

POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE (a view from South Africa)

Hook, D (ed) with Mkhize, N, Kiguwa, P, Collins, A (Section eds), Burman, E & Parker, I (Consulting eds) (2004) **Critical Psychology**. Cape Town: UCT Press.
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In his chapter on psychoanalysis, Ian Parker makes the following statement: “Critical psychology should look to the radical potential of either that *lying outside of psychology* or to that lying at its peripheries” (p142). While he is referring here to non-mainstream theoretical resources (elements of psychoanalysis in this case) the general drift of Parker’s argument would certainly condone a “geopolitical” or “regional” reading of his statement as well. European and especially American theories, practices, journals, books and researchers still dominate and define the field of psychology – and package and ship it off to foreign lands in the glossy textbooks, canonized journals and ready-made interventions and treatment programs we have all been subjected to.

Scholars and practitioners on the geopolitical (and economic) peripheries of this academic and professional empire, including basically everyone outside the US, Canada, Britain, Western Europe and perhaps Australia, are certainly still hopelessly underrepresented in journals, at conferences and in research teams. More troublesome even, is that when they *are* represented it is generally on cultural, political and epistemological terms dictated by the overdeveloped centers of psychological production. The globalization of psychology, like the globalization of nearly everything else, is not an equitable affair.

Over the last few decades, critical psychology has emerged and at times even flourished, forging alternatives to the epistemologically worn-out and morally depleted but still powerful edifice that psychology had become in the hundred or so years of its institutional existence. This remains good news, but is not enough reason to get on our moral high horses just yet. In a world where value is set by unsentimental market forces and universities themselves seek funding through various strategies like the “commercialization” of knowledge and research, critical psychology is a useful new commodity. Therefore, the existence of critical psychology is by no means a straightforward remedy for the political and academic marginalities mentioned above. The best of critical psychology itself, first of all, remains somewhat marginal in psychology. Secondly, the majority of critical psychology books and journals are still

American or British – at least, those available in English and thus marketable in South Africa – while the international conference circuit and research networks are fairly difficult to access for scholars from poor regions and cash-strapped institutions. Critical psychology has its very own centers and peripheries, sustained by the very institutions and industries that make “critical psychology” a marketable commodity in the first place: universities, state-based funding institutions, publishing houses, and the English language.

One of the many ongoing tasks of a critical psychology, or a liberatory psychology as Don Foster (Chapter 22) refers to it in this book, is to create alternative networks and build the kinds of infrastructure through which more peripheral voices could be activated and mobilized – or through which centers and peripheries can continuously be realigned in creative and transformative dialogues. And, this is important to say, not only for the benefit of those at the center: for the legitimation of their critical pursuits or perhaps their appetite for the exotic. Our contribution should be such that we are more than just another exciting destination for the academic tourist – although being a desired destination already helps, of course, as we have come to learn from economic and development discourses quilted around the need to lure “foreign investment” and “tourism”.

The book under review is, without any doubt, a landmark in the attempt to create a more inclusive, more diverse and more equitable critical psychology. In the small but growing collection of critical psychology textbooks, books that will hopefully distribute alternative versions of the discipline to psychology’s principal consumers, the undergraduate student, this is quite simply one of the most valuable, varied, and versatile additions. It provides good descriptions of what critical psychology is (and can be) and valuable, well-argued and very accessible introductions to a number of disparate, sometimes contradictory but always politically useful theoretical resources – mainly in “Section 1: Theoretical resources”, but also in the more “applied” “Section 2: The South African context” and “Section 3: Forms of practice”.

Despite its decidedly “made in South Africa” flavour, the book is also clearly, audaciously and thankfully aimed at a broader audience. Its bold bid for centrality in the field is already clear from its title: **Critical Psychology**, and not the iffy **Critical Psychology in South Africa** it potentially could have been – this is true, of course, of most of the recent “local” psychology textbooks produced by Juta/UCT Press, under guidance of former commissioning editor, Solani Ngobeni. This might be a pure marketing decision, but it nevertheless embodies an important principle: there is no place for narrow nationalisms in critical psychology; in fact, critical psychology should be explicitly transnational in its scope, taking on the important task of developing genuinely transnational conceptions of citizenship, rights, and political alternatives in a world where these things are still all too bound up with the eroded institutions of state-nationalism.

But back to the content of the book. What is presented here is a bold statement, and a wide-ranging set of agendas not satisfied to be a South African franchise of an American or British critical psychology. The theoretical resources introduced already breach the geopolitical hold of Euro-American approaches on psychology, by introducing, next to more “conventional” European resources like psychoanalysis,

Marxism, Feminism and Foucault, also African perspectives on the self, the Black Consciousness Philosophy of Steve Biko and the revolutionary ideas of Frantz Fanon. Derek Hook's discussions of the latter (Chapters 4 and 5), particularly, are valuable and will hopefully not only further revive psychology's interest in Fanon, but instill in students and novice researchers something of Fanon's approach, the critical and strategic reading and appropriation of European traditions like psychoanalysis and phenomenology.

