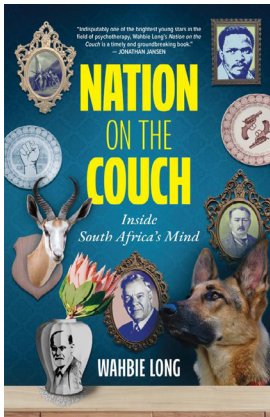




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Nation on the couch: Inside South Africa's mind



**AUTHOR:**

Wahbie Long

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**REVIEWER:**

Crain Soudien<sup>1</sup>

**AFFILIATION:**

<sup>1</sup>School of Education, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

**CORRESPONDENCE TO:**

Crain Soudien

**EMAIL:**

crain.soudien@uct.ac.za

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# The mind of South Africa: A review of *Nation on the Couch*

Books are meant to provoke. They are written to push, prod and stimulate. Hopefully, they help the reader to pause and to think over an idea or a thought. Amazon, shortly after it had announced the release of *Nation on the Couch*, received two customer reviews, one of which, astonishingly, pronounced that the book was a 'sad read', 'nothing new, just an endless rehashing of the same downtrodden ideas.... My only question is', asked the customer, 'Has the writer ever met a white South African?' Long has certainly provoked. That he has not succeeded in helping our dear Amazon customer to pause is certainly cause for me to pause. What will it take, I ask, because I certainly have been shaken up by the book. What will it take, please, South Africans – actually, people everywhere – for us to talk about the state of the world in which we find ourselves? What do people like our Amazon customer wish to hear? I have my suspicions but let me rather stay on the firmer ground of my opinions and make my own mistakes.

*Nation on the Couch* is an analysis, beyond the daily seductive commentary tumbling off our devices, gadgets and, still, thankfully, our newspapers, about the state of South Africa. Long describes it as 'an attempt... to excavate, as it were, the *political unconscious* of life in South Africa. It... examines both the exteriority and interiority of social life' (p. 14). The questions which prompted the writing of the book included 'why...South Africa appear(s) to lurch from one social crisis to the next? Why... her citizens brutalise each other, both interpersonally and structurally?' (p. 14). As an analysis it is focused on cataloguing and examining what he describes as 'the monsters of our collective deep' (p. 14).

It is important to describe how Long undertakes this task of analysis. It is uncompromisingly conceptual. Ideas and theories frame his argument. We will come to what those are in a moment. But the approach is also deeply grounded. He inserts himself, almost biographically, into the story he is seeking to analyse. He is present. In this, he is, of course, fulfilling and exemplifying the role and responsibility of the psychoanalyst. He does so, however, courageously, struggling, as he says of the psychoanalyst, '... to sustain an emotionally meaningful contact with one's own experience' (p. 181). That he has struggled is evident in the design of the book. It begins laden with gloom but ends, even as he is 'called out' by 'woke' intellectuals and students (p. 54), in reasoned optimism.

The conceptual heart of the text is the idea of alienation. It is, Long argues, 'the defining malady of our age' (p. 31). The book devotes three large chapters to its emotional expression: Shame, Envy and Impasse. These constitute Long's diagnosis of the 'monsters of the collective deep'. The remainder of the book, two chapters, explores the concepts of Hope and Empathy, providing what Long (p. 37) describes as 'the search for answers' to the diagnosis.

Long's understanding of alienation essentially comes from that of theorist Rahel Jaeggi who describes it as, ultimately, 'indifference and internal division, but also powerlessness and relationless with respect to oneself and to a world experienced as indifferent and alien.... the inability to establish a relation to other human beings, to things, to social institutions and thereby also ... to oneself' (p. 27). Important for Long, and so distinguishing him from much mainstream psychology, is his explanation of it as 'a bridging concept that brings into view the interconnectedness of social structure and individual experiences' (p. 32). Here interiority, made visible through Freudian analysis, is held in symbiotic connection with exteriority, explained through Marxist structural analysis. The connection is explored well in Long's insightful discussions of Shame and Envy. The opportunity is there too, perhaps less explicitly developed, in what Long describes as the state of Impasse.

The chapters on Shame and Envy are provocative. Shame, Long says, as an alienated and alienating emotion, is the complex product of the denial of respect. Denied respect and feeling undervalued, human beings 'become resentful, and if they reckon within themselves a failure to meet the standards of others they feel ashamed' (p. 40). '(W)hen social formations compromise the dignity of marginalised groups as a matter of routine, the consequences', Long argues, 'are devastating, involving either self-hating shame or envious resentment.' (p. 43). He uses this to describe and explain the catalogue of problems which have befallen South Africa, therapeutic non-compliance in the face of diseases such as HIV/Aids and tuberculosis, interpersonal violence, alcohol abuse, violent protests and many more.

Shame is linked to Envy, Long's next major theme. Shame triggers, he argues, resentment. This resentment simmers: '[When it is] incapable of regulating itself, it finally explodes in the form of *envy* [Long's emphasis], taking shape in the seemingly wanton destruction of property and the apparent senseless resort to interpersonal violence' (p. 70). Long explains that 'in its essentials, it involves a recognition that the Other... has possession of a resource on which our tenuous existence depends. The terror that comes with the ever-present threat of annihilation is unavoidable: its retaliatory bent is all too human.' (p. 71) Long uses this envy to explain the behaviour of the students in the protests of 2015, especially those in the #RhodesMustFall movement: 'The more the Fallists destroy the institution, the more impoverished the collective ego feels. Their envy grows stronger still...' (p. 86).

Long (p. 119) evokes the 'state of Impasse' idea to explain the situation in which white South Africans find themselves in the post-apartheid period. That state he contends, drawing on Hussein Bulhan, is an essentially tragic one: 'On the one hand, they need the colonised to remain in their place... a fate that no human being will tolerate indefinitely. On the other, since the colonial relationship is effectively a recapitulation of the master-slave dialectic, the coloniser never feels recognised as human – because the act of recognition is made by a slave and is therefore worthless' (p. 119). This leads to the essential *Impasse* diagnosis where whites, uncertain of their place, 'withdraw... from public spaces into fortified enclaves' (p. 120).



After this searing analysis, the book concludes, as Long says, with a shift in register: 'from diagnosis to treatment in the search for answers' (p. 36–37). This conclusion begins with a re-siting and a recontextualising of the mood of hope, from its location in the individual to its embeddedness in material relations. To realise that mood, Long explains, is going to take work at both individual and social levels. It is about the restoration of the dignity of South Africans – recognising their mental states and, critically, implementing what he calls 'The Golden Rule', the title of his final chapter: Treating others as you wish to be treated and not as you wish *not* to be treated.

*Nation on the Couch* is a great contribution to the discussion about South Africa. Not only is it written beautifully, but it succeeds in taking complex ideas and puts them in elegantly clear terms. It will not bring *all* of us, as our Amazon customer shows, to that point where we stop and think, but it will do so for many of us. It will do so, moreover, in ways which Long has anticipated. Some of us will agree with him, but some of us not. Some will be infuriated by his depiction of our envy. We will say – and here, actually, is the rub – that he has some of the story right but not the whole of it. There is a great deal more for us to think and say about traumatic experiences such as racism and how we as human beings have responded to it.