

## Debate

### **PINS, that trashy trashing journal.**

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I am disturbed by some odd happenings in **Psychology in society (PINS)** 12, 1989. For example, on page 3, Ronnie Miller trashes Cole; on page 52, Kevin Solomons trashes Dave Edwards; and on page 56, Kedi Letlaka trashes Shula Marks.

There is a clear dividing line between an attack on someone's point of view, however harsh the attack may be, and an attack on the person holding that viewpoint. When assassination masquerades as science, the community from which this comes - in this case, South Africa's small group of progressive psychologists - is in trouble.

The case of reasoned debate is not served by the heavy artillery barrage that Solomons directs at Edwards, whom he accuses of arrogance, intellectual triviality (through sarcastic gratitude for Edwards's "epistemological gem"), personal animus against psychodynamics, and lack of "credibility". Then, inverting the language usage of the Wicked Son in the Jewish Passover ceremony, he pointedly excludes Edwards from the company of "we therapists". The heat of Solomons's rejoinder is extraordinary, and the damage he inflicts (or wishes to inflict) on Edwards infringes on the person, not the viewpoint.

What Letlaka-Rennert does to Shula Marks is no more palatable. She suggests that because Marks is a white South African-born historian, she

stands to her readers in the same liberal-colonial relationship in which Mabel Palmer stood to her ward Lily Moya, which in turn (in her view) reflects the research dominance of the academic left as a new form of colonialism (I assume this is a variant of the "White hands" critique). Marks's idealisation of Lily ("a failed product of missionary education" who made poor use of the opportunities given to her) is further evidence of Marks's own failed liberalism. Letlaka Rennert does not directly answer the question she asks toward the end of the review, namely why Marks found it important to write the book, but implies that it is the product of a form of crypto-colonialism. Again, this review goes beyond the issues involved, and attaches needlessly derogatory labels to Marks: is whiteness a sin that carries with it the risk of this kind of obloquy?

Miller's dismissal of the work by Michael Cole and his associates at the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition (LCHC) also moves across the border between fair criticism and personal assault. He writes that the LCHC suggestion that " .. all cultures have to be considered equally effective in producing ways of dealing with the problems of survival" (p3) opens the door to a cultural relativism which no third world country except South Africa, with its apartheid policies, would think of adopting. This passage does not make the iniquitous suggestion that Cole and other cultural relativists might be seen as endorsing apartheid policies, but it comes close. He goes on to ridicule this relativist view - which has a long and distinguished history in studies of human abilities of moderating racist views and undermining deficit models of "Native" ability - by noting that it has a hollow ring for the world's hungry and oppressed, " .. quite apart from the awesome spectacle that some cultures appear to be considerably more effective in the ways they have produced to exterminate the species" (p3).

However, still on page 3 from which Miller cites, Cole and his colleagues (Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, 1982) write: "Throughout human history, cultural groups in contact have also been competition for resources ... Key resources in such struggles have been culturally elaborated tools (ranging from the bow and arrow to the neutron bomb ...) for operating on the environment (p710). So much for Miller's "awesome spectacle", a phrase suggesting that technological differentiation among cultures has been ignored by the LCHC group. On the contrary, Cole and his co-workers go on to argue that it is tempting to index the developmental level of the world's peoples by the extent of their technological development. But by abstracting activities from their cultural



context, " .. the door is left open to serve abuses of the scientific method in favour of ethnocentric claims about the true nature of reality" (LCHC, 1982 p710).

Why in the course of an argument against cultural relativism is it necessary to heap ridicule on Cole in phrases such as "the conclusions follow with the impeccable logic that informs all tautologies", "this deliberate indulgence in ignorance", or "a perverse mimicry of the natural sciences"? I do not agree with Miller's argument that cultural relativism necessarily upholds a form of mental determinism and therefore an immutability of mental processes, but that is not the issue. The issue is that in the first two pages of his paper, he suggests to South African psychologists who wish to be progressive that to read Cole, or have intellectual intercourse with other cultural relativists (and by implication, other cross-cultural psychologists) is ignorant, tautologous, perverse, and plays into the hands of an apartheid regime. In trashing Cole, Miller's paper stands as an unfortunate block between South African psychologists and field of psychological enquiry that may be wrong, but is certainly very important to the goal Miller sets in his paper, which is to understand what it means to be human.

Knowledge is power. Foucault asks, "What rules of right are implemented by the relations of power in the production of discourses of truth?", and answers, "We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth .... It is truth that makes the laws, that produces the true discourse which, at least partially, decides, transmits and itself extends upon the effects of power. In the end, we are judged, condemned, classified, determined in our undertakings, destined to a certain mode of living or dying, as a function of the true discourses which are the bearers of these specific effects of power" (1980, pp93-94).

In a society on the brink of transformation, in which a search by the "white hands", the "academic left", "progressive psychologists", or whatever else one would like to call them, is under way for a democratisation of knowledge, for a redistribution of resources, for a sharing of knowledge and power in our society for the greatest good and justice, we need to remember that governments, all governments, function by the truths rendered to them by an intellectual elite. At this time, because of the urgency of the intellectual search, reputations can be made and shattered overnight. For the readers of *Psychology in society* (PINS) and its

contributors, the search for truth is not only intellectual, but also in the service of social restructuring. Blood is an enemy of truth, and the more assassinations, the more reputations that lie in ruins, the greater the likelihood that truth will be replaced by its survivor, fashionable opinion: that is the price extracted by purges.

I hope that the editorial collectives who oversee the review process by which **Psychology in society (PINS)** is published will be able to admit criticism of other positions, however fierce it may be, but draw the line there, not allowing this journal to become an intellectual garbage disposal unit into which individuals and reputations are fed to emerge as sludge. The line between criticism and the sludge-maker is difficult to define, but one of the questions authors and editors could ask is about arrogance. A tone that is haughty, dismissive, and wounding is more likely to be arrogant than critical, and arrogance is a poison to truth.

A second criterion emerges from the issue of credibility that Kevin Solomons raises in his rebuttal to Edwards. Credibility has two meanings: the first is one's own credibility among one's co-workers, the extent to which one is accepted and trusted by the people whose votes get one elected to desirable offices. The other kind of credibility is about giving a service, and refers to the respect and trust that the recipients of the service feel toward the person giving it. Here, credibility derives from everyday qualities like keeping appointments, returning telephone calls, being available when needed, and compassion.

I think that if the kind of credibility raised by an article is the latter, it deserves publication; if it is the former, arrogance is not far behind, and the sludge-maker will soon demand its victims.

## REFERENCES.

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