

REVIEW

Ron Roberts (ed.): *Just war: Psychology and terrorism*. Ross on Wye: PCCS Books, 2007, 272 pp. £20, ISBN 978 1 898 05992 9.

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Just War: Psychology and Terrorism represents a much needed and timely intervention, providing an explicitly political critique of the position of psychology and of psychologists in relation to 'The War on Terror'. From the acknowledgements page onwards, this collection of essays functions to challenge the notion that psychologists should espouse a 'scientific' and 'professional' neutrality, arguing that this supposedly objective position serves only to bolster the position of the state, at a time when the state is engaged in a range of violations of human rights. Several chapters of the book are concerned with psychology's complicity, either through direct involvement in the development of theoretical and practical interventions to support the oppressive work of the state, or through a failure to speak out about the psychological impact of the so called War on Terror.

In Chapter One, Harper outlines the history of psychology's complicity in the development and practice of torture in the US and UK. In addition to the direct application of psychological knowledges to torture techniques, in an interesting historical overview, Harper also notes the way such knowledges are implicated in the broader social environment in which the use of torture has been rendered relatively anodyne in political discourse (for example, the use of cognitive psychological work on face recognition in surveillance technologies).

In Chapters Two and Three, Roberts and Robbins deliver trenchant critiques of the failure of the psychological establishment to respond to the War in Iraq and Afghanistan and to comment on growing evidence of torture and other human rights violations justified by 'The War on Terror'. Roberts documents the lack of coverage of the Iraqi War in its broadest reaching journal / magazine *The Psychologist*. He describes his own attempts to have an analysis of this lack of coverage published in the journal and the worrying suggestions made by various representatives of The Society that comment by the BPS on such 'political' questions would be inappropriate. Robbins focuses more specifically on the effects of detention on detainees and their families, noting the obvious relevance of psychological comment on, for example, the mental health implications of these practices. He also notes with some concern the evidence of complicity of psychologists in both the development of torture methods and the use of psychological knowledges derived in actual contact with detainees to aid the interrogation of detainees. Pointing out that the APA has indicated that psychologists should not take part in torture and abuse, but that psychologists might have a 'non-coercive role' in interrogations, Robbins suggests that definitionally all interrogations that occur at Guantanamo are coercive, and calls for psychological societies and associations to rule on psychologists' involvement there.

This concern is developed and amplified by Nimisha Patel, who explores in greater detail the psychological effects of torture, and the role psychologists might serve in prevention. She suggests “(A) declaration against torture is insufficient and has no legally or professionally binding authority – in short, it is a declaration without teeth. Prevention requires an organisational commitment to upholding and promoting standards in international law. The BPS needs to go beyond providing a declaration condemning torture and to reflect this commitment and its obligations under international law.” (Patel, 2007: 107). She argues that the BPS needs to take responsibility for raising the awareness of its members of their ethical obligations, and to specify in codes of conduct an explicit prohibition on participation by psychologists, in any way, in torture and ill treatment.

Slobodo and Doherty provide a useful overview of the history of the Anti War movement in the UK, as a context for exploring the psychology of anti-war activism. They suggest that a shift away from the risk of nuclear war to a concern with the ‘War on Terror’ has produced changes in affective and cognitive responses to war, and shifts in anti-war activism itself. They argue that the nature of the ‘War on Terror’ and the move away from the visible structures of nuclear warfare that provided a grounding for anti-war activism have moved the struggle into more ephemeral spaces in the UK and that these require new activist skills to be developed. Lloyd and Potter also provide an interesting take on the historical context against which we understand the ‘War on Terror’, analysing war speeches of Bush and Blair. They argue that Bush and Blair draw on an ‘us’ and ‘them’ thinking that has historically characterised the ‘old psychology of war and peace’ and that an alternative ‘relational’ approach to war and peace might be more fruitful. My concern in reading this proposal was the danger that this might reduce complex relations of power, aggression and colonisation to the interpersonal, proposing a therapeutic solution to political problems that might ultimately serve conservative ends. Roberts’ chapter, ‘Sleepwalking into Totalitarianism’, also offers an analysis of the prevailing social context, in which he notes that representations of Islam and the ‘terrorist threat’ have been deployed to support the erosion of a range of human rights and freedoms. However, this chapter functions largely as polemic, and would have been enhanced by a stronger theoretical base. In contrast, Hewer and Taylor’s chapter represents a more theoretically interesting analysis of politics, language and representation, arguing that to understand the psychology of suicide attacks requires that we “focus on the content of beliefs rather than simply delineating the structure of individual cognition” (p. 211), and that this lends insight to the cultural and social construction of these actions. This needs to be understood, they argue, against a background of political oppression that acts to facilitate the production of the ideology of suicide attacks.

In their chapter on children and war, Roberts, Becirevic and Tenenbaum offer a consideration of the differential accounts of war by children in the UK and in Bosnia, focusing on the way in which these children made sense of war. In this small scale study, they note systematic differences between the two groups of children, particularly in terms of the way that the Bosnian children’s exposure to war imagery and experiences constructed a different set of meanings around war, and often positioned them to be more vocally anti-war. Though this is an interesting chapter in its own right, it does stand a little out on a limb in relation to the rest of the book, and the connections between it and other chapters might have been more strongly articulated.

In their conclusion, Harper, Roberts and Sloboda suggest that the development of a ‘peace psychology’ might be a useful focus for psychologists’ anti-war activism. While this is an interesting idea, it is unfortunate, I think, that their discussion of such a development dissolved into a consideration of professional issues relating to the work of a ‘peace psychologist’. Having identified a role, they proceed to justify the need for such a role to be paid, to be bound by a specific code of ethics, educated in training courses, etc. This undermines somewhat the political thrust of the chapter, and of the book.

This is a useful book, in that it opens up for analysis by psychologists an area that arguably should be one of the greatest preoccupation of our current time – our engagement with ‘The War on Terror’ and the political and social climate that it constructs. However, the book ultimately fails to satisfy on a number of counts. Most authors draw heavily on fairly standard psychological ideas to support their arguments. For example, in the first few chapters, several authors justify their call to psychology to respond to war and torture by reference to the damaging effects these have on individuals. While this kind of appeal often functions as a political tool to draw resources in, I would argue that ultimately, introducing such a therapeutic and pathologising discourse into the critique might be self-defeating. The book also often slides into polemic – not problematic in itself (I’m rather fond of a bit of polemic!) – but it does at times appear to detract from more substantial theorisation. Nonetheless, despite these weaknesses, the book remains an important intervention for our times, and a potentially useful resource for those who research and teach in this area.

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