AFRICAN DIAPSORA INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES ON STEVE BIKO

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1   INTRODUCTION

Black consciousness philosophy incorporated three distinct traditions of political thought, two of which were international in scope: the complex tradition of black South African political thought; themes of anti-colonialism and the racial liberation developed in Africa and the African diaspora; and the New Left student radicalism with its straightforward recognition of the legitimacy of black power politics.

Frantz Fanon's unflinching hostility to imperialism, especially the global stranglehold of the USA, had a profound influence on Biko's thinking. Among his favourite books were *Black skin, white masks*, in which Fanon credited black Americans with being the most militant, and *The wretched of the earth*, in which he credited the yeoman farmers in the USA with having been the first guerrillas in their struggle against British colonialism. The fact that those thoughts linked up with concepts of both black nationalism and negritude and had their precursors in the 19th century two-way traffic between American and African black thinkers indicates that affinity of ideas does not stem from who came 'first' but from the masses in motion. It is the masses in motion which produced a triangular relationship of ideas among Caribbean, African and United States blacks. That relationship influenced Biko's thinking on imperialism and made him aware of the need to present a counter theory of liberation as a goal for all black people in South Africa.

1968, the year of the founding of SASO,[1] was a turning point not only in the American civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements. The global zenith was in Paris (May 1968), where the great youth movement gained the support of no less than 10 million workers and convinced everyone that they could finally put a stop to both the Vietnam war and the capitalist, racist, sexist and imperialist systems.

The most important lesson that Steve Biko learned from following Dr King's activities in the civil rights movement and his subsequent assassination in 1968 was that there must be a new relationship between theory and practice in the discourse on (black) *liberation*. It also became obvious that activism that does not rely on sound theory will not work.

The call for Black Power by Stockly Carmichael and his student movement was interesting, but they remained essentially elitist in their relationship with the black masses. Malcolm X also gained a reputation as the 'angry young man' of the black revolt. His rhetoric about the class differences between the black masses and the black leadership was followed closely in South Africa. His untimely death in 1965 by an assassin's bullet and that of Dr King (also by assassination) influenced the thinking of the generation of students that was about to found the South African Student Organisation (SASO), led by Steve Biko.

But it was Paulo Freire who made a lasting philosophical impression on Steve Biko. Freire introduced the idea of 'man's inhumanity to man' as the focal and starting point of pedagogy. Freire emphasised that dehumanisation of humans by humans is the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressor, which in turn dehumanises the oppressed (Freire 1984). In the context of South Africa the problem could be summed up as follows:

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[1]   The South African Student Organisation was a student organisation that subscribed to black consciousness philosophy.

The dehumanization of man may be historically ever-present, but since different unjust social orders are bound by their concrete and precise historic referents, what was peculiarly specific about the historic epoch that South Africa was in that distinguished it from other epochs and accounts for the unjustness of that social order? (Addo 1981:21-22).

2   CAPITALIST HISTORICAL DOMINANCE

Biko was not only fascinated by Paulo Freire's philosophy but also interpreted it as a guide to development. He was interested in reconciliation of the values of the developing and the developed worlds in the process of humanising world history. What links the two worlds, according to Freire, is capitalism as it evolved and as it is today. The humanisation/dehumanisation concept cannot be discussed without reference to *culture,* which is humankind's activity in history.

Cultural action for conscientization needed philosophy without which, instead of denouncing reality and announcing the future, it would fall into the mystification of ideological knowledge (Freire 2004:180-184).

Following Freire, Biko had come to believe that reconciliation of the two worlds − that of the oppressor and that of the oppressed − is futile unless the dialogue rejects the historical theme of capital accumulation in pursuit of its historical motive − the bourgeois way of life − and reconstitutes the historical concomitants and the logical corollaries into a much more humanised history. For the oppressed the meaning of the struggle against dehumanisation is located in the great humanistic and historical task of liberating both themselves and their oppresssors. The object of the struggle is to create an order that dehumanises no one.

