academia, he interrupted his study in philosophy: Naville wanted to commit himself to concrete actions.

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In 1924, at the age of 21, Naville got involved in the nascent surrealist movement. Surrealism was an avant-garde cultural movement that began in the early 1920s in France, notably with André Breton. The surrealists claimed to be revolutionary in their approach to writing and visual artwork (Durozoi, 2009). There, Naville met his future wife, Denise Lévy, a committed intellectual, muse of Breton and of the surrealist group, and notably the translator of German texts by Friedrich Engels and Friedrich Hölderlin (Kalinowski, 2007). Naville also became coeditor of *La Révolution Surréaliste* [The Surrealist Revolution], the official publication of the movement. With other surrealists like Breton and Antonin Artaud, he participated in the establishment of the *Bureau de la Recherche Surréaliste* [Office of Surrealist Research], where he invited the public at large to practice automatic writing. Naville even wrote a book—*Les reines de la main gauche* (Naville, 1924) [The Queens of the Left Hand]—using automatic writing.⁹ Contrary to other surrealists, and especially to Breton, Naville did not regard Sigmund Freud’s work as relevant to really understanding the mechanisms underlying automatic writing.¹⁰ Naville rather claimed that

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⁷ French original: “la science du comportement peut donc être considérée en définitive comme la science suprême de l’homme.”

⁸ French original: “Mon adhésion à l’analyse du comportement physique date de 1922, lorsque j’ai connu les travaux de Watson. Et mon adhésion à la pratique du Mouvement Surréaliste et aux analyses sociales de Marx ne m’a pas fait abandonner mon behaviorisme initial.”

⁹ Interestingly, Naville later wrote several articles as a psychologist about the development of writing skills in children (Naville, 1950a, 1950b).

¹⁰ However, psychoanalysis was not the only theoretical source for the surrealist group. Indeed, as demonstrated by Bacopoulos-Viau (2012), the influence of French psychiatrist Pierre Janet—author of *L’automatisme psychologique* [Psychological Automatism] (Janet, 1889)—was silenced by Breton.

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Watson's behaviorism was the best theoretical option to understand artistic processes of creation. According to him, in other words, there was no unconscious level of explanation that could be accessed by means of automatic writing. In practice, he thought that the process runs entirely differently: "In sum, instead of unveiling some unknown or unconscious world which is hiding, automatic writing had to tend to create a universe of words, where the universe of our practical and utilitarian perceptions finds itself fully *disoriented*"¹¹ (Naville, 1977, p. 135).

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To put it briefly, automatic writing should enable one to temporarily inhibit one's memories, habits, and conditionings, and therefore has to be considered as a unique source of genuine artistic creation. This point of view was, however, clearly not the classic one in behaviorist circles. Indeed, a few years later, a promising junior fellow at Harvard University and future champion of behaviorism named Burrhus Frederic Skinner published an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* in which he strongly criticized the use of automatic writing in art (Skinner, 1934). Using the example of a series of experiments on automatic writing reported by Gertrude Stein, Skinner claimed that this technique is only able to provide us with nonsense and meaningless products.

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In the late 1920s, Naville began to think that surrealism was not politically invested enough to be really revolutionary. He tried to convince the surrealist group to adopt a strict Marxist paradigm and published a brochure entitled *La Révolution et les intellectuels, que peuvent faire les surréalistes?* [Revolution and Intellectuals: What Can Surrealists Do?]. Naville then pushed the surrealists to make a crucial choice between negative anarchism and Marxism, and in his opinion, they made the wrong choice. As a result, he got angry with Breton and left the surrealist group. In 1926, Naville decided to join the Communist Party and became coeditor of *Clarté* [Clarity], a communist journal. One year later, he met Leon Trotsky, and they became close friends.¹² Naville published anti-Stalinist articles in *Clarté* and was in no time consequently expelled from the Communist Party for deviationism. Initially close to the French Trotskyist group, he finally parted from them in the late 1930s. However, until the end of his life, he actively participated in French political life and vigorously defended a non-Stalinist Marxist point of view.¹³

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Thinking With Watson

At the beginning of the Second World War, Naville stayed in Paris, where he found the time to resume studying philosophy. He then decided to begin, without being able to finish, a doctorate under the supervision of French Gestalt psychologist Paul Guillaume and started translating the work of Watson. Unfortunately, in April 1940, after discovering his status of political dissident, the French army sent Naville to the Front in a regiment composed of communists, anarchists, and syndicalists. A few weeks later, he was taken prisoner by the German army. In the prisoner-of-war camp, he became seriously ill and was eventually freed. Back in Paris, he found himself politically isolated because both the Stalinists and the Trotskyists considered him as a traitor to their political views. Still interested in psychology, he studied to become a vocational psychologist and published a series of books dealing with materialism, behaviorism, and Marxism. In *La psychologie, science du comportement: Le béhaviorisme de Watson* [Psychology, Science of Behavior: Watson's Behaviorism] (Naville, 1942), Naville introduced Watson's ideas to the French

¹¹ French original: "En somme, plutôt que de révéler quelque monde inconnu ou inconscient qui se cache, l'écriture automatique devait tendre à créer un univers de mots où l'univers de nos perceptions pratiques et utilitaires se trouve intégralement désorienté."

¹² Pierre and Denise Naville published several articles, translations, prefaces, and books about Trotsky (see Marie, 2007).

¹³ For a complete account of Naville's political career and especially his intellectual relationship with Trotsky, see Cuenot (2017a, 2017b).

readership.¹⁴ In *D'Holbach et la philosophie scientifique au XVIII^e siècle* [D'Holbach and the Scientific Philosophy of the 18th Century] (Naville, 1943), he claimed that the Baron d'Holbach (1723–1789), a French-German materialist philosopher close to the Encyclopedist circle, was the forerunner of behaviorism.¹⁵ A few years later, Naville published *Psychologie, marxisme, matérialisme* [Psychology, Marxism, Materialism] (Naville, 1946a), in which he explicitly stated that behaviorism was the only acceptable psychology from a Marxist and materialist point of view.¹⁶

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Even if he did not really work as a “classic” behaviorist psychologist, Naville faithfully adopted Watson’s view on psychology, especially his dismissal of consciousness as a relevant entity or concept for psychology. He considered what is considered consciousness an abstraction lacking any kind of explanatory depth. Consequently, according to Naville, there is no such thing as an “autonomous mind” but only complex relationships establishing themselves between behavior and its environment. Fully aware of the ontological questions raised by this theoretical option, Naville clarified that he was not defending a perspective according to which thought would be a product of the brain but rather clearly stated that there is no such thing as thought (Naville, 1946a, 1963a). In other words, what we commonly call *thought* or *idea* is an abstract construct that is not produced by an individual entity but results from complex relationships between individuals and their environment, following the model of the conditional reflex.

However, even if he seemed to endorse a traditional form of behaviorism, one should acknowledge that Naville’s understanding of Watson was sometimes very original, not to say idiosyncratic, regarding behaviorist *doxa*. More specifically, he wanted to bring to light the political implications of Watson’s theory:

Watson has admitted the physical nature of mankind, with every one of its modalities, is precisely the result and component of a certain number of influences indicating environment. . . . But we can go further. This environment, in the end, is also defined as a social environment, on a *class ground*. For man at birth does not open his eyes to a virgin universe: he enters an already old world, after a succession of millions of generations. . . . In short, he is born in a society, which has not been defined by Watson, but which is capitalist society divided into social classes. Thus, all his further intellectual

¹⁴ Initially, Naville’s project was to translate *Behaviorism* (Watson, 1925), but under the special conditions of German-occupied France, it was forbidden to publish any book from an Allied author. To circumvent this law, Naville decided to alter the text slightly and to publish it under his own name. The first “real” translation of Watson was not released until 1972 (Watson, 1972).

