

# For a permanent critique of psychology: Reimagining psychology in society

What is it about **PINS** that makes it important for us to mark and celebrate its three decades of publication? 30 years is not a particularly long period in the life of a journal; there are many that are older, even in South Africa. Yes, several of the small, independent journals, magazines and newspapers that were established in this country in the 1980s (often in explicit, programmatic opposition to apartheid) have since disappeared, adding to the impression that **PINS** is something of a battle-bruised but tenacious survivor – not only of apartheid’s censorship regime and often violent reprisals against critical intellectuals (McDonald, 2009; Keniston, 2013), but also of the rapid corporatisation of scholarship and the capitulation of erstwhile strong traditions of radical thought and praxis in South African universities – what Helliker and Vale (2012) refer to as an “age of retreat” – after 1994 (see also Jacklin & Vale, 2009). Indeed, in an editorial commemorating the twentieth anniversary of **PINS** in the early 2000s, founding and current editor Grahame Hayes referred to the journal’s “struggle to survive” and the difficulty, not only in South Africa but worldwide, “of sustaining a stance of critique and social engagement in psychology” (Hayes, 2003: 5). Further, he noted:

“The extreme individualism and ‘Taylorisation’ (the SAPSE system of funding amongst other things) of intellectual life at South African (and international) universities is part of the explanation of why much academic writing (and publishing) is so mercenary, strategic, and mean-spirited. Also the forward lurch towards conservatism in political and intellectual life, both nationally and internationally, make for difficult times for left-aligned projects. Many independent journals struggle with issues of funding, production, regularity of appearance, and fluctuating interest from subscribers and readers.” (Hayes, 2003: 1)

But whilst the mere fact of its survival during such tumultuous – then repressive, now perhaps callous – times is not itself insignificant (and certainly, **PINS** deserves attention in any future history of academic publishing in South Africa), it would be easy to overstate this achievement, or to confine one’s appreciation of the journal to this dimension of its legacy. The

## Desmond Painter

Stellenbosch University,  
Stellenbosch  
[dpainter@sun.ac.za](mailto:dpainter@sun.ac.za)

last thing a journal like **PINS** needs is to be reduced to the symbolic capital afforded by a kind of struggle nostalgia; a commodified legacy that inspires dutiful reverence but hardly still guarantees political relevance. It is the last thing a journal like **PINS** needs; and, I expect, it is the last thing it would want. In any case, it is not all that surprising that **PINS** has survived. Firstly, psychology is a relatively large discipline in this country and the pressure on academics and even postgraduates to publish is increasing every year. Any journal accredited with the Department of Education, as **PINS** has been for some time, will continue to receive manuscript submissions. Secondly, **PINS** has come to be seen, by some at least, as a handy little niche journal of sorts that publishes “qualitative research” and other kinds of texts that don’t quite fit into the “mainstream” of psychology, but are not necessarily radical or even just “critical” in orientation. Finally, and crucially, **PINS** has had the good fortune of editorial continuity (and perseverance!) and a number of timely, highly pertinent special editions over the last decade or so (focusing on HIV/AIDS, the TRC, critical psychology, racism, masculinity and the Apartheid Archive project) which have kept the journal on the intellectual radar of authors and readers alike.

Survival, if it is *mere* survival, can in fact be a curse. A journal that had started off as an intellectual and perhaps even political project, a collectively owned forum in which a community of scholars had once rallied transformative ideas about their discipline and its relation to the world, can quickly be reduced to yet another generic “publication venue” servicing a market within psychology. It can easily become simply another platform for the numbing, performance indicator-driven production of academic writing, for the dutiful and endless reproduction of the same – and in competition, often cutthroat, with other similar platforms, not on the grounds of the nature and quality of the ideas they circulate and defend, but on the grounds of the proliferation of various metrics which transform intellectual life into a less exciting version of Pop Idol. **PINS** is certainly not immune to such pressures. I have had colleagues coming into my office to ask whether or not **PINS** is “accredited”; whether or not it “counts” to publish there; what its current “impact factor” is. No, not even **PINS** will be able to fully escape being either claimed or dismissed as a viable option in the calculations each of us is supposed to make when developing high impact, individualised “publication strategies” (Lewallen & Crane, 2010). For me, then, the important thing to acknowledge is not the fact that **PINS** still exists; but that it still exists, despite all that I have grumbled about above, *as it does*: independent, critical, unashamedly local – but without losing sight of the importance of being internationalist, and to develop and defend this internationalism against the glib universalism of an integrationist “global psychology” (eg, Berry, 2013).