Finally, considering that domination is the fundamental theme of the South African epoch and that domination implies its opposite − liberation[2] − it was necessary to explicitly expose the character of oppression and underdevelopment that characterised South African apartheid society. For Biko it was important to confront and understand the main themes dominating South African reality. Biko addresses the major themes of that epoch,[3] which he believed were not isolated, independent, disconnected or static but were always interacting dialectically with their opposites.

3   STEVE BIKO'S VIEWS ON MAJOR HISTORICAL THEMES IN SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY

3.1   Falsification of history: a major theme of white racism

The twin cornerstones of the ideology of apartheid were the absolute superiority of the white race and the need to safeguard its political and economic supremacy. Whites' superiority to blacks is a conviction deeply rooted in the subconscious of all white South Africans. To advance this ideology it has been the practice of white leaders over time to create a number of myths, which were intended not only to condition the white population to accept the 'truth' of the special, superior place they were supposed to have, but also to condition the black population to believe the myth that they were inferior beings.

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[2] This refers to the duality that often exists between two opposite poles, e.g. domination versus liberation, development versus underdevelopment.

[3] An epoch is characterised by a complex of ideas concepts, hopes, doubts, values and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites, striving towards plenitude. The concrete representation of many of these ideas, values, concepts and hopes as well as the obstacles to humans' full humanisation constitute the themes of that epoch.

This was accomplished in part through falsification of South African history. It was this falsification, Biko felt, that was largely responsible for the 'wrong' questions that were being asked about South Africa reality. The libraries of South African schools contained numerous books that were both reminders and historical justifications of apartheid. When closely examined they contained a catalogue of myths like the following:

- Whites and blacks arrived in South Africa at the same time.
- Blacks were migrants until they met whites.
- Shaka, Dingane and Mzilikazi were nothing but bloodthirsty despots.
- The Voortrekkers moved into an uninhabited land that belonged to no one.
- Blacks' original political ideas were always inspired by whites
- Afrikaners were victims of British imperialism and were not colonists.
- The major goal of the 1913 and 1936 Land Acts was to protect black land against the whites.
- The homelands corresponded to the areas historically occupied by each black 'nation' and their fragmentation was the result of tribal wars and succession disputes.

These myths were the weapons used to subjugate black thinking to the false portrayal of their history. More serious was the rejection by whites of history as seen by blacks and history as made by blacks in the modern period.

After the repression of the ANC and PAC in 1963-1964, the apathy of the black people reinforced the feeling among whites that blacks are socio-politically inassimilable. This reasoning was presented as both cause and effect of the absolute refusal to give blacks political rights expect in the 'homelands'. It was clear to Biko that for blacks to regain their humanity these myths had to be demythologised. Yet he was also aware that freedom was not acquired as a gift but had to be pursued constantly and responsibly. The myth that freedom was acquired as a gift had to be destroyed.

Biko's view was that to overcome oppression, blacks first had to critically recognise its causes. Then, through transforming action, they can create a new situation, which would permit the pursuit of a fuller humanity. The oppressed, who have adapted to the structure of domination to which they are subjected and have become resigned to, are inhibited from waging the struggle for freedom so long as they feel incapable of taking the risks it requires.

Thus he recognised the classic dilemma of the oppressed, which was that psychologically oppressed people suffered from *an ambivalence,* which had become entrenched in their psyche. He recognised that although blacks realised that without freedom they could not exist authentically and desired this authenticity, they feared it: they were at one and the same time both themselves and the oppressor, whose consciousness they had internalised. The conflict for blacks, Biko realised, lay in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided, between evicting the oppressor within or not evicting him, between human solidarity or alienation, between following prescriptions or having choices, between being spectators or actors, between acting or having the illusion of acting through the action of the oppressor, between speaking out or being silent, as Paulo Freire once said (Freire 1984:150-151).