¹⁵ The Baron d’Holbach is notably the author of *Système de la Nature* (1770) [System of Nature], in which he notably stated that God does not exist, free will is an illusion, and that there is no soul without a living body. In his book about d’Holbach, Naville extensively commented on his conception of freedom in a way that is reminiscent of what Burrhus Frederic Skinner would later claim (see Skinner, 1971, pp. 31–47):

There is no free will. It is another name for a particular form of necessity: one that is “enclosed within man himself.” Being free, if one wants to provide this expression with a meaning, “amounts to giving up before necessary motives we are bearing in ourselves.” These two wordings of course reflect a certain embarrassment. For they simply mean that being free is being constrained in a certain way. . . . Free will amounts to subduing to what is useful to one, to impulses conducive to maintaining one’s equilibrium; yielding to unfortunate impulses would be rough necessity.

French original:

il n’y a pas de liberté. C’est un autre nom pour une forme particulière de nécessité: celle qui est “renfermée au-dedans de l’homme lui-même.” “Être libre, si l’on veut donner un sens à l’expression, “c’est céder à des motifs nécessaires que nous portons en nous-même.” Ces deux formules reflètent évidemment un certain embarras. Car elles signifient tout simplement qu’être libre, c’est être contraint d’une certaine façon. . . . La liberté consiste à se soumettre à ce qui est utile à l’être, aux impulsions qui sont favorables à son maintien en équilibre; céder aux impulsions fâcheuses serait la nécessité brute. (Naville, 1943, p. 303)

¹⁶ Naville considered that neither Karl Marx nor Friedrich Engels actually proposed a specific theory of psychology, but he thought that with behaviorism, psychology could now be materialist and, consequently, Marxist.

development will be explained, under a certain angle, by the class factors which will have impacted it.¹⁷ (Naville, 1947, p. 128)

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Herein lies the reason for Naville's fascination with behaviorism. Indeed, with this new theory, he thought that he would be able to go further than Marx and propose a genuine Marxist psychology.

In 1946, Naville wrote a letter to Watson and sent him a copy of his book about behaviorism published in 1942. With the greatest reverence, he explained to Watson that "his many French admirers" wanted to know why he was no longer publishing within the "psy" field and even asked him if he would agree to write a article for a French journal (Naville, 1946b). Unfortunately, Watson never replied; Naville simply wrote in the margin of a copy kept in his personal archives: "no answer." Around the same time, he wrote a book about vocational psychology (Naville, 1945) in which he offered a radical critique of the idea of innate vocational aptitude itself. Indeed, as a behaviorist, he claimed that aptitudes are never innate but acquired. Thus, inevitably, he was cast out from French vocational psychologist circles.¹⁸

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Ultimately, it is as a sociologist that he pursued and ended his academic career. Here again, the influence of behaviorism is striking. Indeed, Naville became a specialist in the social effect of *automation* in industry (Naville, 1963b). Naville's idea was that *automation* is neither good nor bad in itself. He rather claimed that it merely created new work conditions and that it is our duty to choose which form of labor organization we want to develop with regards to these conditions. Naville stated that there was a direct link between his interest in automatic writing as a surrealist and automation as a sociologist. In a article published in 1960, he claimed that "between spontaneous and automatic, there is no antinomy"¹⁹ (Naville, 1960, p. 283). This enigmatic sentence was actually written to state that automatism, either in industry, art, and, more generally, human behavior, is not necessarily a restriction of freedom. It might even be quite the contrary. As Pierre Rolle noticed, "automatic behavior in this case indicates the perfection of elementary gestures and freedom gained by the body"²⁰ (Rolle, 1997a, p. 211).

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In this section, we have showed that throughout his life, Naville maintained a strong interest in behaviorism. Thus, we demonstrated that, according to Naville, behaviorism was not only relevant for psychologists but also for philosophers, politicians, sociologists, and even surrealists. However, we also suggested that Naville's behaviorism was clearly very original, if not idiosyncratic. As discussed in the next section, in his opinion, behaviorism was less a specific psychological theory or method than a conceptual philosophical tool relevant for political purposes.

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¹⁷ French original:

Watson a admis que la nature physique de l'homme avec toutes ses modalités, est justement la résultante et la composante d'un certain nombre d'influences qui expriment le milieu. . . . Mais nous pouvons aller plus loin. Ce milieu, en fin de compte, se définit aussi comme milieu social, sur un *terrain de classe*. Car l'homme qui naît n'ouvre pas les yeux sur un univers vierge: il entre dans un monde déjà vieux, après une succession de millions de générations. . . en un mot, il naît dans une société, que Watson n'a pas définie, mais qui est la société capitaliste divisée en classes. Dès lors tout son développement intellectuel ultérieur s'expliquera sous un certain angle par les facteurs de classe qui y auront influé.

¹⁸ Overall, with the exception of psychologist René Zazzo, Naville's behaviorism sometimes led him to difficult relationships with other French psychologists. Naville's criticism of aptitude led him to quarrel with Piéron, who was the preeminent academic psychologist at that time. For a more detailed study of Naville's work as a vocational psychologist and his relationship with Zazzo and Piéron, see Hocquard (1996) and Huteau (1997).

¹⁹ French original: "entre le spontané et l'automatique, il n'y a pas d'antinomie."

²⁰ French original: "L'automatisme du comportement marque dans ce cas la perfection des gestes élémentaires et la liberté gagnée de l'organisme."

Naville Versus Sartre and Merleau-Ponty

The Root of the Conflict

In order to describe the specificity of the French reception of Watson's work, we explore the vigorous philosophical debate about behaviorism that involved Naville, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. This debate started with a series of publications about behavior, beginning with Naville's book about Watson. A few months later, two famous books were published in France that explicitly condemned behaviorism: *The Structure of Behavior* by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1942), and *Being and Nothingness* by Jean-Paul Sartre (1943). In the midst of the Second World War, in Nazi-occupied France, these three books marked the beginning of an intensive discussion about consciousness, freedom, and political commitment between three philosophers who knew each other very well and often discussed politics and philosophy, whether privately—notably at the café *Le Balzar* in the *Quartier latin* [Latin quarter], where existentialist philosophers were a regular fixture at that time—or by means of journals, especially in *Les Temps Modernes* [The Modern Times], founded by Sartre and in *La Revue Internationale* [The International Review], founded by Naville. It is well known that Sartre and Merleau-Ponty were two major actors in French existentialism and phenomenology. Even though there are some major differences between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty's philosophies, they nevertheless both acknowledged the crucial role played by consciousness, experience, and intentionality in human behavior, whether it was “transcending itself to reach an object”²¹ (Sartre, 1943, p. 18) for Sartre or “the structure of behavior”²² (Merleau-Ponty, 1942, p. 238) and “integration of existence”²³ (Merleau-Ponty, 1942, p. 199) for Merleau-Ponty. As a consequence, both straightforwardly disagreed with Watson's rejection of consciousness. In contrast, Naville claimed that consciousness is a mere abstraction that is not necessary to understand human behavior. Interestingly enough, what could have remained a technical, philosophical, or psychological question about consciousness shifted toward a heated political debate about freedom and political commitment that lasted for almost 20 years.

