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Book Review

**Totalization as critique:
a review of
*Marxism and Psychoanalysis:
In or Against Psychology* | David Pavón-Cuéllar
(New York: Routledge 2017)**

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Breakthroughs in thinking are usually made by rendering certain differences *less* different. Works of art, political *mots d'ordre*, scientific creations – as well as psychoanalytic interpretations - are capable of novelty precisely because, through these creations, we have access to a standpoint from which what has come before suddenly emerges as a field of variations contained within certain historical restrictions. New artistic experiments reveal the formal commitments of previous artistic sequences, new political affirmations can “subtract” us from ideologically overdetermined political conflicts, scientific abstraction can determine invariances which turn previous general claims into regional ones, just as surprising love encounters can lead us to reassess a life of repetitions and insisting idealizations. Such seems to also be the proper way of evaluating the merit of David Pavón-Cuéllar’s new book, *Marxism and Psychoanalysis: In or Against Psychology?* (Routledge, 2017), for it introduces a certain *productive indifference* into the otherwise disparate and conflicting attempts to bind Marx and Freud together. In

doing so, Pavón-Cuéllar has both shone a light on the internal organization of this research program and opened up interesting lines of inquiry which cut across any particular stance one might take regarding this important intellectual project.

In what follows, I will try to review the general strategy of the book – which could be otherwise be mistaken for an “encyclopedic” exercise – focusing on three separate moments: (1) *the role of psychology*: the author’s decision to use the critique of psychology as the criteria of intelligibility of this historical reconstruction, (2) *the underlying invariants*: the constants which become legible when we take a look at the totality of these variable articulations between Freud and Marx (3) *the new possibilities*: some of the foreseeable consequences which such newly acquired indifferenciation might open up for those who are, nonetheless, not indifferent to the fate of Marxian and Freudian thinking.

1. Psychology as a site

In his introductory remarks, Pavón-Cuéllar points out that *Marxism and Psychoanalysis* distinguishes itself from the available bibliography for “its breadth” and for its “focus on the psychological elements” (2017: 3) of different Marxist orientations. What is left unclear, however, is why the choice to probe into “the psychological and anti-psychological ideas of Marxism” (ibid: 4) ended up allowing for such a vast study, at the same time “panoramic” in scope and succinct in style. As Louis Althusser reminds us, “one cannot see everything from everywhere” – it is only by adopting certain positions that one can render a totality legible – which begs, then, the question: how did this book manage to create such a concise, but broad panorama of the relations between Freud and Marx by adopting the standpoint of the critique of psychology?

An answer to this question might be sought in the particular definition of “psychology” taken up in this work. For Pavón-Cuéllar’s whole critical apparatus is built to preserve an essential ambivalence at the core of the concept of psychology, taken here to mean simultaneously the set of discourses *about* the interiority of the psyche and the practices which *produce or conserve* such an interiority. This position is particularly useful in that it clarifies the link between the internal consistency of the psyche as an object and the internal consistency of psychology as a theoretical discourse: if the psyche could not be taken as a self-standing object, then no discourse centered on the psyche would be possible – and inversely, the more the discourse of psychology seems consistent, the more it gives practical

support to the treatment of the psyche as an isolated or isolatable mental instance. By keeping this transitivity in view we widen the reach of our critical analysis, for it allows us to investigate, without shifting our position, four different ways one might keep a commitment to the psychic interior as an independent realm: (1) there are the psychological discourses that also admit the objectivity of internal psychology, (2) there are those theories which do not admit the given existence of a psychological interiority, but which “make up for it” with the consistency of their own psychological discourse, (3) there are those discourses which, albeit critical of psychology as a discipline, still suppose the existence of the interior as something to be “dissolved” through critique and therapy, (4) and there are those critical discourses which maintain that there is no self-standing autonomous psyche, but still suppose the self-standing autonomy of the psychological discourse.

