

A NEW DIRECTION IN SCHOLARSHIP IN POSTCOLONIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Hook, Derek (2012) **A critical psychology of the postcolonial: The mind of apartheid**. London & New York: Routledge. ISBN 978-0-415-58757-0 pbk. Pages x + 251.

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This is an important book for a number of reasons. Derek Hook fearlessly takes on the complicated question of what apartheid meant and means, going far beyond the tradition of uni-dimensional psychological explanations. In helping us understand apartheid racism (and its various aftermaths) he achieves something remarkable – he takes the psychological seriously, does not trivialise it, and at the same time infuses the psychological with a very broad postcolonial understanding.

It is all too easy to reduce our understanding of apartheid to one of an array of “last instances”. There are those who view apartheid in materialist terms, those who emphasise cultural and racial politics, and those who prefer a more psychological approach, to name a few. As Hook shows, all of these approaches are simultaneously correct and incomplete, and he does the hard work of showing how it is not only possible but also fruitful to put together a range of theoretical armamentaria to develop new ways of thinking about difficult and bothersome issues. Hook’s concern, though, goes beyond an understanding of apartheid – he is interested, as well, with the question of what we can and should be doing with psychological theory as related to a range of social and political issues.

At the start of the book, Hook notes the somewhat surprising fact that critical social psychology, a tradition which Hook seeks to enliven, has made far less use of postcolonial theory (and particularly of the work of Fanon) than might have been expected. He shows that a central concern of critical social psychology has been a critique of mainstream psychology itself. Though this is useful and important, critical social psychology needs to move beyond within-disciplinary critique to demonstrating its ability to develop productive understandings of phenomena in the world out there. This call by Hook (and his demonstration through this book that critical social psychology can do far more than simply critique mainstream psychology) seems to me to be a fundamental contribution to the development of psychology in South Africa. That Hook makes an important international contribution cannot be denied (the international reviews for this book have been deservedly glowing), but what he does for South Africa psychology is especially challenging. Critical social psychology in South

Africa has much to be proud of, but Hook is correct in pointing out the extent to which the discipline focuses to a very large degree on issues within our discipline. It is sad that some contemporary South African psychology which calls itself critical has not moved beyond a by now almost canonical repetition of all that is wrong with “mainstream” psychology. A productive critical discipline needs to move beyond repeated attacks on what has become an easy caricature of mainstream psychology, with its non-reflexive, acontextual, mechanistic approach to knowledge.

At the heart of Hook’s argument, and a feature of the book as a whole, is a serious concern with the role of affect in the lives of people and societies. Using the work of Biko, Hook argues that “the revolutionary potential of *subjectivity itself* should not be lost in the enthusiasm to reduce the political field to discursive and textual forms of analysis” (p 41, italics in the original). Hook is clear that if psychology is to make sense of the political, and indeed to contribute to it, affect and subjectivity – however slippery those concepts may be – need to be taken seriously. We need to understand both the personal and political consequences of what Hook terms the “dehumanizing, denigrating, abjecting features of racism” (p 46), as well as the affective and libidinal investments in creating these conditions. The critical psychology of the postcolonial, in this view, becomes not either an understanding of the perpetration of racism or an analysis of the consequences of this perpetration, or even a juxtaposition of the two. Hook’s analysis is much more demanding – he wants to understand and take seriously the question of how racism is produced and reproduced by both victims and perpetrators in a network of shared meanings and affective investments. At stake here is not simply the question of collusion in oppression and objectification, but also the developmental reality of what it means to come of age as a psychological being in a world in which dehumanization, denigration and abjection are the order of the day. The psychological production of the master in this context is inextricably linked with the production of the slave. All, to varying degrees, are constituted in and reconstitute what Hook terms a “libidinal economy” – an economy that works “to substantiate a community, to establish the elementary social ties without which a coherent social group fails to exist” (p 131). Here, Hook is describing the conditions for the creation a colonial consciousness predicated on the denigration of blackness. But the implications for South African psychology of what is being said here are much more pervasive.

Following Fanon in particular, Hook shows how a libidinal economy is constitutive not only of the denigrated outgroup but of the ingroup as well. What does this tell us about psychology as a discipline in South Africa at present? In their recent analysis of the status of critical psychology in South Africa, Painter, Kiguwa and Böhmke (2013) note that to some extent critical psychology in South Africa has been “domesticated” – turned into a subdiscipline of the mainstream of psychology, an “academic commodity” (as they put it, p 850), devoid of a vibrant field of critical praxis. As critical psychologists, they note: “We cannot beatifically position ourselves outside the appropriation of psychology under capitalism, simply because we recite Deleuze or Foucault, whereas *they* keep on repeating Milgram and Seligman.” (Painter et al, 2013: 851)

Hook’s work, if taken seriously, requires something much more demanding of theorists than this domesticated form of “critique” which Painter and colleagues expose. Hook demands of his reader (and the book is not an easy read – it is demanding, appropriately and uncompromisingly so) to engage not only with the question of affect

and subjectivity as realised in the apartheid and colonial projects but in all projects, including those of a post-apartheid psychology struggling with the question of what critique means in a context in which, to put it crudely, we all now agree that apartheid was bad, we all want something different and better, but we are all much more confused than we were. Hook speaks to the necessity to address the affective components of living in a world in which we viscerally experience the complexities and contradictions – indeed, the layered and often banal compromises – of life in a much-vaunted but far from perfect democracy.

Hook provides us with a theoretical set of tools to engage with highly complex and contested multi-level issues. In this regard, his book is in good company with another book by another writer from the field of psychology. I would like to think that it is no coincidence that Brian Watermeyer's (2013) important volume on the psychology of disability is written by a South African. Watermeyer's work is a study not of disability itself but of the diffuse interweavings of disablism amongst disabled and non-disabled people alike. Both Hook and Watermeyer, it seems to me, draw on visceral and embodied knowledge based on the experience of living in apartheid South Africa.

Derek Hook's contribution in this book, in summary, is considerable. Not only does he provide an important account of what he terms "the mind of apartheid". Through his work, he also embodies precisely that which interests him – a world of intellectual inquiry which takes visceral experience, and the affective, seriously. His work is anything but reductive – he gives the reader the compliment of providing a textured and challenging account that demands both intellectual and affective engagement.

REFERENCES.

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Watermeyer, B (2013) **Towards a contextual psychology of disablism**. London: Routledge.