More pointedly, **PINS** has managed to survive – at least in regard to its editorial mission – with its most important distinguishing features intact: it remains resolutely critical of unreflexive, de-historicised, individualist and bourgeois modalities and practices of psychology, irrespective of the theory and methodology favoured; and it remains committed to being an intellectual-political project, rooted within and at the same time orienting a scholarly community, rather than functioning simply as a brand-name publication serving a clientele of increasingly atomised academics. In the words of Hayes (2003: 2), reaffirming the journal’s critical intentions, “**PINS** would like to be the collective project for all those who want to participate in debate and argument pertaining to what it might mean to advance a critical perspective in psychology, and especially in this country.” In similar vein, I have reflected in another context that **PINS** has remained “one of those rare things: a journal in the proper sense of the term, aspiring to connect and reproduce a scholarly community through ongoing dialogue, rather than becoming a commercial entity that pursues its academic distinction (its intellectual ‘brand’ and marketability) in terms of the facile, quasi-quantification of scholarly value in metrics like the ‘impact factor’” (Painter, 2012).

However, at this point I would like to suggest that we distinguish – and I am being somewhat facetious, of course – between an Actually Existing **PINS** and something I will call a Utopian **PINS**. Actually Existing **PINS** is the journal you are holding in your hand; it is the collection on your shelf, perhaps going back all the way to those chapbook format editions of the early and mid-1980s. (I own quite a number of these, rescued from the collections of retired and deceased colleagues; I treasure them, and return to them often.) Actually Existing **PINS** is already a fine thing: a kind of counter-archive that has kept alive, against quietism or complicity, against the psychologisation of the political, against the clarion calls of Americanisation, the hope that another psychology is possible.

But even if Actually Existing **PINS** continues to play a role in probing the historical, political and epistemological foundations and entanglements of psychology, especially in South Africa, the last decade or so has also brought a slight waning of critical urgency, leading to a widening gap between editorial vision (eg Hayes, 2003) and many of the articles submitted and published. Several recent contributors to **PINS** seem to have made their peace with psychology, or to have found spaces of relatively comfortable theoretical and methodological co-existence within the discipline. Too many contributions proceed as if not only psychology, but also the nature of society is self-evident, and as if our challenge therefore is simply to apply psychology with more urgency to society and its problems – often without querying whether “social problems” have been declared such by social subjects themselves or by those who govern or manage social subjects. Some contributors seem to assume that steering clear of positivist epistemologies and quantitative methods, or adopting self-relativizing, “reflexive” modes of analysis and writing, is the full extent of the critical work psychology needs to perform on itself.

My argument is that when we abandon constant critical reflection on both the nature of psychology and society, and their dialectical entwinement, Actually Existing **PINS** could easily become just another journal; somewhat left of centre, perhaps, but no longer animated by the desire to change *both* psychology and society – through the continuous critical labour of thinking psychology *in* society, rather than simply applying psychology *to* society, reifying both in the process. What distinguished **PINS** three decades ago was precisely the way it confronted psychology with society, not simply by demanding a more “relevant” psychology (cf. Long & Foster, 2013), but by challenging the discipline more fundamentally at the level of its historical, political and theoretical complicity with (racial) capitalism. **PINS** made it clear that no theoretically and politically defensible psychology can be developed in the absence of an appropriate theory of contemporary capitalist society and an account of the cultural-historical emergence and functioning of psychology within that society. The eventual demise of apartheid did not diminish the urgency of this challenge; *on the contrary*, and despite the triumphalist, post-political accounts of psychology in South Africa post 1994 that are increasingly flaunted by local scholars (eg Cooper & Nicholas, 2013). Capitalism, with its escalation of inequality and brutalisation of life for millions who find themselves not only locked in daily struggles for survival, but increasingly criminalised, is as rampant in South Africa as it is elsewhere. Police brutality, forced removals, privatisation and exclusions – these are daily occurrences in post-apartheid society. At the same time psychology, oriented to the entrepreneurial self of the neoliberal era, has eagerly latched on to the market logic, just as capitalism has incorporated forms of psychologisation into its modes of subjectification, control and reproduction (Illouz, 2007). When will the critical interrogation and reinvention of psychology once again become a matter of political urgency in this society? And where, if not in **PINS**?

