

# The story of sociality: PINS(Psychology in society) at 30

Asserting that some phenomenon exists *in society* is so banal that it warrants not being taken notice of. And yet **PINS (Psychology in society)**, all those 30 years ago now, asserted precisely that psychology was *in society*. Well, where else could psychology be, if not *in society*? The obviousness of locating psychology *in society* was against a backdrop of the psychology mainstream in South Africa during the 1980s that was firmly in the grip of a psychology “floating” above the flotsam and jetsam of social issues, and seemingly uncontaminated by the polluting ideologies of politics. Mainstream academic psychology positioned itself “*above*”, not *in*, society as it pursued its research programmes according to value-neutral scientific principles. South African establishment Psychology during the apartheid 1980s defined (and in many instances, psychology around the world, still defines) itself as a *science*, and thus saw itself as separate from the political vicissitudes of everyday life.

**Grahame Hayes**

Durban

[grahame.hayes@gmail.com](mailto:grahame.hayes@gmail.com)

The aloofness of psychology, and other human and social disciplines for that matter, was especially galling to a predominantly young and radical group of academics and practitioners, who refused to separate the commitment to intellectual and research pursuits from the commitment to striving for a just and non-racist society. The early 1980s was a time of increasing organizational resistance to apartheid, particularly prompted by a government desperate to cling to power in its dying throes and hence resorting to very violent and brutal forms of repression. The decade of the 1980s was the decade of broad-based democratic organisations’ resistance to apartheid. It is worth remembering that the UDF (United Democratic Front) was formed on 20 August 1983 in Mitchell’s Plain, Cape Town. During this time there was a renewed sense of commitment to political struggle, a certain courageous defiance against the state’s repressive apparatus, and a realisation that apartheid was about to be overthrown.

The vibrancy and energy of these times was infectious, and encouraged left (and progressive) intellectuals and academics to bring the lessons of the political activity that they were involved in into the universities, into the lecture theatres, and to make theory, research, and general intellectual pursuits the sites

of struggle too. The growing disquiet, of a politically engaged faculty, with regard to the docility of a conservative, and often reactionary, establishment in psychology in the face of the brutal repression of the apartheid state and its security apparatus, exposed the lie of a value-free science of psychology. It could be said that the rupture between a science versus politics of knowledge revolved around the left's insistence of the *social* bases of (psychological) knowledge, and a view that the operations of ideology could only be undermined by being aware of *how* ideology works rather than thinking that science guaranteed an ideology-free research practice (cf Hayes, 1989; Sayers, 1989; Fay, 1998). The science versus ideology "debate", if it could be called that, was starkly manifest in the spat between Andy Dawes (1985), and the doyen of South African psychology, Simon Biesheuvel (1987). Andy Dawes (1985) had written an article critically questioning clinical psychology's very limited research output regarding the mental health problems that were being experienced by many black South African citizens. Biesheuvel (1987) objected to Dawes's politicisation of the contribution of clinical psychology, and in his reply argued for the necessity of a value-free practice of a scientific psychology that would guarantee objectivity.

These divergent positions on the practice of (psychological) research were not just about differing theoretical paradigms, as the stakes (in 1980s South Africa) were much more political than that. For instance, organised psychology's silence about detention without trial, and solitary confinement during detention were seen as unconscionable acts of omission. There were many instances, not always easy to definitively prove at the time, of psychologists' active support for apartheid policies and practices, especially within the confines of the security and military apparatuses of the state. More insidious and complicit at some level was the ideologico-theoretical work of "justifying" apartheid rule. I am thinking of the "cultural (racial / ethno) psychology" of describing the *essential* nature of African people, or in this parlance, of *the African* (cf Manganyi, 1973; and Nzimande's [1985] critique of the psychology of black workers). The consequences of much of this cultural psychological work were in support of an ideology of separate development as the research had (seemingly) shown how different the various "population groups" (the racial categories of apartheid – black/African, white, Indian/Asian, coloured) were, and that in the interests of social harmony should live (separately) in their own "social groups"! The history of this highly suspect ideological research should caution us against a simplistic embrace of African psychology and the inherent dangers of another kind of essentialism as we attempt to de-colonise psychological theory in this country, and other parts of Africa.

It was in the political context of the anti-apartheid struggles during the late 1970s (post Soweto 1976) and the 1980s, as well as the struggle over ideas for a psychology that was on the side of the oppressed and exploited, that presented the possibilities for the formation of **Psychology in society** in late 1983. The editors, and others associated with the ideals of the journal, wanted to insert psychology back into society, and thus the story of the sociality of psychology was foregrounded. As a way of charting some of this story of sociality it might be useful to track the changes of the editorial statements over the years as one way of beginning to tell the story of sociality, and to re-assess the significance of these changes.

