

Ian Parker and David Pavón-Cuéllar, *Psychoanalysis and Revolution: Critical Psychology for Liberation Movements*, 1968 Press, 2021
(James Lawrence Slattery)

Psychoanalysis and Revolution is a manifesto that continually speaks from the tradition of this political genre, polemically presenting its vision of an intimate relationship between psychoanalysis and left-wing liberation movements.¹ Authors Ian Parker and David Pavón-Cuéllar are academics invested in psychoanalytic and Marxist study and the political struggles they endorse throughout the book. Parker is also a practicing psychoanalyst and together they relay a broad understanding of psychoanalytic ideas and how they are negotiated in and out of the clinical setting.

Following a preface by Surya Nayak, the authors' preface, and the introduction, the book's main chapters are organized by topic: unconscious, repetition, drive, and transference. These chapters broadly correspond to Jacques Lacan's four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis, though this is not explicitly stated.² The book declares itself as for the liberation movements that Parker and Pavón-Cuéllar are presumably involved with, namely, anti-capitalist, feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial struggles across the globe. Written in 2021, there is a sense of urgency throughout the text as capitalism moves towards a point of intensified crisis: its rampant social and financial inequalities compounded by the climate crisis and the stark precarity that coronavirus has brought to our physical, psychic, and social realities. The book opens by situating readers in a 'miserable world,' one that exploits a generalized 'us' comprised of people who labor in

1 Ian Parker and David Pavón-Cuéllar, *Psychoanalysis and Revolution: Critical Psychology for Liberation Movements*. (London: 1968 Press, 2021).

2 Lacan's four fundamental concepts come under the headings of 1) Unconscious and Repetition, 2) Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*, 3) The Transference and the Drive, and 4) The Field of the Other and Back to the Transference. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Routledge, 1977).

different capacities. As with feminist manifestos that have come before, *Psychoanalysis and Revolution* keeps personal and political struggles in dialogue, calling on psychoanalysis to bridge these positions and demonstrate the way they are often reflected in one another.

Sigmund Freud is introduced briefly, though presumably readers will already understand his importance and legacy for psychoanalysis. There is a lack of historical detailing that would otherwise ground readers unfamiliar with the weight of Freud's innovations and discoveries. The shifting political circumstances of psychoanalysis are summarized without much contextualization, making clear that this book is not an introduction to clinical psychoanalysis or its associated theoretical fields. Instead, psychoanalytic concepts are emphatically roused to rethink the limits and possibilities of the present-day urges to change the capitalist world we live in.

The symptom becomes an initial point to develop a continuum between the personal and political. Symptoms are not read as defects that should be repaired to ensure a subject's reintegration into capitalist society. Rather, they are instances that "demand to be listened to, that *speak* [...] of distress and resistance" and thus "open up possibilities of change" for both particular subjects and larger populations.³ The disruption caused by a symptom calls attention to the often-unnoticeable conditions that one is required to abide by in order to function within an environment. Consequently, the manifesto takes this disturbance as a "starting point" that speaks to what cannot be integrated into the logic of neoliberal capitalism.⁴ The social and personal symptom both demonstrate that something is amiss and, instead of attempting to bury or 'manage' it, *Psychoanalysis and Revolution* approach it as a catalyst for questioning the political status quo.

Parker and Pavón-Cuéllar draw attention to particularities that usually go unseen but which must be addressed in order to work towards a radical transformative politic; notably whiteness, masculinity,

³ Parker and Pavón-Cuéllar, *Psychoanalysis and Revolution*, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

