

The Metapsychology of Capital

David Pavón-Cuéllar

Faculty of Psychology, Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, Mexico

Abstract. *Upon observing that there are psychic or mental configurations inherent to the capitalist system, the general thesis that capitalism is also a state of mind is accepted. This idea justifies not only the direct analysis of capitalism by students of the psyche, but also the elaborate theory of the capitalist mind foreshadowed in the theory of capitalism that Marx presents. By examining Marx's theoretical elaborations concerning the psyche it becomes possible to distinguish two levels, one psychological, the other what we shall call metapsychological, to indicate that it goes beyond the psychological, overflows it, transcends it, constitutes it and explains it. That one can announce the existence of a metapsychology of capital, in which some of the principal defining aspects of Freud's metapsychological domain are found, including the fact that it constitutes an unconscious conceived as a mental system and a logical localization in the psyche. This article will show how this metapsychological domain of the unconscious can serve to explain and frame, in Marx and Freud, the psychological sphere of consciousness, and through it, though indirectly, elucidate that which occurs at the metaphysical summits of religion and mythology.*

Keywords: Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Marx, Freud, Capitalism, Psychology

Introduction

Just as a Marxist metaphysics would be manifestly aberrant, so also there is an obvious aberration in a Marxist psychology that does not question, critique and reflexively transcend itself. This reflexive relation of psychology with itself is one of the most important lessons we receive from the approach to the psyche found in Marx (1818-1883). What he teaches us is to probe deeply into the psyche to reach the point where it crosses psychology. His radical epistemological gesture is one of rupture with the psychological, and not just with the metaphysical. *Nearer than the metaphysical and beyond the psychological, the Marxian position is essentially metapsychological.*

We consider that Marx ventured into metapsychology for he neither deserts the psychical nor falls into the metaphysical by going beyond a psychology understood as it has generally been comprehended since the 19th century, namely, as a sphere and science of a subjective and objectifiable psyche, one isolatable and understandable, immanent to individual or social subjects and relegated to their consciousness

and inner life, their cognitions and conducts, their behaviors, thoughts and sentiments, personalities and character traits, sensations and motivations, actions and interactions, etc. Like Freud (1856-1939), Marx transcends all this, doing so by penetrating the psyche down to its very economic, historical, trans-individual and cultural depths, as something unconscious and necessarily exterior to the subject and its psychological sphere. It is from here that a Marxian metapsychological theory emerges, one whose innumerable coincidences with Freudian metapsychology would suffice in and of themselves – even in the absence of other decisive factors – to understand the insistence and perseverance of explorations that date back to the pioneering works of Reich (1923), Bernfeld (1926) and Fenichel (1934), and that continue in the current Lacanian left (see Stavrakakis for a good review, 2007), having traversed the Frankfurt School (e.g. Marcuse, 1953), French structuralism (e.g. Althusser, 1964-1969) and many other perspectives, some virtually forgotten, such as those of Bleger (1958) and Caruso (1974). In addition to pushing these inquiries forward, this article attempts to explain and defend them, in a basic, elemental way, by

detecting some elements at the base of Marx's meta-psychological inquiries into capitalism that coincide with the ideas of Freud.

Capitalism and the Psyche

Capitalism is not merely, as the dictionary states, an "economic regime based on the predominance of capital as an element of production and creator of wealth" (translated from the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*, 2001, p. 438). In capitalism, to begin with, capital prevails not only as an *element of production and creator of wealth*, but also as a *beneficiary of production and destroyer of wealth*; as an *element of exploitation and creator of misery*. Capital exercises its power as a promoter of production, a determining factor in distribution and representation of wealth, a producer of necessities, an apparatus for the organization and domination of society, a form of relation and interaction among people, a lifestyle and a worldview. Given that capital is all of this, capitalism, founded upon the predominance of capital, cannot be simply an *economic regime*.

In addition to an economic regime, capitalism is a social reality, a political option, a historical horizon, a cultural model, an ideological matrix, and a symbolic system. As if this did not suffice, we are also sure that all of this is endowed with psychic elements, aspects and effects, and even determines and configures a certain *psyche* or state of mind that is suitable for its context and necessary for the capitalist system to function well. Capitalism, in effect, can never dispense with a complex made up of conceptions and representations, expectations and fears, motivations and emotions, desires and drives, attitudes and behaviors, interactions and relations, identity constructions and personality structures. These "nervous devices" are indispensable for the economic organism. The capitalist body could not function without the medullary performance of a mental disposition in which we find, for example, highly specific forms of exchange, interest, avidness, dissatisfaction, ambition, appropriation, retentive individuation and competitive socialization.