Biko believed that historically there were a number of negative myths about black people propagated by white society. These myths served to justify the dehumanisation of black people not only in South Africa but all over the world. For Biko the destruction of these myths was a precondition for the psychological liberation of black people. In a series of speeches and articles he set out systematically to articulate ideas, values and issues that affirmed black people and that attacked those whom he believed impeded black people's full humanisation in South Africa.

In essence he saw black consciousness as "the realization by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their oppression − the blackness of their skin − and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude" (Stubbs 2004:96-108).

The task of liberation, Biko stated, required blacks to completely transform the system. He saw white racism as the major oppressive force in South Africa. This white racism found an ally in the "refusal of blacks to club together as blacks because we are told to do so would be racialist" (Stubbs 2004:137-138).

3.2   Self-determination

One of the myths popularised by whites in South Africa had been the congenital inferiority of blacks. This inferiority was 'proved' on supposedly scientific grounds in hundreds of publications, not only in South Africa but in most Western countries. These theories were invoked to explain the hereditary nature of the incapacity of the 'black race', which accounts for its cultural 'backwardness'. This pseudo-scientific argument, found on many levels of the white population, even proved receptive to theological arguments about the diversity of people and the white race's mission to assist primitive peoples.

Biko (1972) had some of these arguments in mind when he spoke of the role of the church in South African society and linked missionary activities to the perpetuation of a racist ideology that tried to substantiate the alleged inferiority of black people. Biko saw acceptance of the colonialist-tainted version of Christianity as a turning point in the resistance of African people. The church in South Africa, according to Biko, needed to be understood in terms of how it was introduced in South Africa. He pointed to the "appalling irrelevance of the interpretation given to scriptures". Thus he said:

> In a country teeming with injustice and fanatically committed to the practice of oppression, intolerance and blatant cruelty because of racial bigotry; in a country where all black people are made to feel the unwanted step-children of God whose presence they cannot feel; in a country where father and son, mother and daughter alike develop daily into neurotics through sheer inability to relate the present to the future because of a completely engulfing sense of destitution, the church further adds to their insecurity by its encouragement of the *Mea-culpa* attitude.
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> … Stern faced ministers stand on pulpits every Sunday to heap loads of blame on black people in townships for their "thieving", "house-breaking", "stabbing", "murdering", "adultery" etc. No one ever attempts to relate all these vices to poverty, unemployment, overcrowding, and lack of schooling and migratory labour. No one wants to completely condone abhorrent labour, but it frequently is necessary for us to analyse situations a little bit deeper than the surface suggests …
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> … Because the white missionary described black people as "thieves", "lazy", "sex-hungry" etc. and because he equated all that was valuable with whiteness, our churches through our ministers see all these vices … not as manifestations of the cruelty and injustice which we are subjected to by the white man but as inevitable proof that after all the white may be right when he described us as savages. Thus if Christianity in its introduction was corrupted by the colonisation of people, nowadays in its interpretation it is the ideal religion for the maintenance of the subjugation of the same people (Stubbs 2004:147-138).

On this particular occasion Biko urged his audience to begin to redirect their efforts towards gaining control of the churches, since in any case most churches in South Africa had an overwhelmingly black membership. In order to do this black people needed to agree that they have a *common problem.* This common problem was that "our white Christian counterparts though brothers in Christ had not proved themselves brothers in South Africa", and are thus preventing the church from becoming THE CHURCH.

The important task that he urged black theologians to undertake was to adopt a black perspective on religion and the church for, according to him, "In order to be applicable to people, [the church] must have meaning for them in their given situation. If they are oppressed people, it must have something to say about their oppression."

Biko saw the adoption of a Black Theology as the challenge facing black priests and laity in their efforts to demythologise the Christian gospel. Blacks needed, he suggested, a theology that seeks to relate the present-day black people to God within the context of their suffering and their attempts to get out of it - a theology that is committed to eradicating all causes of suffering as "represented in the death of children from starvation, outbreaks of epidemics in poor areas, or the existence of thuggery and vandalism in townships. In other words, one that shifts the emphasis from petty sins to major sins, thereby ceasing to teach people to suffer peacefully".

