

## Upright and free: Fanon in South Africa, from Biko to the shackdwellers' movement (Abahlali baseMjondolo)

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Grounded in the South African experience, in discussions with Blacks about their everyday experiences of oppression and in attitudes formed from that experience and sharpened by an engagement with Africana philosophers like Fanon, Steve Biko recreated the kind of praxis that Fanon suggested in the conclusion of *The Wretched of the Earth*, namely that the working out of new concepts cannot come from the intellectual's head alone but must come from a dialogue with common people. Today a new shackdweller movement (Abahlali baseMjondolo) has emerged in South Africa, which has put post-apartheid society on trial and has resonated with Fanon and Biko's idea of a decolonized new humanism. At the same time Abahlali's notion of a person and its critique of reification has been challenged by the spontaneous eruption of xenophobic violence indicating that the stark choice between humanism and barbarism is a most concrete question in the shack settlements. Because Biko's development of Black consciousness and his engagement of Fanon's thought remains of historic importance to contemporary South Africa, the paper begins with a focus on the creativity and the contradictory processes by which Fanon's philosophy of liberation is articulated in Steve Biko's conception of Black consciousness. From this starting point the discussion shifts from Biko's critique of white liberalism to the dialectics of contemporary neoliberal 'postcolonial' reality. What remains central, however, are the creative and contradictory processes that a reengagement with Fanon will create. In other words, since it is 'the live subject that unites theory and reality', the issue becomes how, in a new historic moment, a philosophy born of struggle makes itself heard.

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The *practice* of philosophy is itself *theoretical*. It is the *critique* that measures the individual existence by the essence, the particular reality by the Idea. (Marx, 1841)

To speak about the practice of Fanonian philosophy one first needs to think about the question of method. This paper thinks through what Walter Rodney (1969) calls 'groundings with my brothers' in two, not necessarily opposite, but in Fanon's case, dialectically connected, directions. Since philosophy – not simply practical philosophy but a quest for universality, a philosophy of liberation – is present in the movements of the damned of the earth, a philosophic moment makes itself heard when the exchange of ideas

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In memory of Aimé Césaire who died as I was completing a draft of this paper.

across the Black world is grounded in the strivings both for freedom and lived experience from 'below' and when, as Marx puts it, philosophy grips the masses. These dialogues, often hidden, underground and subjugated, make up what could also be called 'philosophy born of struggle' (Harris, 2002).

Grounded in the South African experience, in discussions with Blacks about their everyday experiences of oppression and in attitudes formed from that experience and sharpened by an engagement with Africana philosophers like Fanon, Steve Biko recreated the kind of praxis that Fanon suggested in the conclusion of *The Wretched of the Earth*, namely that the working out of new concepts cannot come from the intellectual's head alone but must come from a dialogue with common people.<sup>1</sup> Today a new shackdweller movement (Abahlali baseMjondolo, Zulu for people who are staying in shacks) has emerged in South Africa that has put post-apartheid society on trial and has resonated with Fanon and Biko's idea of a decolonized new humanism. At the same time Abahlali's notion of a person and its critique of reification has been challenged by the spontaneous eruption of xenophobic violence indicating that the stark choice between humanism and barbarism is a most concrete question in the shack settlements. Because Biko's development of Black consciousness and his engagement of Fanon's thought remains of historic importance to contemporary South Africa, the paper begins with a focus on the creativity and the contradictory processes by which Fanon's philosophy of liberation is articulated in Steve Biko's conception of Black consciousness.<sup>2</sup> From this starting point the discussion shifts from Biko's critique of white liberalism to the dialectics of contemporary neoliberal 'postcolonial' reality. What remains central, however, are the creative and contradictory processes that a reengagement with Fanon will create. In other words, since it is 'the live subject that unites theory and reality' (Dunayevskaya, 1991, p. xxxiv), the issue becomes how, in a new historic moment, a philosophy born of struggle makes itself heard.

### Grounding Fanon in South Africa: James Cone and the critique of white liberals

[I]t appears to us as too much of a coincidence that liberals – few as they are – should not be determining the modus operandi of those blacks who oppose the system, but also leading it, in spite of their involvement in the system. (Biko, 1979, p. 89)

Accept life together or nothing at all. (Jaspers, 1978, p. 32)