We argue that there is a state of mind inseparable from capitalism, tied to it, molded by it, even inherent to it. Indeed it is not even possible to distinguish the soul from the capitalist body. How can one distinguish capitalism from certain mental calculations of industrialists, businessmen and bankers? Is not the capitalist's compulsion to accumulate intertwined with the accumulative propensity of capital? And how

can we conceive of capitalism without pondering avarice and the lust for lucre of those who embody it? Without its state of mind, what is left of the capitalist system?

Capitalism as a State of Mind

It can be stated categorically, then, that *capitalism is also a state of mind*. This affirmation has two important consequences for those of us who follow Marx into the study of the psyche:

- If capitalism is also a state of mind, then as students of the psyche we have a right to study capitalism as such and not only its incidence in the psyche.
- If capitalism is also a state of mind, then as followers of Marx we can disentangle a theory of the psyche from Marx's theory of capitalism.

Discovering the first indications of the Marxian theory of the *capitalist state of mind* requires no great effort. They are easily discerned, for example, in Marx's profound characterization (1867) of the capitalist as a subject "whose heart resides in his pocket" (p. 173), a being whose "soul is the soul of capital" (pp. 178-179), a "conscious agent" of the "movement of capital", "capital personified, endowed with consciousness and will, such that its operations have no other propelling drive than the progressive appropriation of abstract wealth" (pp. 108-109). If the capitalist thus stands out because of his "absolute thirst for enrichment", his "insatiable appetite for gain", and his "unbridled race in search of value" (p. 109), this is because his soul is "that of capital", and "capital has but one instinct: the instinct to increase, to create profit" (p. 179). This is the instinct that finds expression in the capitalist's "absolute instinct to enrich himself" (p. 499). It is not the "individual mania" of the "hoarder", but the "social mechanism" of a capital for which our capitalist "is nothing more than a spring" (pp. 499-500).

Capital's instinct to increase is what becomes manifest in the *capitalist's thirst for enrichment*. When the capitalist achieves wealth, it is because he obeys a capital that grows. But in obeying it, increasing it, and thus enriching himself, our capitalist not only increases *what he has*, he also dilates *what he is*, amplifies what he personifies, develops his personality, his soul, capital. Thus, we are dealing with a question of identity, not simply of property. While property is precisely where identity lies, there comes an inversion of the roles of proprietor and property, since

in *being what he has, the capitalist becomes possessed by his possession*, bows to it, personifies it, and abandons his soul to it, together with his consciousness and will. Thus, the psychological arises from, and depends on, the economic, which is in turn mediated and performed by the psychological.

In the extreme of economicism, which does not exhaust Marx's materialist theory, the economic fact is the material that gives the subject his psychological profile. The professional spirit of the rich banker tends to be as hard, cold and insensitive as the metallic materiality of the wealth that possesses him. The unstoppable expansion of capital becomes, in the capitalist, insatiable ambition. Miserly bourgeois reciprocity reflects the purely formal equality of commercial exchange. Commodity fetishism is at the origin of the idealism of the merchant. Assertions like these are nothing more than diverse formulations of a single postulate that is central to the Marxian theory of the capitalist state of mind. But this theory has other postulates, as well as a dense constellation of conceptualizations, deductions, demonstrations, argumentations and elucubrations.

Psychology and Metapsychology

In the complex theory that Marx elaborates in relation to the psyche we can discern two levels: one superficial, strictly *psychological*; the other more profound, which we venture to name *metapsychological*. This level is metapsychological not only because it is located beyond the psychological level, overflowing and transcending it, but also because it is implied within it and expressed through it, because it *constitutes and explains it*. In the previous section, for example, we came to appreciate how the psychological profile of the possessor is constituted and explained by an economic fact of possession that, precisely because it is *constitutive and explicative of the psychological*, merits the name *metapsychological*. Another metapsychological factor, the intrinsic tendency of capital to increase, is an economic – not psychological – propensity, though one implicated and expressed at the psychological level of a conscious impulse towards enrichment that is constituted and explained by the increasing of capital. It is for this reason that here, too, we find a phenomenon that is metapsychological, not just economic.

By focusing his attention on the economic, Marx centers it as well on the metapsychological, but in order to concentrate on the metapsychological, he must first disengage attention from the psychological. It is

as if the psychological surface allows the metapsychological depths to be perceived by unfocusing, erasing, fading and making itself transparent in Marxian theory. In Marx, the psychological evanesces, vanishes and disappears. And it disappears because it is left unattended, for it turns out to be secondary and seems even irrelevant. Psychology tends to be obviated and to serve primarily to be crossed over in order to gain access to metapsychology.

