

Interview with Doctor Hook

by Patrizia Montagner

Apartheid came to existence in South Africa in 1948, but the segregation laws between black and white had been effective already from the beginning of the 20th century.

On February 11, 1990 Nelson Mandela was released from prison. This date is considered the end of Apartheid. On May 09, 1994 Mandela was elected the first black president of South Africa. But from 1948 to 1990 the racial conflict touched points of tremendous violence.

In the last 20 years South Africa is trying to become effectively the Rainbow Country.

Psychoanalysis is largely developing in that country, and now South Africa has the first Psychoanalytical Study Group in Africa, inside the International Psychoanalytical Association.

How is it possible for the new generations of Psychoanalysts to face the history of their Country? What does it mean to be born in a place where the racial segregation was so hard? And now, what are the consequences of all that?

Derek Hook gets on a very important research on the themes of Apartheid and post Apartheid on a Psychoanalytical and Psychosocial point of view.

This interview has been registered during a meeting of the Study Group on the Consequences of Apartheid Traumas, led by Mark Solms in Johannesburg with SAPI (South African Psychoanalytical Initiative) members. During that meeting Derek Hook discussed particularly his idea of the importance of knowing everyday life for understanding the Apartheid reality.

For Hook, one of the most interesting examples of this reality is the meaning that animals, and particularly pets, had to representing a sort of image of feelings, between white and black people, that could not be expressed in another way, because of the apartheid prohibition. He says "The spontaneous recourse to an animal enables the narrator, however temporarily, to bridge a symbolic impasse. In response of pressing question of inter-racial relationship - which is much that of familial tenderness as that of effective "ownership" - this operator (the animal) provides an answer." (2013. p. 142)

In this interview Derek Hook answers to some questions about the last two books he wrote, in which he examines the problem of the roots of Apartheid, that he puts on the colonial way of thinking, and of the actual conditions of post apartheid.

In a world in which Psychoanalysis is going to develop largely, the question that the interviewer tries to think on is if and how much is interesting and useful to know and to think together about South African History for us people who live in other countries and apparently do not share anything with it.

May other countries history be an opportunity for us to think about our own historical heritage? May psychoanalysis have anything to say about the racial segregation, seen as an image of other kinds of segregation, of separation, of splitting we live in our social life...?

Patrizia Montagner: *Doctor Hook, I thank you very much for this interview. This gives us psychoanalysts the opportunity of knowing your work on Apartheid and what South African*

psychoanalysts, psychologists and experts of social problems study, think and work through about this dark period of South African history.

This is particularly important for Italy, because in Italy you are known for the communication you did two years ago (2012) in London at the Congress on “Psychoanalysis in the age of Totalitarianism”.

On this Conference, you said something about the psychoanalyst who in the 40's of last century worked together with the Apartheid government in South Africa. This knowledge opened a very interesting debate inside the Italian Psychoanalytic Society on ethics and psychoanalysis, which is still in progress. It constitutes a lived space of reflection on the power of psychoanalysis and psychology and the necessity of an ethical thought on that. But psychoanalysis in South Africa is much more than this terrible fact, and your last two books are a very interesting example of the development that the study on Apartheid and its consequences had and has here. Two years ago in 2012 you wrote a book titled “A Critical Psychology of the Post-Colonial: The Mind of Apartheid”. In this very complex work you examine the element of the post-colonial thought. What is the topic of this book?