and the bourgeois class. In keeping with a Freudian-Lacanian tradition, science's 'objectivity' is questioned along with the infusion of a scientific 'neutrality' in 'psy' disciplines that promote a rational and centralized ego. Psychoanalysis is described by what it is *not*; it is not a form of healing, it is not therapy, psychiatry, psychology, or some combination of these positions such as psychotherapy. According to the manifesto, 'psy' professions often approach subjects' psychic lives in ways that reify them as individuals isolated from others, a perspective that has grown with a capitalist project of alienation. In contrast, psychoanalysis is designated as a method of listening that considers how and why we come up against enigmatic difficulties without investing in or suggesting a solution that would result in the subject's adaptation to the capitalist relations demanded of them. As Freud's work teaches, the subject is not a figure of self-knowledge or self-mastery. *Psychoanalysis and Revolution* stresses how the conflation of self and ego encourages us to think of ourselves as individuals, carved out by others' differences, differences we also internalize and try to eradicate in a quest to be fulfilled. The idea/l of completion has further implications for those already viewed as somehow 'incomplete' due to being situated as disabled, racialized, and gendered within our ablest, racist and patriarchal society. Conventional psychology is framed as maintaining a so-called 'apolitical' understanding of what is "psychologically normal and so socially normative" whereas psychoanalysis "discover[s] another politics" through listening.⁵ Moments of discovery occur not only in what subjects say but in what is unable to be articulated, the block or stumble that indicates "a conflict that contains within it both desire and repression."⁶ Touching on the symptom via free association in the clinic can "open[ing] up new paths" and possibilities as a kernel of contradiction and difficulty is evoked.⁷ From here, we may discover spaces of reflection.

The unconscious is introduced as a collective and social field for

5 Ibid., 70-71.

6 Ibid., 73.

7 Ibid.

the subject as it emerges with language. The “excluded and marginal dimensions of language” are argued as coming into visibility during situations of protests that draw attention to processes of structural othering.⁸ Importantly, specific marginalized groups are not read *as* the unconscious or enigmatic populations that resist sense-making, as has sometimes been the case for women and those racialized as Black and Brown.

The authors note that the unconscious should not replace the ego as a central kernel of the subject but as a point of connection, albeit one that cannot be named or deciphered, as it “appears in the field of language that we share with others.”⁹ Their reading of the simultaneous connection and alienation of the unconscious structure is written optimistically, abstractly, and with excitement. During such moments, I consider how other works that combine political theory and psychoanalysis have chosen different approaches in bringing together Marxist and Freudian or Lacanian knowledges. Notable writers in this genre such as Slavoj Žižek, Todd McGowan or Mari Ruti favor a more theory-heavy approach that contrasts with Parker and Pavón-Cuéllar’s zealous calls to resist capitalist domination. Their choice of address is palpable and one could imagine their words being passionately exclaimed through a megaphone at a rally.

Following from the opening chapter on the unconscious, the second chapter discusses repetition. Repetition is often recognized as feeling inescapable, as if we are destined to repeat patterns of behavior even as we try to do things differently. *Psychoanalysis and Revolution* thinks about how the repetition we experience as individuals can be witnessed in political organizations that the presumed readership may participate in. In contemplating repetition’s staying power, the authors suggest that it is not just “fail[ing] to learn from history” that keeps us in cyclical patterns.¹⁰ Instead, repetition can be regarded as a symptom that can be listened to and which communicates something to us. As the

8 Ibid., 50.

9 Ibid., 35.

10 Ibid., 56.

manifesto continually argues, capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy permeate our worlds in both palpable and unconscious ways, causing us to “reproduce what we intend to transform.”¹¹ The ways in which we are ideologically interpellated into capitalist hegemony prompts us to turn these ideas of domination and power onto others and ourselves.

Counterintuitively, Parker and Pavón-Cuéllar understand repetition as enjoyable in that it gives a consistency to our lives which may otherwise appear chaotic. In this way, enjoyment and suffering are knotted as we may find something in suffering that is “recognisably ours.”¹² This theory of enjoyment differs from other recent investigations into how enjoyment takes on an authorial function in neoliberalism.¹³ Rather than thinking about how capitalism promotes a specific relationship to enjoyment, *Psychoanalysis and Revolution* considers how enjoyment binds with suffering within and beyond the subject’s singularity.

It is then argued that, in clinical work, we may pick apart how enjoyment and suffering translate into symptoms at the level of the signifier. However, Parker and Pavón-Cuéllar assert that there is “no direct equivalent to the clinical work in political practice” and, consequently, this intertwining of enjoyment and suffering is not able to be “managed” in the same way across the spaces of the clinic and liberation movements.¹⁴ The authors stress how what is repeated is what cannot be remembered, what may be too disturbing or challenging to acknowledge. The political dimension of repetition is caught between capitalism’s demands on continual labor and consumption, the ideological imperatives of classism, sexism and racism that sustain it, and our personal

11 Ibid., 57.

12 Ibid., 59.

13 For examples of this argument, see Todd McGowan, *The End of Dissatisfaction: Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004) and Yannis Stravarakakis, *The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007).