When our concept of psychology does not decide beforehand *where* one's commitment with the psychological interior will appear, it is able not only to recognize these ideological dependences within purportedly “progressive” psychologies but within even more radical critical positions which nonetheless remain overdetermined by the object of their critique. To construct a critique of psychology as a critique of the self-standing interior is, on the one hand, to admit as our object *not* a given discourse or entity, but rather *a whole matrix of possible transformations*, the field of all the possible positions where one might deposit one's reliance on this ideological commitment. On the other hand, it also means that we must admit an incredible flexibility into our own critical discourse, training ourselves to navigate these different configurations within their own immanent terms in order to recognize where such commitment emerges. In this sense, rather than focusing on the individual moments of Cuellar's investigation – his survey of uncountable authors and their particular projects – one should approach this as a continuous exercise, whose method grows in clarity as we accumulate its examples: not so much an encyclopedic effort as a propaedeutic one.

We should note that Cuellar's decision to base the critique of psychology on the critique of interiority did not begin with *Marxism and Psychoanalysis*. His previous book, *From the Conscious Interior to an Exterior Unconscious* (Karnac, 2010), was already a solid effort of reconstructing the opposition between psychology and psychoanalysis in terms of two distinct topological structures. There, however, the conducting thread was a didactic reconstruction of the Lacanian perspective – that of the “exterior unconscious”. Which is not to say that Marxism was simply absent – quite on the contrary: one of the most remarkable features of the book was in fact the

courageous substitution of the already worn-out reliance on poetic equivocation as a means of transmission, so common amongst psychoanalysts, for a crystalline step-by-step didactics which owes more to a Marxist commitment to universality than to any sort of “academicism”. Furthermore, Cuéllar’s choice of a case study – taken from an interview with a revolutionary militant - also signaled the author’s deep conviction that psychoanalysis is too important to be kept only within private (and public) clinical settings.

It is true that a survey of David Pavón-Cuéllar’s many works and articles - with a special mention to his still untranslated *Elementos Políticos de Marxismo Lacaniano* (Paradiso, 2014) - would dispel any surprise at finding both Marx and Freud joined together in this crusade against psychology. Since the publication of *Marxisme Lacanien* (Psychophores, 2009), Cuéllar has always positioned himself as a strong defender of the *continuity* between Freud and Marx – in opposition to those who believe that a political project should be derived straight from Freud or Lacan in order to substitute the Marxist one. *Marxism and Psychoanalysis*, however, takes this alliance a step further by reconstructing it from the ground up, through a concrete and localized theme.

This reconstruction is accomplished in the two inaugural chapters of the book. In the first chapter, “Marxian psychologies”, Pavón-Cuéllar goes through “the eighteen *relatively independent* Marxian psychologies” (11). The author’s suspension of any commitment to demonstrate an internal unity between Marx’s different psychological ideas is crucial here. First of all, this attitude is prudent when one has already recognized that the interiority of the psyche can be sustained both in the guise the object of a theory as well as in the theory’s own internal coherence. But there are other merits to this approach: by simply organizing the consequences of Marx’s thinking for the ontology and epistemology of the psyche, Pavón-Cuéllar also localizes psychology as *a region of effects* within the Marxist horizon, rather than as an object which Marx constructed in order to criticize – like the value-form, for example - or as an ontological commitment which heuristically clarifies the true stakes of capitalist exploitation – like Marx’s early defense of the “generic being”. And, insofar as Marx’s theoretical framework is far from being a cohesive and systemic whole, even if the critique of psychology and of psychic interiority is already at work here, there is no synthetic standpoint binding these critical effects together. This is rather the task of the second chapter, which defends the continuity of the Marxian and Freudian doctrines:

we do not relate the two doctrines in their entirety, but only certain ideas relevant to discussions of psychology. Granting a certain priority to Marxian theory, we set out from its categories the eighteen approaches to psychology identified in the previous chapter, in order to discern how Freud may confirm, justify, explain, enrich, nuance, deepen, problematize or revitalize Marx's contributions. We might say we are introducing Freud into a scene organized by Marx. (35)

What is essential here is that Freud is introduced as a thinker whose main challenge is not to propose a critique of psychological interiority – for this has already been recognized in Marx's work - but rather to construct a theoretical and practical apparatus capable of developing these scattered critical effects into a coherent metapsychological framework. In other words, the underlying thesis of the second chapter, clearly defending the continuity between Marx and Freud, is that for Marx to further develop his own insights into the problem of the psyche *he would have had to invent psychoanalysis* – as a regional extension of an already existing theoretical “scene”. By mobilizing the eighteen “critical effects” listed in the previous chapter and retracing our steps, we arrive at the Freudian metapsychology, which introduces a depth of conceptual richness that was lacking in the purely Marxian psychologies as well as a new level of *internal coherence* between the eighteen formulations.

