



Nation on the Couch

Inside South Africa's mind

Wahbie Long

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Review by Moira Levy

Reading the daily news or watching eNCA or SABC1, 2 or 3 can often leave us wondering if everyone in our country has gone slightly mad. The corruption and boundless greed of our leaders; the senseless and brutal violence, especially against women and children; the apparently thoughtless destruction of infrastructure such as schools and universities ... and you've got to ask yourself "what the hell is going on?"

How do we make sense of the actions of a serial rapist, random shootings in poor neighbourhoods, looting of copper wire from train lines which leaves taxis as the last means of transport, even though it takes a kind of madness to travel in those minibus juggernauts, a (former) president and leader of the (formerly) much loved ANC who appears to care nought for the people.

How does the ordinary citizen come to terms with all of this? Does anyone understand any of this?

And just when you feel the onset of a panic attack, here comes Wahbie Long, clinical psychologist and associate professor of psychology at the University of Cape Town.

"There is a brokenness at the heart of our nation that cannot be wished away," writes Long in his book, *Nation on the Couch: Inside South Africa's Mind*.

It takes a brave person to travel inside South Africa's mind – at a

time of mind-numbing poverty, hunger, joblessness, homelessness, landlessness, and all the attendant consequences these socio-economic ills visit on our society. Perhaps it's not wise to visit the mind of South Africa at any time; certainly not the South Africa of the past where decades of colonialism and then apartheid shows us, South Africans, to be either a brutal or brutalised people, and sometimes both.

Long takes the conventions of psychology and stretches them to include aspects of the lived experiences of human beings that the discipline tends to ignore. The American Psychological Association defines psychology as "the study of the mind and behavior;" Long reminds us that to fully understand human thought and behaviour we need to also look at the material and social conditions which shape – and sometimes misshape – human thinking and actions.

It's a bold leap for psychology and South Africa should be grateful to Long for attempting, in this important book, to understand apparently incomprehensible conduct. He returns to the experts in his discipline to extract tools that can be applied to our sometimes sociopathic present day experience.

When protesting "Fallist" students exclaim in their posters "We can't breathe!" says Long, they are exhibiting

a classic symptom of a panic attack, albeit *en masse*. Long reminds us that Freud reminds us of "reaction formation," which Long offers as "the most elegant" explanation. It's not that whites are feared; it is black subjects who fear their desire to be white. And while Fallists may decry this Freudian thinking, Long draws on Franz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks* when he writes: "There is no fear of whiteness *per se* -- but there is an overwhelming fear of the *desire* for whiteness." Using Fanon's terminology, Long writes it is not the black subject but the white subject that then becomes "a phobogenic object, a stimulus to anxiety."

In other words, whiteness becomes a phobia; "The reaction formation shows itself in the anxious deprecation of whiteness, which attenuates the very desire for it." Here Long is drawing on the 1954 classic by C S Hall, *A Primer of Freudian Psychology*.

It's all about Envy, says Long. Not envy as we colloquially understand it, but the Envy of psycho-speak, which he elaborates on in a comprehensive chapter on this sort of Envy. He explains in his Introduction this is what happens when shame turns to resentment, "a phenomenon not uncommon to people from poor and working-class backgrounds when they enter the middle classes for the first time."

He employs the concept of Freudian >>

urges and “drives” to explain South Africa’s endemic violence. Using as an example the almost daily service delivery protests, and their apparent – to the outsider – illogic, he argues that the inevitable outcome has “an internal logic of its own.” These eruptions start with the shame created by relative deprivation, which turns into “righteous suffering” and resentment, which builds up over time and, as Freud warned, seeks an outlet.

Says Long: “with the resentment incapable of regulating itself, it finally explodes in the form of *envy*, taking shape in the seemingly wanton destruction of property and the apparently senseless resort to interpersonal violence.”

The book also includes a chapter called “Impasse,” which considers the predicament of many white people in post-apartheid South Africa who struggle to come to terms with assimilation with the former underclass. Posits Long, this explains their (the whites’) “over the top” affection for their dogs who they turn into mediators in their dealings with black people.

Here Long refers mainly to the “colonial dog,” who was used to tame and control indigenous populations,

the typical violent police dog or the dog bred for fighting: “The hostility of the erstwhile colonial master – his virulent racism – must not be allowed to see the light of day. In psychological terms, sublimation in the form of dog fighting – the translation of darker impulses into socially less-abhorrent pursuits – becomes his vehicle for psychic release.”

Long appears to struggle to explain the post-apartheid switch of white people’s choice of fierce German Shepherds and Dobermann Pinschers to the “more chummy” Labradors and Golden Retrievers. He says, “this does not amount to proof that white South Africans have turned the corner.”

In summary, Long explains that in this chapter, “What I have attempted to demonstrate ... is the psychological and practical significance of dogs in the lives of people who struggle to cope with the demands of the world ... When it comes to ... mind-blindness or Other-blindness – dogs are capable of serving as assuring surrogates for humans thus afflicted. ... They can investigate, interpret and negotiate the world on behalf of uncertain masters.”

Long’s argument unfolds carefully throughout the book, starting with a chapter on “Shame” and, encouragingly,

ending with one on “Hope.” Running through the narrative is the familiar concept of “alienation,” a psychological condition that he uses to good effect in understanding our troubled nation: “South Africans feel alienated in almost every sense – from their loved ones, from their work activities, from their political leaders and, most of all, from each other.”

Long says he uses the concept as a “bridging” notion to emphasise the “interconnectedness of social structures and individual experiences.”

“Alienation is built into capitalist structures as much as it is a feature of subjective life under those structures. It is by treating alienation, then, as a connecting device that one is able to hold the social and individual domains in creative tension instead of collapsing the dichotomy. In my view, this ‘mutualist’ approach to alienation is an important corrective to the damaging dualities of insideness–outsideness, interiority–exteriority, or psychism–materialism.

“On a more practical note, it also avoids reducing alienation theory to an investigation of *either* its sociological causes or its psychological effects, an unnecessary antagonism that has proved harmful to alienation research in the past.” **NA**