

STEVE BIKO: PHILOSOPHER OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

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Let a new earth arise.
Let another world be born.
Let a bloody peace be written in the sky.
Let a second generation full of courage issue forth,
Let a people loving freedom come to growth,
Let a beauty full of healing and a strength of final clenching be the
pulsing in our spirits and our blood.
Let the martial songs be written,
Let the dirges disappear.
Let a race of men rise and take control.

– MARGARET WALKER, “FOR MY PEOPLE”

I HAVE INTRODUCED THIS CHAPTER with an extract from Margaret Walker’s poem “For My People”.¹ It is a verse from the African-American experience of slavery and dehumanisation. The poem was first published in 1942, and could be viewed as a precursor to the civil rights movement. It ends with a “call to arms”, but it is also an affirmation of the struggle for social justice. This poem resonated with Steve Biko and Black Consciousness activists because the call for a “new earth” to arise, the appeal to courage, freedom and healing, constituted the precise meaning and intent of the gospel of Black Consciousness.

Margaret Walker does not so much dwell on the pain of the past or of lost hopes. She recognised the mood of confusion and fallacy that propelled

the foundation of the Black Consciousness Movement so many years later on another continent and under different circumstances. The poem is confident and positive in asserting the humanity of black people and of their capacity to become agents of their own liberation.

The poem ends with the flourish: “Let a race of men arise and take control”. That, in my view, was the attraction of Black Consciousness and Steve Biko’s articulation of it to the young people of South Africa in 1968 when the voice of Black Consciousness was first heard. This philosophy brought into being a new generation of black freedom fighters, and added substance to an intellectual engagement with blackness and freedom. Walker’s poem powerfully expresses what Black Consciousness did for black South Africa in the 1970s and the 1980s. South Africa has never been the same again.

There is evidence of a revival of the ideas of Bantu Stephen Biko (1946–77) in post-apartheid South Africa, especially among student and youth activists at universities. This interest has been fuelled by the disappointment and anger that many feel towards the unfinished business of South Africa’s liberation project: freedom, equality and economic opportunity.

The student movement of twenty-first-century South Africa has drawn inspiration from the generation of student activists in the 1970s who rallied around the philosophy and ideology of Black Consciousness. They have done so as a means of addressing the contemporary challenges that they face as young people and students. The call is for the decolonisation of the university, the assertion of an African identity and for “radical economic transformation”. Steve Biko has become somewhat of a poster boy for this movement. His name and the ideas around Black Consciousness have been popularised by a new generation of student activists. His writings are being read and reread, debated and interpreted. A great amount of Biko memorabilia – posters, films and videos – are to be found in bookshops and at Student Union cafés across South Africa. Discussion groups, radio talk shows and television programmes serve to inspire many young South Africans. It is fair to say that the resurgence of the cult of Biko is accounted for by the paucity of intellectual thought in South Africa’s prevailing social and political climate. Furthermore, to many young South African students and intellectuals, Biko’s ideas have a timeless quality about them and are applicable in a variety of contexts across different generations.

In large measure, this resurgence has been aided by the work of the Steve Biko Foundation, which was established in September 1997 to preserve and advance the legacy of the late Black Consciousness leader. The Foundation has

set itself the task of making his ideas accessible to South Africans. It hosts an annual Steve Biko Lecture,² and has brought eminent scholars and practitioners, such as Kenya's Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Nigeria's Ben Okri and former South African presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki, to South African university campuses to deliver the annual lecture since 2002. The resurgence of Bikoism can also be attested to by the fact that studies on this subject are being undertaken at universities across the world, while researchers increasingly make the academic pilgrimage to South Africa to conduct interviews and assess the relevance of Steve Biko to the contemporary society. In the process, scholarship on Biko has emerged at both South African and foreign universities.

Perhaps, among the more serious works that have been produced, one may cite the books of two South African scholars. Xolela Mangcu, a sociologist, published the 2013 biography, *Biko: A Life*,³ as the first in-depth study of the Biko phenomenon and of the Black Consciousness Movement that he founded and led. The other South African intellectual who has published on Steve Biko is Mobogo Percy More, a philosopher who is also a product of the Black Consciousness era. His essays on Biko have engaged with the political and philosophical debates about the ideas and the man, rooted in a philosophical reading of Steve Biko and his socio-political context. More published a book in 2017 titled *Biko: Philosophy, Identity and Liberation*.⁴ I cite only those two as they present different dimensions of their subject: one is a socio-biographical, historical study, while the other is an avowedly philosophical treatise. Both have strengths and limitations. Much of the scholarly opinion about Biko must address the current malaise in the politics of post-apartheid South Africa, which causes so many to reach out to Biko for answers and for inspiration.

