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PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

Decolonisation of psychoanalysis and Mesoamerican conceptions of subjectivity

David Pavón-Cuéllar * Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, Mexico

ABSTRACT

In this article, situating myself in the context of Mexico and Central America, I critically reflect on psychoanalysis in relation to coloniality, cultural intercourse, native peoples, their ancestral knowledge, and their conceptions of subjectivity. I highlight the cohabitation of psychoanalysts and traditional healers in the Mesoamerican context. I interpret this cohabitation as an expression of the coexistence of European and Mesoamerican cultures. The coexistence of cultures leads me to the question of *mestizaje*, which, conceived as a cultural-symbolic and divisive-conflictive process, can be reconsidered in the light of a psychoanalytical specialisation in the division of the subject with its edge structure. I acknowledge the problematic aspect of the Freudian legacy as part of the colonial inheritance, but I also highlight some of Freud's theoretical and methodological contributions that may be useful for exploring and countering coloniality, including the eternal present of the past, unconscious knowing, the difference between knowledge and truth, and the principles of abstinence and listening. Claiming an essentialism that is *not only* strategic, I detect resonances between psychoanalysis and Mesoamerican ancestral knowledge in the consideration of desire, the singular, the corporeal, the affective, the symbolic, and the external psyche, but also dissonances associated with Freudian drifts such as verticalism, individualism, and speciesism-anthropocentrism. I conclude by cautioning against a colonial use of psychoanalysis and proposing its horizontal dialogue with Mesoamerican ancestral knowledge.

KEYWORDS: psychoanalysis; psychology; indigenous people; decolonisation; coloniality

COEXISTENCE AND MESTIZAJE

Mesoamerica is a cultural region that encompasses central and southern Mexico, as well as Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and part of Costa Rica. In all these

*Contact details: david.pavon@umich.mx

countries, there are those who teach, study, and practice psychoanalysis. The European Freudian heritage thus manages to stay alive in the region where the descendants of the great Olmec, Toltec, Nahua, Mixtec, Zapotec, Mayan, and other cultures still live.

Indigenous healers, sages, and shamans live in the same countries where psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic scholars also reside. This cohabitation is one of the innumerable manifestations of the coexistence of European and Mesoamerican cultures with their respective configurations and conceptions of subjectivity. It is not just that there are, on the one hand, indigenous rural communities with their shamans, and, on the other hand, cosmopolitan cities with their psychoanalysts. This may be true to some extent in the United States of America with its Amerindian reservations, but not in Mesoamerica and Latin America in general, where the current inhabitants of the region, both rural and urban, indigenous and non-indigenous, have been engendered by a complex historical process of cultural-symbolic mestizaje in which the European and the Mesoamerican are knotted and intertwined.

Needless to say, the cultural-symbolic mestizaje to which I refer, precisely because it is cultural-symbolic, has absolutely nothing to do with racial-biological miscegenation. Nor is it something like that embodied by the *cosmic race* dreamt of by José Vasconcelos (1925/2001), which would be the synthesis and final resolution of our contradictions. Mestizaje is rather what Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1987/2005) teaches us: the experience of the contradictions that tear us apart, as well as the tearing itself, the colonial wound that hurts, that festers, that does not close, that cannot be sutured.

The colonial wound is precisely what we are as mestizos. Mestizaje makes us become what colonialism has inflicted on us, what it has made us suffer, what it has made us be by dividing us from ourselves. Considering how divided we are, it is understandable that the Freudian heritage, specialising in the division of the subject, is so popular in Latin America, the mestizo continent par excellence.

THE WOUNDED AND THE BAROQUE

Mestizaje has the structure of division, of the cut or the edge, in which the Freudian method specialises. This is why psychoanalysis might be more apt than psychology to think about and treat subjects, such as mestizos, who are not only wounded, but who are themselves the wound, the tearing as cut, as edge. No doubt this structure—as psychoanalysis teaches us—is that of any subject, but perhaps the experience of mestizaje is an exemplary case of what is at stake here.

Being mestizo is a paradigmatic and historically revealing form of the impossible human existence on the edge. By situating ourselves on the edge, mestizaje is—as Homi Bhabha

(2013) would say—being 'in between'. We can also say—with the Chicana thinker Gloria Anzaldúa (1987/2016, 1993)—that to be mestizo is 'to live in the Borderlands' (1987/2016, pp. 261–262), or, even better, 'to be Nepantla', taking up the Nahua concept that means 'to be between', to be between two places, that is, for the case at hand, to live between Mesoamerica and Europe, between shamanic chanting and free association (Anzaldúa, 1993).

