

NOW THAT YOU KNOW, HOW DO YOU FEEL?

De Vos, Jan (2012) **Psychologisation in times of globalisation.** London: Routledge. ISBN 978-0-415-68202-2 pbk. Pages xi + 162.

*Khonzi Mbatha in conversation with Martin Terre Blanche
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Khonzi: Maybe we could start by giving an overview of what the book is about.

Martin: Okay, so obviously it's about psychologisation and how that plays out in the 21st century.

Yes, but I must say it wasn't quite what I expected, just going by the title.

Same here.

I expected a kind of catalogue of how psychology has infused itself into every aspect of life around the world.

Yes, I was quite looking forward to a description and a critique of how psychology is increasingly used to make sense of everything and of how in the process it oversimplifies things ... turns them into individual problems when in fact they are social and political.

Such as explaining away what the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) are all about with reference to Julius Malema's and his supporters' personal psychological issues - making it easy to ignore the real historical injustices and political agendas and power differentials that need to be considered to really make sense of something like the EFF.

Yes, something like that, plus I was hoping for maybe many, many more examples from everyday life - like how we constantly feel like we have a little Oprah sitting on our shoulders giving relationship advice and preventing us from just engaging naturally with people.

Yes and that word “naturally” is exactly where things get complicated and where the book becomes quite a bit more perturbing than either of us expected. There is no “natural” state of things that then gets spoilt or misrepresented by psychology. Whatever is out there is already socially constructed already, in one way or another. Psychology is an ideological or discursive tool that fabricates certain truths, but so is the idea of “unspoilt”, natural reality.

And so what De Vos is really doing is not so much to show how psychology created a false consciousness of things - we cannot hope to remove the false layer of psychology so as to reveal the real things underneath. Instead, we need to accept that a great deal of our life world in the 21st century comes into being by virtue of psychologisation, so to understand what is going on around us, we need to understand psychologisation.

Khonzi: Okay fine, so according to De Vos, to understand the world as it is now, we need to understand psychologisation. It is not about critiquing psychology, it is about understanding how psychology has created a certain kind of world. So what exactly is psychologisation then?

Martin: I don't know! Or maybe I sort of know. Read the book!

But seriously, that is what the book promises and, I think, delivers.

Okay, so it starts off with a kind of history of how this groundswell of psychologising came about in the first place.

Yes, that's chapter 1. And then he goes on to show in the next three chapters how psychologising happened, or is happening, in three different realms - science, politics and culture.

I really liked one of the things De Vos does in the science chapter - taking those classic social psychology experiments about obedience and dehumanisation in a mock prison set-up (the Milgram and Zimbardo's experiments) and showing how they were actually kind of dramatic enactments of a process of psychologisation. As strictly understood scientific experiments they are crap, because human process cannot be pinned down in that way, but as ways of dramatising the process of psychologisation that has shaped American, and global, society they are very powerful.

Which doesn't mean that Milgram or Zimbardo or all the hundreds of people who have critiqued or commented on their work understood it in this way.

No, not at all. For example, De Vos makes a lot of the role of the person who acted as the experimenter in Milgram's study (the one who instructed the experimental subjects to keep administering stronger shocks because “the experiment requires it, you have no choice”). Everybody acts as if that is just part of the experimental set-up, but De Vos points out how one could read the whole experiment as actually being about this guy more than anybody else: Will he follow Milgram's instructions to act as a cold-hearted,

white-coat scientist or will he break down and let the supposed subjects in on the secret?

Khonzi: Yes, and then there is the moment when “all is revealed” and the subjects are asked to say how it makes them feel ...

Martin: Now that you know, how do you feel?

Yes! I think that phrase will stay with me for the rest of my life.

I guess we can't really explain in detail here what De Vos does with those experiments and how he relates them to broader issues and to current events such as the Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib atrocities. Also I don't know if we can quite explain here why that “now that you know, how do you feel?” phrase is so evocative, but that part alone makes the book worth reading.

Okay, so we won't unpack it in detail. After science, De Vos then uses a similar recipe in the next two chapters, but applies it to two other domains - culture and politics.

What stood out for you in those two chapters?

Well in the culture chapter there is some really interesting stuff about “psychological image culture”, but I was particularly struck by these two sentences towards the end of the chapter: “A critique of psychologisation of culture should thus not envision to rescue Everyday Life: the idea of a real, de-psychologised and authentic everyday life is precisely the core of the imagery of psychology. This reminds us of the 1960s slogan *reality is for those who cannot support the dream.*” (p 90)

And the politics chapter?

Well as one might expect, he talks about contemporary events such as the “Arab spring”, but (maybe again as one might expect) the analytic perspectives he brings to bear are not exactly conventional. For example, there is a fascinating section on the “hunger for the real” and how it conditions the actions of the global superpowers, and even the Oedipal father figure comes into it.

Yes, that's one of the things I don't fully get about De Vos's position. He argues that in order to talk about psychologisation we have to construct, or at least imagine, a platform beyond psychologisation, which enables us to kind of look down upon it and see it for what it is. At the same time, everything is supposedly psychologised - so where are we supposed to find such an independent platform to stand on? His answer is paradoxical - psychoanalysis is at the heart of psychology and thus of psychologisation. It is emblematic of everything all of us would like to imagine

psychology to be about. At the same time it is not exactly the flavour of the day - it has become something that is often seen as a little unscientific, a little disreputable. For this reason - because it is at the heart of the psychology project but also kind of repudiated by much of psychology - that it could, paradoxically, according to De Vos, be exactly the right instrument for dissecting this beast called psychologisation. But I don't quite follow him when he starts to explain why that is the case.

Khonzi: I guess it would be easier for readers who are really into psychoanalysis, which begs the question - who is the book really for? What audience does it have in mind?

Martin: It would be most appreciated by people with some background in critical psychology and theoretical psychology more generally, I think. It might have been good if it started with a somewhat less advanced chapter, setting the scene for readers who are new even to the idea of psychologisation. But that's not to say that less theoretically-minded readers might not also get some benefit from it. They would just have to concentrate a bit harder!

Yes. I noticed in Ian Parker's preface to the book that he calls it "lucid but complex", and further on he also says it is "labyrinthine" - so one really has to keep one's wits about one!

So over-all would you recommend the book and to what sorts of readers?

I would definitely recommend it to people who are already in psychology and specifically critical psychologists, and particularly to people with an interest or background in psychoanalysis. As for mainstream psychology readers, it might be better for them to read some other critical texts about psychology and its place in the world first. I definitely do think De Vos has made an important contribution here. It has definitely shifted my thinking about psychology and psychologisation.