Fanon remained vital to liberation struggles on the African continent after his death. The 1967 French edition of *The Wretched* carried a picture of Congolese rebels still fighting years after Lumumba's murder. In the Portuguese colonies, Amílcar Cabral remained one of Fanon's most important interlocutors. In Mozambique, Yoweri Museveni, who would later become the President of Uganda, wrote about Fanon's applicability to 'liberated Mozambique' (Museveni, 1971). But in South Africa, where the apartheid regime banned anything that smacked of Marxism, Fanon arrived via the Black power movement building in the United States – in the form of young black students schooled in apartheid's 'bush colleges' and hungry for a philosophy of liberation to call their own. Founded in 1969, the South African Students Organization (SASO) heralded the beginnings of the new Black consciousness movement, which found an affinity with Fanon's philosophy, not across the Limpopo but almost subterraneously through the writings of an emergent American Black theology, specifically that of James Cone.<sup>3</sup> The importance of Black theology as a medium for Fanon's travel into South Africa and also the quite different objective

circumstance meant that the usual primacy (see Arendt, 1971) given to Fanon's so-called theory of violence was muted. Indeed the emphasis on Fanon's conception of identity and liberation by figures like Cone had a direct connection to Blacks' experience in South Africa where, as Biko put it, 'the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressed [was] the mind of the oppressed' (Biko, 1979, p. 68).

Like Cone, Biko recognized that Christianity was an effective tool for mental enslavement (Cone, 1986a, p. 127) and he did not think Christian pacifism made sense 'to an oppressed and destitute people' (More, 2004, p. 214). But while Christianity in Africa was recognized as 'Western' – part of the oppressive system and colonizing process – Black theology, with its focus on the liberation of Black people from tyranny and servitude and on Jesus as a political rabble-rouser of the poor and a 'fighting God' (Biko, 1979, p. 94), was considered a positive contribution. Rooted in the language of the slave revolts led by Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner in the early nineteenth century, Black theology in the US also emphasized the significance of churches as spaces for Black political autonomy. But it was Cone's critique of white liberals that particularly resonated with Biko, and his first articulations of Black consciousness were a sharp critique of white liberalism, a suggestive point given that contemporary South Africa has embraced not only neoliberal economic policies but also neoliberal ideas of possessive individualism mediated through the capitalist market place.

Biko directly engaged Cone in his paper 'Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity', which he submitted to *Black Theology: The South African Voice*. The paper spoke of a vision of a true humanity that drew strength from solidarity, an articulation that contrasted starkly with the talk about 'integration' popular among liberal whites. Indeed, in the paper, Biko holds that the liberal discussion of integration forgets that it is people and human relationships that are at stake, not the liberal's instrumentalist concern with the administration of things. For this 'forgetting', according to Biko, far from an aberration, is derived from the exploitative values that liberalism is based on. And as if intimating a critique of post-apartheid society, he argues that the liberal's idea of integration

is an integration in which black will compete with black, using each other as rungs up a stepladder leading them to white values. It is an integration in which the black man 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 rich richer in a country where the poor have always been black. (Biko, 1979, p. 91)

Returning to this point, Biko's 1970 essay, 'Black Souls in White Skin', further argues that the kind of integration that white liberals talk about is 'artificial' and would only perpetuate the 'in built complexes of superiority and inferiority' which would 'continue to manifest themselves even in the "nonracial" set-up' (Biko, 1979, p. 20). Echoing Cone, Biko then asks, 'Does this mean that I am against integration?' He answers:

if by integration you understand a breakthrough into white society by blacks, an assimilation and acceptance of blacks into an already established set of norms and codes of behavior set up and maintained by whites, then YES I am against it... If on the other hand, by integration you mean there shall be free participation by all members of a society, catering for the full expression of the self in a freely changing society as determined by the will of the people, then I am with you. (Biko, 1979, p. 24)

Thus Cone's influence is manifest in Biko's articulation of Black consciousness philosophy as a critique of white liberalism. Taking many of its themes from the first chapter of Cone's *Black Power and Black Theology*, Biko concretized them for the South

African condition. For example, under a subsection of chapter one in *Black Power and Black Theology*, entitled 'Black Power and Existential Absurdity', Cone quips on the absurdity of the American declaration of independence especially its most famous lines, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal'. For Cone, Blacks were and are not equal. To the white retort that the Black is no longer a slave and therefore subject to integration, Cone replies that this is a camouflage, and echoing Fanon, adds that 'the absurdity arises as the Black man seeks to understand his place in the white world'.<sup>4</sup> Thus, for Cone,

if integration means accepting the white man's style, his values or his religion, the black man must refuse ... [O]n the other hand, if integration means that each man meets the other on equal footing ... then mutual meaningful dialogue is possible. (1997, p. 7)

Cone's argument has a resonance with Biko's paper. Like Cone, Biko takes issue with the liberal's idea of integration, insisting that mutual recognition can only come from a rejection of the other's definition. Yet Mark Sanders argues that Biko's critique of white liberals is essentially a 'more "true" liberalism' (Sanders, 2002, p. 168), and to a degree he is right. In as far as 'liberal' is understood in terms of a discourse of mutual reciprocity and dignity, of equals facing each other in an equal situation, even Biko would agree. To be a 'true' liberal, the situation has to change in a double sense: in its structure and its values. And Lewis Gordon makes this point in his 2002 foreword to Biko's *I Write What I Like*:

Liberalism offers a double-edged sword. On the one hand, there is 'conservative' liberalism, where the goal is to be colorblind. The problem with this kind of liberalism is that it changes no structures. Thus, this liberalism expects us to be colorblind in a world of white normativity, a world where whites hold most of the key cards in the deck. Another kind of liberalism focuses on bringing blacks 'up' to whites. The problem with this strategy is that it makes whites the standard. Blacks would thus fail here on two counts. First, they would fail simply by not being white. Second, why must it be the case that what whites have achieved constitutes the highest standards that humanity can achieve? (Gordon, 2002, p. x)

Indeed, in 'Black Souls in White Skin', Biko argues that, rather than acknowledging their ability to think for themselves, white liberals and leftists treat Blacks as if they were perpetual 'under-sixteens' always looking toward whites for recognition. This situation, clear to Biko as a student in the 1960s, led to his first articulation of Black consciousness. Responding to his experiences of white liberal domination of the national student union, NUSAS, he argued that since the dialogue between Blacks and whites was always going to be unequal, mutual reciprocity was not possible; in contrast to the old 'non-racial approach' (Biko, 1979, p. 35), which in reality does nothing to challenge the dominant paradigm, Biko further maintained that the Black's 'inferiority complex' was a 'result of 300 years of deliberate oppression, denigration and derision' and to expect mutual respect between whites and Blacks would be like 'expecting the slave to work with the slave-master's son to remove all the conditions leading to the former's enslavement' (Biko, 1979, p. 35). In other words, for Biko, it was only by removing *all* the conditions of oppression that one could begin to speak about mutual respect and a non-racial society.

It was Black action, however, that led to the white liberal's reaction, and Cone addressed this issue in his essay, 'Is Black Power a Form of Black Racism', where he articulates the idea that 'Black racism is a myth created by whites to ease their guilt feelings' (1997, p. 15). For Cone, guilt is a product of whites projecting onto Blacks the whole edifice of white society's 'brutal' oppositional myths, myths which Fanon also takes to task in *Black Skin*: 'myths of progress, civilization, liberalism, education, enlightenment,

refinement' (Fanon, 1967, p. 194). In other words, for Cone, the white liberals' equation of Black Power with Black Racism is nothing more than an attempt to construct the Black as the white's scapegoat, once again mobilizing myths in which, to borrow Fanon's words, white liberal's superiority is based on the Black's inferiority, or more precisely *nonexistence*. Challenging whites to confront their own 'indifference to suffering' (Biko, 1979, p. 23),<sup>5</sup> Biko quotes Karl Jaspers on metaphysical guilt by way of Cone's essay, who in turn takes it from Fanon's *Black Skin* (p. 89). The problem is not a 'Black problem', Biko insists, 'the problem is WHITE RACISM'. Indeed in 'Fear: An Important Determinant', Biko repeats the Jaspers quote including the following lines from Fanon's *Black Skin* excerpt ellipsed by Cone: 'somewhere in the heart of human relations, an absolute command imposes itself: in the case of criminal attack or of living conditions that threaten physical being, accept life for all together or nothing at all' (Biko, 1979, p. 78). For Jaspers, the obligation of human solidarity in the face of injustice stems from God, but for Fanon the obligation derives not from God but 'the reality of the feeling responsible for one's fellow man'. Biko sees in Jaspers' proclamation 'life for all or not at all' not so much the issue of white metaphysical guilt but Black solidarity. What for Jaspers might be ethical bad faith becomes for Biko a discourse on the fear created by the apartheid state security police. For Biko, the issue is circular, for it is solidarity that will undermine the fragmentation and the division on which fear breeds, and for Biko as for Fanon, solidarity is based on action: 'alterity of rupture, of conflict, of battle' and the need 'to educate man to be actional' (1967, p. 222).

#### Dialectic of solidarity: Being on your own

[I]t is too late in a sense. We don't need an organization to push the kind of ideology that we're pushing. It's there; it's already been planted. It is in the people. They could ban five of us; it makes no difference. (Biko, 2008, p. 37)

