

OPENING ADDRESS

REFLECTIONS ON 30 YEARS SINCE THE DEATH OF STEVE BIKO: A LEGACY REVISITED¹

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Stephen Bantu Biko was an ordinary young man of his time. Nothing could have distinguished him, his family circumstances and environment from any other young man growing up in a small township in a small Eastern Cape town. Not even his death, in some respects, was extraordinary. After all, it was not unusual for political activists to die in detention. He was in fact the 42nd person to die while detained by the South African security police, the Special Branch. Almost all those who died were young. Steve's comrades in the Black Consciousness Movement were also beginning to die, either in detention or in suspicious circumstances. Mapetla Mohapi, a young social worker and community activist, who died in detention, comes to mind, as does Mthuli ka Shezi, assassinated by being pushed in front of an oncoming train at Germiston station. Onkgopotse Abraham Tiro was killed in exile by a parcel bomb. The manner of his death was not extraordinary either, shocking as it was. He would not have been surprised.

Steve Biko was an ordinary young man who lived in ordinary times, but who made something extraordinary out of his life, not of his own will but through the machinations of an evil system. He touched the lives of young men and women of his generation and he was part of an abiding movement capable of changing the social and political face of our country. In other ways he gave birth to a society that could shape its own future.

I am one of those then young people of Biko's generation who was touched in amazing ways by his life and presence. For me it began when we shared a desk in class IVa at Lovedale in 1963; it continued when as university students we found ourselves at an ASF conference at Michaelhouse, Natal, and later during a very long evening of conversation following a NUSAS conference at Rhodes University, Grahamstown. It grew through three remarkable years when he invited me to live with him in Durban and I ended up sharing his room illegally at the Allan Taylor residence of the University of Natal Medical School (UNB). Together with our two families we then shared a house in Umlazi, Durban. We travelled together across the length and breadth of the country, sharing long conversations, good times and bad, and a host of dear friends and comrades.

The last time I had contact with him was on 15 August 1977, when we had a long telephone conversation about his domestic situation, in contravention of the banning orders which had been served on us. Later that afternoon the security police came and took me into detention at Baakens Street police station. On the Sunday Major Fisher called by to tell me, with alacrity, that they had also detained Steve. I heard no more. I never saw the police again. But a few days after Steve's death circumstances in my cell changed. The coloured policeman who was on duty at the police station disappeared. A young white police constable appeared. He was truly shocked to see me in prison. "Meneer prokureur," he said, "wat soek jy hierso? Hulle het mos my gesê daar is 'n baie gevaarlike terroris hierso." Upon seeing me he could not believe it. Unbeknown to me, he had been suddenly transferred from his duties as

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a court orderly in the magistrate's court in Port Elizabeth, the new law courts, where I used to appear as an articulated clerk with a right of appearance. He was a kind young man. He allowed me to shower, exercise outside the cell and, as a privilege, read his morning newspaper – although by this time he was less keen to let me read it. I managed to read a report on a statement by Jimmy Kruger about Steve Biko's death – the infamous "Biko's death leaves me cold". Then I knew what my young policeman friend wanted to hide.

But many South Africans of my generation could tell similar stories. My comrades in the movement could tell their own stories. They could speak of a sense of loss and devastation, of anger, of the unleashing of resistance and the re-dedication that came with Steve's murder. They could tell of the personal pain they felt at the loss of a loved friend, comrade and leader. They could also share a sense of fear and, for some of us, guilt that he was dead while we continued to live. For some there may have been despair and hopelessness that with Steve's death all was lost, and the exodus into exile and the armed struggle turned into a flood. I remained in detention until August 1978 under section 6 of the Terrorism Act, followed by another spell of preventive detention.