In the Marxian theory of the psyche, the interpsychological confrontation between capitalists and workers, between their respective behaviors, thoughts and feelings, serves only to unravel the metapsychological contradiction between existence and an alienated essence (Marx, 1844), between dissolution and consolidation of social classes, between truth and ideology, between subject and object (1847, 1858), between “live labor” and a “dead labor” that feeds, like a “vampire”, by “sucking live labor” (1867, p. 179). The development of capital at the cost of labor, of the undead at the cost of the living, of ideology at the cost of the truth, is what truly matters in the ensuing conflict between capitalists and workers. What matters is not the psychological plot of roles and interactions of personages in the well-lit scenario of society, but rather the somber metapsychological fabric wherein that plot is woven, where we can explore, behind the scenes, the structural positions and relations that underlie personal roles and interpersonal interactions (1858). In other words, what matters are the personified “economic categories”, not the “persons” that emerge from “personification”; the “interests” of those of whom one is but a “representative”, not the representation itself; the “relations of which the individual is the social offspring”, not the individual who “is subjectively considered far above them” (1867, p. xv). What matters, in sum, is not the psychology of “the economic roles represented by men”, but the metapsychology of “economic relations within which individual men confront one another” (p. 48).

The Unconscious of Capital

In their emphasis on metapsychology, Marxian and Freudian theories coincide, for both transcend the psychological sphere to seek its elucidation in the metapsychological domain. Marx conceives this domain exactly as does Freud (1898, 1901), namely, as something “behind consciousness” (1898, p. 316), as the logical space of “the unconscious” (1901, p. 251), as “the unconscious” in the topical sense of the term, as a “psychic”, not “anatomical” locality, situated in a “place” distinct from “consciousness” (1915, pp. 170-171). The “consciousness” of capitalists is thus

found *in another place* than the capital they “personify”, and this capital, which acquires consciousness through them, naturally has no consciousness in itself, nor is it capable of acquiring it for itself (Marx, 1867, p. 109). Similarly, in the Marxian representation of the psyche, the tendency of capital to increase is found in a recondite, enigmatic, paradoxical metapsychological region, one intimate yet alienated, essentially unconscious and topically distinct from the psychological region of the conscious impulse towards enrichment. In Freud’s terms (1915), what we find here is a “topical divorce” between two “regions of the psychic apparatus” (p. 170).

In both the Marxian and Freudian approaches, the unconscious metapsychological domain is more basic, fundamental, and “profound” than the psychological region of consciousness (Freud, 1915, pp. 169-170). In Marx, this justifies the vertical distinction between the ideological-psychological “superstructure” of consciousness and the material-economic “base”, the unconscious infrastructure where we locate metapsychology (Marx, 1859). It can be postulated, in general, that the metapsychological is the “base” of the psychological, a postulate valid for both the representation of the psyche and theoretical elaborations concerning this representation, and both in Freud’s theory (1917, p. 221, note 1) and in Marx’s (1867, pp. 44, 410).

In the psyche as conceived by Marx (1867, 1885, 1894), the psychological superstructure of the capitalist’s consciousness is founded upon the metapsychological base of a capital whose psychic functioning is “inapprehensible” (1867, p. 14), “invisible” (pp. 57, 452), “bereft of meaning” (1885, p. 47), “inexplicable” (1894, p. 461), and “unconscious” (p. 614). But this does not mean that capital simply escapes consciousness. In addition to being *unconscious*, capital corresponds here to what Freudian terminology calls *the unconscious*. What we are dealing with is “a psychic system” – in this case the capitalist system – whose unconscious character is not only a state, a situation or attribute of the system, but its very existence, its logical localization, distinctive structure, immanent activity, and “endowment with certain properties” (Freud, 1915, p. 168).

The Consciousness of the Unconscious

The unconscious is the only form in which capital can fully exist, as a system, in the psyche. The soul possessed by the capitalist system can only consist in *the unconscious* as a positive, substantial and substantive form of being, of organizing and of operating, and not

just as a negative quality that would indicate the lack of consciousness. It would not even be correct to affirm that consciousness is lacking in the capitalist system. This unconscious never ceases to perspire, to secrete conscious effluvia. Consciousness forms part of a system whose “mechanical automatons”, for example, not only have “unconscious organs”, but also those “conscious organs” we call “workers” (Marx, 1867, p. 347). Working consciousness is just as crucial as the accumulating, speculating, consuming consciousness, among many others. It is through all these that capital acquires the conscious faculties it needs in order to function.

The system possesses our consciousnesses, but not for this does the unconscious cease to be what it is. All its consciousness is ours, is pulverized among us, and in each one of us is incomplete and uncommunicated, truncated and limited, focused and confined exclusively to one specific task and to one precise point of the system itself. Our consciousness is consciousness of the unconscious and of those doings of the unconscious of which we are conscious. This determination of consciousness by the unconscious is what is formulated, in apparently simplistic terms, as the determination of the ideal superstructure by the material base, of forms of thought by modes of production, of the ideological contents of consciousness by the capitalist system that we assimilate to the unconscious.