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The structure of this debate also has to be understood from the perspective of the understanding of Marxian philosophy specific to each of these three philosophers. Indeed, although all of them could be considered leftists, each one had his own particular sense of leftism. From this perspective, it is worth recalling that the relations between Sartre and the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) [French Communist Party] were complex. Even though he was first met with much distrust by the PCF after 1945, Sartre nevertheless progressively became a fellow traveler of the movement, especially after the mid-1950s. In contrast, as an expelled member, friend of Trotsky, and critic of Stalin, Naville was a sworn enemy of the PCF. As for Merleau-Ponty, he primarily developed a “wait-and-see” attitude toward Marxism (Merleau-Ponty, 1947), later leading him to a more explicitly critical position that he himself described as “a-communism” and criticized Sartre for his “ultra-Bolshevism” (Merleau-Ponty, 1955). Moreover, one also has to keep in mind that Naville proposed an original, perhaps iconoclastic, view of Marxian philosophy. Contrary to most of his contemporaries, who mostly saw a *philosopher* in Marx, he claimed that the author of *Das Capital* [Capital] was first and foremost a *scientist* who had tried precisely to overcome philosophy through science. As a result, it is not surprising that Naville has been accused of being a positivist. Indeed, he fully endorsed a materialist and determinist theoretical perspective, whereas Sartre and Merleau-Ponty saw it as a genuine philosophical dead end.

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²¹ French original: “en ce qu'elle se transcende pour atteindre un objet.”

²² French original: “la structure du comportement.”

²³ French original: “intégration de l'existence.”

Sartre, Existentialism, and Freedom

A major controversy between Sartre and Naville motivated the publication of several books and articles (Spurk, 1997). The debate began on October 29, 1945, after a famous lecture given by Sartre in which he introduced existentialism to the French audience. One year later, he published a little book, a verbatim transcription of the lecture, entitled *Existentialism is a Humanism* (Sartre, 1946a). The conference and the book were two instant public successes and even immortalized in a famous novel by Boris Vian (1947). Sartre's goal at this conference was to explain existentialism to a broader audience and in a simplified form compared with his fully developed and complex *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 1943). Sartre's perspective is well known: For his consciousness being "nothingness," Man "escapes the causal order of the world, he unglues himself from being"²⁴ (Sartre, 1943, p. 58). As a consequence, Sartre wrote, "What I call freedom is therefore impossible to distinguish from human-reality's *being*"²⁵ (Sartre, 1943, p. 60); thus, as he would later write, Man is "condemned to be free" (Sartre, 1983, p. 447). In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, in order to make his philosophy more accessible to a wide audience, Sartre took concrete examples connected to the wartime experience. In particular, he told the story of a student of his, a young man who was facing a dilemma during the Second World War: Should he care for his mother, who was isolated and without financial resources, or should he join the Resistance against the Nazis? According to Sartre, the student should make the choice by himself and would have to bear that responsibility, which is precisely what Sartre meant by freedom in an existentialist perspective. Sartre claimed, therefore, that he was not supposed to give any advice to the student. Yet the text of the conference is followed by the transcript of a debate between Sartre and Naville, which occurred just after the lecture. Throughout the discussion, Naville objected that, in order to really help the student, one could not let him deal with his dilemma alone. On the contrary, one had to help him understand the conditions and consequences of both sides of the choice. Naville refused the attitude advocated by Sartre, and, at the very end of the debate, said to him,

Fn24

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There was a need to answer him. I would have tried to inquire as to what he was capable of, to his age, his financial possibilities, to examine his relationships with his mother. . . . I would have encouraged him to do something.²⁶ (Sartre, 1946a, p. 109)

Fn26

Sartre answered, "If he comes for a piece of advice, he has chosen the answer already. Practically, I could very well have given him advice; but since he was looking for freedom, I wanted to let him decide"²⁷ (Sartre, 1946a, p. 109).

Fn27

According to Naville, one could not leave the student face to face with his choices. On the contrary, one must actively help him to understand the potential causes and consequences of his choices. In other words, Naville did not believe in freedom in an existentialist perspective and claimed that one has to create one's own conditions of freedom. This was so important to him that, a few months later, he published a book

²⁴ French original: "il échappe à l'ordre causal du monde, il se désenglué de l'être."

²⁵ French original: "Ce que nous appelons liberté est donc impossible à distinguer de l'être de la réalité-humaine."

²⁶ French original: "Il fallait lui répondre. J'aurais essayé de m'enquérir de quoi il était capable, de son âge, de ses possibilités financières, d'examiner ses rapports avec mère. . . . Je l'aurais engagé à faire quelque chose."

²⁷ French original: "S'il vient demander un conseil, c'est qu'il a déjà choisi la réponse. Pratiquement, j'aurais très bien pu lui donner un conseil; mais puisqu'il cherchait la liberté, j'ai voulu le laisser décider."

entitled *Les conditions de la liberté* [The Conditions of Freedom], in which he developed his critique of phenomenology and existentialism.²⁸ Naville notably stated that if Man was as free as Sartre claimed, this would imply that he should be held fully responsible for the deeply unequal social world we are living in. On the contrary, according to Naville, one could not be blamed for being subjected to all the social determinisms and psychological conditionings that surround us. Paradoxically, to free themselves, individuals should first become aware of their difficulties—or even their inabilities—to naturally access freedom. Approximately at the same period, Sartre (1946b) explained that, from his point of view, there was no contradiction between the facts that the world is driven by physical laws and that human beings are free. In this work, Sartre turned Naville's argument around: In a strictly deterministic world, how could one be a revolutionary? If everything is already written, what can one do? Sartre ironically stressed that the determinism of materialists condemns them to be reactionary.

Fn28

Less than 10 years after this vivid discussion, the debate sparked up again between Naville and Sartre. Indeed, Naville (1956a) published a book entitled *L'intellectuel communiste* [The communist intellectual], with a pretty clear subtitle—*à propos de Jean-Paul Sartre* [about Jean-Paul Sartre]—in which he continued his discussion with the existentialist philosopher. This book is notably composed of several articles published against Sartre. Naville focused especially critically on *Nekrassov* (Sartre, 1956a), a recent theater play written by Sartre in which he condemned anticommunism. Yet in the mid-1950s, Sartre had become a leading intellectual figure of the PCF, and Naville tried to demonstrate that this play illustrated Sartre's uncritical allegiance to PCF Stalinism. A few weeks before the publication of the "Khrushchev Report"—in which Khrushchev denounced Stalin's crimes and the cult of personality around him—Naville accused Sartre of creating a philosophy justifying a political wait-and-see attitude:

AQ: 20

Reducing the intellectual to the novelist, the playwright, the essayist, [Sartre] was assigning to him only *testimony* as a function, a weak form of engagement. Little by little, repeated testimony turned into compliance, and compliance with what? With the general directives of the Stalinian apparatus of the Communist Party.²⁹ (Naville, 1956a, p. 33)

Fn29

According to Naville, this political weakness was the straightforward consequence of Sartre's understanding of subjectivity, consciousness, and freedom. By constantly stating that consciousness centrally existed in human behavior and choices, Sartre's philosophy risked driving people to political passivity: "I cannot prevent myself from seeing that there exists a secret bond between the statement of unconditioned subjectivity and the assurance that *what happens had to happen*"³⁰ (Naville, 1956a, p. 40).