14 Parker and Pavón-Cuéllar, *Psychoanalysis and Revolution*, 60.

family histories. Capitalism also replicates its logic along the divisions of labor, causing workers to “adopt the other’s discourse,” the discourse of managers or bosses that do not reflect their material wellbeing.¹⁵

By thinking about how psychoanalysis can touch on difficulties that play out across repetition and symptoms, the manifesto maintains an optimism that refuses to determine repetition as inevitable or change impossible. Stressing the potential transformation that can come from the analysis in clinical work, readers are asked to consider how destructive patterns in political movements might be readdressed through a psychoanalytic paradigm. Thinking of repetition as “the force that drives the symptom” may make space for meaningful change that holds potential for larger-scale social transformation.¹⁶ There is not a direct mapping from clinic to liberation movements but by touching upon what is repressed and reappears, something different can emerge.

Following from repetition, Chapter 3 of the manifesto turns to drive, a concept often regarded as one of the most challenging and contested theories in psychoanalysis. There is some difficulty in discerning what the drive is, especially for those not versed in the structures that psychoanalysis builds and works among. Because the project of this book is an incitement to anti-capitalist thinking, complex terms are introduced without a rudimentary working through but this may be a somewhat inevitable trade-off for the manifesto to remain largely accessible for a wider audience.

The chapter begins by presenting the drive as that which “compels us to rebel.”¹⁷ The authors then move to think about how language structures us, with words “not only oppress[ing], imprison[ing], chain[ing] and immobiliz[ing] us” but also “encourage[ing] us to act in order to free us from our chains.”¹⁸ The body, consequently, is not a container for us as beings of language but is implicated and shaped by

15 Ibid., 64.

16 Ibid., 63.

17 Ibid., 81.

18 Ibid., 82.

language. The alienation of the subject to their body is heightened in capitalism as the body is sold as labor and feels broken or hindered if its capacity to be organized into capitalist relations falters. The authors stress how “[w]e can never know our body directly” as we read ourselves and others through a prism of images and language and are “mediated culturally by ideological misrepresentations.”¹⁹ However, there is a hopeful call to the body’s ability to refuse the constraints of capitalism.

The drive is described as a ‘life drive’ and a ‘death drive’ though these are not distinct, separate forces that we experience. The life drive is the “drive to speak and act” and is:

productive and collective, relational, and sexual. It is not locked inside us, but it exceeds us and overflows us; it is between us and outside of us; it makes us bond with others and thus weave the world around us.²⁰

This can then transform into “something more deadly, as a ‘death drive.’”²¹ Capital is posited as a death drive — where life is transformed into labor, profit and ultimately “dead money” — even as it thrives off a life drive of workers.²² There is a contradiction of drives that pulls us in different directions, to exceed and commit to the capitalist relations that situate our bodies. Even without capitalism as a master signifier, life and death are tightly bound sides of the drive that borders the subject and their wider environment. It is in such summaries and the enmeshing of psychoanalytic concepts with a polemical call to politics that the book veers into sweeps of terms such as the drive, to rethink identifiable capitalist relations.

In connection to the body, sex is entangled with “prohibition and transgression.”²³ Psychoanalysis developed in part to reflect upon

19 Ibid., 83.

20 Ibid., 84.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 85.

23 Ibid., 90.

the conflicts and difficulties in negotiating sex, a history that continues in the contemporary clinic. I find that it can often be difficult to discern how sex 'fits' with neoliberalism. It is somehow everywhere and nowhere, perpetually filmed and screened yet still caught up in webs of shame and confusion. Whilst the manifesto does not look at the specifics of how sex is situated in the contemporary moment, it does consider how sex combines enjoyment and suffering to transform and structure us. The unconscious is essential for the sense of sex being discussed here as:

There is always more to [sex] than we are told, more that is prohibited and incited, pushed out of consciousness and alluded to, hinted at, provoked as a place of deeper personal transgressive enjoyment. Even for those who have sex as they should, there is pleasure and pain when they follow this double contradictory injunction to conform to cultural codes and to go beyond them.²⁴