To live in mestizaje is to live on the border and in the contradiction between cultures. Then our border and contradictory situation is elaborated, unfolded, entangled, and disguised in the baroque not only as an artistic style, but also as that mestizo and colonial existential form on which Bolívar Echeverría (2000) reflected. We can finally unravel something there thanks to the psychoanalytic method, a method deeply akin to the baroque, which Jacques Lacan (1970/1991) already noticed when he was dazzled by Baltasar Gracián (1657/2011).

THE PROBLEM OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

It would seem that the psychoanalytic method is the right one to treat the colonial wound of mestizaje with its baroque symptomatic manifestations, optical illusions, labyrinthine volutes, and rhetorical mystifications in the profuse and garrulous Latin American subjectivity. Apparently, what we are, as colonially wounded beings, could be cured by psychoanalysis. The problem is that psychoanalysis is inseparable from the very coloniality that wounds us. How then could it heal the wound? How could there be a coincidence between the two horizons that Walter Mignolo (2017) has described respectively as 'psychoanalytic healing and decolonial healing' (p. 36)? How to heal from coloniality through something as colonial as the Freudian inheritance?

As Mrinalini Greedharry (2008) warns us, 'the main problem with using pure psychoanalytic structures' in dealing with coloniality 'is simply that it gets us no closer to understanding psychoanalysis as a colonial and colonizing discourse itself' (p. 149). Psychoanalysis cannot cease to be part of what wounds us, as evidenced in a previous article (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2021a). This article, in fact, has shown us that psychoanalysis does not cease to be colonial, however decolonising it may be. Even if it can be useful in an anticolonial project, psychoanalysis is part of the problem and therefore cannot be the solution, of course, assuming that a solution is to be found here.

Psychoanalysis is part of the problem because it is not something culturally neutral, but something as European as the bibles of the evangelisers and the arquebuses of the conquerors. If something like this has been so successful among us, it is not only because it is akin to our baroque style, nor because it specialises in the cut and the edge that constitute us so flagrantly. The Latin American success of something as European as

psychoanalysis has also been, quite simply, due to the previous Europeanisation of Latin America, because Europeans migrated en masse to the continent, because they colonised it, because they mixed with its inhabitants, because they Christianised and Europeanised them, because they managed to impose their model of subjectivity, which is the same model that Freud and his followers have dealt with.

Colonisation prepared the ground for the implantation of psychoanalysis in Latin America. If this continent can be so receptive to psychoanalysis today, it is because it already contains the modern European model of subjectivity that was introduced and entrenched over centuries through the processes of conquest, colonisation and evangelisation, imperialist expansion and capitalist globalisation, neocolonial modernisation and dependent re-education, subsumption of other cultures into capital, and the resulting imposition of capitalisable forms of life and consumption. All these processes constituted the inhabitants of Latin America as subjects of the unconscious for whom the Freudian legacy makes sense.

Let us say that the Freudian legacy is conditioned by the colonial heritage, by conquest, colonisation, colonialism, and its consequences or prolongations. At the same time, the Freudian legacy is part of the colonial heritage, being inseparable from three of its manifestations: the evolutionary economic-political continuation of colonialism in capitalist neocolonialism (Fanon, 1957/2015, 1961/2002; Guevara, 1965/2007; Nkrumah, 1965), the economic-social-cultural internalisation of the colonial system in the internal colonialism of the former colonies (González Casanova, 1969, 1978) and the ideological-psychological and symbolic-imaginary persistence of the colonised condition in coloniality (Quijano, 1992, 2011/2017). It is because of our coloniality that we are both analysable and only analysable in a certain way, but it is because of an inextricable structural knotting of coloniality itself with neocolonial capitalism and internal colonialism that our analysis goes in a certain direction and that some—only some—of us have the restlessness, uncertainty, emptiness, desire, interest, time, money, and other resources necessary to analyse ourselves or to train in psychoanalysis. Our analytic training, the transmission of psychoanalytic theory and the institutional functioning of psychoanalysis also involve neocolonialism, internal colonialism, and coloniality, as well as presupposing colonisation and external colonialism. In all cases, the colonial past is a premise of the no less colonial present in which our psychoanalytic legacy is embedded.

