

STEVE BIKO IN 2007: A RETURN TO NON-RACIALISM?

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1 INTRODUCTION

In his evidence in court Steve Biko stated the following about SASO (South African Students' Organisation):

SASO is a Black Student Organization working for the liberation of the Black man, first from psychological oppression by themselves through inferiority complex and secondly from the physical one accruing out of living in a White racist society (Arnold 1976:18-19).

"Black Consciousness," he continued, "refers itself to the Black man and to his situation, and I think the Black man is subjected to two forces in this country" (Arnold 1976:19). One, he is oppressed by an external world through institutionalised machinery, laws, working conditions, poor pay, hard living conditions and poor education. Secondly and most importantly, black people themselves have become alienated to some extent: they reject themselves because they regard all that is white as good.

In 2004 Paul Prinsloo, a Unisa colleague, became part of an artists' project on Biko in Pretoria and found that Biko's face was that of a man he never knew. In the eyes of the church, says Prinsloo (*Rapport* 2004), he was an anti-Christ, in the eyes of the state he was a communist. "I got to know him, and Biko brought me to the point where I can say: 'I cannot look the other way anymore'" (*Rapport* 2004).

This volume of conference papers presents a wide range of approaches to Biko. My focus is on Biko's role in 2007: can he make a contribution to non-racialism? Biko once said that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed. Black consciousness claimed that "mental emancipation is a precondition for political emancipation", hence the relationship between white control and black fear must be severed. Biko liberated our minds long before 1994.

On Tuesday 21 August 2007, Henry Jeffreys (*Beeld* 2007), editor of *Die Burger* in Cape Town, held forth on the title of William Gumede's book *Thabo Mbeki and the battle for the soul of the ANC*. The current high profile political dramas in the ANC will yield a winner, but also an ANC to be less excited about, an ANC without a soul. The South Africa of today is certainly different from the liberated, democratic South Africa of before. More pertinently, one could add, it is different from the South Africa that Steve Biko visualised.

I focus on former president Nelson Mandela's approach to Steve Biko, non-racialism within the ANC, the ANC and non-Africans, the conclusions in the biography of ANC stalwart Mac Maharaj, and then turn to Steve Biko.

2 NELSON MANDELA AND STEVE BIKO

In the 2001 publication *Reflections in prison*,² edited by Mac Maharaj, Mandela (2001:21-64) patiently and clinically analyses the achievements of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in order to critique its approach. In his critique he

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² This article was written in 1978 and smuggled out of Robben Island the same year.

acknowledges that looking at the political situation from prison has disadvantages in that it tends to distort the “very events one is trying to examine and makes an objective analysis far more difficult” (Mandela 2001:22). Nevertheless, reading through the critique, the former president displays a remarkable grasp of the BCM and its context.

- He refers to the arrogance of the BCM in speeches and writings, citing examples like “it was the result of our efforts that the relations between the ANC and PAC in prison improved”; “Only the BCM is known by the people outside prison”; et cetera.
- It’s the prerogative of youth to exaggerate their own importance – he refers to the actions of Biko’s peers in their younger days. However, he concludes, that they will probably mellow with time.
- To the BCM youth, who were made to believe they were at the helm, it was a real shock to discover on Robben Island that they were, after all, far weaker than the ANC.
- The ideology of the BCM remains embryonic and clannish. They adopt a purely mechanistic approach and brand all whites oppressors. Whites are thus excluded from all matters relating to black people’s struggle.
- The concept of black consciousness advocated by the BCM is imported from America and ‘swallowed in a lump’ without regard to our concrete situation where progressive whites, including Marxists, liberals and businesspeople, form part of the liberation movement.
- The BCM said it had “no time for the dusty manuscripts of Marx and Engels”. No serious-minded freedom fighter, says Mandela, “would reject ideas in theoretical manuscripts that are a blueprint of the most advanced social order in world history ...” (Mandela 2001). He was speaking of the Soviet Union.
- He deals with who was responsible for the 1976 uprising, and also attacks the focus on Afrikaans in the uprising. I will not go into that here.
- What interests me is his reference to race. “To say that race is a myth and that in our country there are no Africans, Coloureds and Indians, but only blacks, is to play with words,” says Mandela. Look at portraits of Shaka and Napoleon, at Tambo and Dadoo, Kotane and Reggie September. In addition to the colour of their skins and the texture of their hair, they differ in historical origins and in their culture and languages. (Mandela 2001:49.)

However, Mandela (2001:64) concludes that “in spite of all its weaknesses and mistakes, the BCM attracted able and serious-minded young people who acquitted themselves well, appreciated the value of unity, and whose main efforts were directed towards this goal.”