Derek Hook: There have been a number of different scholars that wanted to suggest that post-colonial studies (in a way) is a whole field and a number of different scholars want to think about the particular challenges and complexities of post-colonial societies in different ways. Some of them, those inspired by Edward Said and his approach to orientalism, want to use a kind of Michel Foucault inspired approach to reading discourses, who want to look at power in different facets, there is Marxist way of doing it, there's multiple different ways, but one of the most exciting facets of this broad new form of scholarship (its old now, but I mean in the early 80's, late 70's and so on) was that it enabled people to start thinking about psychoanalysis as a way of doing an analysis of power and of course the big figure in many ways for this was *Franz Fanon*, because he had attained a great deal of international fame, certainly in the 60's where a lot of people would refer back to “*The Wretched of the Earth*” or some people preferred to call it “*The Damned of the Earth*” – a text which has a whole series of reflections, some kind of pseudo-Marxist or para-Marxist thoughts on the post-colonial sphere or the sphere after the colonial independence and the struggle to gain some kind of autonomy and independence. But of course the earlier text that he writes, “*Black Skins White Masks*”, is very much about a psychoanalytic understanding of colonial racism. So I come to Fanon's work, both thinking about the post-colonial and because he seemed to have something useful to say about the Apartheid situation, and as it turns out, also the post-Apartheid situation. And of course he has got an ambivalent relationship to psychoanalysis (he takes some aspects from it, he is critical of others), but he does put psychoanalysis to work and he says a whole series of interesting and productive things, one of which is the colonial situation, and you can say the post-colonial situation too, is a domain of phantasy and you can see why that might be the case in a place like South Africa, where there is such massive divides of power, with such radical asymmetries, divisions between privilege and dispossession and when you have those material discrepancies, those material markers of inequality, it's not surprising that groups on either side of this divide start having questions and ideas and phantasies about one another – and of course this is precisely the thing that Fanon is interested in. One of the elements of his work that I tried to develop quite strongly in the book that you mentioned is that he not only wants to embark on a psychoanalytic theory of racism, but he wants to ask- Could we think of racism as involving a whole series of phantasies and phobic, a kind of phobic economy?- and so he develops that in a little way and I think it's quite a productive way of thinking about racism. And I also think that it brings to the forefront that's something very important about psychoanalytic thinking, because

where lots of colleagues that I was working with at the time were looking at discourse, texts, representations, ideology, representational materials, which are important, Fanon does that but he also looks at affects, phobias, actual feelings. So I could speak for a long time on different facets of Fanon, which are so fascinating to thinking the psychoanalysis of racism and the psychoanalysis of the Apartheid and post-Apartheid sphere. He is not the only guy, but I think that he opens up a lot of questions that you basically don't approach in quite the same way without him, and without his form of psychoanalysis.

PM: *In this book, you very often quote or refer to several other authors, we can see that there are a lot of authors who studied the problem of ideology of the racial segregation. This large number are evidence of the spread and the deepness of this kind of studies. We must say that for example in Italy we don't have the same attention in our past history and on the social, and also colonial and racial problems we had during a period of the last century (I mean the law against Jewish for example). Do you think that this book and your studies have something to say to other people, or other countries?*

DH: Sure. It's an interesting question because I was speaking of Franz Fanon earlier, and at the beginning of *Black Skins White Masks* he makes the claim that his analysis is particular to the colonial sphere as it's developing and Martinique at a certain time. And I think there is a bit of ambivalence about that, because on the one hand he wants to suggest that you can't extrapolate too widely from his analysis, but of course on the other hand some of the things that he says clearly have import and value for other applications. So I could make in a way a similar claim and say that the book is really supposed to be about a certain sphere (about, at least my grounding in and routing in a South African content) and therefore you may say that it has limitations about how you apply it elsewhere. And I have tried to find some South African authors, and the kinds of authors that aren't normally thought about as orthodox psychoanalytic, or certainly psychological terms. So you could say that maybe what would be a useful thing to do is to embark on a similar project, and maybe utilise a series of Italian authors, or people talking about the Italian context. But you could also say that, then again, I have also used a lot of authors that are talking more theoretically about things, I mean, I draw on Homi Bhabha, I draw on Julia Kristeva, the novelist J. M. Coetzee, a South African psychologist and psychoanalytic thinker Chabani Manganyi. And there is no reason why some of those thoughts, shouldn't be, and some of those theories shouldn't be drawn upon, extrapolated from, articulated for the Italian sphere. Some will work better than others, but I think that is what we always battle with a bit in psychoanalysis, is that you have a whole set of theories and you have then got the actual person, the patient, on the couch, and which of those theories will work in what way and at what time. So there is always a bit of a gap. But I would suggest that some of the material there would potentially be of interest and hopefully have some bearing on the Italian, or other countries, situation.

