The Antinomies of Black Rage

David Hemson

Review Article
I Write What I Like
by Steve Biko
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> Ah then, it is true that something of us does survive even in the
> Halls of Hades, but with no intellect at all, only the ghost and
> semblance of a man (Homer *Iliad* XXIII 103)

The sharp controversies around claims to the heritage of black consciousness
and legacy of Steve Biko which have followed the first post-election
commemoration of his death in detention, remind us that there are certain
unsettled matters in our national history and consciousness in relation to
both. The fusion of the personal and the political appears uncomfortable and
the links to current practice is contested. The boundaries between the
personal and the public are blown apart, subject to public debate, and then
carefully re-erected.   As Mamphela Ramphele has remarked about the
'unfinished business' following her eight year passionate involvement with
Steve Biko in launching her autobiography:

> I am now at peace with it, it is incorporated into my life. But it has been talked
> about so much and given so many different associations that it is important my
> own interpretation had to be given...the next few years will be very intense but
> there is less urgency to talk of one's experiences (SAfm, 19 October 1995)

Personal memories and the products of black imagination are being fought
over by black intellectuals. No white person in opposition to apartheid in the
late 1960s and early 1970s could avoid passing through the fire of criticism

of self, motives, and practice mounted by the student advocates of black consciousness. As one of that generation I can testify to the fine fury and interrogations characteristic of passage through its political heat. A certain humility was learnt. Many of the whites who entered later into political activity—at the time of an established Congress non-racial practice—appear to have a bland self-assurance which is surprising to the activists of the earlier period.

Biko provided a frontal criticism of the role of whites in political activity at that time: either as part of the System or as its critics. In his verbal exchanges, he was a passionate advocate of black liberation but also an accomplished debater, a master of the Socratic question and (in a lighter vein) a political tease.

But it is to the black people that he addresses his well-crafted arguments and pleadings. His writings stand as the historical documents of his time, a curious period between the crushing of the liberation movement in the early 1960s and the flowering of mass protest in the mid 1970s. It was a period devoid of political traditions, a time in which the intellectual vacuum invited innovation and the recasting of black politics. Black consciousness at that time attempted to retrieve the morale of the black intelligentsia by instilling black pride while stabbing at the balloon of white racism. At its apogee its practice was daring, innovative and heroic. It set itself an extremely ambitious goal: that of uniting the oppressed—African, Coloured, and Indian—around a common black self-identity and in common organisation. At the time, this approach was bold almost beyond measure. Today in the post-election period—which has generated both a Rainbow nation and currents of ethno-nationalism separating African, Coloured, and Indian people—it appears to be a palpably impossible goal. Hybrid political formations clustered around demands for or in opposition to ethnic entitlements (e.g. in its current form of affirmative action) are fragmenting the broad identity of the oppressed as 'black'.

Today, black consciousness (whether from strategic choice or innate ideological orientation) stands somewhat aside from the historic compromise between the official black (and white) parties. The prognosis of South African resistance becoming divided along sharply defined racial lines in the struggle for liberation was firstly elbowed aside by the Congress non-racialism in the 1980s and then sidelined by the overwhelming and extraordinary mood of reconciliation after the election. This is a mood which can be exploited and misused by those whites who effortlessly shoulder the mantle of non-racialism while resting on established privilege.

The black-consciousness and Africanist traditions, however, remain deep within the psychology of African politics as an oppositional current to the non-racialism (or as the Africanist terminology would insist: 'multi-

racialism') of the past and present. In the movements supported by the African people, the dominant tradition of moderate nationalism contains within itself its unofficial opposite, watching and waiting for its time and place. It is this phenomenon which justifies a retrospective review of *I Write What I Like*, the most comprehensive edition of Biko's writings.

Nowhere else are the ideas of black consciousness given fuller expression than in the writings and speeches of Steve Biko. Here is possibly a unique collection of writings, statements in the dock, essays and interviews, illuminating the nature of politics and the struggle to define black identity at a time when it was being denied and repressed. Biko's formulation of black consciousness is presented as it appeared in the political struggles of the time—a period roughly between the foundation period of SASO (South African Students' Organisation) in 1969 and his murder in 1977.