In contrast to the liberal argument that Black consciousness is a closed world, Biko's conceptualization expresses the dialectic of liberation he found in Fanon. In 'White Racism and Black Consciousness', Biko takes a quote from the conclusion of Fanon's chapter 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness' in *The Wretched of the Earth* which summed up Fanon's dialectic of self-consciousness: 'As Fanon puts it', Biko writes, "'the consciousness of self is not the closing of a door to communication ... National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension'" (Biko, 1979, p. 72). This notion of dialectic is important to Biko as he situates the struggle in South Africa within the 'Black world'. In 'White Racism and Black Consciousness' (which was first published in *Student Perspectives on South Africa*<sup>6</sup>), Biko cites Aimé Césaire's 1956 letter of resignation from the French Communist Party. He finds Césaire's remarks about the specificity of the Black's place in the post-war world resonating with his own understanding of South African politics. For Biko, the South Africa of the mid-1950s was a place where Black consciousness was germinating among

young Black men who were beginning to 'grasp the notion of (their peculiar) uniqueness' and who were eager to define who they were ... [D]isgruntled with the direction imposed on the African National Congress ... [they were] beginning to realize that they need[ed] to go it alone and to *evolve a philosophy based on, and directed by, blacks*. (Biko, 1979, p. 67, my emphasis)

Then, after the banning of the Pan Africanist Congress (and the ANC) in the early 1960s, Black political expression was silenced. In such a situation the evolution of a philosophy based on self-determination appeared difficult. Yet for Biko it was not altogether impossible. He believed that if Blacks realized that they were truly *on their own* – that is, autonomous – and that genuine liberation must be an act of self-activity articulated in contrast to being beholden to white liberals and their values, such a direction was possible. Black consciousness would then, in response to the old ‘multiracial’ approach,<sup>7</sup> represent a new direction and new articulation that drew from cultures of resistance in the present.

Thus, for Biko, Black consciousness was an important challenge to young educated Blacks wooed by white liberals. Eschewing the ‘old non-racial approach’, Black consciousness’ claim to authenticity and self-determination would have to come endogenously. But this did not mean that it could not look to anything outside of itself for its becoming; self-determination was not a ‘closing of the door to communication’. Rather, it was signal to encourage mutual reciprocity. This concept of being on your own can be traced to Fanon’s discussion of Black consciousness in *Black Skin, White Masks*, and Biko’s colleague, Barney Pityana,<sup>8</sup> quotes the following from Fanon as a crucial articulation of Black consciousness in his paper, ‘Power and Social Change in South Africa’, also published in *Student Perspectives in South Africa*:

The dialectic that brings necessity into the foundation of my freedom drives me out of myself. It shatters my unreflected position. Still in terms of consciousness, Black consciousness is immanent in its own eyes. I am not a potentiality of something. I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place inside me. My Black consciousness does not hold itself as a lack.<sup>9</sup> It IS. It is its own follower. (1972)<sup>10</sup>

Pityana then goes onto add,<sup>11</sup> ‘This is what we Blacks are after TO BE. We believe that we are quite efficient in handling our BEness and for this reason we are self-sufficient’. In short, even if Pityana’s articulation of Black consciousness had an individualist existential moment of self-examination and personhood<sup>12</sup> – a quest ‘TO BE’ – the emphasis is still on becoming actional *social* beings. This is not unlike Biko’s formulation, which following Fanon, links psychological liberation to a ‘sociodiagnostic’ (1967, p. 11), grounding individual alienation in its socio-economic and political contexts and individual liberation in the social situation. In other words, they all saw and built on Fanon’s concern with the social individual and the idea that individual liberation required a psychological revival that had to be intersubjective.<sup>13</sup>

Biko’s essay, ‘We Blacks’ (Biko, 1979, pp. 27–32), expresses the importance of self-consciousness of the individual in the collective nature of social action, which, in apartheid South Africa, necessitated a complete break with the ideological and psychological system produced by colonialism and apartheid. For Biko, such an action demanded the understanding that white liberals were not simply apartheid’s beneficiaries but active accomplices in reinforcing the idea that Blacks were not capable of becoming autonomous human beings. Moreover, Black consciousness’ internal revolution – its becoming – required the subject’s total commitment. For Black consciousness was a political movement whose philosophy was not simply strategic but a demand for total liberation.<sup>14</sup> This, though, did not mean that Biko rejected strategy, but it did mean that Biko’s vision, like Fanon’s, was a total critique. The quest for a new humanity required fundamental change.

### Radical mutations: Culture and revolution

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*)

I worked on jobs with my feet and my hand  
 But all the work I did was for the other man  
 Now we demand a chance to do things for ourselves  
 We're tired of beatin' our head against the wall  
 And workin' for someone else  
 We're people, we're just like the birds and the bees  
 We'd rather die on our feet  
 Than be livin' on our knees  
 Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud (James Brown, 'Say it Loud, I'm Black and Proud')