The masthead of the "foundation edition" of **Psychology in society** in September 1983 read: "**Psychology in society** is a journal which aims to critically explore and present ideas on the nature of psychology in capitalist society. There is a special emphasis on the theory and practice of psychology in the South African context". And while in this first issue there was no explicit mention of *apartheid* in the editorial masthead, the editorial article did mention that "**Psychology in society** has been conceived by a group of South African psychologists who share a general critique of that

network of ideas and practices that has come to be known as ‘psychology’ in the Anglo-American world. In particular, we share a concern as South Africans about the uses and abuses to which ‘psychology’ is put in the maintenance of apartheid and other forms of social oppression in this country. And it is precisely this deficiency in mainstream psychology publishing (and thinking) that has prompted the editors of this journal to bring out a new dimension to psychological debate in South Africa.” (Editorial Group, 1983: 2) The somewhat (purist) influence of left intellectuals, Marxists in particular, was evident in the phrasing or framing of the social nature of society in the masthead as “capitalist society”. However, two years later, in 1985 (**PINS 3**), the masthead was changed to read: **Psychology in society** “aims to critically explore and present ideas on the nature of psychology in *apartheid and* capitalist society. There is a special emphasis on the theory and practice of psychology in the South African context” (emphases added).

The reasons for adding “apartheid” were twofold: firstly, to explicitly indicate that **PINS** was anti-apartheid, or at least to alert its readers and (prospective) authors to a political commitment against a psychology establishment that made no mention of the context of apartheid that psychology was practised in. And secondly, to soften the somewhat implied Marxist orientation by an exclusive focus on a critique of *capitalist* society. While some of the editors were openly Marxist in their approach, the same could not be said for most psychologists, even those committed to an anti-apartheid struggle, and hence **PINS** was concerned to appeal to a broad alliance of progressive forces in psychology, and not only left radicals.

The above editorial position served **PINS** well until the democratic elections of 1994, when it became necessary to re-think the direction of the journal given the formal and official demise of apartheid, and the beginnings of the transition to a new society, and especially seeing as South Africa had legitimately become part of Africa. **PINS** reflected these changes in its editorial by making two slight, yet telling, “additions”. The masthead in 1994 (**PINS 18**) was changed to read: “**Psychology in society (PINS)** aims to critically explore and present ideas on the nature of psychology in *post-apartheid and* capitalist society. There is a special emphasis on the theory and practice of psychology in the *southern* African context” (emphases added).

A significant outcome of the democratic government was to remove the pariah status of South Africa within continental Africa. Although **PINS** has struggled to appeal to a readership and authorship beyond the confines of South Africa, there is still a concern about merely being a parochial South African journal! But given the state of psychology within southern African countries, it is likely that **PINS** will remain a South African journal for the foreseeable future, and yet hopefully with a (*southern*) African consciousness. The change in the **PINS** editorial masthead from apartheid to *post-apartheid*, might be seen as the more problematic alteration. At one level this change could be read as merely descriptive of the new democratic society of 1994, namely, literally, *post-apartheid*. The editorial reasoning behind this modification was an attempt to capture some of the *social* dynamics involved in the transition to a *post-apartheid* socio-economic and political order. The impact of nearly 50 years of apartheid rule on ordinary people’s lives, and the continuing effect that this was likely to have well into the years of the *post-apartheid* society, was the rationale in designating the social order as *analytically, post-apartheid*. It was **PINS**’s contention that the effects of apartheid ran deep in the society, in peoples’ everyday practices and experiences, and marked them in psychological ways that were important to study.

The 1990s were an exciting and difficult decade as many of the intellectual and political formations that had existed during apartheid had to re-position themselves in relation to the

new democratic society, and the political hegemony of the ANC. It was in this period (1994-1996) that **PINS (Psychology in society)** continued to tinker with its editorial statement in the hope of reflecting a new social reality that was emerging in the country, along with the serious tasks of social reconstruction of post-apartheid democratic South Africa that needed to be undertaken. There was also a concern to locate **PINS** both locally and internationally, and so to be of interest to critical intellectuals beyond South Africa. Thus the final adjustment to the **PINS** editorial statement was changed in late 1996 (**PINS 21**) to read: “*Psychology in society (PINS) aims to foster a socio-historical and critical theory perspective, by focusing on the theory and practice of psychology in the southern African context.*”

Without overstating it, in the story of sociality outlined here, **PINS** has always tried to be responsive to changing socio-historical circumstances, and to somehow reflect this in modifying its editorial statements accordingly over the years. Clearly more is needed in thoroughly rethinking **PINS**'s editorial position than these “tinkerings”, and maybe now with the critical contributions to this special issue, the editors have enough material to start thinking about the future editorial direction of **PINS**.