PRESENT OF THE PAST AND KNOWLEDGE WITHOUT KNOWING

We are the subjects of psychoanalysis today because between yesterday and today, right here, we have been first Europeanised and Christianised by colonialism, and then, on the one hand, alienated, commodified, and culturally proletarianised by neocolonial and

internal colonialist capitalism, and, on the other hand, seduced, captured, and constituted or reconstituted by coloniality. Nevertheless, however deeply the European colonial heritage has permeated, it has not been able to encompass all that we are in Latin America, all that we still are because of the indigenous that was, that continues to be, that can never cease to be. This insistent present of the most remote past, this insurmountable presence of the origin of our history, is something to be recognised in the psychoanalytic sensibility, which, in this, differs from the amnesia that reigns in a dominant psychology in which we are impelled to look only to the future and leave the past behind.

Freud has taught us that the past is not something we can turn our backs on, but something that surrounds us on all sides, that stands between us and our future and that we pass through as we walk forward. The past is not even here something that has simply passed. The past is passing, being as present and as much in the future as the ancestral is in Latin American cultures, in communities, as well as in each one of us.

Freud's own teachings should make us understand that we in Latin America are not only what Freud dealt with in Europe. We are not only what we have been made to be through our colonial subjectivation. We are not only the subjects of European psychoanalytic theory, but also, in a way, the beings referred to in the ancestral knowledge of our continent: knowledge that, in a strange, significant, and scandalous way, is not studied either in our faculties of psychology or in our schools or associations of psychoanalysis.

That we Latin American psychoanalysts and psychologists ignore the indigenous ingredients of mestizaje means, of course, not that these ingredients do not exist, but simply that we do not see or hear them, perhaps by virtue of the blindness and deafness successfully induced by centuries of external and internal colonialism, neocolonialism, and coloniality. It can be conjectured that the success of colonisation, besides ensuring the reception and implantation of psychoanalytic knowledge in Mesoamerica, has as a consequence that we do not fully know what is preserved in Mesoamerican ancestral knowledge: what is most remote and original about us, what we still are of our origin, what we still feel and think, what we somehow know through what we are, for as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987/2016) would say, we know 'things older than Freud' (p. 69). We know such things, but without knowing them, since it is a knowledge that has no place in the colonial order.

In Freudian terms, coloniality prevents us from knowing consciously what we know; it stops us when we try to become aware of our origins; it somehow censors and represses what we would be aware of, making it unconscious. However, the repressed unconscious returns in a symptomatic form, a colonially deformed form, having to be deformed precisely because of the effect of repression. This deformation is the way in which the indigenous often participate in the equation of our baroque, exuberant, garrulous, and variegated mestizaje.

THE QUESTION OF THE ORIGINAL ESSENCE

Our mestizaje symptomatically reveals our indigenous unconscious background as much as it conceals it by disguising and disfiguring it in its baroque nature. In reality, as Luis Villoro (1950/2005) noted in his time, the indigenous only manifests itself to us today in an already Europeanised, mestizo, colonised form. This is something that postcolonial thinkers also remind us again and again, making us bear in mind that we are precisely in a postcolonial moment, after a colonialism that cannot be reversed in order to return to the origin.

The original essence would be irreversibly lost, lost forever, from the postcolonial perspective. From this perspective, we can only pretend that the essence is not lost, as in Gayatri Spivak's (1985/2008) *strategic essentialism*. However, in doing so, we may again be underestimating and belittling the original peoples who have managed to preserve so much of their essence through 'a practically anticolonial way of life' such as that of the Algerian peasant communities who were thus celebrated by Fanon (1961/2002, p. 133). This anticoloniality is not only strategic, but precisely essential, lying in the preservation of a certain essence in the most adverse circumstances.

Of course, the original essence that subsists in rural and indigenous communities can be used strategically against coloniality, but it does not exist in an anticolonial way by virtue of the strategy, for it already exists by itself and is already anticolonial by itself. Its anticoloniality is as essential as its existence. When we relegate this essentiality to pure strategy, we are revealing our opinion of both the original essence and the peoples and movements that claim it and sustain it with great effort, as well as our criteria, its instrumental reason, governed exclusively by means and ends, by strategies and purposes.

The categorical repudiation of any non-strategic essentialism is perhaps also a defensive mechanism, in the Freudian sense of the term, for the purpose of not recognising the truth that is symptomatically revealed in the return of the repressed indigeneity. Undoubtedly, truth reveals itself, as Lacan (1957/1999) would say, in a 'fictional structure', but it does not cease to reveal itself. Considering this revelation, perhaps it is necessary to bet on something that I dare to call *not-only-strategic essentialism*: yes, strategic, lucid, aware of its limits and its fictional structure, but also respectful of the essence and sensitive to its capacity to know something of it, knowing it by going through the colonial fantasy of the absolute and universal, absolutised and universalised European.