PM: *To come back to the specific of psychoanalysis, as you said, in your book you use psychoanalytical concepts to read the mental processes which support the Apartheid ideology. One of these concepts I, as a psychoanalyst, find rich of opportunities of investigating that process is that of unconscious phantasies. May you say something more about that?*

DH: I mean I suppose all of us have a different voyage, different journey through psychoanalytic concepts and I find that is a fascinating sub-question – how in one's training – how one thinks or understands a whole series of concepts. And every now and then one seems to come in prominence, or at least one seems evasive and can't quite get a grip on it. The notion of phantasy to me just seemed incredibly important in terms of particularly the project about racism. I mean I alluded to it a little bit earlier, by saying that once you have got such radical discrepancies of power and dispossession that that phantasy will be in place. And there's moments when, you know, Fanon alludes to this and other

scholars allude to this, but I think it's a particularly crucial concept in thinking about race and racism and thinking about power, and there are a number of reasons for that. But one of the reasons that I think it's so important is that this might be a slightly more Lacanian approach to phantasy than say for example a Kleinian approach. The Lacanian approach to phantasy is one that always poses that questions that come to the forefront in one's life, difficulties, enigmas, or in Lacanian terminology *the Real*, you can't compute, you can't quite process, sexuality, death, where we came from – these are the kinds of questions. And of course in a highly radicalised colonial sphere race (itself) becomes one of them and the other, or otherness starts to become highly criticized. That's one of the reasons that I think it's important. But we can also make another point and that is to say, people sometimes say that race is socially constructed, but I suppose I want to say that it's more than socially constructed, it is also phantasmatically constructed, constructed via phantasy. Which is a very different thing to simply saying that race is just about representations, texts, social practices. If race is also substantiated phantasmatically (by phantasy), as indeed say sexuality difference is, then it's not so easily eradicated, it's not so easily dissipated – it has that tenacity. And I think that for me has been a very important understanding, because there are certain elements of a power structure that remains in place despite that a whole series of economic and structural things will change. And I think phantasy is one way of explaining why that is the case, because phantasy not only underwrites a certain version of reality, but it also brings with it certain rewards.

PM: *To go to your second book, the last one you wrote in 2013: “(Post)-Apartheid Conditions”. In this book, in my opinion you use more than in the previous, we can say almost always, psychoanalytical concepts to read and to give an interpretation to the actual social reality in South Africa. In my opinion it's a very rich book, very vital and full of symbolic pictures, that gives an open way of looking at the situation and involves different ways of looking at the situation.*

In your opinion what is the central point of it?

DH: I mean it's a nice question to ask and in a way it's a tricky one, because sometimes the way that I go around constructing books is not as books but as a whole series of snapshots, interventions. In some ways I would think of it more as a book of short stories, if you have an analogy to fiction then as a complete front to back cover novel. Having said that, it's amazing that when you try and do that because you do find that there is a whole series of commonalities and things that keep on coming up. But when I was forced to bring together these chapters, all of which involve some psychoanalytic engagement with a facet of Apartheid or post-colonial life and all of which basically say how is society instantiated, or various forms of formation instantiated, made somehow semi-viable, through cyclical processes. I suppose the one theme that links all of them is that of a problematic relationship to history.