Biko is a fluent writer. His writings remind us of his forceful and dialogical speech. Often, his assertiveness is keenly argumentative and at times dissolves the meaning of the question rather than answering it. Throughout, however, he would take up genuine points of debate from the opposing camp and provide a reasoned response. The title of the book expresses the fierce individualism of the man as well as his insistence on his own ability to see, judge, and speak. While a close reading of these texts revives all these sentiments, it also reveals the antinomies of black consciousness together with fresh questions of identity, ideology and strategy, which in judicious measure will be explored below.

All his writings were aimed towards the creation of (in his words) a 'solid identity' among blacks, a resilience in the face of the utter ruthlessness of triumphant white power. These writings give evidence of this courage and his moral and intellectual qualities: there is the extraordinary exchange in court with Judge Boshoff during the trial of the SASO leaders when Biko provided calm and determined responses to hostile questioning and rarely conceded ground. Throughout the book, the broad strokes of a portrait of a political man who is neither servile nor blindly belligerent, takes shape.

The themes of culture, black dispossession, white cruelty and the critique of the disparate and somewhat formless opposition to apartheid are covered. These are complemented by savage attacks on black collaboration, an exemplary opposition to Bantustans, analysis of the colonial character of South Africa and an examination of the psychological forms of domination. There are, however, also silences which can be noted without arrogance and with the benefit of hindsight: the cheap labour system, the strategic strength of the African working class, the struggle of black women and the tactics of moving from black 'conscientisation' to strategic engagement with the enemy—in short the outlines of a strategy for power. The texts can also be

dated in terms of our political culture: the term 'comrade' has yet to appear. We are here in a certain pre-history of mass resistance.

Two Faces of Courage

Revisiting these texts as a participant in the student movement of the time, I am struck by the freshness and originality of Steve Biko's thought and the fruitful contradictions which run through his arguments. Biko's extraordinary courage was both physical and intellectual. In the nadir of black subjugation during the 1960s triumph of apartheid, he engaged in a project of restoring African cultural capital in preparation for the task of resistance. The first step towards consciousness was the recognition of what had been lost and the resultant desolate world bereft of comfort, that the black people inhabited.

Biko was able to confront platitudes of the time (e.g. the notion that the liberal opposition and a flimsy form of non-racial unity cobbled together under white leadership, would bring about change) and asserted a fierce opposing logic which drove in the direction of a separate black sphere of politics and radical nationalism. He showed great daring in being able to pull away any weak scaffolding in the construction of opposition, in particular in illusions in white liberals. It meant facing up to white people who were often sincerely involved in oppositional politics and pointing out (often without alienating their friendship) the limits and contradictions of their practice.

It is difficult to convey just what bravery it took then to *think* coherently and logically about the need for revolution—to posit an utterly different future—and to speak your mind when the act of speech itself could summon imprisonment or a death sentence. There were two constraints: firstly the mental inertia and formlessness of resistance in the student field and secondly a signal confusion about a strategy to move beyond formal criticism of apartheid in the practice of an *internal* resistance which could shake the regime to its foundations.

His most remarkable bravery was in breaking from the manacled conventions of the politics of defeat of the 1960s: by creating a political space for new ideas, showing a sceptical attitude towards the movement in exile (an attitude which even then was greatly controversial) and being prepared to confront the phenomenon of black collaboration with the regime. He also expressed with considerable and striking honesty his perceptions of the problems of black society.

But it was his physical courage which helped galvanise a black generation and inspire implacable hostility to the system of racism and exploitation—a tradition of intransigence which has lived on in the defiant songs in court and prison to the present. Most graphically this is shown in an

interview in 1977 about his determination to resist to the death. In a sense, he was making a living response to the rhetorical question he himself had posed about the black man:

> Does he lack in his genetic make-up that rare quality that makes a man willing to die for the realisation of his aspirations (1987.28)?

Tragically, his interview entitled 'On death', presages the most likely circumstances of his death: 'I'm afraid you may have to kill me in the process even if it's not your intention'. He sees that the police would be infuriated by his defiance but that they were in a vulnerable position even in torturing him. This audacity is a mark of his character. He was a revolutionary consciously prepared to give up his life and keenly aware of the public significance of the death of a black fighter.

Before his death, Biko gave recognition to the indomitable courage of the township youth and he saw in the growing polarisation of the post-1976 period that the method of death itself could be a politicising event for black people. Most probably his torturers went beyond whatever limits they might have been set; undoubtedly also, he breathed defiance to the end.