FREUDIAN METHOD AGAINST COLONISATION

We know something of the precolonial origin by retroactively reconfiguring it from our position in coloniality. This coloniality does not prevent us from knowing something about the indigeneity that constitutes us, but it does require us to decipher and interpret our

knowledge, since it is a colonised, colonially coded, and symbolised knowledge. For the deciphering and interpretation of our knowledge about our origin, the Freudian method is an essential tool. This method serves us on the path of knowledge towards a truth of origin that is of the kind Freud approached: a truth that can only be known halfway, as enigma and riddle, as fiction and myth.

Needless to say, the approach to the origin also requires other principles of the Freudian method, such as the one of abstinence and especially the one of listening to the speaking subject (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2019). This listening to the subject as subject, unlike the objectifying gaze of psychology, allows indigeneity to manifest itself as what it is and not as the object to which it has always been reduced in colonial history. In contrast to an invasive psychological method in which the colonial invasion continues by other means, the authentically psychoanalytic method should allow us to open a space for the radical otherness of indigenous peoples.

For the approach to indigeneity, perhaps Freud's greatest teaching is to refrain, to be silent, and to listen to what the indigenous have to say, interpreting not exactly what they say, but rather what we hear in what they say. What we must interpret is then our listening and not what the subjects say, our knowledge and not their truth, our interpretation and not the indigenous word. This word only needs to be listened to respectfully, literally, without giving it any Freudian metapsychological meaning.

Without putting Freud's metapsychology into play, his method can help us to listen to the native peoples in such a way that the mere understanding of their word is the discovery of something unique, unparalleled, absolutely different from everything we know. What we discover in this way is irreducibly particular. However, like all truth in its particularity, it is something universal that in this case has a profound meaning for our lives and fascinating resonances with psychoanalysis.

RESONANCES

It is almost as if what Freud glimpsed, especially all that remains invisible to psychology, was already well known to the original peoples. Let me give some examples from the Mexican and Central American context that I draw from a book I wrote about Mesoamerican indigenous conceptions of subjectivity (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2021b).

The Nahua idea of the human subject as *in ixtli in yóllotl*, as face and heart, emphasises the unique singularity of each one. It highlights what is unique in each face, with a physiognomy that distinguishes it from all others, and in each heart, with a desire that also singularises it, all of which is perfectly consonant with the insistence on the singularity of the subject and his/her desire in Freudian casuistry, in case-by-case analysis. Each case is

unique exactly as the *tonalli*, the Nahua soul determined by the instant and circumstances of our birth, is also unique in each subject.

The *tonalli* reappears today as *itonal* in some Nahua communities. Something characteristic of the Nahua *itonal*, as of the Purepecha *mintsita*, is to constitute a corporeal soul. This soul demonstrates a knowledge of the internal structural identity between the psychic and the corporeal, a knowledge profoundly incompatible with the dualism constitutive of psychology, but which also manifests itself in Freud's various monistic concepts, among them the drives that somehow represent the somatic in the psychic, the sublimation that transmutes carnal desires into spiritual inclinations, or the conversion hysterias in which one remembers, fantasises, feels, and thinks with the body.

More precisely, the Freudian postulate of a bodily desiring affectivity underlying rational intellectuality, as expressed in an idea such as rationalisation, finds its Mesoamerican equivalent in the *feel-thinking* of the Nahua, the *neyolnonotza*. It is the same thing that is at stake in emotional-intellectual organs conceived by other indigenous peoples, such as the *yóllotl* or *yolo* of the Nahua themselves, the *senni* of the Popoluca, the *omeeats* of the Huave, the *cuctal* of the Chol, the *yatzil* of the Tojolabal, and the *chulel* of the Tzotzil and Tzeltal. In all cases, we see that the native peoples have always known very well something that Freud has taught us in the West: that our judgements and knowledge are insidiously guided by our desires and our drives, that we enjoy our ideas, that we think with what we feel in our bodies.

It is with the body that we think and feel because we *are* our body. We are not just a soul that has a body, but an animated body, a body that is also a soul. This, difficult to assimilate by conventional psychology, has been clear both to Freud and to the Mesoamerican original peoples, among them the Maya, who thus metaphorically describe the human being in the *Ritual of the Bacabes* as *uinicil te uinicil tun*, being of wood, being of stone, wood and stone as metaphorical representations of the flesh. The subject here is an embodied being as in psychoanalysis and not fleshed out as in psychology.

