

## STEVE BIKO AND MODERN EUROPEAN PHILOSOPHY

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

Let me start with the bad news. I am afraid I am not a Steve Biko scholar. The good news is that I do know a little about modern European philosophy.

Here it gets tricky again because, within the tradition of modern European philosophy, Sartre is the typically modern philosopher one refers to in relation to Biko and the idea of black consciousness. And I am not a Sartre scholar. Neither do I know much about Frantz Fanon, the supposed link between Biko and Sartre.

Now, this is my plan.

In the literature – to be found on the internet – significant differences between Sartre and Fanon are identified, differences that point to an, I think, interesting correction of Sartre by Fanon. In Biko's writings I find elements that underscore this correction and that run parallel to a line opposite to the one represented by Sartre in modern European philosophy, namely the line represented by Romanticism.

There is more to Biko than an outspoken philosophy of consciousness like Sartre's. That in itself is important. But more important is that this 'more' includes important clues to understanding modern culture, in Europe as well as in Africa, clues that might also function

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as a source for criticism of modern society, at least as we know it in the Netherlands.

For all this I lean heavily - in addition to Biko's *I write what I like* - on the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's *Sources of the self*.

You will find I am expressly oriented to philosophy, as opposed to the more theological Biko interpretations given by my Kampen colleagues Akke van der Kooi (in her *De ziel van het christelijk geloof*) and Gerrit Neven (in his *Barth lezen*).

## 2      DESCARTES, SARTRE, BIKO

In philosophy we use the term 'modern' when we speak of what came after the Middle Ages. What we call the Renaissance contains the beginnings of it, but is still too much oriented towards Plato and other classical philosophers to fit modern natural science. Fully modern thinkers are ones like René Descartes and Francis Bacon. With the rise of modern natural science and the corresponding philosophies of Bacon and Descartes the classical idea of 'cosmos' gradually disappears. The universe is no longer an organic whole of which humankind forms an organic part. Once the big bang happened, and we know it. The Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa speaks of "the howling madness of a dead universe".

See illustration on next page.

Modern philosophy is, generally speaking, foundationalist. Descartes does not need the rickety theoretical buildings of his predecessors. He starts anew, from the indubitable certainty of his thinking ego, the modern subject, and the

world as an enormous mechanism that the subject can analyse unhindered.

The separation of humankind and world, as Descartes installs it, implies objectifying the world in a way that makes it impossible to experience the world as a meaningful whole any longer. The modern subject is its own only source of meaning and sense.

M H Abrams epitomises the opposition between classical and modern with his image of mirror and lamp: the mirror mirrors meaning and order; the lamp radiates meaning and order in a reality that, without it, would lie hidden in darkness.

(Charles Schulz, *Charlie Brown*).

Jean-Paul Sartre is a prominent protagonist of this modern worldview in the 20th century.

It is understandable that Sartre is often mentioned as an essential influence on Fanon and Biko. First of all Sartre, maybe more than any other white European philosopher, displayed an interest in and commitment to the cause of anti-racism and anti-colonialism. But his philosophy also has elements that attract the protagonists of black consciousness.

The grand opus of the first period in Sartre's philosophy is *L'être et le néant (Being and nothingness)*. In this work Sartre posits – reconstructing, one might say, Descartes's dualism of

matter and consciousness (body and soul) – a dualism of human consciousness as *pour-soi* (for itself) over against the world, and things as *en-soi* (in itself). Things are just what they are, they rest in themselves, are passive and massive: 'being'. Human consciousness is never what it is; it is its own project, its own future. It *is* nothing (*le néant*). I am always ahead of myself. There are, of course, also more objectifiable dimensions of me – what you see, my past – but they are of my *facticité* (factuality), not the real me, not my essence. My essence is my existence, my freedom. In my freedom I transcend, negate, my factuality.

To Sartre humans' relationship with one another is one of objectification: I tend to make you an object, and you tend to make me an object. You know me, know who I am. To you I am Onno Zijlstra, the guy who ... et cetera. I try to put you in my pocket and you try to put me in your pocket. We threaten one another's freedom. The look ('regard') plays a key role in our mutual objectification. Our living together is marked by looking at one another, by objectifying or being objectified, dominating and being dominated, a sadomasochistic series of events. (Typical of this is Sartre's refusal to accept the Nobel Prize for literature in 1964, because these sorts of institutions endanger one's freedom.)

Another element of Sartre's conception of human beings is the notion of *mauvaise foi* (*mala fide*, bad faith). 'Bad faith' refers to our tendency to deny that we are nothing, that we are just a project. It would be a lot easier to be a being, a something, a thing. So we tend to interpret ourselves as such: "I am just this lazy person that I am, and that is why I act as I do. I did not become a famous author, because I simply do not possess the nature, the characteristics, the talents of such a person. I am who I am."

With Sartre we have to accept that we, being free, are the source of what we do and who we become. At the same time, however, we have to accept that part of us that *is* given, our factuality.

