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Book review: A critical psychology of the postcolonial: the mind of apartheid

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Derek Hook, **A CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY OF THE POSTCOLONIAL: THE MIND OF APARTHEID**, London & New York: Routledge, 2011, 251pp., £15.00 (pb).

Against a background of an often quite deliberate de-emphasis of the psychic dimensions of racism and oppression in much post-colonial critique, psychologist, psychoanalyst and post-colonial theorist Derek Hook's latest book provides an innovative and productive account of the role of the sexual, bodily and visceral realms of desire, fantasy and affect underpinning the dynamics of post-colonial racism.

His work provides a framework for reinvigorating both post-colonial studies and critical psychology in two ground-breaking ways. Firstly through his re-reading of a variety of anti- and post-colonial authors (including Fanon, Biko, Manganyi and Bhabha) alongside the work of writers such as Zizek, Kristeva and Butler – which provide a framework for a 'psycho-political' account of racism rooted in concerns with power, social structure and historical location. Secondly, his positioning of post-apartheid South Africa as a 'problem space' against this new conceptual frame opens exciting opportunities for new perspectives on the dynamics of wider global oppression and anti-colonial struggles.

In many ways, the book is an extended study of Fanon in dialogue with a formidable series of thinkers who have also engaged the 'psychopolitics' of racism. Fanon is positioned as an articulation-point between what are usually discrete areas of scholarly and political thought, as part of a wider spanning, and creative superimposing, of disciplinary domains.

The first chapter makes the case for a sociological form of psychology attuned to the work of political critique. Fanon is touchstone here. His overlaying of psychiatric and political concerns makes him central to the book's attempt to refine a concept of the 'psycho-political'. Fanon's preoccupations are extended by attention to Steve Biko, with the chapter providing a helpful overview of the related literature on the Black Consciousness Movement in apartheid South Africa, posing the question of why this political utilization of psychological

concepts (a form of ‘vernacular psychology’ in Hook’s terms) does not feature more strongly in histories of the discipline.

The second chapter links Fanon’s visceral descriptions of bodily destruction – a means of evoking the physicality of colonial racism – to the concept of ‘the abject’ as used by theorists ranging from Achille Mbembe and Judith Butler to Julia Kristeva. Here the notion of the abject resonates with Fanon’s ‘wretched of the earth’ with Hook arguing that Fanon’s account of racist subjugation is implicitly that of abjection (as detailed in Kristeva’s psychoanalytic account), although he cautions against the reduction of structural-political racism to interpersonal antagonism, as is the case in some psychoanalytic accounts.

The third chapter, focussed on Fanon, is an excellent entry-point for students of Fanon’s ‘psychology’ of racism. It sets up multiple links to other theories of racism and racialisation, particularly novelist J.M. Coetzee’s undervalued essay ‘The mind of apartheid’. The influence of Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalytic theory is strong here, with Hook implying that Fanon anticipates certain subsequent conceptual preoccupations of Lacanian theory. This is particularly so in relation to Fanon’s repeated insistence on the visual, either via notions of the racist gaze or the idea of ‘epidermalization’ (how race is ‘pinned to the body’ in colonial regimes of looking) exemplifying the political dimension of Lacan’s imaginary. Paul Gilroy is also cited here, as Hook links more recent ideas of ‘libidinal economy’ to Fanon’s description of the ‘phobogenic’ nature of white racism.

The final chapter focuses on racialising embodiment. Here Hook skilfully criss-crosses historical literature, reading the psychoanalytic work of Black Consciousness psychologist Chabani Manganyi together with Fanon, and alongside Slavoj Žižek’s thesis of racism as the ‘theft of enjoyment’. A rich series of ideas follows. These include e.g. why it is important to distinguish between ‘expressive’ and ‘imposed’ phenomenology, and an emphasis on the need to think of racism not only as socially constructed, but also constituted through ‘extra-discursive’ (affective, bodily) measures.

Each chapter opens with a narrative from the Apartheid Archive Project, a research initiative that has collected accounts of apartheid racism. Hook uses these accounts to excellent descriptive effect, with particularly attention to

their bodily focus, their ability to invoke sexual anxiety, and the radically dehumanising quality of apartheid racism.

One of the book's opening arguments is that the partitioning of academic disciplines in this field of study has excluded particular questions and research topics. Hook's cross-fertilizing links (e.g. anti-apartheid writings read in conjunction with psychoanalytic theory, social psychological contributions overlaid with ideas from literary theory) start to break down these partitions, opening up new vista's for critical psychology and postcolonial studies, and also for the production of a novel discourse of critique.

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