Another conception of the *Ritual of the Bacabes* that distances us from the psychological perspective by the same gesture by which it brings us closer to psychoanalysis is that of *uayasba*, corresponding to a word, signifier, or symbol that makes us ill and that can only be combated through symbolic resources. The Maya people thus understand, like Freud, that the word cures as well as sickens. They also have a keen understanding, like Freud and Lacan, that illness has a symbolic plot, which manifests itself in symptoms that present what ails us and not only represent it, being causes and not only effects of what we suffer.

By explaining our suffering through the symbolic, the Maya people are decentring it from the individual and re-centring it in a transindividual exteriority. This exteriority, which reminds us of that of the unconscious for Lacan, is that of that communal weft in which Mayan subjectivity understood as *uinic* is woven. It is as *uinic*, in a communal way, that we

can really constitute ourselves as subjects, while individually we are something as insignificant and illusory as the *tlacatl* among the Nahua, as the *ego* in Freud and Lacan.

In psychoanalysis as in Mesoamerican ancestral knowledge, to delve into the consciousness of the *ego* is to go through it and reach a sphere that transcends the imaginary surface of the individual, whether it be that of the *id* and the unconscious in Freud, that of the real and the symbolic in Lacan, or that of the *teyolia* in which everything is connected for the Nahua. The *teyolia* is at the same time the most intimate and the most external, exactly like the Lacanian *extimacy*, and it is also, as in Lacan, something not internal and individual, but external and transindividual. It is like a tree in which the small branches correspond to all spiritual, animal, vegetable, and mineral beings: all united by the unique structure of the tree as by the structure of language in Lacan, with no place for metalanguage in either case. The great difference is that *teyolia* cannot be reduced to the symbolic aspect of culture or to its effects on the psyche of the subject, but rather connects the symbolic and the real, as well as the psychic and the physical, and interiority and exteriority. All of this comes into tension with the Lacanian perspective, showing an initial dissonance such as those we see below.

DISSONANCES

The examples I have just given disclose disconcerting resonances between psychoanalysis and Mesoamerican ancestral knowledge. These resonances should not make us forget the dissonances. I refer to only three of them that are closely linked to each other, that refer to the social, that seem to me to be politically determinant, and that could guide a radical decolonisation, reappropriation, indigenisation, and repoliticisation of psychoanalysis in Mexico, Central America, and perhaps Latin America as a whole.

The first difference is between the indigenous conception of a communitarian subjectivity, perfectly horizontal and leaderless, and the Freudian idea of the group as a vertical horde centred on its leadership (Freud, 1912/1997a, 1921/1997b). This Freudian idea reveals a certain historical difficulty both in contextualising and discussing inequality and in thinking about egalitarianism and communism. The difficulty was overcome by Paul Federn (1919/2002) and by other exponents of the Freudian left (e.g., Fromm, 1934/1970, 1937/2011; Reich, 1933/1973, 1934/1989), but not by Freud, perhaps because of the generation to which he belonged or because of a certain political inclination that was more latent than manifest, more spontaneous than deliberate (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2021c, 2021d, 2023).

Perhaps it must also be explained politically that Freud only developed psychologies of the *ego*, of the *id*, and of the masses composed of *ego*-particles, but not a conception of the *we* such as the ones we find in Mesoamerican ancestral knowledge. In this indigenous

knowledge, the pronoun 'we' designates the original and fundamental subject, as can be seen in the intensive use of words such as the *tik* among the Tzeltal and Tojolabal of Chiapas or the *ndoo* among the Mixtec of Oaxaca. It is as if Mesoamerican indigenous peoples had received Ludwig Feuerbach's (1843/1975) famous lesson on the *we* as the essential form of the human, but the truth is that they did not need this lesson, just as they did not need Karl Marx's (1845/1981) precision on the relational and non-aggregational aspect of the *we*. Those who could benefit from what Feuerbach and Marx teach us are the vast majority of psychoanalysts who dissolve psychoanalytic theory and practice into a typically psychological and liberal individualism that is incompatible with Freud's findings.

