

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.

Keywords: Fanon; Biko; Cone; Black consciousness; Black theology; South Africa; shackdwellers; Abahlali baseMjondolo; xenophobia

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.¹ 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.² 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.³ 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'.⁴ 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),⁵ 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*⁶), 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,⁷ 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,⁸ 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.⁹ It IS. It is its own follower. (1972)¹⁰

Pityana then goes onto add,¹¹ ‘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 personhood¹² – 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.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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.