I have said that Steve's life was ordinary and that, in the circumstances of his day, not even his death could be said to have been extraordinary. But what was germane to Steve's story is that he touched the lives of many people of his generation, black and white. Among them was the then editor of the East London *Daily Dispatch*, Donald Woods, and, at another end, Fr Aelred Stubbs CR. They were close friends and they had the power of influence. They could not prevent his death, but they could tell the world who he was. They wrote about how Steve Biko changed their lives. The world listened, and Steve was no longer an ordinary friend and comrade. He became a figurehead of the new generation of political activists and would-be revolutionaries that we fancied ourselves to be. But this is not a biography, it is not about Steve or about Barney Pityana. It is a personal reflection on the 30 years that have passed since Steve was murdered. From the perspective of present-day South Africa I want to analyse the meaning and relevance of the life and times of Steve Biko, and their impact on contemporary South Africa.

Recently I received by e-mail a copy of my paper "Black Consciousness and Black Theology" from Dr Ben Khumalo, a South African theologian now based in Germany. I learned from the e-mail that Dr Khumalo had seen fit to distribute the paper to a number of people around the globe in commemoration of Steve Biko. The paper was published in a book of essays on *Black Theology*, edited by Prof Mokgethi Motlhabi, now on the staff of Unisa's College of Human Sciences. Reading the paper again at the behest of Dr Khumalo, I was reminded of how ideas flowed and developed during the black consciousness era. I want to introduce this substantive part of the paper with a brief reflection on the black consciousness method. Steve Biko has come to be known as the 'father of black consciousness'. While that is true, it needs to be put in context.

It is important to point out that black consciousness drew much from the method and pedagogy of the Latin American grassroots development movement. The Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire and his seminal work, *A pedagogy of the oppressed*, were early influences. Social analysis leading to reflection and action were critical tools of engagement. I am reminded of how black consciousness evolved through many long hours of interaction and debate among friends at the Alan Taylor residence. Steve Biko was a key participant; he listened and challenged ideas as they emerged, concretised them, and brought them back for further development. There was a small group of male and female medical students, but they were joined regularly by some of us from other universities, especially at weekends. In such an environment it is hard to say who the originator of the ideas was. All ultimately owned and identified with the expression of the collective idea. What I do know, though, is that it was Steve who translated that common idea into essays that went into his column "Frank Talk: *I write what I like*", and as memoranda to SRCs and SASO local

branches. Ultimately it was Steve who concretised and articulated the ideas. He captured the common mind.

It should be noted that this group of black consciousness activists were avid readers. Through their circle I was introduced to the works of Paulo Freire, Amilcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr, as well as African literary giants like Chinua Achebe and James N'gugi (as he was then known). There was a culture of reading and intellectual engagement in the group. Debate was always vigorous, maybe even opinionated, but there was never any question of uninformed debate or ideas that could not be justified.

With such critical insight it was possible to subject the social and political reality of South Africa at the time to critical scrutiny. The starting point and the perspective were those of the oppressed, the marginalised, those who sought and yearned for freedom. It was observed that at the time liberation politics was in danger of suffocating from the vice grip of two social forces. While black consciousness was aware of and acknowledged the proud history and traditions of liberation struggles, it had to contend with the fact that visible and vocal activism had gone underground, with many in exile and still more in jails. The dominant state of mind was one of pathological fear, because the security system was repressive and ruthless.

First was the relentless onslaught by the system with its Bantustan-ism. It was observed that in an environment where the authentic voice of the people was not heard many Bantustan quislings had appropriated the rhetoric of freedom. They presented the Bantustans as a step towards freedom and a legitimate response to the cry of the people. What was alarming was not only that this nonsense was becoming accepted as some joined the system – ostensibly in order to subvert it – but also that the media of the day were acquiescent and touted the Bantustan leaders as representative of the people. It was necessary to deal with that.

Second there was the 'liberal' onslaught. Various bodies and institutions led by whites who were opposed to the policies of the apartheid regime were assumed to be speaking for the black people. It was important to refute any idea that they could be speaking for us. For one thing, there was effective accommodation of the prevailing white ethos and hegemony, which needed to be exposed and distinguished from the liberation ethos we sought to affirm. The trouble was that there seemed to be an incipient idea that black people need not do anything themselves but that white people and institutions could be the defenders of black interests. There was real concern that black people were abdicating responsibility for their own liberation and entrusting it to those who had no interest in the liberation of black people.