To be sure, the historical contexts for Fanon writing the *Wretched of the Earth* and Biko developing Black consciousness are quite dissimilar in that the situation in South Africa in 1969 is far different from that of revolutionary Algeria in 1959. Biko argues, for example, that by 1960 'all Black resistance was killed, and the stage was left open to whites of liberal opinion to make representation for Blacks' (Biko, 2008, p. 21). In other words, the 1960s in South Africa was less a decade of turbulence than quiescence. Nevertheless it is clear that Biko found the issues Fanon developed in *The Wretched* similar enough and compelling for this reason. For example, in 'Some African Cultural Concepts', Biko, like Fanon, views African cultures as neither time bound nor pre-colonial but have very nearly been battered out of shape by settler colonialism (Biko, 1979, p. 41). In fact, he says, even talking about African culture is a difficult thing to do because the African is not supposed to have an understanding of his or her own culture. Thus Biko, like Fanon, is critical of educated Blacks who, mimicking white liberals, take an elitist attitude toward African cultures, failing to understand that the rural folk's criticism of apartheid is based on a fundamental truth, that it is an elemental resistance to the destruction of the African ways of life (Biko, 1979, pp. 69–70). Biko's call for a reconnection to the people's elemental resistance is, as we remember from reading Fanon, a critical element of the dialectic of national consciousness. So while Biko acknowledged the Fanonian notion of cultural resistance, he also recognized Fanon's critique of the native intellectual, especially since Black consciousness first emerged among Black students.<sup>15</sup> And, like Fanon, Biko argued that a critical consciousness must encourage a self-critical attitude toward elitism. And in this vein, he argued that in order for SASO to transition from being a student organization to becoming a national organization, the Black People's Convention (BPC) had to 'stress . . . the relation of the intellectuals with the *real needs* of black community'. Thus emphasizing the need for national policies that are grounded in the 'real needs' – the *experience* – of common people, Biko was developing a notion of solidarity that rejected the notion of 'tribal cocoons . . . called "homelands" which he saw as nothing else but sophisticated concentration camps where black people are allowed to "suffer peacefully"' (Biko, 1979, p. 86). At the same time, he was also following Fanon's conception of a dialectic of a national consciousness, which insisted not only that radical intellectuals reject the racist regime and its invention of 'tribal' politics, but that they also, somewhat paradoxically, use what they learned in the apartheid schools and colleges against the regime itself. This, of course, meant that, far from a simple critique of 'Bantu education', 'tribal homelands' and any collaboration with apartheid, intellectuals had to rethink concepts of collectivity and what it meant to 'return to the source' (Cabral, 1974).

For such a return required a mental liberation from the all the inferiority complexes that had been produced by years of living in apartheid South Africa. And, particularly for Biko, it meant a liberation grounded in African cultural concepts of collectivity and sharing that put the human being at the center. Like Latin American liberation theologians and US Black theologians like Cone, Biko rejected the Christian homily that the poor are always among us,<sup>16</sup> and viewed the kind of poverty and destitution that one sees in Africa as not endemic to it, but a product of colonialism and apartheid. Thus he maintained that 'poverty was a foreign concept' in precolonial Africa (Biko, 1979, p. 43) and would probably agree with European economists like Karl Polyani that starvation and malnutrition did not exist in communal societies in Africa where assistance to the destitute was given unquestionably (Polyani, 1957, pp. 163-164).

So while Biko emphasized the specificity of the African situation, he also understood the international urban scope of the modern Black consciousness movement<sup>17</sup> that was developing among the youth in Africa.<sup>18</sup> Young Blacks, Biko argued, were finding inspiration from the soulful<sup>19</sup> and defiant message of James Brown's anthem 'Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud'. Biko identified this song as part of 'our modern culture; a culture of defiance, self-assertion and group pride and solidarity' (Biko, 1979, p. 46). Indeed, Cone had also applauded James Brown's 'Say it Loud' as a source of Black theology, adding, 'It is the Christian way of saying, "to hell with your stinking white society and its middle-class ideas about the world. It has nothing to do with the liberating deeds of God"' (Cone, 1973, p. 25; see also Cone, 1997, p. 25). So, going back to Biko's demand for African cultural concepts for self-becoming, how did the 'Soul Power' of the African-American singer, James Brown, singing from the heart of the capitalist monster, the United States (Fanon, 1968, p. 313), with its narrowly instrumental individualist ideology, jibe with his conception of Black communalism?

Biko did not address the possible ambiguities, rivalries and incipient class divisions in the Black world. But, like Fanon, his rejection of white liberal (and colonial) culture was based not on a belief in cultural essence but on an embracing of the tradition of popular resistance to apartheid. Emphasizing the threads of solidarity in the Black community, Biko argued that 'the basic tenets of our culture have largely succeeded in withstanding the process of bastardization'. Still, when it comes to a difference between Fanon and Biko, 1969 was not 1959 in another important sense. South Africa aside, 1969 was almost synonymous with the word revolution, especially the Black revolution in the United States. And Biko's notion of African cultural concepts, of 'giving the world a more human face', was, as I have argued, worldly and revolutionary – not a harkening back to any imagined past but rooted in the lived experience of the here and now. And its sources are continental, including the intellectual and cultural exchanges between the United States and South Africa. Thus, for Biko, the reference to James Brown is not external to African cultural concepts but an expression of an 'all-engulfing rhythm' that 'immediately caught on and set millions of bodies in gyration throughout the world' (Biko, 1979, p. 46). But the question is, as far as he was making claims about millions of people 'throughout the world', was he falling into the abstractions of negritude?