The primary example the authors use to convey how sex is negotiated is in the context of the nuclear family where sex can be traded for love and money, transforming it into work under patriarchal arrangements.²⁵ Though this conventional arrangement may be somewhat outmoded, it allows the reader to think about how sex is commodified beyond more 'obvious' examples of explicit sex-work. Subsequently, there is a call for work to be transformed in order to fight against exploitation including (recognized and unrecognized) sex-work. Fighting for the rights of sex workers to take control of their labor is a fight against their exploitation. This contrasts with legislative prohibition which perpetuates cycles of oppression as labor is made forcibly precarious and accentuates how we experience our bodies and lives as repressed. For this manifesto, developing new structures can create "possibilities for desire, for desiring others, and new paths for the drives, paths in which the enjoyment of one does not require the

24 Ibid., 90.

25 Ibid., 91.

humiliating suffering of others.”²⁶ How such change could or should be implemented is not laid out. Rather, the manifesto continues to forge intimate links between psychic structures and structures of labor to help readers imagine and reflect on possibilities of change, change that can only be transformative if we take seriously the unconscious and the limit to mastery of ourselves and our fellow subjects.

The drive is emphasized by the authors as shaped by culture and not conflated with ideas of natural, biological drives. Language is caught in a web of the drive but this is not something that can be strategically mapped and explained. Largely, drive touches on how we sense our needs, wants, desires, compulsions to and from ideological mandates. It reconfigures “our biological needs” as “social needs,” with sex working as a “nodal point of society” that charges our relationships, permeates culture, advertising, and commodities as well as “scientific works, religious beliefs and political ideals.”²⁷ This is why psychoanalysis has taken sex as its focus, why capitalism utilizes sex as an instrument of domination, and, presumably, why some liberation movements think through sex to theorize and imagine emancipation.

For Parker and Pavón-Cuéllar, emphasizing desire as social and dialectically structured in relation to others can help reframe connections that may be otherwise mutated by capitalism’s insistence on individuality and ownership. Capitalism curates desire to take specific directions that alienate the subject and think the other as a fetishized object for consumption whilst making inanimate commodities erotically charged. This rendering of objects and people into consumable entities is perhaps most readily witnessed in how patriarchy frames gender as differentiated along lines of men and women, where the former reduces the latter to the object to be possessed.²⁸ In this way, the manifesto recognizes how “Fighting against this machismo and the other expressions

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 95.

28 Ibid., 100.

of patriarchy is a way of subjectively undermining capital.”²⁹ Wider struggles aligned with gender and sexuality (such as some LGBT+ subjects and activist groups) similarly problematize capitalist logic as they call for the singularity of the subject’s desires and drives to find expression beyond capitalism’s indictment to desire in particular ways. However, at times the manifesto’s emphasis on normalized desires and structures, including patriarchy, racism and heteronormativity, does not give room to consider how ‘alternative’ formations and representational practices may still be captured by neoliberalism’s incredible ability to transform almost anything and everyone into a ‘niche’ consumer base.

The final main chapter of the book concentrates on transference which is one of the more succinctly introduced concepts. To begin, transference is defined as:

personal relations with others, including relationships structured in the family, [which] are transferred into the clinic, repeated in the signifiers the analysand uses to configure and comprehend their relationship, or lack of relationship, with their analyst.³⁰

However, this is specifically designated as a “reduced meaning” with the authors careful to point to how such interpersonal relationships that are repeated in the clinic may be influenced by and transferred into spaces beyond this setting.³¹

Psychoanalysis maintains a radical potential when the analysand is given space for their speech to be listened to. When speaking in analysis, their “unconscious [is] made more present,” enabling them to “hear connections between signifiers” previously unspoken or unnoticed.³² As Parker is a working Lacanian psychoanalyst, he offers nu-

29 Ibid., 101.

30 Ibid., 105.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 107.

anced understandings of the role of the analyst that emphasize how the analyst should not clarify the analysand's language but have knowledge about the "nature of language."³³ From here, the manifesto returns to the limits of psy professions and professionals, arguing that they frame their practices as neutral or objective and, as a result, misrecognize how subjects enter a dynamic in the clinic by treating 'patients' or 'clients' as objects rather than subjects.³⁴ Psy professions and other models of relationships ("psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists, parents, friends, colleagues, bosses, teachers, evangelists, ideologues, intellectuals, politicians, journalists, publicists, entrepreneurs or advertisers") contrast to the dynamic in the analytic clinic where there should be no intentional domination or manipulation but, rather, a space for the subject's desires and drives to speak and find connections.³⁵