This last point – to which we will return later on – is, at first sight, the most paradoxical: if we began our review by suggesting that a radical critique of psychology must be wary of both the consistency of the psyche as an independent object *and* its consistency as an autonomous discourse, how could Freud provide us with a unified point of view for the Marxian the critique of psychology? This is where the *clinical* dimension comes in, as it conditions the internal coherence of the Freudian metapsychology not so much on what is theorized about the psychic apparatus, but on a practice which is itself dependent on exoteric and indeterminate factors. The psychoanalytic clinic allows for the continuity between the Marxian and Freudian theoretical frameworks, but it also introduces a certain unsurmountable fracture between the two, insofar as it is practically bound by scale and technical constraints.

We are now in condition to understand why it is that psychology functions as a special sort of site in *Marxism and Psychoanalysis* and why it is that, from this particular perspective, such a broad panorama could be constructed. A site – as the philosopher Alain Badiou suggests – is a place “at the edge of the void” of a given

situation: it is contained in the world, but *what is contained in that site is not*. Badiou gives us the example of the worker in factory: a worker is definitely a part of the world of labor, but what is contained in a worker – his singular life, his particular relation to his own concrete activity, etc – is not. A site is an unremarkable part of the world, if seen from the standpoint of an already established structure, but by probing into it we find the first traces of something new, something which does not belong to the architecture of the situation as a whole. The critique of psychology seems to function here precisely in this sense: on the one hand, it allows us to investigate the articulation between Marx and Freud through a particular and circumscribed theme, but, on the other, this theme already signals to an altogether different paradigm, as the critique of psychology is not merely a point in common between two heterogenous projects, but rather a point of *passage* from Marx to Freud.

This seems to be the underlying reason why so many different forms of articulation between Marxism and psychoanalysis could be counted together in Pavón-Cuéllar's book: from the standpoint of the critique of psychology, which brings to the fore the *continuity* between these two fields, all attempts to *relate* Marx and Freud appear to equally fall short of asserting that Marxism and psychoanalysis are in fact in an absolute *identity*. To put it in more speculative terms: if we affirm that these two fields *share the same being*, then both the thesis that they are related and that they are not related are equally wrong – there is no relation because there are no discrete differences to relate.

2. Underlying invariances

In this review, I have tried to downplay the encyclopedic aspect of *Marxism and Psychoanalysis*, even though, in just under 200 pages, Pavón-Cuéllar references a vertiginous number of different thinkers and proposals of how to articulate Marx and Freud. This approach seems justified as the author recalls Marx in order to warn us that his method of investigation is "critique understood as a 'weapon of war' and not as a 'surgeon's scalpel', critique that seeks to 'strike' rather than to 'clarify', critique whose 'interest is not to refute, but to destroy'" (197). It is in view of this clear partisan positioning – which does not vacillate in stating that "psychology exists, is deplored, and must be confronted on the battlefield of critique" (ibid) – that we must consider the book less as an encyclopedia and more as a "weapon". To assess the book as a dictionary or summarization would lead us to evaluate its merit on the basis of how well it represents the different trends and projects it condenses, but to assess it as a

weapon means to evaluate its capacity to strike a blow which affects its heterogeneous content as if hitting a homogenous block - it means to treat totalization as a form of critique.

I have argued above that Pavón-Cuéllar's underlying thesis of an essential continuity between Marxism and psychoanalysis – present as nowhere else in the impasse of psychology – offers us a new perspective from which to analyze the different approximations between Marx and Freud throughout the 20th Century. In short, if we assume the hypothesis of an identity or at least a subsumption of psychoanalysis into Marxism, then the very formulation of the question of an articulation between the two, *no matter how it is answered*, already misses the point. Furthermore, this indifference, far from signaling one's disengagement with the matter at hand, allows us to treat this diverse history as a coherent *historical sequence*, and opens up the space for new developments.