This essay, then, is an interpretative appraisal of Steve Biko, his life and ideas, his key intellectual influences – from Hegel to Gramsci, Fanon and Du Bois (see Jinadu and Morris on Fanon and Du Bois in this volume) – and the power of his ideas to shape the future of South Africa. I conclude with reflections on the place of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness in contemporary South African politics. The essay also attempts to dig deeper than the Biko phenomenon, to try to find the roots and meaning that give value to the democratic and constitutional dispensation that South African society espouses. The abiding value of Steve Biko in the development of political consciousness and intellectual activism in South Africa is that his theorising draws from the lived experiences of black South Africans, and is informed by these experiences, developing lessons from them. In Biko's philosophy of Black Consciousness, we find the intricate

interrelationship and interdependence of thought and activism, a critical insight into the human condition, and the courage to learn lessons, however uncomfortable. It is for these reasons that Biko has an intergenerational appeal, and his theory is not culture- or class-bound.

From Ginsberg to Natal: The Making of a Revolutionary Philosopher

The township of Ginsberg in the Eastern Cape is set atop a hill facing eastwards towards the coastline of South Africa. Below the simple dwellings lies the colonially named King William's Town on the banks of the Buffalo River, once the capital of the province of British Kaffraria. This was part of the British colonial scheme of land dispossession and occupation in the nineteenth century. There is a curious blend and atmosphere in the place evidenced in the street names and architecture of the buildings that still reflect its colonial past. To this day this small town oozes the irrepressible spirit of rebellion, history and the cultures of the Xhosa people who inhabited it long before the colonialists set foot in it.

As one approaches Ginsberg these days, one passes the Biko Centre, established in 2012 with the financial support of donors and the South African government. It is a community centre, with activities in the creative arts and education. The Centre has also developed a community library and has spaces for exhibitions, performing arts and dance. It hosts lectures and debates, workshops and conferences. It is a place of meeting and training for young and old, and represents a worthy tribute to one of the most prominent sons of Ginsberg. All manner of Biko memorabilia and Black Consciousness and struggle artefacts can be found in the Centre.

Ginsberg is where Steve Biko was born on 18 December 1946 at his home – 698 Leightonville, Ginsberg Location – the third of four children of Alice and Mzingaye Biko. His father was a clerk in the local courts. In those days, Mzingaye was among the *izifundiswa* – the educated people of the community – and a respected local figure. He was studying law by distance learning with the University of South Africa (Unisa) when he died in 1950. Steve was four years old at the time. His mother Alice (“Ma Mcete”) took on the responsibility of raising their four children on her own: Steve, a brother and two sisters. Steve

was very close to his mother, while in his later years his father was something of a distant memory.

After Biko completed his early schooling at Forbes Grant Secondary School in Ginsberg, he went to Lovedale High School in the little educational town of Alice. Lovedale was a missionary station established by the Scottish Glasgow Missionary Society in 1828 and set along the Tyhume River in what in colonial times was the Victoria East region. It was at Lovedale that Steve and I met. We shared a desk in class, and became firm friends. I remember being struck by this friendly and lively boy who was easy to get along with. We lived in the same boys' hostel, and played sports together. He was also incredibly intelligent. It was clear that Steve was destined to score high grades, had it not been for the fact that there was a strike at school and, in August 1963, we were among those expelled and sent home. Steve and I never returned to Lovedale. Instead, he went to St Francis College in Mariannhill, Natal, a Catholic boarding school and a more liberal educational environment than Lovedale. It is fair to say that Steve thrived in this setting. He made enduring friendships with fellow students, and studies under teachers whom he greatly admired. His religious tolerance was tested, and his rebellious streak was often driven close to breaking point.

Steve did well enough at St Francis to gain admission to the University of Natal Medical School, the only one in South Africa that was devoted solely to training black students as medical doctors. It was at Mariannhill that Steve read widely and developed his skills as a debater. His knowledge of literature and politics was expanded. He had fond memories of the nuns who had taught him in school, and who encouraged him to express himself. Steve was always conscious that, as a child of a single mother who had struggled to make ends meet and to bring up a family of four, he had a responsibility to apply himself to his studies. He was fortunate as a good student to have won bursaries. But, by this time, his eldest sister had qualified as a nurse, and she could help his mother to bear the burden. Steve was the first and only one of his siblings to attend university.