Anyone familiar with Fanon's *Black Skin* will be immediately wary of such a claim of 'rhythm' since it echoes Senghor's essentialist claims about the Black's emotion, sensitivity, intuition, and rhythmic attitude (1967, p. 127).<sup>20</sup> In fact, in 'Some African Cultural Concepts', Biko does approvingly quote Kenneth Kaunda (then the president of Zambia) about Africans beings pre-scientific people. Yet, if we briefly hold this in abeyance, we see that 1969 is not 1948<sup>21</sup> or 1949, when negritude was essentially a literary movement



connected to the burgeoning anti-colonial movements. Rather, in 1969, Black Consciousness was a worldwide mass and revolutionary phenomenon, and 'Say it Loud I'm Black and I'm Proud' took on a revolutionary significance,<sup>22</sup> listening to 'Say it Loud I'm Black and I'm Proud' in this context, Biko seems to have been describing what must have felt like the rhythm of a mass movement in the immediacy of Black revolt. After all, Biko showed no interest in making claims about a Black essence, only the attempt to develop authentic links (in an existential, not essential, sense) for an autonomous and revolutionary humanist politics which he called 'situational-experiencing' (Biko, 1979, p. 43). For him, the future of South Africa is Black in the sense of struggle rather than a timeless, static essence, and Black solidarity meant rejecting the apartheid division along essentialist 'tribal' lines. Thus Black *becoming* is the Black masses making themselves and making history; it is a process of re-entry into their own history and the creation of an alternative history that had been buried and dismissed by colonialism and apartheid. In short, in Biko's conception, self-determination is an 'endogenous' process rooted in a critique of liberalism and elitism, not an embrace of an *ahistorical* cultural or racial essentialism.

Paraphrasing Fanon's statement in 'On National Culture' (see 1968, p. 210), Biko writes 'as one black writer says, "colonialism is never satisfied with having the native in its grip but, by some strange logic, it must turn to his past and disfigure and distort it"'. However, a major, though subtle, shade of difference between Fanon and Biko's conception of culture seems to be over their attitudes to 'native' culture under colonialism. Though Fanon appreciates how the 'native's' culture has continued to resist colonialism, 'On National Culture' seems to follow a different trajectory, one that emphasizes how this clandestine culture of resistance is 'condemned to extinction' (1968, p. 237). Inert and already destroyed, indigenous culture can only be rejuvenated, indeed transformed, by the 'struggle'. Fanon sums up the dialectic (1968, p. 210):

The struggle for freedom does not give back to the national culture its former values and shapes; this struggle which aims at a fundamentally different set of relations between men cannot leave intact either the form nor content of the people's culture.

And indeed for Fanon this development is crucial to the definition of a new humanism.

When Fanon speaks of culture he maintains that it is opposed to custom. Culture is living and changing, while custom is reified, formal and rigid.<sup>23</sup> And it is culture, not custom, Fanon argues, that the damned of the earth hang onto even under the most extreme conditions. Contested and clandestine, and however broken-down, rigid and smashed by poverty this culture has become, it remains an original source of resistance which keeps the spirit of struggle alive. During the anti-colonial struggle, Fanon argues, these cultures are often transformed. After all, this national culture is also a struggle against the reification of tradition and custom (and with them the narrow nationalism of xenophobia, regionalism and chauvinism), and while Fanon appreciated the recovery of the history of African civilizations, he also seemed to suggest that such a discovery did not change the objective situation. For Fanon, national culture must be a fighting culture, one that draws from the long resistance to colonial occupation and transforms it in its struggle for national liberation.

Biko's idea of African cultural concepts was concerned with expressing a critique of the alienating character of capitalism that is based, as Biko argued, on dehumanization (see Olyphant, 2008). In other words, Biko's concern, not unlike Fanon's, was first and foremost with the need to reconnect with national culture to resist reification – the inert, static and outworn *custom* that served as the outer shell on which ethnic