I am not so sure that the BCM and the students of 1976 in general would have taken kindly to those critical comments at the time.

However, when we look at two subsequent lectures by Mr Mandela, one at the commemoration of Steve Biko’s death in 1997 and the other the fifth Steve Biko Lecture at the University of Cape Town in 2004, we see greater appreciation for Biko’s role. Paying homage to Biko³ as “one of the greatest sons of our nation”, Mandela quotes a famous Biko statement:

³ Address by President Nelson Mandela at the commemoration on the 20th anniversary of Steve Biko’s death.

In time, we shall be in a position to bestow on South Africa the greatest possible gift – a more human face.

Emphasising Biko's relevance to present-day South Africa, Mandela elaborates on the attitude of mind and way of life:

The attitude of mind and way of life that Biko and his comrades called for are needed today in abundance. They are relevant as we define our being as an African nation on the African continent.

A new attitude of mind and way of life are required in our efforts to change the human condition. But they can only thrive if we succeed in that common effort to build a better life. They are required as we strive to bring all power into the hands of the people ...

In his 2004 lecture Mandela brings the Biko experience much closer home. The ANC welcomed black consciousness as part of the genuine forces of the revolution, he says.

2.1 African Renaissance

When we speak of the African Renaissance today “the life, work, words, thoughts and example of Steve Biko” assume a “relevance and resonance as strong as in the time that he lived”⁴ The change of consciousness that Biko brought is exactly the fundamental change that the African Renaissance calls for. In Mandela's words, this is “consciousness of ourselves, our place in the world, our capacity to shape history, and our relationship with each other and the rest of humanity”.

What we see in Mr Mandela's new approach to Biko is the clear relevance of the Steve Biko of yesteryear to South Africa in 2007.

We need to recognise the achievements of our new democracy: the transformation and development, the international recognition, the economic framework. However, it is at the level of what “we once referred to as the RDP of the soul that we as a nation and people might have crucially fallen behind since the attainment of democracy”.

And this is where Biko's role and relevance to today are clearly demonstrated:

The values of human solidarity that once drove our quest for a humane society seem to have been replaced, or are being threatened, by a crass materialism and pursuit of social goals of instant gratification.

One of the challenges of our time ... is to re-instil in the consciousness of our people that sense of human solidarity, of being in the world for one another and because of and through others. It is, as Biko did at that particular moment in history, to excite the consciousness of people with the humane possibilities of change.

I wish we could stop here. But it appears to me that, besides the consciousness we have to instil, we need to look a little deeper into non-racialism and to what extent it is still relevant today, both in the ANC and in South Africa.

3 NON-RACIALISM

⁴ Fifth Steve Biko Lecture by former president Nelson Mandela, 10 September 2004, University of Cape Town.

In its submission to the World Conference against Racism in 2001 the ANC said the following:

For the African National Congress and its allies, non-racialism was not a programme that would be achieved after liberation. It was something to be built in the here and the now.

However, when we survey present-day South Africa we note that we are drifting further and further apart from each other, that our society is becoming increasingly polarised; this is evidenced by the letter columns in newspapers and calls to radio talk-shows. It seems we are becoming increasingly racist and are moving further away from non-racialism.

In an in-depth analysis of the ANC and non-racialism Nhlanhla Ndebele (2002:133-146) examines the “lengthy and highly contested debate over the issue of membership of the ANC”. He tests two propositions regarding the organisation’s commitment to non-racialism. The one argues that non-racialism has been an “enduring part of the ANC’s culture – a so-called ‘unbreakable thread’ – since the ANC’s formation in 1912”. The other is that “for years the ANC embraced a narrow and exclusive brand of African nationalism”, and that its embrace of non-racialism came about only as a result of “sustained struggle within largely the post-1960 exiled wing of the organisation”.

This debate may cause some surprise, as it highlights the fact that the struggle against apartheid was not as united as we may claim. In fact, the divisions were (and still are) quite deep.

Truth is that the ANC was not open to all South Africans for quite some time, despite the preamble to the Freedom Charter that “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, both black and white ...”. It was only in 1969 that the ANC partially opened membership to whites, Coloureds and Indians, who were defined as ‘non-Africans’ in the ANC struggle. A policy of full open membership was only adopted in 1985; before that only African members were allowed to participate in the decision-making processes of the organisation (Ndebele 2002:133-134).

Two scholarly works present contrasting positions on ANC non-racialism. Julie Frederikse (1990) says:

Non-racialism runs like an unbreakable thread throughout the movement’s history.

Not so, says Hilda Bernstein (1991) in her review of the book.