Vision and Revision

This, in brief, is the man. The ideas published in *I Write What I Like* were enormously important and continue to have political relevance. They impinged on the agenda of the many commissions of SPROCAS (Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society) to which Biko addresses critical remarks. They percolated into the discourse of South African Christianity, crystallised a perspective for the white democratic left which set about investigating white oppression in response to his injunction to turn their attention to changing white society and stimulated radical intellectuals (such as Rick Turner) who in turn responded with counter-challenges. They polarised student politics and brought a generation of black intellectuals into political activity. For all, they constituted a grounding for debate.

One way or another, resistance politics were forged in response to these ideas: *Sechaba*, the journal of the ANC (then in exile) had editorials in sympathetic response to these ideas. In a little known item of history, Ben Turok, (then one of its editors) was dismissed and later expelled from the Communist Party for advocating ideas to some extent influenced by Biko and the dynamics of internal resistance. Shortly before this expulsion he published a pamphlet in which one section is headed: 'Black Consciousness is not False Consciousness'. For all these reasons, Biko's writings deserve a

careful reading they do not appear to have had to date. Historically, they provide the evidence of black intellectuals struggling for theoretical and strategic clarity to see with 'unnatural eyes the hateful chambers of decay that fill the gods themselves with horror' (Homer *Iliad* XX 64).

Much of the early writings are taken up with his repudiation of white liberals and conventions of internal resistance—in particular the idea that forms of inter-racial unity in themselves would be sufficient to undermine and finally break-up apartheid. The argument was fairly straightforward: while white liberals were confident in their ideas and abilities and dominated common organisations, blacks, considered as a whole, suffered from an inferiority complex which made it impossible to take control of their own lives and assemble their own outlook. Underlying this psychological approach to the assertion of black identity is the perception of the exercise, blatant or disguised, of white hegemony through the ideology of liberalism. The ringing declarations of the liberal faith from the mouths of white people seemed nothing less than a sophisticated defence of the System and the pleading of liberals for non-racial unity, nothing less than the arrogance of the dominant in dictating the appropriate methods of opposition to their System. Biko expresses an irritation with a perceived sophisticated domination by arguing for clearing the ground of an 'extraneous' element: 'Their presence amongst us is irksome and of nuisance value'.

For blacks to be able to take hold of their destiny and plan a different future, there was in Biko's view the historic necessity to make a radical rupture with the past and not to remain trapped in the 'two-faced' nature of African politics. A historian sensitive to the subtleties of African political leadership recognises the metaphor of mask as central and argues that the concept of ambiguity is essential to any understanding of domination (Marks 1986:2). However, out of a particular sense of conviction of his generation's vocation, it is precisely the 'two-faced' nature of African politics that Biko is determined to end: 'ultimately the leadership of the non-white peoples in this country rests with us'. The politics of ambiguity is replaced with implacable declarations of intent. Fuzzy conceptions are substituted with an unambiguous statement of principle.

Although black consciousness encouraged thinking and writing along racial lines (similar to that of United States blacks on 'race pride') Biko argues that it is not racist:

> racism is discrimination by a group against another for the purposes of subjugation or maintaining subjugation. In other words one cannot be a racist unless he has the power to subjugate (1987 25)

He compares black mobilisation to that of the trade union form in which workers organise separately from employers and yet are not called separatist.

As in the Leninist conception, Biko draws a line between progressive and reactionary forms of nationalism along the divide between oppressor and oppressing nations.

But if whites were barred from black organisations what were they to do? Liberals, he argues, should loop back to white society—'the place for their fight for justice', the fight for their *own freedom* and they should not attempt to fight on behalf of the 'nebulous "they" with whom they can hardly claim identification'. They must educate their white brothers. When they ask 'What can I do?' Biko answers: 'stop using segregated facilities, take menial jobs, defy privilege'. But he accepts that it is unrealistic since skin privilege 'will always put him miles ahead of the black man'. 'Thus in the ultimate analysis, no white person can escape being part of the oppressor camp' (1987:23). The cycle of argument closes in on itself. Within the compartments of race, Biko cannot see any prospect for individual self-determination.