Another difference between Freud and Mesoamerican ancestral knowledge is the humanism of the former, with its speciesist-anthropocentric approach, in which non-human beings appear only as representations of the human, such as the *totem* animal. There is no worthy place in psychoanalysis, a subjective and non-objective place, a central and non-subaltern place, for the non-human, be it spiritual, animal, vegetable, or mineral. All this non-human, respectfully considered by the original peoples, always appears in Freud as already humanised, symbolised, assimilated into culture, and re-centred in its human nucleus, thus placing humanity at the centre of the universe, which undoubtedly reflects a real historical experience in the Anthropocene, but an experience that is no less ideological for having a reality in history.

The refutation of humanist ideology surrounds us on all sides in the capitalist system, under the absolute power of capital which decides everything at the expense of humanity, to the point of unstoppably driving this humanity towards annihilation resulting from the devastation of the planet resulting in turn from pollution and overexploitation of resources. It is between capital and nature that the fate of a humankind is being decided. Humankind was finally not as much at the centre as it imagined. Not being at the centre, it may well disappear. There is no ideology in which one can live forever.

The anthropocentrism that puts us at the centre, comparable in this to geocentrism before Copernicus and Galileo, has been wisely avoided by the Mesoamerican peoples, but not by the modern European culture of which Freud is a part. This culture still imagines now, as in Freud's time, that the human is at the centre of the universe. There is here—to speak in Freudian terms—a Copernican revolution pending.

CONCLUSION: AGAINST A COLONIAL USE OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

Although Freud continues to put the human at the centre, it is true that at the same time he dissolves it into impersonal, inhuman instances and forces, such as the *id* and drives. This brings Freud and the native Mesoamerican peoples closer again. Proximity is as evident here as in other cases, but it is also as evident as distance in other aspects.

We can emphasise distance or proximity. It doesn't matter what we emphasise as long as we establish a horizontal dialogue between the European and Mesoamerican perspectives. This horizontality would have to proscribe any psychoanalysis of the ancestral knowledge of the native peoples in which this knowledge is put in the place of the object of our knowledge, as if it was not itself a knowledge that is also reflective on itself (see Pavón-Cuéllar and Mentinis, 2020).

It must be well understood that the ancestral knowledge of indigenous peoples has its own concepts and does not require Freudian concepts to show its unfathomable depth of meaning. Nor does it need to be psychoanalysed to make its unconscious conscious. It is not a formation of the unconscious that should be interpreted in Freudian terms.

Ancestral knowledge has its own keys to interpretation, as well as its own forms of self-awareness and reflexivity. All this must be studied, respected, and considered so as not to carry out a colonial exercise of psychoanalysis, so as not to pervert Freudian knowledge by instrumentalising it to colonise other knowledge. Instead of colonising ancestral knowledge, psychoanalysis should rather try to decolonise itself by listening to it, attending to it, and taking it seriously in political implications such as those to which we have referred.

The decolonisation of the Freudian heritage is an urgent task in contexts such as Mesoamerica and Latin America in general. In these contexts, as Helena Maldonado Goti (2017) has noted, what Freud has left us is 'an alien proposal that we must make our own and original' (p. 75). It is necessary and urgent that we reappropriate psychoanalysis, that we reinvent it, that we indigenise it by decolonising it (see Pavón-Cuéllar, 2020, 2021a).

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

David Pavón-Cuéllar is a Mexican Marxist philosopher, Lacanian psychoanalyst, and critical psychologist. He is a professor of Psychology and Philosophy at the Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo in Morelia, Mexico. He holds a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Rouen (France) and a PhD in Psychology from the University of Santiago de Compostela

(Spain). His recent books include *Psicoanálisis y Colonialidad: Hacia una Inflexión Anticolonial de la Herencia Freudiana* (Fontamara, 2024), *Then and Now: On the Crowd, the Subject, and the Collective* (with Betty Fuks, Paola Mieli, Rosalind Morris, and Alain Vanier, Agincourt, 2023), *Sobre el Vacío: Puentes Entre Marxismo y Psicoanálisis* (Paradiso, 2022), *Psychoanalysis and Revolution: Critical Psychology for Liberation Movements* (with Ian Parker, 1968 Press, 2021, translated into nine languages), *Virus del Capital* (Docta Ignorancia, 2021), *Más allá de la Psicología Indígena: Concepciones Mesoamericanas de la Subjetividad* (Porrúa, 2021, translated into Portuguese), *Zapatismo y Subjetividad: Más allá de la Psicología* (Cátedra Libre, 2020), *Psicología Crítica: Definición, Antecedentes, Historia y Actualidad* (Itaca, 2019), and *Marxism and Psychoanalysis: In or Against Psychology?* (Routledge, 2017).