Marxism and Psychoanalysis: In or Against Psychology? could in fact be divided into three parts: a first part composed of the first two chapters, in which the hypothesis of a continuity between Marx and Freud is established in view of the critique of psychology, then a second one, composed of chapters three to six, in which the author investigates the history of articulations between Marxism and psychoanalysis from the standpoint of this hypothesis, and finally a third section, comprised of chapters seven and eight, which explores the consequences and possibilities of this investigation. Let us then focus on the second part of the book, as it provides us with ample ground to justify the novelty of Pavón-Cuéllar's approach.

In "From psychoanalysis to psychologization", a first corollary of the book's central hypothesis is explored, namely, that if the critique of psychology is essentially a Marxian endeavor, then *the closer psychoanalysis is to Marxism, the less it is in danger of relapsing into psychologization of its own categories*. As Pavón-Cuéllar states quite bluntly in the conclusion of this chapter "fortunately, there is still nothing like a Marxist ego psychology" (66) – and this is not by chance: as we have seen, the clinical grounds of psychoanalysis were a necessary condition for the expansion and systematization of the different critical perspectives on psychology inaugurated by Marx, but this necessary condition is always in danger of *taking itself for a sufficient condition*. This places psychoanalysis in a tense and inherently contradictory position: on the one hand, it is regionally constrained to the same space as psychology, but on the other, its critical heritage leads it to subvert and destroy psychology (59). This internal conflict leads to an oscillatory movement, well captured by the author in his survey: the closer psychoanalysis comes to Marx, as in

the case of Jacques Lacan, who explicitly acknowledged the Marxian origin of several important ideas of psychoanalysis, the better equipped analysis is to sustain its subversive edge in face of psychology, while the more it tries to cut this connection in favor of conceptual autonomy, the more psychology returns with a vengeance (61), making psychoanalysis proportionally more reliant on objects and theoretical constructs which can guarantee its own “interiority”.

In chapters four and five – “Psychology and its critique in Marxism” and “Marxist psychologies”, – we look at the critique of psychology from the other side, that of Marxism. In chapter four, we explore a second corollary of our initial hypothesis: if there is a continuity between Marxian and Freudian perspectives, and psychoanalysis deepens and systematizes the critical position inaugurated by Marx, then *Marxists are less in danger of revisionism the more they recognize, anticipate and respond to psychoanalysis*. Pavón-Cuéllar’s detailed review of the psychological ideas of Engels, Plekhanov, Lenin, Trotsky and others allows us to gauge the “discrepancies and coincidences” (91-92) between Marxism and psychoanalysis, but, above all, it also shines a light on a paradoxical status of what we have previously called the “region of effects” concerning the psychological in Marxian thinking. On the one hand, the more Marxists recognize that the reach of Marx’s ideas includes a treatment of the psyche, and therefore assume the task of considering the ontogenesis of the psyche and the question of psychic causality, the more they approach the psychoanalytic realm. On the other hand, this same movement also leads Marxists to substitute the opening towards psychoanalysis for other psychological theories, thereby compromising the power of Marx’s critique of psychology. This paradox is further examined in chapter five, which analyzes the work of Marxist psychologists. Here the contradiction between recognizing the effects of the Marxist critique of psychology and reifying this critique into a new consistent psychological theory is even more clearly felt. Working through the projects of Vigotsky, Rubinstein, Holzkamp, and many others, the author shows that the very attempt to produce a “marxist psychology” is problematic and requires, even in the best of cases, that some aspects of both Marxism and psychoanalysis be betrayed (111-112).