This repudiation of white liberals is simultaneously an assertion of radical black leadership. Biko shows a more complex strategy than one of simply breaking up the small intellectual groupings of inter-racial consensus. Although Biko initially seems to have dismissed the liberals for good, he later shows a duality in attitude: white liberals

> must serve as a lubricating material to help change gears in trying to find a better direction for South Africa (1987:26)

They are rejected within the fold of black strategy but Biko sees them as part of the potential superstructure of managed political change.

These are by and large the ideas for which black consciousness is well known. But in many ways, it is Biko's responses to *changes in black society* which provide the most interesting reading of his writings in the present context.

In a more gender-sensitive age, the preoccupation with masculinity is stark; the theme of the regeneration of the black man is vivid and at times so pervasive that black consciousness appears a self-consciously masculine movement. Here are echoes of current black nationalist practice in the United States. In one of the most remarkable quotations of the book, Biko writes:

> Black people under the Smuts government were oppressed but they were still men ... But the type of black man we have today has lost his manhood. Reduced to an obliging shell, he looks with awe at the white power structure and accepts what he regards as the 'inevitable position' ... All in all the black man has become a shell, a shadow of man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity (1987:28).

This quote is often repeated but deserves deeper analysis—Steve is arguing that under the period generally termed 'segregation', the African psyche was not fully colonised and retained aspects of independence. However, with the coming of apartheid society, there was a sense of psychological devastation Nowhere else is there a sharper expression of the loss of identity and a self-critical reflection by a black writer. I read the references to masculinity as deliberate rather than as slightings of the generic 'human' as 'man'. The link between politics and male sexuality is explicit.

The political direction of black consciousness then emerges as a current of black male redemption:

> The first step therefore is to make the black man come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth (1987 29)

Black consciousness is then an expression of manhood and through its medium the black man would no longer 'tolerate attempts by anybody to dwarf the significance of his manhood' (1987:68).

There is an insistence on masculinity and resistance, a feature which has recur in studies of struggle and counter-violence (see Campbell 1989). An explanation for this combination has to be sought in the living conditions of the black intelligentsia of the time. It was men, by and large, who were granted the privilege of education and yet paradoxically it was men who suffered the grossest of humiliations at the hands of white authority. Again it was also men who were failing to provide the leadership for the black community and who were caught in an impasse between resistance or collaboration.

While Campbell focuses on the *demobilising* effects of the politicised male on black women, this self conscious masculinity confronts the political incapacity of the black community and emerges as a force to rejuvenate the politics of the oppressed. To what extent is this frank assertion of masculinity justified? A feminist critique of the ideas and practices of black consciousness would have no difficulty establishing the silences on the question of the black woman or even of the socio-political attitude black men should have towards women. But is all assertion of masculinity sexist? How is the masculinity of black consciousness essentially combined with resistance? Is this not simply another form of men engaging in sexual politics as Campbell implies? Marcuse (1969a:23) has remarked, 'all liberation depends on the consciousness of servitude'. The question remains: which identity is being strengthened and what oppositional force is being prepared.

Part of the answer to this question has to be located in the contradic-

tions within the patriarchal nature of African movements. As a new political formation, Black consciousness, like other redemptive political movements, had to start with a new group of activists. In accounting for the structural weaknesses of black politics, it had (like others such as the ANC Youth League of the 1940s) to build a critique of the older generation too and project its own values and strategies.

Biko found this confrontation both necessary and difficult. He notes at one point that the 'lack of respect for the elders is, in the African tradition, an unforgivable and cardinal sin'. Yet, while working within what he accepts as the African tradition, he formulates a sharp critique of the politics of the traditional political organisations.

The question which has constantly been asked is: 'Was Biko for or against the ANC and its policies?' A close reading of his writing shows that Biko was in many ways in *opposition* to the ANC's politics; black assertiveness, while never absent, was not the ANC's dominant tradition and Biko argued for the unity of all movements which was then the position of the PAC.

To pursue the discussion: at one point he argues that the Charter (most evidently its opening phrase declaring that South Africa belongs to all who live in it) was evidence of the 'ease with which the leadership accepted coalitions with organisations other than those run by blacks' and that the opposition to the Charter showed the 'first real signs that the blacks in South Africa were beginning to realise the need to go it alone' (1987:67). He traced the antecedents of black consciousness to this opposition of the ANC leadership. In confirmation of this line of argument he states that the revival of the Natal Indian Congress, a key component of the Congress Alliance, was evidence of 'dangerous retrogressive thinking which should be given no breathing space'.