In short, I think we can make more of (and with!) this journal, and that the time is ripe to do so. The nature and content of this “more” is what I refer to as Utopian **PINS**: a journal scholars

will once again engage with, not just to keep abreast of “the latest findings in my field”, but to take the pulse of something angry, something new, in psychology as well as in society. Utopian **PINS** is a *critical* psychology journal; it sets out from the assumption that there can be and will be no justifiable, emancipatory social science or psychology without critical theory (Dahms, 2008). Utopian **PINS** is a journal that remains fundamentally at odds with psychology – as a disciplinary matrix, a societal technology or an ideology – at the same time as it actively pursues the project of reimagining psychology. Utopian **PINS** publishes many more historical studies about psychology in South Africa, many more philosophical critiques of the discipline and of contemporary modes and discourses of psychologisation, many more debates, and many more manifestos. Utopian **PINS** is willing to go on the attack: against triumphalist accounts of post-apartheid psychology; against the narrowing of critical inquiry; against the banalisation of subjective life. Utopian **PINS**, in other words, poses a challenge, not so much to the journal and its editors as to us; we who read it, write for it, call it “our” journal. Theodor Adorno is reported to have said, “No cathedral can be built if no community desires one” (Müller-Doohm, 2005: 48). The same applies to successfully maintaining a journal that does more than patrol the boundaries of a disciplinary subfield or provides a service for individual academics needing to meet their publication targets.

How can we not desire Utopian **PINS**? We live in an era of political crises and (perhaps fragile) revolutionary potential. It is once more necessary to insist on the historical nature of psychological categories; to formulate and debate new theories of society and subjectivity; to develop alternative notions psychological distress; to ask what precisely it means to do psychology in *this* society. Of course, no psychology, or any other social science, can claim legitimacy simply on the grounds of its “critical” self-description. Legitimacy, at the very least, will require “some form of proof that its critical perspective is reinforced by a need or a movement within social reality” (Honneth, 2007: 66). This is the real challenge: articulating and describing these needs and movements; rethinking our relationship to these needs and movements and the social reality in which they are experienced and expressed; allowing them to shatter psychological preconceptions rooted in capitalist notions of “need”. This is the task of any critical psychology worthy of the name.

We are in very a fortunate position. We have access to one of the very few surviving journals in psychology that explicitly commits itself to this kind of intellectual and political labour. Not only has the journal survived, it also remains committed to precisely the aims that I have claimed above for my Utopian **PINS**. Here again Hayes (2003: 1):

“**PINS** would want to be part of a discourse and set of practices that challenges the social and intellectual conditions conducive to the demise and retreat of critical thought, ideas, and practices. The shouts of pragmatism and realism from so many quarters these days make the project of critical engagement all the more imperative.”

Yes, **PINS** has a proud history, but its future excites me more. It is perfectly positioned. For the first time in two decades capitalism is, if not under attack, at least critically debated even in the mainstream media. For the first time in as many years academics worldwide, and not just those who identify with as critical intellectuals, are petitioning against commercial journals and the toxic effects of an overreliance on impact factors and other publication metrics. And increasingly scholars and activists are looking to the global South, rather than to Euro-America, for the birth of the new.

**PINS**, your time, *our* time has come!

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