AQ: 21

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This debate continued to rage and even culminated with the publication of two articles: "Réponse à Pierre Naville" [Answer to Pierre Naville] (Sartre, 1956b) and "Les nouvelles mésaventures de Jean-Paul-Sartre" [The new adventures of Jean-Paul Sartre] (Naville, 1956b). In his article, Sartre strongly blamed Naville for not being able to understand the intellectual evolution of the world. He notably claimed that behaviorism was already an obsolete position.

AQ: 22

²⁸ The initial title was *Phénoménologie de la phénoménologie* [Phenomenology of Phenomenology] and 10 years later when he unsuccessfully tried to republish the book, he wanted to have the subtitle *Critique of Existentialism*. In this book, Naville especially criticized Sartre and Merleau-Ponty's philosophies (Pierre Naville Papers, CEDIAS-Musée Social, Paris).

AQ: 43

²⁹ French original:

Réduisant l'intellectuel au romancier, au dramaturge, à l'essayiste, [Sartre] ne lui assignait pour fonction que le *témoignage*, forme faible de l'engagement. Peu à peu le témoignage à répétition s'est mué en acquiescement, et en acquiescement à quoi? Aux directives générales de l'appareil stalinien du parti communiste.

³⁰ French original: "Je ne peux m'empêcher de voir qu'il existe une secrète liaison entre l'affirmation de la subjectivité inconditionnée et l'assurance que *ce qui arrive devait arriver*."

As for Naville, he repeated his earlier criticism toward Sartre's "political quietism" and his submissive attitude toward the PCF. When looking at this debate, it is worth noticing that, according to Naville, Sartre's existentialism led him to develop reactionary beliefs, whereas, according to Sartre, Naville's materialism and behaviorism are precisely what constitute a reactionary political position.

Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, and Marxism

La structure du comportement [*The Structure of Behavior*] (Merleau-Ponty, 1942) begins with what could be called a damning indictment of the behaviorist view of human behavior. What is so wrong with behaviorism? According to Merleau-Ponty, Watson falsely reduced behavior to its physiological components:

It is known that in Watson, following the classical antinomy, the negation of consciousness as an "internal reality" is made to the benefit of physiology; behavior is reduced to the sum of reflexes and conditioned reflexes between which no intrinsic connection is admitted. (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p. 4)

However, as Naville noted, this is not exactly Watson's claim. In *Psychology From the Standpoint of a Behaviorist*, the founder of behaviorism even stated that it is perfectly possible for a behaviorist to be ignorant of physiology and to have a "comprehensive and accurate" (Watson, 1919, p. 195) understanding of emotions or human behavior. Merleau-Ponty's rough criticism of behaviorism presumably comes from the fact that he had no first-hand reading of Watson's texts. There is indeed not a single direct quote from Watson in the entire *Structure of Behavior*, whereas other psychologists or physicians are widely and directly quoted.³¹ Moreover, in a footnote, Merleau-Ponty admitted that he had just learned in a book³² that came to him when *La structure du comportement* was in galley proofs, that initially, Watson's project was not to reduce behavior to physiology. However, despite an apparent contradiction, at the end of this footnote, Merleau-Ponty repeated his criticism and claimed that although Watson had a "healthy and profound" intuition, he ultimately turned into a materialist and therefore provided us with an inaccurate view of the problem:

But what is healthy and profound in this intuition of behavior—that is, the vision of man as perpetual debate and "explanation" with a physical and social world—found itself compromised by an impoverished philosophy. In reaction against the shadows of psychological intimacy, behaviorism for the most part seeks recourse only in a physiological or even a physical explanation, without seeing that this amounts to putting behavior back into the nervous system. In my opinion . . . when Watson spoke of behavior he had in mind what others have called *existence*; but the new notion could receive its philosophical status only if causal or mechanical thinking were abandoned for dialectical thinking. (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p. 226)

In his criticism of phenomenology and existentialism, Naville extensively discussed Merleau-Ponty's view of behaviorism and especially pointed to his debatable views on the role of physiology in behaviorism. Naville also tried to demonstrate that phenomenology, by refusing to fully acknowledge the role of determinism in human sciences, offered a mystical vision of behavior:

The simple and conditioned reflex is philosophy's pet hate. And why is that? Because it introduces determinism into biological behavior on a human scale. . . . Reflex activity poses a capital form of bond between animal organism and (internal and external) environment. Through it the organism ceases to be

³¹ For instance, Goldstein is directly quoted 54 times; Koffka, 32 times; Pavlov, 21 times; and Tolman seven times.

³² Merleau-Ponty referred to *Le béhaviourisme* (Tilquin, 1942), an introduction to behaviorism published by André Tilquin. Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty did not quote Naville's book about Watson, although it had been published 4 months before *La structure du comportement* (Noble, 2011).

pure self-determination and becomes the seat of preferred reactions. This is what metaphysics, and theology in particular, cannot tolerate, even under its existential shape.³³ (Naville, 1947, p. 88)

Fn33

According to Naville, phenomenology and existentialism were just new forms of the old idealist philosophy. Moreover, one should not overlook that this ontological consideration goes along with a political one. In that respect, Naville decided to hold a debate in his own journal, *La Revue Internationale*. It seems that his idea was from the beginning to publicly debate with Merleau-Ponty himself about phenomenology and Marxism. In 1945, Naville tried to ask Merleau-Ponty to write an article for a special issue about Marxism and philosophy (Merleau-Ponty, 1945b). First, Merleau-Ponty declined the invitation. However, he then agreed to possibly submit an article but only after the publication of the special issue (Merleau-Ponty, 1945d). Eventually, Naville asked Jean Domarchi, an economist, to write an article about phenomenology and Marxist economy, and Tran-Duc-Thao, a Vietnamese phenomenologist,³⁴ to write a more general article about phenomenology and class struggle. Naville offered a long answer in two parts, entitled “Marx ou Husserl,” published it in the following issues of his journal, and published it again as a chapter in *Les conditions de la liberté* (Naville, 1947). He began with a critique of Domarchi and Tran-Duc-Thao, but it seems that his real purpose was to debate with Merleau-Ponty. Indeed, he ended his article with a criticism of Tran-Duc-Thao and Merleau-Ponty’s claims that Marx’s analysis of society—and especially the role of the proletariat³⁵—did not square with reality any longer. Naville acknowledged that society could change but he strongly disagreed with the idea that phenomenology could be interesting for a “true” Marxian. On the contrary, he claimed that phenomenology would lead to a subjective and partial interpretation: “Precisely, the international crisis of proletarian classes has to be explained and solved from an economic, social, demographical, political, military analysis of our era, and not through resorting to ‘lived experiences,’ desperately locked into subjectivism”³⁶ (Naville, 1947, p. 167). This is exactly the same criticism that we presented earlier, now directed at Merleau-Ponty—phenomenology’s rejection of determinism in human sciences led it to be blind to the role of context and to social progressivism: “Pure metaphysics, abstract universality, always entails a reactionary seed, a potential absolutism . . . If some followers of existentialism have joined the resistance against Nazism, if they are republicans, even socialists, it is despite their philosophy”³⁷ (Naville, 1947, p. 189). A few months after Naville’s articles were published, Merleau-Ponty finally agreed to write a contribution to the debate, without directly

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³³ French original:

Le réflexe simple et conditionné est la bête noire de la philosophie. Et pourquoi cela? Parce qu’il introduit le déterminisme dans le comportement biologique à l’échelle humaine. . . . L’activité réflexe constitue une forme de liaison capitale entre l’organisme animal et le milieu (intérieur et extérieur). Par elle l’organisme cesse d’être pure auto-détermination pour devenir le siège de réaction privilégiées. C’est ce que ne peut tolérer la métaphysique et particulièrement la théologie, même sous sa forme existentielle.