Since the unconscious of the capitalist system determines the ideological contents of consciousness, we understand that the metapsychology of capital can serve Marx by explaining the psychology of capitalists. We must recall that these are nothing more than “personifications” of a capital that needs them so as to “endow itself with consciousness and will” (Marx, 1867, p. 109). The conscious and willful psyche of the capitalist pertains to, and obeys, the unconscious system of capitalism. Even if the systemic functioning may be perturbed and transformed by insubordinate and uncontrollable forms of psychic movement, these forms arise from, and struggle in, what is perturbed and transformed by them. Hence it is in the metapsychology of the system that we must resolve the psychology of the individual with his consciousness and will, but also with his impulses, appetites, representations, cognitions, behaviors, thoughts and feelings. This psychology, which is most studied in psychology departments throughout the world, has its base, foundation and explanation in that which is the subject matter of economics, history, anthropology, ethnology and other fields of knowledge into which Marx and Freud inquired as they probed more deeply

into psychology, until they traversed it, though without falling into metaphysics.

Metaphysics and Metapsychology

Metaphysics is the great temptation that Freud and Marx resisted when going beyond psychology, beyond which – according to them – there is nothing subtle and ethereal, spiritual or celestial, but *only what there is*, material and body, life and desire, needs and drives, individual and collective histories, family and cultural configurations, symbolic and economic relations. This “nearer to here” is the “over there” of Marxism and psychoanalysis. Psychology is thus surpassed from within. It contains its own horizon, is transcended as it is explored more deeply, and it is this deepening that leads us to the domain of the metapsychological, beyond the psychological sphere, but not beyond the psyche. Simply put, we reach “the dimension of the deep psyche” (Freud, 1915, p. 170).

The deep psyche does not cease to be strictly psychic because it is economic or historical. History and economics are metapsychology. However, in this metapsychology we transcend psychology and dissipate its illusions, among them metaphysics, mythology and religion, which Marx and Freud conceive in ways that are both consonant and complementary:

- As “a religious reflection of the real world”, where “products of the human mind look like beings endowed with life, with independent existence” (Marx, 1867, pp. 38, 44).
- As “a psychology projected onto the exterior world”, where “it reflects” the “obscure discernment” of “psychic factors and constellations of the unconscious” (Freud, 1901, p. 251).

In both conceptions, metaphysics is reduced to a psychology that is not only illusory and distinct from the *real or exterior world*, but implies a psychically *produced or projected* truth that remits us to the *human mind*, to *psychic factors* and *constellations of the unconscious*. Marx and Freud attempt to unravel this metapsychological truth in the psychological-metaphysical illusion. Both wish, as Freud (1901) would say, “to transpose *metaphysics* to *metapsychology*” (p. 251). Both yearn to arrive at a metapsychology by delving more deeply into the psychology of metaphysics. This is exactly what Marx (1867) does, for example, when he explores the psychology of “the real timidity” that “is reflected” metaphysically and “ideally in natural and popular religions”, which then allows him to posit the metapsychological theory of

the “umbilical cord”, of the “natural link” in the “lack of development of man within its material process of the production of life” (p. 44). This historical-economic circumstance is the metapsychological factor through which the psychological trait manifested in metaphysical creations is explained. It does not suffice, as in ancient modern science, to dissolve metaphysics in psychology. Rather, *psychology must now be dissolved in metapsychology*. This second critical-reflexive gesture is the one represented by Marx, and not only by Freud, in the crisis of modernity and its concept of science.

Conclusion

When Marx and Freud go beyond the psychological sphere to intern themselves in the metapsychological domain, we witness a critical-reflexive return of culture in relation to itself in a historical stage of cultural crisis that we have not yet overcome. This crisis of modernity makes the obvious fall into the category of the ideological, and makes science understand that it cannot subsist as such without extracting that which lies latent and underlies the evident object. It is then that the psychological ceases to be convincing and to suffice in and of itself; it becomes suspicious and demands that we cross it, go beyond it. This *going beyond* is a fundamental principle of any radical critique in our time.

The radical critique of Marx and Freud goes beyond psychological ideology to develop a de-ideologizing metapsychological science that we have only barely begun to sketch out. It is necessary to inquire into this science, to continue exploring it, and to find the additional coincidences between Marx and Freud that lie in its interior. The coincidences are there among the divergences. It is not even necessary to look for them. It will suffice to continue finding them through explorations of a metapsychology that, in reality, is neither of Marx or Freud, but of culture in the historical stage in which these two authors coincide, and where we discover coincidences between them. Each coincidence found justifies not only our own explorations, but also those that came before.

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