It could be said that our current editorial statement (the one above, since 1996, in **PINS 21**) is in many ways a retreat! A retreat from politics; a retreat from a radical critique of the nature of society – capitalist and post-apartheid; and a retreat into the comfortable theoretical paradigm of critical psychology, which having lost a lot of its initial radical edge often looks like the “alternative mainstream”. What is missing from the pages of **PINS** is a proper theorisation of the social, and especially the kind of society that South Africa is and how this affects the lived experience of ordinary people. If **PINS (Psychology in society)** is a journal of social analysis in, of, against, psychology, then the particular character of the capitalism in this country, and its effects on the everyday lives and psyches of the citizenry, should form part of our analyses. It is only ideologues of the capitalist class, the 1%, who believe that class doesn't exist, or that it is unimportant in defining social relationships. Asserting the importance of social class as a socio-economic category of analysis, is not the same as saying that the working class is still the main agent of social change. The rapacious character of contemporary capitalism has seen to it that the working class are on the political and economic defensive, with a growing under-class of highly exploited migrant workers, and the luxury of a permanent job being a thing of the past. The social and psychological implications of surviving, as that is literally what many people are trying to do, under such precarious circumstances, in the face of massive and *visible* inequality, have heightened “the social cost of ... people's misery” (Therborn, 2013: 183), and far too little political and intellectual work is being on the consequences of this *avoidable* human tragedy.

It is a truism that in South Africa people's class lives are inextricably linked with the racial history of oppression and exploitation under apartheid. According to Mbembe (2013) there were three modalities of brutality that the white minority government had to secure in order to ensure the functionality of its governance, and sadly the effects of this brutality are still evident in post-apartheid society. The first modality of brutality that Mbembe (2013) refers to is how white minority rule “weakened black people's capacity to secure and sustain social reproduction both generationally and on a daily basis”. The second mode of brutality that he mentions is that that was wrought upon the black body, and he notes that “apartheid brutality was somatic”. And finally, Mbembe suggest that apartheid brutality “systematically targeted its victims' nervous systems and tended to deplete them of the capacity to engage in meaningful symbolic and creative work”. Some of the effects of these forms of brutality would have been ameliorated depending on where people

found themselves in terms of class position. Nevertheless, surely the sedimented history of the psychic effects of these and other forms of brutality linger in the social and human fabric that make up post-apartheid South Africa. While Mbembe focuses on the brutality suffered by black people, what do we make of the consequences of those who enacted this brutality upon black people, and those, mostly white people, who “quietly” benefitted from a brutality enacted in their name? Maybe **PINS** removed its focus on *post-apartheid* society too hastily, given how much we still need to do to understand the psychic geography of everyday life and suffering in this fragile democracy.

Finally, although **PINS** is now well established as part of the discourse of what constitutes psychology in this country, and will continue to be a forum of critical and independent debate about the nature of psychology as it struggles to find a place in the changing social conditions of an emerging democratic and non-racist South Africa, should **PINS** (want to) play this role? The unchallenged assumption is that Psychology is mostly a “good news” story, and very few thinkers these days, with the possible exception of Ian Parker (2007), think that psychological practice might have become part of the problem that afflicts modern society, rather than the solution. For example, Saths Cooper (2014) in his editorial in the latest edition of the **South African Journal of Psychology** special issue celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of both the formation of PsySSA (Psychological Society of South Africa), and the advent of democracy in South Africa, only points to organised Psychology’s apartheid past as problematic. The last 20 years, and the future, are presented as a story of the unification and democratisation of psychology. Most of the papers in this special issue document organised psychology’s contribution to the social good of all the citizens of the country. Are the outlooks for applying psychology in South Africa this optimistic, and what dangers would organised psychology, for instance PsySSA, see with the increasing “psychologisation” of everyday suffering and misery?

If **PINS** is to be pro-psychology, then which Psychology should it be making a case for, given the previously noted problems even with critical psychology? Should **PINS** be advocating an African psychology, and what would this entail? In this part of the world we need to think very hard, and ask difficult questions about what it means to practice psychology, to conduct research, to develop theory, and to teach students. In other words, we need to think about psychology *and* Africa, psychology *in* Africa, an African psychology, and Africanist psychology. We need to resist the essentialist, mythological, romantic, and even reactionary dimensions of a too easy solution that all we need to do is Africanise psychology, develop an African psychology. Is an African psychology an inherently liberatory practice that is simultaneously anti-colonial, de-colonising, and emancipatory for the subjects of Africa’s diverse countries?

In some ways **PINS** has a more crucial and difficult role to play in the development of the new society, than was the case under apartheid where in many instances the issues were so clear-cut. **PINS (Psychology in society)** will continue to be interested in situating psychology within the society it operates in, both in terms of a critique of its social location and developing new ideas and forms of practice appropriate to psychology being a “servant of society”. And if some of this involves **PINS** being a forum for an anti-psychology, then maybe **PINS**’s story of the sociality of psychology will endure.

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