³⁴ For more information about Tran-Duc-Thao, see Benoist and Espagne (2013).

³⁵ Naville quoted an article from Merleau-Ponty in *Les Temps Modernes*: “Proletariat as a class is too weakened to remain by now an autonomous factor of history. We cannot have a Marxist proletarian politics in the classical manner anymore, because it does not bite onto facts any more.” French original: “Le prolétariat comme classe est trop affaibli pour demeurer à présent un facteur autonome de l’histoire. Nous ne pouvons plus avoir une politique marxiste prolétarienne à la manière classique, parce qu’elle ne mord plus sur les faits” (Merleau-Ponty, 1956, p. 589).

A Q: 45

³⁶ French original: “Précisément la crise internationale des classes prolétariennes doit être expliquée et résolue à partir d’une analyse économique, sociale, démographique, politique, militaire de notre époque et non par le recours à des ‘expériences vécues,’ désespérément enfermées dans le subjectivisme.”

³⁷ French original: “la métaphysique pure, l’universalité abstraite contient toujours un germe réactionnaire, un absolutisme en puissance . . . Si des adeptes de l’existentialisme ont adhéré à la résistance contre le nazisme, s’ils sont républicains, voire socialistes, c’est en dépit de leur philosophie.”

answering Naville's attacks.³⁸ In a letter to the philosopher Alphonse de Waelhens, Merleau-Ponty explained his position:

Fn38
AQ: 23

Decidedly, no, I will not respond to Naville. I preferred making a small article on "Marxism and philosophy," of a positive feature, and relate to it a few general critiques of pseudo-Marxist scientism, which is in my opinion something sickening.³⁹ (Merleau-Ponty, 1946)

Fn39

As a matter of fact, Merleau-Ponty's article begins with a criticism of Naville's materialism, comparing him with Auguste Comte. Like the founder of positivism, Naville would want to replace philosophy with science and "to reduce man to the state of a scientific object"⁴⁰ (Merleau-Ponty, 1966, p. 221). Merleau-Ponty also turned the political argument around and pointed out that Naville's positivism actually led him to defend reactionary stances:

Fn40

A priori, scientism seems a conservative idea since it causes us to mistake the merely momentary for the eternal. Throughout the history of Marxism, in fact, the fetishism of science has always made its appearance where the revolutionary conscience was faltering.⁴¹ (Merleau-Ponty, 1966, p. 223)

Fn41

Overall, in his article, Merleau-Ponty tried to explain that we should overcome the antithesis between mechanism and idealism and that this is precisely the philosophical endeavor of phenomenology. In the conclusion, he tackled Naville's critical attitude toward philosophy, for it seems to be, according to Merleau-Ponty, more ideological than genuinely scientific. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty warned his readers of the risk such an attitude entails: "Are we . . . going to look at philosophy through the police chief's glasses?"⁴² (Merleau-Ponty, 1966, p. 240).⁴³

Fn42-43

Interestingly, during the very same period of this heated public debate, another related controversy was privately at play between the same actors. This one was about the arbitrary imprisonment of Tran-Duc-Thao in September 1945. Immediately after his imprisonment, Naville issued a petition and, notably, sent it to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. The latter answered that he and Sartre preferred to add some modifications to the text. Merleau-Ponty explained to Naville:

AQ: 24

Sartre was actually willing to sign your text and it is I who thought of writing out another one. Our goal has to be, in my opinion, less to make a demonstration, inefficient on the political front, than obtaining Thao's release. This is why it seems appropriate to me to give your text, of Marxist inspiration, a "liberal" note likely to collect a larger number of signatures.⁴⁴ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945a)

Fn44

Merleau-Ponty criticized Naville for his purely Marxist reading of the situation, which, according to him, had to be further substantiated and, above all, could be potentially dangerous for Tran-Duc-Thao. Conversely, Naville considered that Merleau-Ponty's

³⁸ This article entitled "Marxisme et philosophie" [Marxism and Philosophy] and originally published in 1946 in *La Revue Internationale*, was published again in *Sens and non-sens* (Merleau-Ponty, 1966).

³⁹ French original: "Décidément non, je ne répondrai pas à Naville. J'ai préféré faire un petit article sur 'Marxisme et philosophie,' de caractère positif, et y rattacher quelques critiques générales du scientisme pseudo-marxiste qui est à mon avis quelque chose d'écœurant."

⁴⁰ French original: "réduire l'homme à la condition d'objet de science."

⁴¹ French original: "*A priori*, le scientisme apparaît comme une conception conservatrice, puisqu'il nous ferait prendre pour éternel ce qui n'est que momentané. En fait, dans l'histoire du marxisme, le fétichisme de la science est toujours apparu du côté où fléchissait la conscience révolutionnaire."

⁴² French original: "Allons-nous à notre tour regarder la philosophie par les lunettes du commissaire de police?"

⁴³ Claude Lefort, a philosopher close to Merleau-Ponty, proposed a more detailed critic of Naville's behaviorism (Lefort, 1946).

⁴⁴ French original:

"Sartre était en effet disposé à signer votre texte et c'est moi qui ai pensé à en rédiger un autre. Notre but doit être, à mon sens, moins de faire une manifestation, inefficace sur le plan politique que d'obtenir la libération de Thao. C'est pourquoi il me paraît indiqué de restituer à votre texte, d'inspiration marxiste, un texte "liberal" capable de recueillir un plus grand nombre de signatures."

attitude demonstrated lack of courage. In a very long letter addressed to Naville, Merleau-Ponty, pushed to his very limits, told him a few home truths about the discussion regarding Tran-Duc-Thao's petitions: "I do not have sharp opinions and a defaulting will. I am only asking myself what the future of Marxist-revolutionary politics is, and I do not like bullshit, that's all (I mean: dreams believing they are truths)."⁴⁵ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945c)

AQ: 25

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We could not find which of the two petitions was eventually published—probably both. Tran-Duc-Thao was freed in December 1945. This anecdotal episode in any case confirms the roughness of the debate between Naville versus Merleau-Ponty and Sartre and also the entanglement of philosophical and political claims within a theoretical endeavor. Finally, it is worth noting that Naville played a significant role in the final break between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. In 1953, the French behaviorist submitted a two-part article to *Les Temps Modernes* entitled "Etats-Unis et contradictions capitalistes" [The United States and Capitalist Contradictions], in which, as a Marxist, he criticized capitalism (Naville, 1952, 1953). Merleau-Ponty, who was then developing a criticism of communism, added a short note about the contradictions of socialism in which he severely attacked Naville. However, in an authoritarian manner, Sartre decided to remove Merleau-Ponty's note. After several months of political divergence between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, this event led to a final quarrel between the two men. Ironically, as noted by Birchall, "it seems that neither Sartre nor Merleau-Ponty had read the full article. In the second part, which appeared five months later, Naville did indeed discuss the contradictions of the 'socialist bloc'" (Birchall, 2004, p. 123).