Even as a junior medical student, Biko established a reputation as being sociable, affable and intelligent, as well as being a good orator. His critical eye could sense that the environment of a segregated medical school, with teaching staff drawn wholly from white academics (with some Indian lecturers within a supposedly multiracial university), left much to be desired. He examined the prevailing student organisations and engaged with them, without joining any of them.

Biko soon became one of the leaders of the Alan Taylor Medical Residence. It was during his time that the Natal Medical School changed from being called

the “Non-European” section to the “Black Section” of the university. It was also during his time that the University of Natal Black Section (UNB) sought and received its own representation on the National Union of South Africa Students (NUSAS), rather than remaining an appendage of the “white” University of Natal. Finally, it was during Biko’s time that the political identity of the campus also changed. And yet Steve was never isolationist, nor was he a loner. He confronted the lily-white leadership of NUSAS on campus. He was friends with many of them, and was good at socialising with all and sundry. He held his own in debates, challenging hidden prejudices and helping whites to examine their own thinking. He made friends with many of the student activists and liberal academics. He became part of a group of younger or more junior medical students who brought an atmosphere of intellectual and political engagement into the medical school campus.

In 1967 I reconnected with Steve when I was then a law student at the University College of Fort Hare in Alice. He had a political interest in all student formations, and I had a spiritual or religious interest. That year, we attended various conferences together, including the inaugural conference of the University Christian Movement in Johannesburg, and later the Anglican Students’ Federation held at Michaelhouse college in Howick, Natal. I was aware that Steve was also drawn, understandably, to the Catholic Society and their National Catholic Federation of Students (NCFS). What occupied us most was the superficial relations among students – black and white – including the unease that many of the young white students felt when they were in the company of black students. We were also determined to take a stand on the politics of church and country. On both counts, we were never disappointed. These gatherings became a meeting point for black students across all the segregated and isolated black campuses in the country. Bridge-building was an essential ethos of Christian student life.

The Origins of Black Consciousness

July 1967 marked the stirring of the rebel in Biko. At Rhodes University in Grahamstown (now Makhanda), NUSAS held its annual conference. Steve was a delegate from the University of Natal’s Black Section. As was the custom, the university forbade black delegates from staying in the student residences

where all other delegates were housed. The organisers had, as usual, made arrangements for the black delegates to be accommodated at church halls in the nearby African township of Joza (or Fingo Village). This was to avoid falling foul of the apartheid-era 1950 Group Areas Act separating the two races. For the first time in the history of NUSAS, Steve was the one who raised strong objections to this arrangement.⁵ He insisted that black students were not to be accommodated anywhere else but at the venue where the conference was to be held. This stand elicited a stirring debate at the conference, and divided black and white groups. It was the turning point in South African student politics that was to shape the politics of South Africa for many years to come.

It was following this Rhodes University NUSAS conference that Steve and I met at my home in Port Elizabeth in July 1967 to start charting a new politics for student life in South Africa. Five months later, a small group met at Mariannhill under Biko's leadership. It adopted a concept statement, and planned for a larger gathering in 1968. The University Christian Movement (UCM) held a conference at Stutterheim in the Eastern Cape in July 1968. These were the best places for large numbers of representatives from black campuses to meet. Even there, too, blacks were required to contrive a way to avoid contravention of the segregationist Group Areas Act, as well as the influx control laws meant to restrict the movement of black South Africans beyond their residential magisterial districts. Once again, a stand was taken, challenging the whole conference to defy restrictive apartheid laws. A protest march was also organised.

It was at this conference in Stutterheim that Steve called a blacks-only caucus of conference participants. This caucus resolved to continue engagement across all black campuses, and to meet later that year. The inaugural meeting of what later became known as the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) was held in Durban in July 1969. At this conference, Biko was elected its first president.

It thus fell to Steve and his collective of fellow medical students at the University of Natal to bring this nascent organisation into life. This meant that SASO had to have an organising principle beyond mere opposition to racism and racial discrimination. This required an understanding of, and a critique of, the politics of liberation in South Africa, as well as knowledge about contemporary developments and events in Africa and the world. It also meant drawing from the reservoir of knowledge and theory that would serve as the fulcrum and anchor for the passion and enthusiasm that black students were then displaying. There had to be a strategy not merely in regard to the existence and sustainability of

the organisation, but also in terms of the means for political education, human and leadership development, the astuteness required to manage the difficult situation on university campuses, and the expected barrage of attacks from the apartheid security establishment as well as from the white liberal controllers of black thought.