What emerges from the interviews by Frederikse as an unbreakable thread, the strongest and most enduring idea that has impelled the liberation struggle forward is not so much the concept of non-racialism but the persistence of nationalism as expressed by a sense of national pride and national identity. And that non-racialism emerged, often slowly and with difficulty, for a variety of reasons, not the least being practical experience of struggle; it had to be fought for, explained, taught.

Ndebele (2002) then takes us through various phases of policy in regard to membership:

- 1912-1960: the founder members and leaders of the ANC understood the struggle to be racial, and their approach was predicated on a primary need for the unity of the African people.
- The 1960s: in exile the ANC confronted the same old problem of interracial cooperation, but in a new context. How was it to draw on the skills and resources of non-Africans in an exile-based struggle

while preserving the ANC's identity as an exclusively African organisation? (See Ndebele 2002: 137-139.)

- From Morogoro to Kabwe: at the Morogoro conference in 1969 membership was partially opened up to non-Africans. Immediately afterwards two leading ANC members were accused of inciting African members to denounce the decision to open membership to non-Africans.
- The influence of the BCM on the ANC with its redefinition of racial identity as "black" – that is African, Coloured and Indian – became clear.
- Tension over the issue of non-racialism continued to bedevil the ANC in the early 1980s. Steady growth of a non-racial community coexisted with internal conflicts between differing ideological strands. In London participation by non-Africans in ANC politics remained a sensitive issue. Mike Terry of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement perceived the ANC office in London as predominantly non-African, consisting mainly of whites and Indians.
- Within the BCM Africans continued to accuse non-Africans of exploiting them in the struggle. They questioned the intentions of non-Africans and perceived them as unwitting agents of the apartheid system – that is, as being out to subjugate Africans.
- That brings us to Kabwe, the second major national conference. The historical decision was to open membership to all racial groups, both those in exile and the internal underground wing of the ANC. For the first time members of other racial groups were eligible for election to the National Executive Council (NEC).

I wish we could stop here. But that would imply that these membership policies were merely historical. However, they are not and in conclusion I refer to the biography of Mac Maharaj (O'Malley 2007).

The book concludes with a statement that the Dutch would call "*snijden in eigen vlees*" (cutting into your own flesh):

There is a new terrain of struggle. The struggle for power, and in this struggle what the pundits call a battle for the soul of the ANC is increasingly becoming the battle for a large empty space (O'Malley 2007:492).

Here are some comments and quotations from this last chapter (entitled *Hush! Apartheid thoughts of a different kind*):

- Cassius Make, member of the NEC, remarked that in NEC meetings Mac should watch his tongue, that not all members had had the privilege of a university education.
- Mac was aggressive in a culture where aggression was considered negative.
- There is a huge cultural divide between the way the Indian community in South Africa engages in the process of decision making and the African mode.
- "The trouble with Mac is that he talks as if he is an African; he has no sense of apology about him."
- "There was this element in Lusaka, if you were non-white, if you were classified as Indian or Coloured, because you had had some privileges relative to the African majority, you had to feel a bit guilty somehow and you had to pander a bit and you had to know your place in the hierarchy and Mac did not know his place."

And then there are paragraphs that make me yearn for Steve Biko and the BCM:

- Breaking the physical chains of oppression, repealing the legislation of oppression, celebrating the symbols of newfound freedoms, creating the political space for freedom of speech are the easy parts of establishing a new national identity.
- Breaking the mental chains takes a generation or two.
- The systemic domination embeds a sense of inferiority in the psyche of the oppressed that continues to inhabit the mind even when they are freed and assume the political power previously the exclusive preserve of their oppressors.

At the root of national identity is a myth that underpins a country's relationship to its sense of self. In the new South Africa it is the myth of non-racialism. The ANC wraps itself in the fiction of being a non-racial movement. The promulgation of historical conceit is not just the province of South Africa, but a universal one; each nation state nurtures its own comforting accounts from whence it has emerged (O'Malley 2007:480-481).

5 CONCLUSION

It would certainly be presumptuous and premature to try and impose Steve Biko on present-day South Africa, and present that as the solution to all our problems.

I think at best we need to be honest about the past, more particularly about the struggle history of the liberation movements. We also need to heed what Nelson Mandela said:

One of the challenges of our time ... is to re-instil in the consciousness of our people that sense of human solidarity, of being in the world for one another and because of and through others. It is, as Biko did at that particular moment in history, to excite the consciousness of people with the humane possibilities of change.

Our discussions will no doubt continue. And perhaps our experience with Biko will be the that of Paul Prinsloo: we cannot look the other way anymore.

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