In challenging black clergy to take up the cudgels by giving meaning and direction to the black man's understanding of God he concluded: "No nation can win a battle without faith, and if our faith in our God is spoilt by our having to see Him through the eyes of the same people we are fighting against, then there obviously begins to be something wrong in their relationship."

3.3   Psychological liberation: a quest for true humanity

A major concern to Biko was the fact that in the South African situation the wrong questions were being asked, and consequently the wrong answers were being given about South African history. These wrong answers fed into the South African psyche manifested behaviourally in the form of false interpretations of social and political reality by both whites and blacks, that is false superiority complexes among whites and a false and totally unnecessary inferiority complex among blacks. That, Biko thought, was the crux of the problem. To overcome it, what was needed was to ask the right questions and to seek right answers.

> We have to find out what went wrong – where and when. We have to find out whether our position is a deliberate creation of God or an artificial falsification of the truth by power-hungry people whose motive is authority, security, wealth and comfort (Stubbs 2004:96-108).

According to Biko an examination of South African history clearly showed that the question of colour in South African politics was originally introduced for economic reasons. That is, the leaders of the white community needed to create a racial barrier that would justify their appropriation of power and still feel comfortable doing so. This, Biko pointed out, was the political lie that came to dominate most political programmes implemented by whites against the interest of blacks in South Africa. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that –

> In South Africa, after generations of exploitation white people on the whole have come to believe in the inferiority of the black man, so much so that while the race problem started as an offshoot of the economic greed exhibited by white people, it has now become a serious problem on its own. White people now despise black people, not because they need to reinforce their attitude and so justify their position of privilege, but simply

because they actually believe that black is inferior and bad (Stubbs 2004:108).

This, according to Biko, was the basis of racism and this was what made South African society racist. Blacks' realisation that South Africa is a racist society that had institutionalised this mode of behaviour ought to lead to a re-examination not only of the causes of racism but also of the things black people needed to do to defend themselves against it. The starting point for such a defence strategy was to question the political wisdom of a coalition between blacks and whites, when such a coalition was based on a wrong analysis of black people's situation.

Two groups that have conflicting notions of reality cannot work together, pretending that they do not have differences. Steve Biko's main criticism of the 'liberal' white group in South Africa was their conclusion that the problem of South Africa was apartheid, that the solution was 'non-racialism', yet the outcome was not clearly spelt out. Consequently it left blacks in a state of mental confusion and the absurdity of blacks becoming a colourless, spineless, tasteless entity as the reward of 'integration'. In a situation of strong white racism, he argued, the black response must be strong solidarity among the blacks on whom this racism seeks to prey. The solidarity would come sooner if blacks rejected "the beggar tactics that are being forced on us by those who wish to appease our cruel masters".

Blacks also needed to be critical of the concept of integration as defined by liberals. In their definition integration was based on exploitive values:

> An integration in which black will compete with black using each other as rungs up a step-ladder leading them to white values, an integration in which black will have to prove himself in terms of these values before meriting acceptance and ultimate assimilation and in which the poor will grow poorer and the rich richer in a country where the poor have always been black … (Stubbs 2004:96-108).

The search for black people's dignity consisted in developing a different mindset, a mental attitude and way of life that were totally intolerant of oppression. This would not happen, however, unless blacks consciously rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. Freedom, according to Biko, is

> … the ability to define oneself with one's possibilities held back not by power of other people over one but only by one's relationship to God and to natural surrounds.

> ... If one is free at heart, no man-made chains can bind one to servitude, but if one's mind is so manipulated and controlled by the oppressor as to make the oppressed believe that he is a liability to the white man, then there will be nothing the oppressed can do to scare his powerful masters (Stubbs 2004: 44-51).