Families play a crucial role in how the subject is structured and the book highlights how the patriarchal nuclear family is a powerful ideological arrangement, though one might question the continued staying power of this formation, and how family structures that diverge from it retain some of its structural power. Although the authors want to encourage people to "break from familial logic altogether," they recognize that this family organization is a fantasy that "is often brought to life again in the clinic in transference."³⁶ From here, Parker and Pavón-Cuéllar observe how the clinic is potentially limited in dismantling this Oedipal structure, and turn to liberation movements as possible sites for disrupting this hegemonic model, whilst noting that transference extends to relationships beyond the clinic. At times, the manifesto expresses a wariness of psychoanalysis itself that stops it from being an object or area that is overly invested in. Because psychoanalysis may make life more liveable for an analysand, there is a risk that psychoanalysis can become idealized as

33 Ibid., 108.

34 Ibid., 109.

35 Ibid., 110.

36 Ibid., 112.

a method to be applied, rather than reading the process as a “lived relation” where the analysand has done the transformative work.³⁷

Fantasy is constructed, forged through cultural imperatives that are absorbed by the subject consciously and unconsciously. The analyst is “accorded power” and becomes part of an arrangement of desire through transference.³⁸ In this instance, the authors seem to be evoking Lacan’s ‘subject supposed to know’ but without bringing up the specific terminology that psychoanalytic scholars may be comfortable with. Because the authors come from academic and clinical backgrounds, in combination with left-wing political alignments, their desire to remain accessible to a broad audience is palpable, especially for readers familiar with the ideas being rephrased in a manner that eschews the often-alienating specialized language that we may have spent anguished time pouring over. However, this isn’t a book for those interested in finding an introduction to psychoanalysis, but one that enthusiastically melds psychoanalytic ideas with radical political urges. In this joining together, readers are asked to rethink how liberation movements may critically reflect on psychic arrangements that go unnoticed and remain unconscious. Through a process of such discernment, we may garner a glimpse of stubborn kernels that halt a potential radical upheaval of the tortuous, albeit seductive, status quo of neoliberal capitalism.

Through transference, truths for the analysand can emerge but these are always “half-truths,” as the symbolic cannot contain everything; “Not everything can be said.”³⁹ Nonetheless, touching upon half-truths can be transformative. The authors make a repeated connection between the subject of analysis and the subject of liberation, with a hope that what can be gleaned from psychoanalysis can be rediscovered in liberatory struggle. There are also ways that the book links psychoanalysis and liberation in more direct ways, such as thinking transference in relation to feminist organization by sug-

³⁷ Ibid., 113.

³⁸ Ibid., 115.

³⁹ Ibid., 119.

gesting that transference allows the subject a ‘standpoint’ to recognize how one is situated in power without pretending that such structures do not exist or can be viewed objectively from a supposed ‘outside.’⁴⁰

Importantly, the past is not a time that can be wholly resolved or overcome. As with the rejection that psychoanalysis presents a ‘cure’ for the subject, the manifesto does not envision liberation as ending with “one simple political victory” nor making people abide by the conditions of capitalism — conditions that are necessarily unliveable for many.⁴¹ The manifesto does not use the filmic or literary examples often evoked as anchor points in the quest to make psychoanalysis accessible. Instead, *Psychoanalysis and Revolution* is invested in thinking through the complications of agency in capitalism, the failure to act with revolutionary hope and potential, to fight against capitalism and our own selves replete with destructive impulses. The change the manifesto calls for is not expressed in concrete, material actions that explicate how to reorganize or restructure social arrangements which one would be able to follow or implement. In many ways, the book spends time negotiating how this idea of change often misses the deadlocks that make such transformation feel impossible. Instead, there is a generous and optimistic call that echoes throughout *Psychoanalysis and Revolution*, inviting readers to critically reflect on the world through psychoanalysis, a method that always includes a kernel that is unknowable to us yet can lead to transformation as we touch upon its difficulty.

40 Ibid., 124-125.

41 Ibid., 127.