

In response to "white hands"

Book review

Nicholas, L and Cooper, S (eds) (1990) **Psychology and Apartheid: Essays on the struggle for psychology and the mind in South Africa.** Johannesburg: A Vision/Madiba Publication.

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Psychology and Apartheid, contains edited versions of some of the papers that were delivered at the Psychology and Apartheid Conference which was held at the University of the Western Cape in March 1989. The conference set out to articulate the ways in which psychology was used historically, in South Africa, to perpetuate domination of the majority by the minority white regime. The tone of the conference (and which is reflected in the book) was one of outrage, in the first instance, and an attempt, in the second to begin a discourse that would respond to the perceived needs of the majority of South Africans.

This objective is outlined in the preface of the book in the suggestion that the conference was a " ... landmark ... [which] explored the nexus between Apartheid and Psychology", and in the keynote address during which Bulhan describes the conference as a " ... special gathering of, by and for Black South African Psychologists" (p66). The conference and the book can therefore be regarded as a response to "white hands" - of all political

persuasions. I will return to the import of these pronouncements after briefly describing some of the specific issues raised in the book.

The book is divided equally into two parts. The first part concerns itself with the role of psychology (and psychologists) in South Africa. This role (of organized psychology) is seen as largely oppressive in nature. The gate-keepers of the profession are argued to be White, male and politically conservative. It is argued that these gate-keepers intentionally keep out those who are likely to challenge the status quo and perhaps more importantly, Blacks. While this might be true at one level of analysis it can also be argued that institutions in society (like universities) are charged with exactly that task. Marxists would argue that capital will dictate the nature and form of the reproduction of knowledge. This latter contention is not articulated by any of the authors in any detail. The reader is left with the feeling that all the authors' anger (and it is a very angry and emotive discourse that is used throughout the book) is directed at the individual white psychologist and their professional organs.

This latter suggestion finds some evidence in the comparison of "silences" in Seedat's contribution. He compares the themes covered in articles by the official publication of the Psychological Association of South Africa (PASA), and by the independently published **Psychology in society (PINS)**, and suggests that in both journals " ... mainstream psychology remains intact and firmly embedded within a decontextualized positivist framework" (p26). While this may be true of the official publication it does not ring true of **PINS** given Seedat's own findings (cf Table 2, p33). This table documents the extent to which the editors of **PINS** have succeeded in fulfilling their editorial policy, that is, " ... to critically explore and present ideas on the nature of psychology in apartheid and capitalist society ... (and) the nature and practice of psychology in South Africa". Seedat's comment on the fact that **PINS** represents yet another instance of the dominance of "White hands" is somewhat surprising given his membership of its editorial collective at least for part of the period that he reviewed.

The article by Bulhan, entitled "Afrocentric Psychology: Perspectives and practice", repeats in summary the major issues that he discusses in his book, **Frantz Fanon and the psychology of oppression** (1985), a review of which can be found in **PINS 11** (1988). Besides arguing for the need for psychologists to pursue a psychology that is systemic and relational he also argues that it be genuinely liberatory. He writes: " ... psychology must not only interpret an oppressive reality but help to change it." (p70).

The second part of the book is more difficult to label. It contains two largely theoretical papers, one by Butchart and Seedat (who employ social

contructionism to criticise mainstream theories in community psychology), and another by Nell (who uses Fanon's colonial hypothesis to understand the nature of oppression and violence in South Africa). There are also two empirical papers, one by Letlaka-Rennert (who reported on part of a larger project in which street-children were assessed for "placement in school amongst other things"), and one by Statman (who reported on the types of adjustment difficulties that Black students studying in the US experience). The other paper in this section is by Cooper reflecting on his experiences in South African prisons between 1971 and 1986 (as a consequence of his anti-state activities).

While **Psychology and Apartheid: Essays on the struggle for psychology and the mind in South Africa**, is considered a useful addition to the literature, it does not, despite the suggestions of the editors, create a new discourse. PINS, and the Organization for Appropriate Social Services in South Africa (OASSSA) have for many years been debating the issues raised by this collection. That **Psychology and Apartheid** raises important issues once again is to their credit. The issue of White males who are politically conservative being primarily involved in the reproduction of knowledge, and that even the progressive psychologists (involved in PINS, for example) are white (and for the most part, male) is a worthy observation. However in making sense of this observation the contributors to the book fail to coherently articulate its causes and potential solutions.