As we have shown here, the reception of behaviorism in France was linked to a strong, if not violent, debate between Naville, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. Indeed, according to Naville, phenomenology and existentialism ultimately led to the development of reactionary beliefs, whereas according to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, it was Naville's materialism and behaviorism that were intrinsically reactionary. As a result, it seems that this controversy is not understandable if we consider it only as a "classical" theoretical debate in psychology. On the contrary, we demonstrated that the philosophical and political underlying issues are mostly what structured this debate. In the following, in order to better understand what was at stake, we explore the role of the context in which those thinkers were evolving.

Behaviorism in the Shadow of Existentialism and Phenomenology

In a Completely Different League

The vigorous debate presented above could mislead regarding Naville's status and fate. Even if the proponents of existentialism and phenomenology were set against those of behaviorism, this does not actually mean that the two movements were comparable at that time with regard to their public credit. Quite the contrary, the rapid public and academic success of existentialism completely overshadowed Naville's attempt to popularize behaviorism. Based essentially on Sartre's, Merleau-Ponty's, and Naville's careers, we present a few details about the rapid development of existentialism in France before comparing it with what happened to behaviorism. There are indeed strong arguments to claim that the actors in this philosophical and political debate were actually playing in completely different leagues. It is especially true for Sartre, who is often described not only as an important philosopher but also

⁴⁵ French original: "Je n'ai pas des opinions nettes et une volonté défaillante. Je me demande seulement quel est l'avenir de la politique marxiste-révolutionnaire, et je n'aime pas les conneries, voilà tout (j'entends: Les rêves qui se croient des vérités)."

as the quintessential public intellectual (Baert, 2015; Boschetti, 1988). Indeed, in the mid-1940s, Sartre became a French celebrity and even turned out to embody the figure of the “politically committed intellectual.” His international recognition led him to be awarded the 1964 Nobel Prize for Literature, an offer that he could afford the luxury to refuse. Overall, his book sales were very good. This is especially true for his literary writings, which often turned out to be bestsellers. When he died in April 1980, his funeral was attended by a huge crowd, estimated at 50,000 people. As for Merleau-Ponty, he became one of the foremost French philosophers of the period immediately following the Second World War (Noble, 2011). He was made Professor at the University of Lyon in 1948, holding the Chair of Child Psychology and Pedagogy at the Sorbonne from 1949 to 1952, and was then the youngest ever to hold the most prestigious position for a philosopher in France, the Chair of Philosophy at the *Collège de France*.

In comparison, Naville’s career was less prestigious and far more hazardous. As we explained in the first part of this article, Naville’s attitude led him to successively leave the surrealist circles, the communist party, and the vocational psychologist community. His materialist beliefs and strong interest in behaviorism can certainly be regarded as having played a negative role in the development of his career. Moreover, contrary to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, Naville did not follow the classic academic pathway. Naville did not pass the *agrégation de philosophie*, a highly competitive French examination designed to be an important part of the intellectual training of an academic philosopher in France. Therefore, although he finally obtained an academic position, his career is certainly not comparable with those of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. As an example, in 1992, after a long career throughout which he published more than 40 original books, 40 translations, and approximately 250 articles, he found himself obliged to self-publish his last book, which was dedicated to politics in Russia (Naville, 1992). As a consequence, it is not surprising that Naville did not succeed in giving voice to behaviorism in France: He was clearly a minor player as opposed to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and his eclectic interests did not help to portray a clear image of behaviorism.

AQ: 26

But the lack of interest in behaviorism in France presumably also has something to do with the French political context. Indeed, right in the middle of the Second World War, especially in occupied France, discussing behavior and freedom was definitely political. During that time, French citizens were forced to choose between collaborating with the Nazis or joining the Resistance. After the war and the fall of the collaborationist Vichy government, France was swept by a wave of executions: the *épuration sauvage* [savage purge]. The humiliation of the rapid defeat combined with a long and painful occupation and the purge of collaborationists created a traumatic experience for the French. This trauma led to the creation, just after the war, of a national myth called *résistancialisme* [resistantialism] by Rousso (1991), which could be described as a systematic exaggeration of the importance of the role of the resistance during the war. In this context, studying how we behave and what free will and responsibility are had acquired a very specific meaning. More specifically, Sartre’s ideas about absolute freedom were certainly more appealing than Naville’s deterministic ones. Likewise, Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to preserve subjectivity was far more acceptable than Naville’s negation of the very concept of the subject. Above all, existentialist ideas were more in line with what could be called the French national narrative of the immediate postwar (Baert, 2015). This is especially true for Sartre’s conception of freedom, which allowed the public to glorify those who chose to join the resistance and to condemn those who chose to collaborate, whereas Naville’s deterministic point of view took away the glory by eliminating the choice. However, Naville’s absolute defeat by Sartre should be nuanced. As noted by Kemp (2014),

Sartre's ultimate understanding of freedom might well have been influenced by behaviorism and presumably by Naville's behaviorism:

In 1969 Sartre defined freedom as "this little movement which makes of a social being totally conditioned a person who does not wholly render what she received from its conditioning", adopting behaviorist terminology and demonstrating striking rapprochement with the behaviorist line. (Kemp, 2014, p. 346)

Finally, as Braunstein (1999) accurately highlighted, there existed "an anti-psychologist spell"⁴⁶ in French thought from the end of the 1950s into the 1960s, that is to say, exactly at the time when psychology was institutionalized in the French university and proclaimed its independence from philosophy and medicine. Actually, it was above all philosophers who provided most of the criticism of psychology, the most famous of which came from philosopher Georges Canguilhem and took the form of a conference delivered in 1956, titled "What is Psychology?"⁴⁷ (Canguilhem, 1958). Psychology, he wrote, blends "philosophy without rigor, ethics without demand, and medicine without control"⁴⁸ (Canguilhem, 1958, p. 12). In the 1960s, Canguilhem's article was the foundation of a series of critiques of psy-knowledge in intellectual circles leaning to the political left (Carroy, Ohayon, & Plas, 2006). In emancipating itself from philosophy, psychology would be at risk of becoming a discipline that served economic or political priorities dictated by the state. Not every form of psychology, however, was rejected, but rather its marginal aspects that were presented as the most scientific ones: experimental psychology and, more specifically, behaviorism. Thus, Naville's debate with Sartre and Merleau-Ponty is only a part of a more general French criticism of psychology in general and of behaviorism in particular.