The second chapter for example is about a certain kind of image which comes up again and again in South African public culture, both in apartheid (particularly so) but also in post-Apartheid, and I suppose here again I am interested in phantasy –this image, typically one of the broken body, the black broken body, which seems to be some kind of phantasmatic preoccupation for Apartheid mentality or for white South Africa, perhaps not only, but it keeps coming back in various forms. I could give a whole series of examples of that – this kind of imprint that keeps on returning. And there seems to be some really worrying relationships of enjoyment or desire to this image.

The third chapter I talk about Steve Biko, I just question what it means to retrieve aspects of him. That seems to be the chapter that is least overtly psychoanalytic, but it does involve some psychoanalytic interpretations, one of which is an interpretation or a critique of certain forms of

antiracism, which pretend, as it were, to be charitable forms of antiracism and it tries to kind of read that. But again there is the issue of historical repetition – what does it mean to kind of retrieve Biko today. And I suppose one psychoanalytic reading of it is that sometimes in the retrieval of a historical object one retrieves certain aspects of it but not the whole thing. It's almost like a little bit of a screen memory kind of situation.

The subsequent chapter is about different forms of how we could conceptualise working through within the broader realm of (contemporary), of the public sphere of South Africa. There is one on nostalgia for the Apartheid era, this paradoxical formation which seems to appear where suddenly being in the post-Apartheid era seems to produce multiple forms of desires and nostalgias for what was there before, which is obviously politically problematic and ethically problematic. But on the other hand you can see I suppose if there is a kind of abrupt shift like that, that it could possibly happen. So I have a chapter on nostalgic retrievals.

PM: *Reading this book, I found two things you talk about which could be studied in depth. The first one is the interesting use you made of Freud's concept of uncanny, and precisely you speak of the uncanny embodiment that many monuments sight makes, as an example, the one is Strydom Square.*

DH: The first chapter is about the uncanny and it's about you've got monuments in South Africa which work in a kind of uncanny way. And of course the Freudian uncanny is both about a kind of bodily relationship, a relationship that doesn't seem to necessarily work; so Freud gives all these examples of ghosts without physical body, or physical bodies without a psychology, a mentality. So it involves those disjunctures, I talk about ontological dissonance, but it also of course, the uncanny involves repetitions of time. And I explain an example of a monumental statue in Pretoria which in a way seemed to try to implement an aura of Apartheid power, a spectral quality of power and I make a number of arguments of about how that may have worked. And I suppose what fascinated me about that was that power and intimidation is in part psychological, it's a part cyclical, and I think that example worked. Although interestingly the uncanniness of that monument was also part of its undoing, because there was this weird fact that that monument was up in Apartheid and then several years into the post-Apartheid era this big head of J.G. Strydom collapses and it collapses and falls through the floor seemingly on its own on the day that would have been the republic day. So you have this kind of odd, almost supernatural coincidence, which I think you know is uncanny in a way that sort of tries to undo something of Apartheid. So that chapter was about a blockage or an issue of historical repetition that had to do with the uncanny.

PM: *The other subject that looks like very promising for investigating the deep influence that Apartheid had on people's minds is the constitution of the Apartheid Archive Project. What is the use and the meaning of this, what do you want to do with this project, and why?*

DH: Here is the idea, and in a way I am presenting the aims and objectives of other colleagues, I am part of it but I didn't initiate it. But what they were saying was, and this is now already 6, 7, 8 years ago, we are in a post-Apartheid era, and it seems that people don't like Apartheid now, and people are all too quick to say that we are in post-Apartheid, Apartheid is gone, it's in the past, we have dealt with it. And they use a kind of Freudian explanation and say well, the more something pretends to be forgotten and the more that we don't speak through it or work through it or deal with it, the more it will repeat. And of course they gave a whole series of examples. And of course you do find this in contemporary South Africa, that for lots of periods there is an appearance of some kind of "we get on