We can recognise Sartre's early philosophy in Biko's definition of black consciousness and in his statement that all in

all “the black man has become a shell, a shadow of man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity” (Sartre 1946:29). Biko never tires of pointing out that the systematic oppression that has brought about the distorted self-image of the black person includes the creation of a false understanding of oneself in education and religion (Sartre 1946:52). Black and white carry with them “their inferiority and superiority complexes” (Sartre 1946:64). “The philosophy of Black Consciousness, therefore, expresses group pride and the determination by the blacks to rise and attain the envisaged self. At the heart of this kind of thinking is the realisation by the blacks that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed” (Sartre 1946:68, 92). In opposition to this oppression, which in Sartre’s sense is an objectification, is, to quote William R Jones, “freedom, freedom, freedom ...” (Sartre 1946:xi). In the extracts from Biko’s evidence in the 1976 trials that are included in *I write what I like*, Biko quotes the first paragraph of the resolutions passed at the General Students’ Council, in which psychological oppression of blacks comes before physical oppression (Sartre 1946:100). Biko comments on the notion that a black person “is first of all oppressed by an external world (...) and secondly, and this we regard as the most important, the black man himself has developed a certain state of alienation, he rejects himself, precisely because he attaches the meaning white to all that is good (...)” (Sartre 1946:100). A striking feature is that Biko dwells on the role language plays in this process, “how language can help in the development of an inferiority complex” (Sartre 1946:107-108), and the effects of being treated like an animal by doctors (Sartre 1946:111). Becoming aware of all this is essential for liberation: black consciousness. Our tendency towards ‘bad faith’ – that we simply are the way we are and things cannot be changed – makes it necessary for Biko to hammer this home.

Throughout Biko is talking about the interpretation of a situation that is more than real: the situation of blacks under apartheid, their lack of self-esteem in reaction to physical and psychological oppression and their actual position in society. By

comparison Sartre's idea of consciousness and freedom seems abstract, abstracted from the real economic, social and political conditions – as if one can, being a *pour-soi*, freely define oneself, develop a self-image. In contrast to more mechanistic forms of Marxism, Biko follows Sartre in his emphasis on the possibility of altering our consciousness even if the circumstances remain the same.

### 3 THE LATER SARTRE, MARX AND BIKO

World War II made Sartre politically aware. He joined the French resistance against the German occupation. After the war Sartre chose time and again to side with the oppressed in their struggle against imperialism, colonialism and totalitarianism. Thus he took the side of Algerian freedom fighters against the French government and army.

Sartre himself discerns two periods in his philosophy: an anarchistic, individualistic one and one in which the individual is seen much more in relation to society. In his later work, especially *Critique de la raison dialectique (Critique of dialectical reason)* (1960), Sartre tries to combine his earlier insights into human existence with Marxist views of society and history.

Many have felt that there is something awkward in Sartre's later attempt at a marriage of Marxism and existentialism. Like his relationship with Simone de Beauvoir, it is full of tension. Orthodox Marxists felt uncomfortable with Sartre on their side. He could always change his mind.

We can try to trace elements of the later Sartre in Biko, but I think it is easier to turn directly to Marx, because the points of agreement with Sartre are the points of agreement with Marx, but without the differences that distinguish the later Sartre from Biko. In his later work Sartre still echoes the abstract idea of un-institutionalised freedom, a notion foreign to Steve Biko. And unlike Sartre, Biko seems to agree with Marx that under ideal circumstances one can think of one humanity. Black consciousness is a condition for achieving those circumstances. (Cf. Biko's reference to Hegelian dialectics, where he applies Hegel's dialectics rather mechanically.)

Historically we can trace the tension in Sartre's later thought and the difference from Marx and Biko back to the fact that Sartre's existentialism is a radical offspring of one line in modern European thought, whereas in Marx's thinking – and, in another way, Biko's – one can see a convergence of two lines in modern European thought. Let me explain.

In the second half of the 18th century the worldview represented by Descartes (and Sartre) was heavily contested by Romanticism. Romanticists experienced the disengaged rationality and atomistic individualism of Descartes and others as alienation. Their alternatives always contain a dialectics of extreme individualism and holism. In relation to Biko, I would like to point out two elements of this alternative line in modern European thought.

In the social philosophy of Romanticism atomistic individualism is criticised against the background of the ideal of organic ties and loyalties, traditional communities, spontaneous solidarity. Individualism cannot but lead to pursuit of selfish interests, the abstract tyranny of money, social alienation and anonymity, as well as alienation from nature through technological and economical interests. Leszek Kolakowski (1981) points out this motif in Marx's thought in the first part of his *Main currents of Marxism*.

This vision of the situation of the person in modern society is complemented by the idea of the human individual. The Romanticists promoted a new form of inwardness in which we find our moral source within ourselves. Charles Taylor (1991:26-27) suggests that this can be seen "as a continuation and intensification of the development inaugurated by Saint Augustine, who saw the road to God as passing through our own reflexive awareness of ourselves". Jean-Jacques Rousseau is *the* exponent of this idea. In his work it is connected to the idea of what Taylor calls self-determination. This is a concept of freedom that goes beyond 'negative freedom', because it leaves me free, not only insofar as I decide for myself but also insofar as I decide in accordance with my inner voice. Herder develops this idea further with the notion that "each of us has an original way of being human" (Taylor 1991:28). This gives rise to a

“powerful moral ideal”: “I am called upon to live my life in this way” (Taylor 1991:29); I have to be true to myself, my own originality and potentiality (Taylor 1991:29).

This individual, in Romanticist vein, will spontaneously identify with the community in which she can realise her personal potential. “Instead of freedom being conceived in the liberal fashion as the private sphere of non-interference with others, it becomes the voluntary unity of the individual with his fellow men” (Kolakowski 1981:411). In Marx this Romantic ideal works out, not in a Luddite destruction of modern technology, but in its completion.

Biko, from his African background, seems to be more of a piece, thinking more coherently, reasoning as a matter of course in terms of individual rights and modern-technical-instrumental thinking on the one hand, and on the other hand in terms of the more spiritual, communitarian, nature-friendly approach that values tradition. I think this suggests a theme for modern or, if you like, postmodern philosophy.

*Note:* Some elements of Biko’s thought that one might read as ‘Romantic’ could also be read as ‘postmodern’, as opposed to more modern aspects of his thought – consider the idea of the retrieval of tradition. Counter to a tendency to read Biko as postmodern, one can regard him as thinking ‘big’: black consciousness, ‘the Westerner’, African culture and the like.

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