Fn46

Fn47

Fn48

An Unexpected Fate

However, a difficult reception does not imply a complete lack of reception. Behaviorism interested some French intellectuals, but strangely enough, it was mostly outside of "psy" circles and especially in the literary field. In an recent article, Kemp (2014) recalled that in 1948, French literary critic Claude-Edmonde Magny coined the expression "behaviorist novel." According to Kemp, her purpose was not to characterize the use of the theme of behavior modification through conditioning in Western works like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *1984* (1949), Antony Burgess's *Clockwork Orange* (1962), or even Burrhus Frederic Skinner's *Walden Two* (1948):

Interestingly, the term behaviorist novel did not attach itself to texts like these but, in line with Magny's analysis of the contemporary American novel, became associated exclusively with the fashion for impersonal narration offering an external perspective on the characters. (Kemp, 2014, p. 347)

Magny was well aware that those novelists were certainly influenced by the cinematic viewpoint and its technical constraints in filmmaking, but she pointed out that novelists, contrary to filmmakers, had chosen this constraint. In *L'âge d'or du roman américain* [The Golden Age of the American Novel] (Magny, 1948), Magny analyzed the work of several American novelists—like John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, or William Faulkner—and explained that

⁴⁶ French original: "un moment antipsychologiste."

⁴⁷ French original: "Qu'est-ce que la psychologie?"

⁴⁸ French original: "une philosophie sans rigueur, une éthique sans exigence et une médecine sans contrôle."

it is in America that the philosophical school one calls *behaviorism* flourished; it is defined by a bias which holds what an external observer could perceive of the psychological life of a man or animal as the only reality . . . which eliminates all that can only be known by the subject himself, by means of an internal analysis; in short, which reduces psychological reality to a succession of behaviors, such as gestures or facial expressions as well as speeches or screams. Nearly all American novelists of the past twenty years, from Hemingway to Caldwell, seem to have unconsciously endorsed this behaviorist view of Man: they provide us not with the feelings or thoughts of their characters, but with the objective description of their actions, the stenography of their discourses, in short, the report of their “conducts” in the face of a given situation.⁴⁹ (Magny, 1948, p. 50)

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At the same time, Sartre was also genuinely interested in those American novelists, even though he never used the term “behaviorist novel.” Yet several times, he discussed the specificity of American novelist’s literary style.⁵⁰ This theoretical interest led him to use this technique in his own literary work as early as 1939 (notably in *L’Enfance d’un chef* [The Childhood of a Leader; Sartre, 1939b]⁵¹ and, especially, in his trilogy entitled *Les Chemins de la liberté* [Roads to Freedom; Sartre, 1945, 1947a, 1949]⁵²). As Sartre explained in a article entitled “American Novelists in French Eyes” (Sartre, 1946c), beginning during the interwar period, French novelists were influenced by several American novelists:

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All around us clouds were gathering. There was war in Spain; the concentration camps were multiplying in Germany, in Austria, in Czechoslovakia. War was menacing everywhere. Nevertheless analysis—analysis à la Proust, à la James—remained our only literary method, our favorite procedure. But could it take into account the brutal death of a Jew in Auschwitz, the bombardment of Madrid by the planes of Franco? Here a new literature presented its characters to us synthetically. It made them perform before our eyes acts which were complete in themselves, impossible to analyze, acts which it was necessary to grasp completely with all the obscure power of our souls. (Sartre, 1946c, p. 117)

Paradoxically, Sartre claimed that deep psychological analysis (“à la Proust”) prevents us from fully understanding “what was going on in the souls of . . . characters” (Sartre, 1946c, p. 117). Instead of using introspection to describe the psychology of characters, Sartre recommended following the technique used by several American novelists and by fully describing how they act: “It is from their conduct that we must, as in life, reconstruct their thought” (Sartre, 1946c, p. 117). Interestingly, Sartre’s and Magny’s interest in “behaviorist novels” led to a debate in the French literary milieu. Nathalie Sarraute, a French novelist close to the *Nouveau Roman*,⁵³ published between 1947 and 1956, a series of articles in *Les Temps Modernes* and *La Nouvelle Revue Française* [The New French Review], in which she criticized the use of the behaviorist technique in literature—that is, third-person perspective combined with a disdain for subjectivity—and contrasted it with a tradition derived from Proust—that is, a taste for psychological analysis

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⁴⁹ French original:

C’est en Amérique qu’a fleuri l’école philosophique qu’on appelle *behaviourisme*; elle se définit par un parti pris de tenir pour seul réel, dans la vie psychologique d’un homme ou d’un animal, ce que pourrait en percevoir un observateur purement extérieur . . . d’éliminer tout ce qui ne peut être connu que par le sujet lui-même, au moyen d’une analyse intérieure; bref, de réduire la réalité psychologique à une suite de comportements, dont les paroles ou les cris font d’ailleurs partie au même titre que les gestes ou les jeux de physionomie. Presque tous les romanciers américains des vingt dernières années, d’Hemingway à Caldwell, semblent avoir inconsciemment adopté cette vue behavioriste de l’homme: Ils nous donnent non pas les sentiments ou les pensées de leurs personnages, mais la description objective de leurs actes, la stenographie de leurs discours, bref, le procès-verbal de leurs “conduites” devant une situation donnée.

⁵⁰ See, for instance, “*Sartoris* par W. Faulkner” (Sartre, 1938b), “A propos de John Dos Passos et de 1919” [About John Dos Passos and 1919] (Sartre, 1938a) or “A propos de *Le bruit et la fureur*. La temporalité chez Faulkner” [About *The Sound and the Fury*. Temporality in Faulkner] (Sartre, 1939a).

⁵¹ For more details, see Besand (2013).

⁵² In this trilogy, Sartre explored the theoretical theme of existentialism throughout the story of Mathieu, a socialist teacher of philosophy and his friends during the Second World War.

⁵³ The *Nouveau Roman* is a French literary movement that appeared in the second part of the 20th century and called into question the traditional modes of literary realism (Jefferson, 1980).

(Sarraute, 1956). In that respect, as Kemp noticed, Sarraute's work could be seen as the antithesis to the "behaviorist novel."⁵⁴ Surprisingly, Naville was also interested in Sartre's literary style. Despite his severe criticism of the founder of existentialism, Naville mentioned his admiration for Sartre's literary work on several occasions: in *Les conditions de la liberté* (1947), Naville pointed out that *Les chemins de la liberté*⁵⁵ (Sartre, 1945, 1947a, 1949) was "one of the best literary pieces of this time"⁵⁶ (Naville, 1947, p. 188). Moreover, in an ambivalent obituary, he claimed that, overall, Sartre's intellectual record was negative but that he would be remembered for his writing style (Naville, 1980). Finally, in 1963, when Naville published a new edition of his 1942 book about Watson's behaviorism, the dust jacket blurb mentioned the decisive influence of behaviorism in literature: "Psychology of behavior not only played a capital role in psychology's modern development, but also exercised a decisive influence on the understanding of the great American novelists"⁵⁷ (Naville, 1963a, p. C4).

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This is a very surprising statement because the book itself did not address this issue at all. It was probably a marketing strategy designed by the publisher to expand readership of the book, but it is definitely an invitation for the historian to further explore the cultural aspects of the indigenization of behaviorism in the French context.

Conclusion

To sum up, we argue that three main factors played a significant role in the difficult reception of Watson's ideas in France: first, the weak position of Naville, the French ambassador of behaviorism, in the French intellectual community. The versatility of his interests combined with his revolutionary tendencies led him to always remain an outsider, or as he once described himself, to embody the figure of "the damned behaviorist (Naville, 1987)." Second, exactly at the moment that behaviorism was introduced in France, alternative theories defended by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty met with rapid and major success. Both existentialism and phenomenology, which explicitly condemned Watson's theory, overshadowed behaviorism. Third, the specificity of the political context of postwar France was clearly decisive. After the humiliation of the occupation by the Nazis, the French audience was especially critical of any deterministic view of behavior, which could be seen as a justification of collaboration. As a result, both existentialism and phenomenology were more in line than behaviorism with what could be called the "French national narrative" of the immediate postwar.