together – races – so-called rainbow nation”, but every now and again you have this sharp and quite brutal moment that receives a degree of public attention, which is, quite, as it were, unreconstructed and quite brutal racism, happening today, almost exactly in the same forms as it did then. Today, about this project called the Apartheid Archive Project, a bunch of us went out to go collect narratives by a whole series of colleagues, people, talking about their experiences of Apartheid. And one of the things that I found so amazing, was particularly white colleagues speaking about their childhood and racism (Apartheid racism), often ended up talking about animals. And it started to become interesting to me to sort of ask, what’s going on here, why animals, and what do the animals do in those narrative. That for me is another example of phantasy, and it feels, to cut the long story short, that what happens there is that often when there is the problem of a relationship to a black man or woman, that the child doesn’t quite know how to compute, how to make it work, and even now, in speaking about those relationships, suddenly an animal comes up into the text and somehow the animal seems to provide one kind of answer, one kind of way of thinking about that relationship, but I will give more examples about that. But that essentially is the idea, maybe two ideas. One, you can’t understand what the post-Apartheid situation is, I don’t think, without some sort of psychoanalytic attention to the time and the history. And the second way of understanding it is to think and ask the question how enormously productive it can be if you utilise psychoanalysis and its various ways of thinking about time.

Melancholia was another topic in the book, melancholia, screen memories, phantasmatic retrievals, all of these different ways of trying to understand ruptures, blockages, failures, in retrieving aspects of Apartheid history. I give one or two examples in the book. And of course again this speaks to a psychoanalytic understanding of history, that history isn’t a dis-continuous linear process but sometimes you will have an event that happened there which is transposed onto the future or is transposed into the present. That is the thing that they wanted to raise, they said that we need to reconsider and keep alive a project of retrieval of aspects of Apartheid history or not just deny that they happened, or just forget them because it is very convenient to forget them. And the other things that they said was, and this was a kind of vogue for a while, they had the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where there was a big attempt to revisit key events. But they were saying, the thing is that racism and Apartheid doesn’t work, and isn’t repeated, simply by virtue of the very very violent and (I keep on using the word “brutal”) but you know, brutal instantiations. There were lots of high profile cases, things that people remember the televised things where there was an extraordinary level of violence, and those tend to be the ones that get focused on. And they were saying what about the mundanities of everyday life. And I think in that respect we have had some successes, because sometimes, I think, what really keeps the racism going and the racist system in place is not so much the massively dramatic and violent instances of racism (and in fact those things can backfire – then it becomes apparent just how brutal racism is, and it becomes unpalatable). But in some ways what keeps racism in place far more effectively are just the small little bits, and I can give some examples of that... I’ll just give one example of that: Fanon, again just to talk about him, has this memorable phrase, where he says that the colonialist is an exhibitionist, it’s like, what does he mean... the colonialist is an exhibitionist – I don’t know what you mean. And of course there are different ways of reading it, but one of way of reading it is that he is attuned to how everything that happens in the colonial sphere is signalling something. And I think it was incredibly true in Apartheid, like whites would go here, blacks would go here, whites would use these tea cups, blacks would use those tea cups. So like an extraordinary degree of signification, every small little thing, how we shake hands or how we don’t shake hands, all seemed to send out this symbolic marker, this symbolic measure of racial difference.

So what I started to find in a lot of the Apartheid archive things is that sometimes racism sometimes was a symbolic thing and very dramatic, although still small. So a couple of examples, one guy a white South African writing about Apartheid, gave the description of, he was a young boy, he was in the scouts, and he saw his coloured (which is mixed race in South African terminology) in the street, so he saluted his scout master and his mother said “what are you doing, you don’t salute a coloured man”. Another example, a white miner is saved by a black miner (a miner working in the mines and underground getting gold), this guy saved his life, they have a whole big ceremony and the black miner puts out his hand and the white guy refuses to shake his hand. So you have these things, which are, what I’m saying is that those symbolic gestures are enormously powerful, they may not seem to be violent or dramatic in the most obvious sense but they set out a marker, they have huge implications for how the world is organised. And I think one of the successes of the Apartheid Archive Project is to draw attention to that. I think that Project was really helpful because it helped for us to think about and demonstrate the over-determined-ness of racism. How it’s multifaceted and how it links to sex, how it links to gender, how it links to masculinity, all of these different dimensions.