entrepreneurs and chauvinists, as well as homeland leaders, apartheid academics and colonial apologists, based and drew their power. When it came to the rural areas, the centrality of the so-called 'Homelands' to apartheid's hegemony made it clear to Biko just what the recovery of the people's culture and their history was about – namely, the real history of anti-colonial struggle. Indeed, for Biko, it is revolutionary anticolonial history that relates 'the past to the present and demonstrates a historical evolution of the black man'. Thus when Biko spoke about paying attention to 'our history' (Biko, 1979, p. 95), it had nothing to do with the 'customary' – the reified traditions and manners – that had been fashioned according to the needs of the colonial state. And Biko's idea of history did not jibe either with the tactics of Bantustan leaders like Buthelezi, who claimed to be fighting the regime from the inside. As Biko put it, 'We are oppressed not as individuals, not as Zulus, Xhosa, Vendas or Indians. We are oppressed because we are black' (Biko, 1979, p. 97). Of course, Bantustans played an important material and ideological role for white South Africa, but the mass of people in rural areas did not accept Bantustans because they were fundamentally at odds with 'the basic tenets of our culture which ha[d] largely succeeded in withstanding the process of bastardization' (Biko, 1979, pp. 95–96). Thus apartheid fabrication of the tribal homeland is an imposition that is utterly in contradiction with the real needs of the mass of the people. And, for Biko, African cultural values, which center on appreciating 'man for himself', are not only crucial to the 'quest for a true humanity' but also in direct contrast to white liberal culture:

Ours is a true man-centered society whose sacred tradition is sharing. We must reject, as we have been doing, the individualistic cold approach to life that is the cornerstone of Anglo Boer – culture. We must seek to restore to the black man the great importance we used to give human relations ... to reduce the triumph of technology over man and the materialistic element that is slowly creeping into our society. (Biko, 1979, p. 96)

Rather than simply a 'multi-ethnic' or 'multi-racial' nation, the Black consciousness slogan 'One Azania, One Nation' echoed Fanon's double warning that if social consciousness is reached without a strong national consciousness, it could 'paradoxically' lead to regionalism and ethnic xenophobia. At the same time, if 'nationalism' was not made explicit and 'enriched' into a 'consciousness of social and political needs, in other words humanism, it leads up a blind alley' (1968, p. 204). Thus, for Biko, appreciating the nation building attempts of Shaka, Moshoeshe and Hintsa did not mean accepting 'Bantustan theory' grounded in colonial concepts of race and tribe. What was important was to be reminded of what Africans had achieved and what could be created in a quest for a new humanity. The history of nation building thus was part of the contemporary dialogue that strove for the freedom of the formerly excluded and dehumanized mass of people who were now being encouraged to hear themselves speak and be part of creating a new nation.

### **Fear and the fragmentation of black resistance**

Ground for a revolution is always fertile in the presence of absolute destitution. (Biko, 1979, p.30)

When I turn on my radio, when I hear that someone in jail slipped off a piece of soap, fell and died I say that we have been lied to: Hitler is not dead, he is likely to be found in Pretoria. (Biko, 1979, p. 75)<sup>24</sup>

Biko's critique of white liberals and his challenge to the Black's 'inferiority complex' (Biko, 1979, p. 45) was not the main issue in the townships where, as Biko argues, Blacks have no respect for white people and instead there is an 'aura of immorality and naked cruelty' perpetrated in the name of whites (Biko, 1979, p. 76). Thus political paralysis is not created by a complex; it is not a hallucination; it is a social fact created by force and the fear of reprisal that 'erodes the soul of black people' (Biko, 1979, p. 76). Fanon himself insists on this in chapter 4 of *Black Skin*: that one return to 'reality' in order to get the source of the problem. This leads us to Fanon's second idea of hegemony, hegemony based on pure force, which he discusses in *The Wretched*.<sup>25</sup> Hemmed in and controlled by the colonial policing system, the 'native', subjected to violence, struggles to survive, and Fanon contends that this violent atmosphere, deprived of an appropriate outlet against its real source, results in an 'aggressiveness turned against his own people'. Apartheid is simply the logical conclusion of a rule that is meant to teach the 'native [to] learn to stay in his place and not go beyond certain limits'. In this totalitarian context, Fanon argues, freedom is achieved during sleep, 'in the dreams of movement and aggression' (1968, p. 52).

Echoing Fanon's discussion of life under colonialism, Biko argues that 'Township life alone makes it a miracle for anyone to live up to adulthood. There we see a situation of absolute want, in which black will kill black to be able to survive. This is the basis of vandalism, murder, rape and plunder that goes on while the real sources of evil – white society – are sun-tanning on exclusive beaches or relaxing in their bourgeois homes' (Biko, 1979, p. 75). In other words, the system of oppression is not nuanced; white domination is maintained by fear and force, and Blacks in the township understand this. While this understanding alone does not undermine the reality of the force on which fear is constructed, it does allow another point of view. And Biko once again takes up Fanon's position, understanding that colonial society is a Manichean reality, a world split in two, where the 'natives' are bowed but not broken and kept in check only by force.