Chapter six, “Marxism, psychoanalysis and critique of psychology”, consolidates the reach of the initial insight of *Marxism and Psychoanalysis* by exploring a third corollary of its thesis: if there is a continuity between Marxian and Freudian ideas, then *the critique of psychology in Marxism is best done by spousing a psychoanalytic position*. Focusing mostly on different strands of Freudo-Marxism,

this chapter explores the work of thinkers who, aware of the limitations of psychology, sought psychoanalysis as a critical standpoint capable of surpassing the problematic nature of both Marxisms which do not engage with the critique of psychology and Marxist psychologies. However, as Pavón-Cuéllar shows us, this position, albeit recognizing and exploring the resonances between Marxism and psychoanalysis, ultimately encounter the structural limit of treating the relation of Marx and Freud *as a relation*. So, while, on the one hand, the contradiction of “marxist psychology” is overcome through the direct recourse to psychoanalysis, on the other, the “logical space” (148) produced by this articulation formally retains the distinction of two separate poles - Marx and Freud - which must be “bridged” in some way, a presupposition which, as the author shows, leads us, in some cases, to formulations which are neither Marxist nor Freudian, and which sacrifice both for the sake of establishing their connection, as in the case of Habermas or Honneth (141-145).

Rather than signal a progression, the movement from chapter to chapter brings to evidence a certain *displacement*: chapter three mapped the tension between psychology and psychoanalysis, showing that without Marxism the latter tends to retract into the former; chapters four and five showed that Marxism on its own, however, is equally incapable of living up to its own critical insights: remaining at the analytic level of Marx himself, classical Marxists did not develop enough critical tools to avoid relapses into psychologism, but “diving” into psychology on their own did not lead to the overcoming of this impasse as well. Chapter six, finally, brings psychoanalysis and Marxism together, but we are still faced with the same tension, just in a new form: after haunting psychoanalysis and then Marxism, psychology returns here to haunt their very relation, to the point of compromising what it relates.

To turn a progression into a lateral displacement – this might be a possible definition of what it means to use totalization as a means of critique. But, more importantly, at this point we can already foresee the productive consequences of reviewing the history of articulations between Marx and Freud as a historical sequence bound together by an invariant trait. The fact that all these different attempts to relate Marx and Freud depart in one way or another from the faulty hypothesis that two *separate* fields are being brought together does not entail that we should dismiss any of them. Instead, this recognition allows us to reconstruct this rich and creative panorama as a common field of practical, institutional and conceptual experiments bound together by an implicit orientation towards the

critique of psychology. Going from Engels to Marcuse, from Vigotsky to Michael Schneider, Pávon-Cuéllar manages to *truly patch up these conflicting conceptual fragments into a critical history which we can use* - that is, he manages to history into a weapon.

3. New possibilities

Another, more synthetic way to approach the book's conceptual strategy is to divide it in a first section concerning the *continuity* between Marxism and psychoanalysis, followed by a section analyzing the history of the *relations* between the two, leading up to two conclusive chapters dealing with their *non-relation*. While the first part is developed in close proximity to Marx and Freud themselves, the second one covers all possible forms of "Freudo-Marxisms" and "Marxo-Freudisms", and concludes, no wonder, with a focus on the Frankfurt School. Finally, the third part, albeit equally heterogeneous as everything which preceded it, might nonetheless be historically located in relation to the "poststructuralist turn" and could perhaps be appropriately called a *post-Althusserian* or *post-Lacanian* sequence.

Indeed, most of the thinkers reviewed in this third and concluding section are associated with that singular moment in the history of Marxist and psychoanalytic thinking which was the political and intellectual environment in post-war France. Due to well-known reasons, a common tendency emerged in political and psychoanalytical domains at the time, opening both fields to the theoretical problem of a rigorous *return* to the fundamental insights of Marx and Freud and to the practical challenge of thinking emancipation from the *standpoint of the colonies*, thereby detaching each praxis from their culturally-specific variables. With this, a major shift in the very structure of the project of articulating Marx and Freud became possible: rather than looking for a communion of *objects*, suddenly it was suddenly possible to theoretically affirm that they were in fact identically *placed*.