PM: *First of all you are a researcher, but now the question is what is the meaning of this kind of studies. In your books you discuss about your Country history, social problems, brutal public violence and deep private violence, power and melancholia... In your opinion, are your books an ethical action?*

DH: I must say, I find the domain of ethics quite difficult to theorise and think about, because you have an everyday intuitive sense of ethics. I don’t know why, but I feel almost a bit tempted to say almost no. I think they more easily lend themselves to a set of political ideas and a series of psychoanalytical ideas. But in a way I don’t think they are ethical in the most obvious of senses, because it depends on how they get taken up, how they are utilised, if they provoke something if people think about them. And in some of the more recent work that I am doing, now, I mean I am starting to work now on other books as well, that idea has become important to me, that, so here is my answer... That the work of critique and the work of ethics isn’t something that is done by the scholar or the analyst alone who gives an interpretation or prompts the patient or says something, or offers a construction, or theorist (this is what Franz Fanon says, isn’t it interesting how it applies to South Africa). That’s only half of it. I think one of the things that psychoanalysis teaches us is that in a way the psychoanalytic encounter has to be a kind of dialogue, doesn’t always work very well, maybe there is break downs and conflicts and not hearings and so on, but all the books can do is try to be some kind of prompt and to pose some ideas – they may be totally rejected they may cause some reaction, people may take them up, people may want to think about them. But I think where the ethics would happen is somewhere in between what I am trying to do with writing and how it gets taken up and thought about and responded to. How did you imagine ethics?

PM: *For a psychoanalyst, a way of treating, of reading everything happens not only in the inside world, as we do in our consulting rooms, but also in the outside world and the social situation, as a mental space that makes people and the analyst himself to think about that. About the power the psychoanalyst has – doing his or her job- it is the power of the interpretation of the situation. The way we interpret the situation could be an ethical action, in the sense of making all of us aware of the responsibility we have with regard to the past and the present, for the knowledge of the human thinking, the developing of the human being, or could be something else, for reaching something else, for example for taking advantage from the situation.*

DH: Yes, well then I think I agree with you and I suppose, I stick with my answer. I think that that is kind of what the work is trying to do. And I suppose also, just one last reflection, it seems to me that why it's difficult to answer the question as well, is that at some level ethics also requires the reflection and the concern about how it impacts back on the person who is writing. And I will give one example of that, and I suppose I am leaving the question out there, does ethics always apply something of a subjective relation – and I think it does, both to the person who is writing and to the person who is reading, hence I can't answer the question fully in terms of what the books do or what I try to teach does.

But one way where it's been reflexive and has caused me to think of my own project, is that second chapter in "*The (post-)Apartheid conditions*" book, has this whole series of images, broken bodies, broken black bodies, and in there I talk a little bit about ethics and I talk a little bit about how to respond to these images and what they might mean. But what was quite surprising for me is I end the chapter by saying: "Is it the case that we as people actually enjoy these kind of images, subterranean elicit enjoyment in them?" And I published the material and thought I had done a good job and presented on it a couple of times. And a couple of times people said : "Are you not implicated in this, is this not part of your own phantasy, are you enjoying these images?". I think that was a kind of ethical moment, because sometimes you think you are producing a piece of research which apart from you own phantasmatic investment in these things, and what those people, the number of people who asked that question, made me realise is that it is also my phantasy which is coming through and potentially my enjoyment as well. So it was a little bit of a shocking thing, a bit uncomfortable. But it certainly did set off that ethical dimension, again, in terms of how the material was received, not in terms of I had thought about it in and of myself only.

There is always other material that comes up that I could let you know about...

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