Social and political analysis was a necessary starting point for reflection and action. Much of Steve's writing, therefore, dealt with three themes: fear, Bantustans and liberals. This was important in order to create a conceptual space that would free black people for creativity and for taking responsibility for their own liberation.

Steve Biko's discourse on fear was in fact addressed to the black community. It was an internal conversation. It began with an analysis of the history of white people's dealings with black people, which were always aimed at instilling as much fear as possible in order to dominate, suppress and conquer. Fear had even more devastating consequences. It demeaned the dignity of black people and negated their humanity. It had to be resisted, therefore, because to do so was to assert one's humanity. Resistance was the most humanising response to oppression.

The white liberal establishment, including white opposition parties in the apartheid parliament, the media, and institutions like SAIRR and NUSAS could not be entrusted with the task of liberation. They too were part of the movement that imprisoned the minds of black people and created false hopes of what they might accomplish while at the same time participating in and enjoying the fruits of an evil system. Their vision of South Africa was based on exploitive values, and the integration they espoused would entrench inequalities. There was also connivance between all these forces. The apartheid regime with their Bantustan collaborators and the liberal establishment all had one thing in common: they applied and derived

comfort and sustenance from a system of racial oppression, then dared to believe that self-respecting black people would wish to be co-opted into their grand design, and ultimately to have their response to the condition of oppression programmed. That had to be repudiated.

This analysis set the scene for a presentation of black consciousness as a response to a social and political condition that was seen as a dead-end. The idea was to transform politics to obviate the danger of acquiescence, and position the voice of liberation as an abiding one – a voice that could not be silenced. That required courage, but also clear thought and ideas. As an ideology, then, black consciousness was meant to lift black people out of despair and instil in them hope of a future that was in their own hands. Millard Arnold (2007:xii) was right in observing that “Biko’s lasting legacy was that he had an uncomplicated vision; an intrinsic appreciation of the essence of the struggle confronting black people”.

In a sense there is nothing original about black consciousness. Its articulation represents an amalgam of ideas from the black power and civil rights movements in the United States; there is a thread that runs through from the early nationalist movements in Africa, the Ethiopian movement, to the early ANC; there is much that draws on the influence of the negritude of Senghor and others and the Pan-African movement. Essentially, though, it was not meant to become merely a set of ideas but “a way of life”, as the SASO Manifesto so aptly put it. It was first and foremost a call to black society to take responsibility for their liberation, to free the human spirit and claim back their nature as free humanity. Secondly, it was giving notice to all who undermined the humanity of black people that the condition of subjugation was not one which God had ever decreed, that black people were ready to claim their freedom and their inherent humanity, and that they would do so on their own terms.

Let me highlight three instruments that were intrinsic to this liberation ethic. The first was a new and critical understanding of culture. Culture needed to be liberated from what Biko called its ‘arrested’ image that lacked vibrancy and dynamism. His idea, however, was that culture was a necessary means of humanising black people, of reclaiming their instruments of humanity. Of course, it was recognised that the same culture had been used as an instrument of subjugation, boxed as backward and uncivilised. Inasmuch as the history of all subjugated peoples was a history of conquest, black people needed to be authors of their own histories, to make history while they lived it. Culture was an important determinant of consciousness but African culture had to be subjected to critique, which would include the discovery of authentic culture, draw on elements of the African culture of communalism and solidarity, and engender an understanding of human nature, of creativity and the arts, of wisdom and insight. All this suggests that African culture was not something to be ashamed of but that it could be an instrument of liberation. There are echoes of Amílcar Cabral and Frantz Fanon in Biko’s discourse on culture. In a profile of Cabral he makes the following point:

Culture has to take its place at the heart of the struggle for liberation. It is not enough to talk about raising consciousness, what is important is the type of future we envisage, the kind of social relations we plan to set up and how we prepare for the future of humanity.

Fanon (1967) for his part states bluntly: “[I]t is this that counts, everything else is mystification. It is around the people’s struggles that culture takes on substance, not around songs, poems or folklore.” I raise this point here because black consciousness and Steve Biko have been criticised for lacking liberatory action and revolutionary force.