All this required extensive self-education. At a time when liberation organisations were not visible – being underground or in exile – black students needed to refresh their political focus. At a time when the security and political environment within South Africa spelt defeat for the forces of liberation, repression of all kinds was rife; the repressive state was at its most powerful; white liberal voices were muted; and those groups that could operate were advancing solutions whose effect was merely to mitigate the worst effects of apartheid. All the while, the apartheid government was advancing its grand plan of Bantustanisation and forced removals. In the face of these developments, the general black populace was cowed by fear, bannings and actual forms of repression. There was, in fact, no resistance possible under these circumstances.

It is fair to say that any attempt at resistance was considered futile or foolish or both. The conclusion of both the instruments of apartheid and the white liberal opponents of apartheid was that black people had been defeated. The African National Congress (ANC), in particular, was influenced by white liberal ideology, and the communist Left was also considered to be a dominant force within the movement, which could thus not be trusted. The ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) were banned organisations; and an era of intense repression ensued in the wake of the Rivonia Trial in 1964. The result was that many ANC and PAC activists were banned, imprisoned or went into exile. Various proposals were then being bandied about. The Bantustanisation of South Africa was becoming entrenched, the voice of the white opposition was becoming increasingly muted, and the apartheid government was gaining support among the white electorate. The white liberal newspapers were toying with ideas of collaboration. None of these took the voice of the oppressed black majority seriously enough.

Black Consciousness, therefore, became an ideology driven from, and authenticated by, black students on segregated university campuses across South Africa. This meant that black students took ownership of articulating the lived experience and frustrated aspirations of black people in four key ways. Firstly, SASO aggressively asserted that black South Africans had to speak in their own voices, and that their voices were not to be mediated by any other interests,

however well-meaning. Secondly, Black Consciousness was to become the voice of the oppressed seeking solutions *by* black people. Thirdly, SASO asserted that liberation must begin with human conduct, a behaviour that is free, assertive and courageous. Black people had to understand themselves and to cast aside their fears in order to challenge the systemic oppressive apparatus of the state. Fourthly, SASO defined blackness in such a way as to undermine the very essence of apartheid. “Black” in the language of Black Consciousness was a state of mind, an awareness of the condition of oppression, and a determination to challenge, resist, rebel and overturn the system – in effect, to break the chains of oppression. Black Consciousness was thus a philosophy of life, as much as of survival.

It was Biko who spent much time spreading the gospel of Black Consciousness: visiting many black campuses, addressing mass meetings and talking to student leaders. It was he who designed and articulated the theory, principles and ideology that were to form the bedrock of this new movement. It fell on Steve to lead the charge in training, education and research, and in communicating these ideas. It was he who became the principal strategist of this new movement. This was the context within which all of Biko’s papers, addresses, speeches and articles were crafted. They were first compiled by the South African journalist Donald Woods. Following the murder of Steve Biko at the hands of South Africa’s apartheid security police in September 1977, a book of the collected works of Biko edited by Father Aelred Stubbs was published in London in 1978 under the title *I Write What I Like*. Stubbs included in this first volume an epilogue essay with the title “Steve Biko: A Martyr of Hope”.

Biko did not theorise in the abstract. All of his writing was done in the course of advancing a vision that was widely shared: that South Africa would never be liberated by the goodwill of others – whether it be the liberal do-gooders, or by armed forces from sympathetic states, or through the agency of the United Nations – but by our generation. All of this took its toll, and Biko just could not continue with his medical studies. He did not write a theoretical or academic treatise, nor did he write for social edification. He wrote solely to advance the cause of Black Consciousness.

Steve dropped out of medical school in 1970. It took him a long time to reach this monumental decision. He was aware of how much he owed to his mother and his siblings, and aware too of the burden of expectations that lay on his young shoulders. His marriage to Nontsikelelo Mashalaba in December 1970 also brought with it additional family responsibilities that would soon become overwhelming.

From Hegel to Fanon

Besides his medical studies, Biko was well read, in literature, both English classics and literature by African writers, such as novels by Chinua Achebe, as well as African-American writers. He was well versed in many of the standard works of philosophy, and Pan-African political writings by Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah (see Biney in this volume) and Tanzania's Julius Nyerere, as well as the struggles of African people in the diaspora, particularly American writers such as Malcolm X (see Daniels in this volume) and Martin Luther King Jr. Biko thus loved literature, poetry and philosophy. He wrote fluently. His was a critical engagement with history, culture, religion and the customs of the diverse people of South Africa. This expansive knowledge was supplemented by Steve's ease of articulation of ideas, his easy-going style of conversation, and his power of listening and understanding. I do not recall Biko ever raising his voice in anger, even where circumstances may have justified it. He had a commanding presence and leadership style that coaxed people to listen to him.