While the book is not willing to (dis)qualify its position in critical psychology by suffixing its title with "in South Africa", it is also not ashamed to do critical psychology *from* South Africa. This, of course, is vastly different from both a self-marginalizing nationalization (as "Critical Psychology in South Africa" would have risked being) and a one-sided attempt to efface nationally specific interests by representing them as universal (as almost all American textbooks do). Critical psychology would be of very little value if it did not articulate its theoretical and political agendas with specific regional (rather than restrictive "national" concerns) and for too long not only theories and practices in psychology, but legitimate research topics and social problems themselves have been dictated from elsewhere. The South African context is thus explicitly fore-grounded in this book (Section 2), and besides good chapters on gender issues, community psychology and HIV/AIDS, the thorough confrontation with psychology's past *and contemporary* racisms and strategies of exclusion (Duncan, Stevens and Bowman in Chapter 14, and Ratele in Chapter 15) deserve mention.

Here, of course, size begins to matter. The book could not have been any longer than it already is, but it is a pity that gender, racism, and HIV/AIDS, the substantive issues of this section, could not have been expanded by a chapter or two addressing equally important, but less stereotypically "South African" and "Third World" phenomena like neo-liberalism, capitalism and consumerism, globalization, culture and identity, the natural and built environment, youth culture, mall culture – to name but a few of an endless range of possibilities. Racism, HIV/AIDS and gender quite clearly are major issues here, and perhaps *the* major issues, but critical psychology should guard against a situation where "developing" contexts like South Africa are marginalized in another way, by attributing to them a special range of "problems" for which special but marginal kinds of psychology are allowed, thus ensuring that the mainstream need not really engage with these issues. Community psychology has functioned in this way, and critical psychology might too. The range of phenomena associated with globalization and hyper-capitalist consumerism clearly show that critical (and community) psychology not only deals with *local* problems, but with *global* problems that are ignored by mainstream psychology. Critical psychology should make it clear from the outset that it is more *genuinely* global than mainstream psychology.

The final section (Section 3) addresses forms of practice. A good section-introduction by Nhlanhla Mkhize sets the scene for chapters on (not mentioned in order of appearance) community psychology and development, participatory rural appraisal, critical discourse analysis, and the politics of research and publication. The final chapter, by Don Foster (Chapter 22), provides an excellent overview of theories and effects of domination as well as the possibilities of liberation in a world still marred by local inequalities that are increasingly framed by global risks and injustices. In a phrase that resonates deeply

with a long history of critical theory and socialist praxis, Foster asks: “What is to be done?” – here, now, but also in global terms.

The section presents an excellent collection of chapters, but more than elsewhere in the book I felt a certain lack, as if the inclusion of resources for practice, unlike the theoretical resources, steers too closely to well-rehearsed critical psychology strategies like participatory community interventions and academic discourse analysis. Nothing wrong with these, of course, and the chapters dealing with them are excellent. Unfortunately, however, less conventional (for psychology) alternatives are mentioned but not really discussed. Foster, in a delightful list of actions, refers to “boycotts, martyrdom, strikes, go-slows, hunger strikes, sit-ins, pamphleteering, marches, slogans, protests, guerilla warfare, passive resistance, disruptions, bra burning, consciousness raising, self-help groups and charters of demands” (p575). Macleod (Chapter 20), in a chapter that skillfully unpacks the politics behind research and publication processes, refers to non-academic writing like petitions, letters to the press and brochures. These are wonderful examples of an expanded interventionist or activist imagination, and an extra chapter exploring such and other alternatives, like comics, t-shirts, short films and documentaries, photographic exhibitions, plays, culture jamming and critical on-line communities sustained through mailing lists and blogs, would have been a valuable addition. It is in fact quite striking that there are so few references in the book to the growing amount of critical psychology resources and communities lurking on the Internet.

The book is of course mainstream in another way as well: it is firmly located in and supported by the increasing dominance of English over intellectual life. The exclusionary effects of English in education, publishing and psychology is mentioned by more than one author in this book, but still, and probably for purely practical reasons, the majority of references are either Anglo-American or French-through-English – I don’t recall seeing references to books or articles that are written in any African or other European languages. While this is clearly not a deliberate strategy to marginalize other voices, it does show how easily even a critical psychology project can find itself within the parameters of an institution so dominant that alternatives seem almost unthinkable. The critical psychology of the future, I imagine, would also have to find ways to breach these limits set by language (and exploit the resources existing in different languages) in publications, conferences, interventions, and engage more fully with developments in the (substantial!) non-English speaking world.

Despite these comments, **Critical Psychology** is, as I said above, a landmark text. It more than testifies to the vibrancy of some forms of psychology in this country and elsewhere. It points to the many opportunities existing for promising scholars and activists to continue articulating a critical psychology that will “become more than a form of loyal opposition and, instead, seriously attempt to take over, or fatally subvert, the discipline as a whole” (Painter & Terre Blanche, 2004:539). This book is more than a good first step. It already is a movement.

REFERENCES.

Painter, D & Terre Blanche, M (2004) Critical psychology in South Africa: Looking backwards and looking ahead. **South African Journal of Psychology**, 34(4), 520 – 543.