Asking the right questions is crucial. It means that blacks should continually examine and question concepts (sociological, psychological and political) as well as systems. Such critical questioning will bring the consciousness which will enable blacks to evolve the kind of programmes that reflect an understanding of their history, their culture and their institutions.

Black people's search for a true humanity would include a re-examination of the educational system for blacks. Blacks could no longer tolerate people who had no interest in nor any understanding of black aspirations teaching black children to despise their upbringing at home and to question the values and customs of their society. If blacks allowed this to happen, it could only lead to conflict between black children and their parents. "Who," Steve Biko asked, "can resist losing respect for his

tradition, when in school his whole cultural background is summed up in one word Barbarism?"

The history of black people would have to be rewritten to correct the false portrayal of black people and their leaders as nothing but a story of defeats, ignorance and blunders. For Biko a lot of attention had to be paid to the history of black people as a precondition for self-respect.

> We have to re-write our history and to produce in it the heroes that formed the core of our resistance to the white invaders. More has to be revealed, and stress laid on the successful nation-building attempts of men such as Shaka, Moshoeshoe and Hintsa. These areas call for intense research to provide some sorely needed missing links. We would be too naïve to expect our conquerors to write unbiased histories about us but we have to destroy the myth that our history started in 1652 − the day Jan Van Riebeeck landed at the Cape … (Stubbs 2004:44-51).

The path to regaining this true humanity required black people to return and retain the human-centred society that Africa historically had. Blacks must reject the individualistic, cold approach to life that was the cornerstone of Anglo-Boer culture.

> … We must seek to restore to the black man the great importance we used to give to human relations, the high regard for people and their property and for life in general; to reduce the triumph of technology and the materialistic element that is slowly creeping into our society (Stubbs 2004: 44-51).

According to Biko blacks had become the direct objects of exploitation, hence the quest for self-determination required them to evolve a strategy to deal with the economic situation. The recognition by blacks that they were colonised even within the borders of South Africa through white exploitation of their cheap labour had made South Africa what it was:

> Our money from the townships takes a one-way journey to white shops and white banks, and all we do in our lives is pay the white man either with labour or in coin. Capitalistic exploitative tendencies, coupled with the overt arrogance of white racism have conspired against us …
> It is the poor people who stay furthest from town and therefore have to spend money on transport to come and work for white people; it is the poor people who use uneconomic and inconvenient fuel like paraffin and coal because of the refusal of the white man to install electricity in black areas; it is poor people who are governed by many ill-defined restrictive laws on fines for "technical offences"; it is the poor who have no hospitals and are therefore exposed to exorbitant charges by private doctors; it is poor people who use un-tarred roads, have to walk long distances and therefore experience the greatest wear and tear on commodities like shoes; it is poor people who have to pay for their children's books while whites get them free. It does not need to be said that it is the black people who are poor (Stubbs 2004: 80-87).

Biko urged blacks to take another look at how best to use their economic power by seriously examining the possibilities of establishing business cooperatives whose profits would be ploughed back into community development programmes. Borrowing from Malcolm X, Biko pointed out that blacks were oppressed "… not as individuals, not as Zulus, Xhosas, Vendas or Indians. We are oppressed because we are black." We must, he said, "use that very concept to unite ourselves and to respond as a cohesive group. We must cling to each other with a tenacity that will shock the

perpetrators of evil." Recognising that one of the biggest obstacles to cohesive action by blacks was fear, Biko urged blacks to −

> … remove from our vocabulary completely the concept of fear. Truth must ultimately triumph over evil … in a true bid for change we have to take off our coats, be prepared to lose our comfort and security, our jobs and positions of prestige, and our families for just as it is true that "leadership and security are basically incompatible", a struggle without casualties is no struggle … (Stubbs 2004:109-134).

Black consciousness philosophy, Steve Biko believed, would make blacks see themselves as complete human beings, less dependent and more free to express their humanity. "Let us march", he said "… with courage and determination, drawing strength from our common plight and our brotherhood. In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest gift possible − a more human face".

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