The idea of Black Consciousness therefore arose from all of these sources. This philosophy definitely had a South African pedigree: from the history of resistance to colonial subjugation and dispossession; to the ideas nurtured in various phases of, and from, all of the various elements of the liberation struggle since 1912; from theories and insights from philosophy, and a reading of the struggles of the people of Africa, to the American civil rights movement and its key proponents such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr, as well as the black church, artists, poets and cultures. Even theories of Pan-Africanism and *Négritude* (see Irele in this volume) had a lasting value in the ideas immortalised by Biko. He was the undisputed ideologue, theoretician and strategist of the Black Consciousness Movement during his epoch.

Hegel also became a very influential philosopher and sparring partner for those of us like Biko and me who were seeking answers to our many questions, despite Hegel's own racist opinions about Africa and African people. The very idea of consciousness is Hegelian. It suggests not just a psychological state of mind, but an inner being, a personality who thinks and acts. In other words, Hegel offered a ringing denunciation of the apartheid philosophy, designed as it was on separation and on the superficial characteristics of race.

In 1978 the London-based South African historian Baruch Hirson published his most strident attack on Steve Biko and Black Consciousness in the book

*Year of Fire, Year of Ash.*⁶ Having emigrated from South Africa in 1974 after spending nine years in jail, Hirson had clearly never observed or understood the thinking and strategies behind Black Consciousness. He did not know Biko personally. In London, he made no effort to engage with the many of us Black Consciousness adherents who were there at the time to test his thinking, his reading and his ideas about the philosophy. In fact, his entire book was drawn from journalistic pieces that merely served to confirm his jaundiced mind.

For Hirson, the idea of “consciousness” as an organising principle for political action was not just counterproductive, but counter-revolutionary. He considered “consciousness” to be a “mysterious ingredient” in Black Consciousness philosophy. Without going into more detail about Hirson’s misguided intellectual attack, we should note that the lived experience of black folk in South Africa was such that they lived apartheid oppression daily. This was not a theoretical construct. Biko knew that apartheid was wrong, and sought by various means to abate the worst effects of this dehumanising policy. Consciousness was not so much about educating people about their situation, of which they were well aware. Consciousness was about developing tools to overcome this condition, to begin with, by addressing the psychological state of being a “defeated” people and distrusting one’s collective power. Black South Africans no longer believed in their capacity to overcome white oppression. This was quite understandable, given the many military battles that had been waged against colonial oppressors without much success, and the many casualties of wars against white oppression that littered the historical landscape of the Black Consciousness struggle.

Frankly, white people had come to be viewed by blacks as invincible. Consciousness was empowerment in the language of Black Consciousness. The mind of the oppressed need not simply be available for appropriation for the purposes of the oppressor. Rather, the mind of the black person should become the means of resistance for overcoming oppression. The apartheid state knew that Black Consciousness marked a silent revolution. It was no longer a question of educating people about their oppression but, rather, about equipping people with the tools for overcoming this condition. Biko defined his credo succinctly: “There is no freedom in silence.”⁷ Consciousness, as Mabogo More noted, cannot be understood outside its authenticity. “To exist authentically”, states More, “is to exist in full consciousness of one’s freedom and to choose one’s self within the conditions of this freedom and one’s situation.”⁸

Freedom is neither given, nor does it exist as an internalised condition. Freedom exists in assertion and as a lived experience. In other words, to be free is to resist all that seeks to limit one's freedom. Intellectual life was therefore about the search for the truth and a challenge to some of the putative truth claims that were meant to restrict this freedom. Steve Biko was fascinated by this idea of acknowledging difference. And, yet, differences were being fused into a new kind of Hegelian syllogism, "an undivided unity of differences, which is enriched rather than dissipated by the multitude of its manifestations".⁹ This is sometimes referred to as the principle of the identity of opposites: of knowing and being, a synthesis of opposites.¹⁰

The Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci was also influential for the Black Consciousness movement, and so was Herbert Marcuse's seminal work *One-Dimensional Man* (1964).¹¹ Marcuse was a German philosopher and sociologist exiled in the United States. His work influenced the theorising of the 1968 student uprisings and the New Left movement. Through Marcuse, we became aware of the pressures in society exerted through vested interests who controlled the media, the church and the education sector; who viewed society through their own lenses of privilege and power; and whose messages reinforced the ideology of privilege and the justifications of the status quo.¹²

To criticise societal systems of authentication and to resist their capturing inertia was to claim one's freedom. The task of Black Consciousness was thus principally to provide a counter-education that would encourage black people to reject or resist the machinations of control put in place by the apartheid system.