Louis Althusser, for example, defended (at least for some time) the absolute separation of both theoretical projects while maintaining that they share the same "method". For him, both Marxism and psychoanalysis are "conflicting sciences" which, albeit dealing with entirely different theoretical objects – political economy and the unconscious, respectively – share problems of the same *form* due to the fact that both fields are part of their object of critique: Marxist organizations and theories are susceptible to ideology critique just as psychoanalysts are susceptible to their own unconscious. Jacques Lacan in a certain sense consolidated the movement

initiated by Althusser: Marxism and psychoanalysis are linked insofar as both Marx and Freud recognized the structural paradoxes at the heart of representational logic - leading to the theory of surplus-value and the theory of the drives, respectively - but not only do they not share any similar objects, they also do not share a common method. For Lacan, an essential *dissymmetry* would separate Marxian and Freudian practices, given that the revolutionary perspective of Marxism would still cling to an overcoming of social discontent while psychoanalysis would fully recognize the structural import of these paradoxes hindering human satisfaction. The identity at the heart of Marx and Freud would thus emerge as an unsurpassable incommensurability - a “non-relation”, to use the Lacanian parlance.

Thus, the third section of Pavón-Cuellar’s book - comprised of the last two chapters, “Towards a critical metapsychology” and “Critique as praxis” - is marked by the challenge of thinking *beyond* the relation of Marx and Freud - and therefore “beyond psychology” (150) - which, as I have suggested, also means to think *after* Althusser and Lacan.

Chapter seven reviews some of the most important projects which sought to answer in one way or another, to the challenges raised by this new paradigm, both by further developing the theoretical insights of Althusser and Lacan as well as by transposing this challenge to new social conditions outside of Europe. In a certain sense, we have crossed a threshold which brings us to the “edge of the void” of psychology: we are no longer analyzing the displacements of psychology from the standpoint of our underlying continuity between Marxism and psychoanalysis, but directly investigating what this continuity could entail. A “critical metapsychology” is precisely what emerges from this underside: once the psychological interior is purged from Marxism, psychoanalysis and from their relation, we must concede that “there is only one exteriority without a psychological interiority substantially different from the exteriority” (152). Marxism and psychoanalysis are finally tied together by their recourse to the same radical “exteriority”, initially introduced by Althusser as the methodological orientation that is grounded on its exteriority to itself and by Lacan as the ontological orientation by that which concretely insists as exterior in any interiority. The projects of Laclau, Badiou, Žižek, Braunstein, Rozitcher and many others, analyzed in this chapter, all appear as different attempts to critically mobilize this impossible topology while remaining aware of the dangers of transforming it into the “interior” of a new project – only a *metapsychological* standpoint can therefore affirm that what ties Marxism and psychoanalysis together *is their shared structural blind spot*.

The last chapter, finally takes us from this fringe position to a whole new vista of what is possible today: from the *intrusive* character of the “real” to the *extrusive* force of tactical and strategic action (175). “Praxis”, defined as an immanent tarrying with this exteriority, enters the picture as a new site from which the continuity between Marxism and psychoanalysis can be evaluated, experimented and discovered. At this point it one of those self-evident facts which hides in plain sight suddenly becomes clear: all three sequences which Pavón-Cuéllar tracks in *Marxism and psychoanalysis* are primarily concerned with grounding the transitivity, relation or negative community of Marx and Freud at the *theoretical* level - even if with some important exceptions along the way. The idea that one can only affirm and defend this continuity through a practical engagement - that is, at the very place where knowledge, critical or otherwise, falters – becomes discernible only against the already saturated history of the critique of psychology in Marxism and psychoanalysis. All different sorts of struggles – communist strategy, populist and feminist movements, as well as institutional projects and emancipatory forces – are read here from the standpoint of their practical contribution to the “destruction of psychology” (195): not only as a theoretical discipline, but also as a pathological and ideological discipline of the psychic interior:

Surmounting psychology - as we explained earlier - requires going beyond theory. The criticized psychology must be overcome in practice: challenging all psychological rationality in a taking of power like that of Iglesias and Errejón, recovering the feminist space usurped by psychology as in Firestone, refuting the dependency complex through struggles for independence as in Fanon, resolving the interior psychopathological problem in the institutional exterior as in Tosquelles, and undermining the classist conditioning of psychological dualism and de-psychologizing psychoanalysis as in Politizer. It should be stressed that political practices do not apply the theoretical critique of psychology, but rather continue it, deepen it, demonstrate its truth, and resolve some of the problems that it confronts. (194)

Concrete militant politics is the continuation of the theoretical critique of psychology because *at its origin psychoanalysis was always a continuation of Marxian thinking.*