Overall, Naville's failure to popularize behaviorism should be understood as the counterpart of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty's success in introducing existential phenomenology. Yet we do not claim that the very specific debate between Naville, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty is sufficient to fully explain the fate of Watson's ideas in France. Further

⁵⁴ For a more developed interpretation of Sarraute's work, see Kemp (2014, 2018). Paradoxically, as Kemp successfully demonstrated, Sarraute could be seen as one of the most "behaviorist writers":

In her focus on mental life as a response to outside stimulus, her deconstruction of complex mental activity into simple quasi-physiological movements, and her emphasis on the involuntary over the willed, Sarraute offers a representation of psychology that has more in common with behaviorism, in the original sense of the word, than any of the other writers considered here. As the most outspoken detractor of the "behaviorist novel," it is a parallel she would not have been pleased to acknowledge. (Kemp, 2014, p. 358)

⁵⁵ We could even ask ourselves whether Naville's title of his critique of existentialism and phenomenology—*The Conditions of Freedom*—was not a reference to Sartre's trilogy *The Roads to Freedom*. By using this title, Naville pointed out that freedom is not a road with good and bad decisions that must be taken but that there are conditions to freedom that are mostly independent of our choices.

⁵⁶ French original: "Une des meilleures œuvres de ce temps."

⁵⁷ French original: "La psychologie du comportement n'a pas joué seulement un rôle capital dans le développement de la psychologie moderne, mais a exercé aussi une influence décisive sur la conception des grands romanciers américains."

research should study the role of French experimental psychologists in this history and the effective implementation of behavior therapy in clinical practice. However, we think that, using the example of behaviorism, this article clearly illustrates how the combination of philosophical and political contexts can be decisive in the indigenization process of scientific ideas.

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1

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AQ3—Author: Please be sure to provide the name of the department(s) with which you and your coauthors are affiliated at your respective institutes if you have not already done so. If you are affiliated with a governmental department, business, hospital, clinic, VA center, or other non-university-based institute, please provide the city and U.S. state (or the city, province, and country) in which the institute is based. Departments should be listed in the author footnote only, not the byline. If you or your coauthors have changed affiliations since the article was written, please include a separate note indicating the new department/affiliation: [author's name] is now at [affiliation].

AQ4—Author: Per style, terms such as “surrealism” and “existentialism” have been changed to lowercase rather than capitalized, OK?

AQ5—Author: Please limit your list of keywords to 5 words/phrases currently there are 7, so please delete 2.

AQ6—Author: In the sentence beginning “Indeed, as recently proposed,” for clarity, please change “among others” to “among other things” or something more specific, if possible.

AQ7—Author: Please change the sentence “As we will see” to “As we outline,” “As we discuss,” or something similar.

AQ8—Author: Per style, nontemporal instances of “while” and “since” have been changed to “although,” “whereas,” or “because.”

AQ9—Author: Per style, ellipses at the beginning or end of quotes have been deleted. Also note that it is not necessary to enclose ellipses within brackets or parentheses; this has been

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corrected.

AQ10—Author: Per style, quotations less than 40 words have been set to run in with the text rather than being given as a block quote.

AQ11—Author: Per style, when noting letters written that have been taken from a source, the information about the letter should follow the citation; this has been corrected (e.g., for Bienaimé, 2010, p. 384).

AQ12—Author: For all dates noted for letters, please use the American English format, such as “May 6, 1991.” Please check for all dates given in the form “06/05/1991,” for example, in both the text and references and change to the proper format.

AQ13—Author: In the paragraph beginning “Pierre Naville was born,” per APA style, if sources are available for any of this information, please provide citations and confirm the sources are included in the references.

AQ14—Author: Per style, instances of “where” that do not refer to a particular place or location have been changed to “in which.”

AQ15—Author: Please provide an English translation of *Clarté*, where indicated with bullets.

AQ16—Author: Per APA preference, for all instances of “paper” or “papers” that refer to published articles, please change to “article” or “articles,” as appropriate.

AQ17—Author: Please change the sentence “As we will now see” to “As discussed in the next section” or something similar.

AQ18—Author: In the sentence beginning “In the midst,” please provide English translations where indicated with bullets.

AQ19—Author: In the sentence “Contrary to most,” please provide an English translation.

AQ20—Author: In the sentence “Indeed, Naville (1956a) published,” please provide translations in brackets.

AQ21—Author: In the quote beginning “I cannot prevent,” please indicate whether the emphasis has been added or is from the original quote (e.g., “emphasis added,” “original emphasis”).

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AQ22—Author: In the paragraph beginning “This debate continued,” please provide translations.

AQ23—Author: For the quote beginning “Decidedly, no, I will not respond,” for the citation of the letter, per style, letters from repositories or private collections should be formatted as author-date citations and listed in the references. An example for a letter from a repository would be: “Frank, L. K. (1953, August 15). [Letter to Robert M. Ogden]. Rockefeller Archive Center (GEB series 1.3, Box 371, Folder 3877), Tarrytown, NY.” The corresponding citation would therefore be “Frank, 1953.” Please make this corrections for letters from archives.

AQ24—Author: For the quote beginning “Sartre was actually,” please change to an author-date citation and add the source to the references.

AQ25—Author: For the quote beginning “I do not have sharp opinions,” please change to an author-date citation and add the source to the references.

AQ26—Author: In the sentence “Naville did not pass,” please provide an English translation.

AQ27—Author: In the sentence “Nathalie Sarraute,” please provide a translation in brackets.

AQ28—Author: In the References, for chapters in books, when translations are provided, only the chapter title is translated and not the book title; this has been corrected as appropriate.

AQ29—Author: For Kvale, S., & Grenness, C. E., please confirm the date is correct, as a reference check suggests this should be 1986–1987.

AQ30—Author: For Merleau-Ponty, M. (1942), if the publisher name can be spelled out, please provide the full spelling.

AQ31—Author: Merleau-Ponty, M. (1946) is not cited in the text. Please add a citation to the text or delete from the references.

AQ32—Author: For Merleau-Ponty, M. (1967), please provide city of publication.

AQ34—Author: For Spurk, J. (1997), please provide page range.

AQ35—Author: For Watson, J. B. (1972), if the publisher name can be spelled out, please provide the full spelling.

AQ36—Author: For the correspondence address, if available, please provide a street address or

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box number.

AQ37—Author: Please add Interview of Jacques Rognant to the references and change the citation to an author-date citation.

AQ38—Author: Please add Letter from J. Wolpe to J. Rognant to the references and correct the citation.

AQ39—Author: In Footnote 5, per your references list, Kvale (1967) has been changed to Kvale and Grenness (1967), OK?

AQ40—Author: In Footnote 7, per your references list, Blum (2007) has been changed to Blum and Le Dantec (2007), OK?

AQ41—Author: Janet, 1889 is not included in your references. Please add to the references or delete the citation(s).

AQ43—Author: For Footnote 29, please change the citation to an author-date citation, if possible.

AQ45—Author: In Footnote 39, Merleau-Ponty, 1956 is not included in your references. Please add to the references or delete the citation(s).