Many of the studies of Black Consciousness I have come across tend to miss these influences that gave power and resilience to Black Consciousness. Engagement with philosophy brought into sharp relief the depravity of the South African environment that was being challenged. Those who felt threatened by Black Consciousness in the political contestations of the 1970s delighted in presenting it as lacking in revolutionary intent and confining the idea of consciousness to a psychological aberration. Indeed, consciousness had a revolutionary appeal in the conditions then prevailing in apartheid South Africa. It was a necessary prelude to preparing the oppressed to liberate themselves. As for critics like Baruch Hirson, we can only assume a misreading of Steve Biko and a misunderstanding of Hegel. Consciousness is both about the truth and about reality. It is concrete and material. It is the ultimate Being.

But this intellectual environment did not begin and end with Hegel. It was taken up in the studies of Frantz Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth* (first

published in English in 1968).¹³ As with Steve Biko and Black Consciousness, there is a resurgence of interest in Fanon in contemporary South Africa.¹⁴ It is also heartening that there is a recognition that Fanon, during Biko's era, offered a stinging critique of the post-liberation practices in Algeria and elsewhere in Africa (see Jinadu in this volume). The Martinican who had studied and worked in France as a psychiatrist later became a naturalised Algerian and was much engrossed in the freedom struggle of the Algerian people as a diplomat across Africa. Fanon warned against practices that would undermine the value of the struggle and consign newly independent Africa to forms of subjugation not much different from those under colonial rule. He was important in our time because he offered a theory of liberation that affirmed its core values, and then provided the analytical tools of understanding when that vision faced betrayal. The important intellectual tools were both suspicion and distance: to learn to live by distrust, and to demand accountability and justification for actions by those in authority.

In his *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952),¹⁵ he was a pioneer in his analyses of racism and dehumanisation as a post-colonial legacy. Fanon provided the theoretical and analytical tools to define the racism of apartheid. These two books by Fanon together present not just the theory, but also the means of resistance to apartheid that Biko developed in his own writing.

Fanon, who had participated in the freedom struggle of Algeria from a brutal French colonialism between 1956 and 1962, and later committed his life to the people of Africa, was not just a Che Guevera—a roving professional revolutionary—but an intellectual idealist who believed passionately that revolution would have no meaning if it did not have an abiding value for the people who had been liberated. He thus provided Biko with the analytical tools to critique the various manifestations of apartheid's social control and collaboration. This helped Steve to understand the mind of the oppressed, and the various stratagems of social control employed by the oppressive classes.

Fanon also inspired Biko in his analysis of the "cult of fear" among the oppressed, and in discovering the truth about black people participating in their own oppression. He further shaped Biko's thinking in exposing the role of white South African liberals in denying the oppressed the duty to be their own liberators. Nobody had ever done such an analysis of the South African condition before Biko in the various phases of the liberation process. With every push, there was defeat, and the ideal of freedom was expressed as a rallying call to action. There was an appeal to universal principles of humanity as well as of

religious – mainly Christian – anthropology. Biko skilfully demonstrated how to address the reasons for the failure to succeed in our collective efforts. That was because we might not have paid sufficient attention to the psychology of oppression.¹⁶

Black Consciousness as Liberation Theology

In summary, then, Steve Biko and Black Consciousness began from a curiosity about human experience that raised questions which had no answers, and which perhaps would never have satisfactory, finite answers. Furthermore, these musings had a theoretical framework for their intellectual quest and, finally, they sought a liberatory praxis that gave effect to these ideals. What is clear is that Black Consciousness drew ideas from a wide spectrum of thought and practice: from African culture and traditions to European philosophy and Caribbean-inspired modern revolutionary practice. The radical effect of drawing on the language of consciousness can easily be lost sight of. This approach was radical in that none of South Africa's liberation movements had used this language before, even though the idea of Black Consciousness can be traced back to the 1930s. The ideology was also radical in that it sought to find explanations for the pathetic state of resignation of conquered black South Africans that was evident in the early 1960s. The philosophy thus sought to give new life to the quest for black liberation.