Because such a society can subdue Blacks only by force, the apartheid system is, as Biko says, 'the best economic system for revolution'. It is the 'great leveler' because it blocks the development of a Black middle class in the urban areas. Living in the same-sized four-room houses and taking the bus or train to work, Biko argues, solidarity could emerge across class lines. 'It's a perfect system for common identification', he adds, because 'the evils of it are so pointed and so clear, and therefore make teaching of alternative methods, more meaningful methods, more indigenous methods even, much easier' (Biko, 2008, p. 45). Arising from a new generation of young Blacks, Black consciousness was, in a sense, a product of this leveling, which rescribed 'non-white' and with it 'Indian' and 'Coloured' as 'Black', and promoted Black consciousness as a transformative social action. Black consciousness is, in this sense, a fairly straightforward philosophy of solidarity that reflects what the people already know, even if they have not systematically thought about or articulated it. But while Fanon discusses the possibility of violence emerging as a 'cleansing force' (1968, p. 94), Biko makes no reference at all to the possibility of such counter-violence. Rather, his focus is on the work needed to break the hold of fear that has been so crucial to apartheid rule, violently 'fragmenting' Black resistance and turning itself against itself. Yet, Biko's objective remains similar to Fanon's: what Blacks need is to stand up as a group, and Black consciousness' role is to rechannel the 'natives' 'pent-up' aggression toward the real source of violence.<sup>26</sup> On this score, Biko heeds Fanon's warning that liberation cannot come about from a reactive action based on a politics of revenge. Thus, Biko emphasizes Black consciousness' notion of solidarity, one that is based not on a

dogmatic sinking of differences, but on an intellectual elaboration that encourages Blacks to follow up their chain of reasoning:

'Black consciousness' therefore seeks to give positivity in the outlook of the black people to their problems. It works on the knowledge that 'white hatred' is negative, though understandable, and leads to precipitate shot-gun methods which may be disastrous for black and white alike. It seeks to channel up the pent-up forces of angry black masses to meaningful directional opposition basing its entire struggle on realities of the situation. It wants to ensure a singularity of purpose in the minds of the black people and to make possible total involvement of the masses in a struggle essentially theirs. (Biko, 1979, pp. 30-31)

In short, Black consciousness is a philosophy of self-emancipation. And, like Fanon, Biko understands that there is no demiurge, that freedom will not come from outside.<sup>27</sup> There is no use simply waiting for men with machine-guns to come and liberate them. They must stand up to oppression together. Surely this was what the Soweto student rebellion of 1976 heralded. And, for Biko, this idea of autonomy was not only necessary but also practical, and in retrospect, his position is absolutely correct. Black consciousness would soon represent a new stage of cognition and revolt, a stage that was essential – even to those in the mass democratic movements of the 1980s who had not been part of Black consciousness (see Gibson, 1988) – to the eventual unraveling of apartheid South Africa. Indeed after Soweto, 1976, Black consciousness became a philosophy whose time had come.

Alreaed Stubbs notes that in May 1976 Biko's comments at the Black consciousness trial had become public knowledge. Reported daily in the *Rand Daily Mail*, he had become the 'toast of the shebeens'.

Here was at last the authentic voice of the people not afraid to say openly what all blacks think but are too frightened to say ... Can the example of this man's courage have inspired the boys and girls of Soweto to face death, as they bravely did just six weeks later? (Biko, 1979, pp. 120-121)

The concreteness, indeed brilliance, of Soweto as an 'event', a subjective moment that had become objective, initiated a new stage: the beginning of the end of apartheid. Grounded in a specific situation and experience, Black consciousness in South Africa is a product of the experience of a 'moment' – of apartheid, of postcolonial Africa and of the Black consciousness mediated by US Black freedom movements. So, while Black consciousness as such signified a new stage of cognition, we have to ask: is Black consciousness applicable to contemporary South Africa? If so, how?

To be sure, Biko's Black consciousness may be too specific to be immediately applicable outside of its historical context, but as an idea of liberation, it still remains essential for any contemporary critique. Raya Dunayevskaya's 1973 discussion of the African 'revolutions' seems to talk to this issue when she argues that

it is not possible to comprehend the African reality apart from the compelling objective forces of world production, the pull of the world market, and the underlying philosophy of the masses which Marx called 'the quest for universality' ... [E]ven now ... after all the set backs ... far from rigor mortis having set in among 'the poor Africans', they are continuing the discussion of the relationship of philosophy to revolution. (1982, p. 246)

The point is that a philosophy born of struggle is ongoing. There is nothing to prevent it from presenting epochal truths. Even if philosophy belongs to its time, it should not be *reduced* to its time. After all, Soweto's 'concretization' of Black consciousness as a new stage enlivened rather than worked out the 'contradictory processes' internal to it.<sup>28</sup>