The second focus was religion. Although Biko himself was not consciously ‘religious’ – in particular he did not take part in institutional religion and the church – he was deeply conscious of the role religion could play in social upliftment, in asserting a common humanity as well as human solidarity. He was equally conscious

that through the missionary movement the church had brought Africa mixed blessings: a liberating gospel and an ideology and practice of acquiescence. He therefore took his place among the radicals and nonconformists, who held that the gospel had to be liberated from the clutches of the missionary establishment's politics. African traditional religions were a significant pointer to a people's quest for authentic self-expression, and the church had abiding value for large numbers of black people who continued to find it meaningful. His approach, therefore, was not to denounce the church or embrace atheism but to liberate religion and theology as well. That is how it came about that black consciousness made common cause with the UCM, launched the Black Theology project, and cooperated very closely in advocacy work with the black churches and with theological colleges.

The third area was social development. Black consciousness as a strategy for liberation built its philosophy on the idea that oppressed blacks shared common values and aspirations. The ethic of black solidarity was critical for black consciousness. It was important that students, the intelligentsia of their society, must remain connected to their social and cultural roots. SASO pioneered a programme for engaging students in community development. By so doing they not only participated in community upliftment, but also took time to understand the communities, listen to the people, hear their stories and struggle for life, and work with them towards solutions. The community development projects began with literacy training, using the Paulo Freirean psycho-social method of pedagogy. Students later ran clinics and were soon building schools and community centres. Through the work of their hands, the application of their knowledge and learning from the elders they were not only able to fill gaps in their knowledge and history but were conscientised as well. Biko's rallying cry to SASO members was straightforward:

We have a responsibility not only to ourselves but also to the society from which we spring. No one else will take up the challenge until we, of our own accord, accept the inevitable fact that ultimately the leadership of the non-white people in this country lies with us.

Of course, this idea was not original. It has been the means by which a liberation ethic could afford to build its system on the basis of contending social forces. The idea was that through their common interest such forces could be fused and the tendency towards intellectual and bourgeois elitism neutralised by committing these groups to integrating their life and praxis with the communities they served. That was what Amilcar Cabral did in Guinea Bissau and Paulo Freire promoted in Brazil. Charles Peterson (2001) describes Cabral's thought thus:

The elite reunion with mass popular struggle and culture disproves the lie of colonial invincibility and superiority by showing how colonial subjects can move beyond foreign domination. For the elite class, the class most immersed in colonial ideology and culture, moving beyond the shadow of colonial influence demonstrates the possibility of a new nation rising out of the ashes of a dominated past. With an eye on the future the re-born elite, by becoming one with the mass population, suggests and actively works towards a new democratic nation that attempts to deliver on the party's national liberatory promises.

The reference to 'non-white' was made in 1969. The terminology of blackness, non-white and solidarity had not become set. In later times he would never have referred to blacks as non-white, but only to those who betray the destiny of black people and their liberation.

Black consciousness never attempted in any systematic sense to formulate a manifesto for a new South Africa. In part this was because black consciousness, certainly during Steve Biko's time, never saw itself as an alternative liberation force,

and partly because it was rightly preoccupied with the transitional phase: the strategies necessary to bring about the revolution of the mind that leads to action. In its early formulations black consciousness had no desire to replace the traditional liberation organisations, neither did it see itself as postulating an alternative ideology. Its primary point was that in the circumstances of its day black disunity was a luxury we could not afford. That explains how someone like me could be a loyal cadre of the movement even though I had solid standing in the ANC Youth League. Indeed, at the time of black consciousness I was regularly in touch with the underground at various levels. I made sure that what black consciousness was about was well communicated and understood. It was not a matter of engaging loyalties from different movements, but of seeking ways to transcend such divisions by articulating a meta-narrative of liberation that was unifying rather than particularising.