The late Nigerian philosopher Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, in his book *Reason, Memory and Politics* (2008),¹⁷ provided an insightful explanation of W.E.B. Du Bois's idea of "double consciousness"¹⁸ (see Morris in this volume). Du Bois was referring to the split personality of the racially oppressed who have to live their life and identity as both American and African, have to seek freedom as human beings yet contend with their paralysing pathological fear and self-doubt. But Du Bois went further. He also believed that redemption and integrity were to be found in the pursuit of a higher self, and that this quest could start only when the injustices of slavery and colonialism as well as the ideologies of racial supremacy and their legacies had been recognised and dismantled.¹⁹ In that sense, the Negro, rather than becoming a mere victim, becomes a revolutionary subject: a person with second sight, endowed with the fruits of wisdom, survival and hope. It is through self-actualisation and struggle through this double consciousness

that black people achieve an original, universal compact with providence.²⁰

Biko's liberatory scheme therefore allowed no room for moral or psychological resignation, since the conditions of existence of black people provided them with the tools for their own liberation. He understood well both the power of the forces of oppression and the transformatory power of resistance. The key strategy was for oppressed people to be empowered to overcome or to sense the possibility of the imagination that conquers. Black Consciousness gave South Africa's majority the confidence and courage to know that the apartheid system of oppression could be overcome, and that they were themselves the agents of their own liberation.

That is what Biko achieved in his lifetime and through his martyrdom: a life of sacrifice that today shapes the thinking of many for a better world. At the pinnacle of his thinking was the idea that liberation was the essence of being human. Two essays with which I conclude this chapter define the totality of Biko's ideas from which all else flows. His 1970 essay, "We Blacks", published in a column that Biko wrote in the *SASO Newsletter*,²¹ provides an introspective gaze into the inner life and being of South Africa's long-suffering black community. It is a candid critique of the black experience. But it adopts this blunt approach in order to raise awareness about the debilitating effect of the psychosis of black subjugation. One of the most seminal principles of Black Consciousness is never to make the oppressed subject people: neither in conversation, nor in our consciousness. For Biko, black people were not destined to be subject people and supplicants to the white god, but people with the fullest humanity endowed by the Creator. Black people could spend much time preoccupied with the white oppressor to the point of paralysis, and overlook – even if unconsciously – the fact that the power of liberation was in their own hands. Steve believed that the material want of black people should not be taken for granted but instead had to be transcended.

The important point for Biko was for black people themselves to address their wants, desires and possibilities. The first thing, he argued, was that, to some extent, the black person was the author of her or his own condition; not that they were the cause of it. However, he noted that by resignation or by not doing enough to resist, they allowed the state of dehumanisation to prevail. Black people who succumbed to oppression had thus internalised the designs of the oppressor. They had become a "hollow shell, a shadow of a man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity".²² This was a painful truth told to, and acknowledged by,

black people themselves. Biko argued that to be free was to recover and exercise one's own personality: "to pump life back into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity".²³ "We Blacks" was therefore a rousing call from black people to themselves about themselves.

In his second critical and much-acclaimed 1975 essay, "Black Consciousness and the Quest for True Humanity", Biko made this emphasis clear: "While it may be relevant now to talk about blacks in relation to whites we must not make this a preoccupation, for it can be a negative exercise. As we proceed further towards the achievement of our goals let us talk more about ourselves and our struggle, and less about whites."²⁴ Biko thus infuses blackness with both the positive and the acknowledgement of what is possible – potentiality.

The second essay is Steve's most popular work. No doubt it was speaking to the state of not just non-humanity, but of active inhumanity and dehumanisation. To the extent that to be unfree is to be less than human, an acknowledgement and assertion of one's humanity is the very essence of liberation. Biko asserted that being human was to give positive quality to human relationships in order to negotiate a meaningful relationship with one's environment. In that regard, poverty was evil, and national resources had to be shared equitably. Steve provided a trenchant critique of apartheid and the laws by which it was enforced. For him, the racist ideology sought to undermine the human quest for "abundant life".

Concluding Reflections: Biko's Relevance to Contemporary South Africa

With these two seminal essays in mind we can next undertake, in concluding this chapter, a brief appraisal of contemporary Black Consciousness. South Africa is now a constitutional democracy, founded on the values of "human dignity, the achievement of equality, and the advancement of human rights and freedoms".²⁵ And, yet, this is an epoch in which the people of South Africa have been paralysed by all forms of violence, by brazen corruption and unaccountable government, of poverty and inequality, by an administration under Jacob Zuma (2009–18), who was forced to resign by the ruling ANC after nearly a decade of poor leadership and rampant corruption.

This raises two further issues. First, why in such a climate did Steve Biko's ideas become hollow and meaningless? The intellectual climate under Zuma was one of protest, as if the popular will existed outside, and in contradistinction

to, the power of the state. Political parties that espouse the Black Consciousness philosophy have been obliterated in South Africa's parliament, unable to generate support among voters. Although among intellectuals and university students Biko and his Black Consciousness philosophy appear to have enjoyed a resurgence, the reality is that exponents of Black Consciousness are very confusing, from Andile Mngxitama of the Black First, Land First (BLF) Movement, which claims to espouse Black Consciousness, even as he supported a Zuma government enmeshed in corruption and state capture; to Itumeleng Mosala, erstwhile president of the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO), which was never clear as to whether its was a socialist ideology or a nationalist Pan-African accompaniment to the South African struggle for liberation. No wonder Black Consciousness has failed to gain traction among the rank and file of the electorate.

A more trenchant critique of Biko and Black Consciousness was undertaken by South African academic M. John Lamola in his essay "Biko, Hegel and the End of Black Consciousness: A Historico-Philosophical Discourse on South African Racism" (2008).²⁶ Lamola's criticisms are focused on the alleged philosophical incoherence of the dialectical reasoning of Biko and his application of the Hegelian triad.²⁷ The author argues that Biko's socio-philosophical analysis was deficient, and was thus bound to produce a result contrary to what he might have intended. Lamola argued, for example, that Biko's approach produced the unintended consequence not of the full humanity he envisaged, but instead of locking blackness into self-isolating and self-negating essentialism.²⁸ He concluded that "to lump these racially damaged senses of selfhood hastily and prematurely but without the necessity of liberation of one by the other, will lead to the perpetuation of false consciousness: a false humanity".²⁹

How did Lamola arrive at this conclusion? He believed that Biko's fundamental analytical error was in positing black solidarity as an antithesis to white racist apartheid. This meant that black solidarity appeared to be similar to that which it sought to overcome, and the synthesis accordingly is what lacks a viable antithesis. This may well be one explanation in the new democratic order that has caused Black Consciousness to struggle to reach followers or to become viable in the changed environment of South African racism. The dialectical method, in Lamola's words, "inexorably exposes the theoretical inconsistencies and practical contradictions of Black Consciousness as a political philosophy".³⁰

Thus expressed, I believe, Lamola himself fails to understand holistically the Black Consciousness philosophy. For one thing, the Hegelian triad is a notional conceptual analytical device. The theory does not stand or fall by it. It remains

true that the thesis as stated was a racist white apartheid system that needed to be overthrown. The only possible challenge to it was black solidarity, not black racism. But it had to be a black solidarity that was itself liberated, and this is not defined by the limits of its adversarial “other”. This solidarity needed to transcend that which it objectified if it was to break out of the stranglehold of the vicious circle in which it found itself.

There does remain a problem, though, about the reception and interpretation of Black Consciousness in the changed circumstances of a post-1994 democratic South Africa. Black Consciousness, as defined by Biko, remains relevant today. To understand it more clearly, though, I believe that one needs both to take account of the context in which the ideas were first developed and to apply it meaningfully to the changed environment of post-apartheid South Africa. One must then readily admit that the Hegelian triad as a fulcrum of Black Consciousness theory will need to be redefined or reinterpreted if it is to result in the new consciousness of the new democratic humanity that Biko envisaged.

Among South Africa’s contemporary student formations, Black Consciousness and Biko are often expressed with insensitivity to the rights of women, or as a black essentialism and without regard for the ethical implications of political activism. In other words, intellectual activism has substance to the extent that it advances a just and moral governance system of ideas. And then, of course, one is left with another dilemma: how to position Biko and Black Consciousness at the cutting edge of the transformation of society and of the ivory tower. This requires truly transformative thinking. Failure to provide such thinking over time meant that it was easy for the ruling ANC in ascendancy to incorporate much of Black Consciousness thinking, especially during the eras of presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki (1994–2008). The demise of Black Consciousness movements was thus, to some extent, inevitable.

I end with the reflections of African-American intellectual, Cornel West, who suggested that nihilism in the black experience can only be defeated and subverted through leadership that “exemplifies moral character, integrity and democratic statesmanship within itself and its organisations”.³¹ West termed this phenomenon the “politics of conversion”, which “stays on the ground among the toiling everyday people, ushering forth humble freedom fighters – both followers and leaders – who have the audacity to take the nihilistic threat by the neck and turn back its deadly assaults”.³² West is referring here to the persistent problem of racism in the United States. This could equally apply to the condition of the people of South Africa: not just the prevalent forms of racism, but also the

totality of corruption on the part of those within the political and economic elite entrusted with the well-being and the wealth of South Africans. It is because we live in a society so wedded to materialism, glitz and glamour that Biko's values of caring, sacrifice, courage and truth have only been honoured in the breach. With Steve's martyrdom has gone the entire project of human worth and the spirit of *Ubuntu*: the gift of discovering our shared humanity.