Nonetheless Steve Biko never hesitated to promote his own vision of a new South Africa. That vision was never detailed. It was not a Freedom Charter, it was not a ten-point programme. These were ideas Steve formulated, mainly in responses in interviews he had, usually with outsiders curious about a future South Africa. From them emerges a vision of a common humanity and the affirmation of a society founded on justice, without any privileges or special consideration for minorities. He recognised that under majority rule South Africa would be black and nationalist in its orientation and political practice. He never substantively critiqued socialist ideology, save to say that he harboured intellectual suspicions about socialist ideologies and practice.

Steve Biko's essay "Black Consciousness and the quest for a true humanity" is by common consensus considered the best statement he could have made about his vision for a new society. It is the product not just of discursive reasoning but also of a critique of society as it was organised. He then spells out a vision of the people of South Africa ultimately sitting down together with a *tabula rasa* to formulate a truly new society based on the values we all share as common humanity. Somehow this essay gives us insight into Steve Biko as a visionary and someone with a truly humane heart. "We have set out," he says "on a quest for true humanity, and somewhere on the distant horizon, we can see the glittering prize" (Biko 1978:108).

Finally I need to reflect on what all this might mean for a new South Africa. What strikes me, first and foremost, is how much society needs both intellectuals and heroes. It is correct that this society should honour its heroes and heroines and celebrate its intellectuals. Heroes are never those who set themselves up as such, or who go about their business expecting to be hero-worshipped. Likewise intellectuals do not draw attention to themselves but to ideas and social critique. For both their currency is truth: to stand by the truth, to articulate reality as truthfully as they understand it without calculating personal benefit. Perhaps what we need even more in our present climate is a good dose of idealism. We need that capacity to think ahead and above the din of the madding crowd. Idealism comes from the knowledge that current circumstances need never be the final word and that we can visualise a better future. Without idealism we can hardly find solutions to contemporary challenges and shape our future.

I believe that Steve Biko did all three things for our country. He was enormously prescient in his utterances, and he clearly envisioned the kind of future South Africa is struggling to establish today. What is most refreshing about Steve's writings – looked at today – is their bluntness and matter-of-factness. He does not seem to be courting acceptance. Reading Steve today one is amazed at how truly 'free' a spirit he was. If one considers that he was writing at a time of repression, his courage shines through. No wonder the young people of his generation were rapt in awe of him and cultivated their own imagination. In that sense Steve Biko has lessons for the young leaders of our day.

I believe that this should call us to reconnect with the values that sustained and entrenched the liberation struggle against all odds; in particular with the abiding humanity – *ubuntu* – that informed all aspects of the struggle. For us today it would

mean, I believe, that we would vigorously address poverty and place human development at the centre of our national development strategy. We would by now, in the second decade of our liberation, be making better headway with development indices like housing, health care, primary education and basic literacy – very like what the heads of state committed themselves to at the Millennium Summit in 2000: the Millennium Development Goals.

In truth crime and corruption devalue whatever we stood for during the liberation struggle. They are marked by selfishness, jealousy and cold, inhuman violence. Crime and corruption violate our common humanity and dignity. We are a society devoid of any regard for human life and cynical about the rights of others. The same can be said about racism and ethnicity. A society which by common consent was founded on racism cannot but be riddled with the cancer of racism. Resolute steps must continue to be taken to analyse all forms of racism, take corrective measures, set systems in place to entrench equality and punish all traces of racist conduct and behaviour. Social cohesion remains a major deficiency of our society today. We are as divided as ever along lines of race, gender and poverty/wealth divides. Social cohesion must remain an overriding goal of our society at all levels.

Finally, Steve Biko continues to point the way to a vision of leadership that is as visionary and sacrificial as it is transformational. His relationship with colleagues and comrades was truly collegial. A larger than life figure, he was at one with those from whom he sourced his ideas and thinking. Steve was always able to discern the strengths and weaknesses of his teams and often guided colleagues according to their gifts. Biko lived with many of us like brothers and sisters. He was deeply concerned about our well-being and shared with those in need. We cannot tell what kind of leader Steve might have turned out to be in the new South Africa. What is undeniable is that he nurtured a band of comrades, confident and articulate, who lived fearlessly in dangerous times. Steve Biko is a true model of his generation.

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