This thinking was certainly regarded as a problem by the ANC leadership of the time (although the ANC-supporting Defence and Aid Fund produced a commemorative book after his death). But Biko saw the mutual friction in its internal context. The younger generation was seen to be 'moving too fast' by an older generation passively linked to old allegiances involved in Bantustan politics or simply trapped in fear. The youth had to challenge the traditional leadership to break out of this paralysis.

Shortly before his death, Biko argued that the black consciousness movement was uniquely placed to be able to bring together the different strands of resistance to apartheid. But this diplomacy was never exercised—not only because of his murder, but also because of the fiercely competitive nature of nationalist politics which never allowed the matter to be seriously ventilated. The imperatives of resistance, moreover, could not wait for this coming together and as a matter of historical record nothing was achieved

along these lines; movements fell or stood on the basis of their ability to unite the largest forces against a formidable enemy and to counter their opponents.

For a time, however, it appeared that the savage repression of the 1960s had created a desolate landscape which allowed a new movement (the term then used was the 'third force') to flower in the vacuum of the interior. In short, during the 1970s, the politics of exile and of the interior moved in different directions before coming together in the 1980s as a movement built around the broad traditions of African unity in the ANC and its non-racial ethos. The Congress movement then became the majority expression of the movement and the Africanist wing (roughly speaking the PAC) its minority partner, with black consciousness its lesser theme.

The Politics of Culture: The New African Emerges

Lying at the centre of Biko's perception of difference and continuity is the analysis of culture. Yet it is possibly in this area that his contribution has been least appreciated despite having an original perspective which makes a number of forward linkages to our present. Although Biko argues it is 'not necessary to talk with Africans about African culture', it is precisely this debate among Africans that he helped initiate and develop. The antinomies revealed here still remain in contention in contemporary African culture and politics.

At various points he distinguishes and uses diverse notions of culture: universal, communicative/African, political/resistance, and Western/techno-logical, among others. Said (1993:xxix) links such variety of interpretive perspectives on culture to the colonial condition:

> Partly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic.

It is among these various concepts of culture that Biko seeks the values by which to build a new political tradition and to exercise judgement from an African perspective.

Biko defines culture as 'essentially the society's composite answer to the varied problems of life' (1987:96). If this is the universal nature of culture, what answers are there to the problems of life in apartheid South Africa? He enters into the debate about cultural tradition and change, and argues that culture has a nationally or racially defined problem-solving capacity.

Biko re-establishes Africanism as a resilient and powerful force which has not been crushed by the power of colonial cultural capital. To establish its vitality he insists on continuity in African culture. In phrases which evoke many of the contemporary debates, Biko declared himself

> against the belief that African culture is time-bound, the notion that with the conquest of the African all his culture was obliterated (1987:41).

Two points appear to be made: firstly, that African culture is evolving and secondly, that traditional culture remains extant. This connection, although containing a certain contradiction in suspension, is sustained throughout Biko's writings on the subject. Biko switches between asserting traditional values and recognising the new cultural forms evolving in African life. Since both aspects make up a certain whole, they should not be treated in exclusion of one another. The African people had suffered 'severe blows' but

> even today one can easily find the fundamental aspects of the pure African culture in the present day African (1987:41).

In another publication, Barney Pityana remembers how Steve Biko was greatly impressed with the insistence of a fellow passenger in the railway coach on sharing his food. Here appeared the living evidence of cultural continuity he was seeking.

In a memorable phrase, Biko rejects the 'arrested image' of African culture presented by certain forms of Western social science; he both reclaims traditional African culture and attempts to present the evolution and confrontation of black culture with 'white' culture.

> Our culture must be defined in concrete terms. We must relate the past to the present and demonstrate an historical evolution of the modern African. We must reject the attempts by the powers that be to project an arrested image of our culture This is not the sum total of our culture. They have deliberately arrested our culture at the tribal stage to perpetuate the myth that African people were near-cannibals, had no real ambitions in life, and were preoccupied with sex and drink In fact, the wide-spread vice often found in the African townships is a result of the interference of the White man in the natural evolution of the true native culture (1987.71)

From the black consciousness viewpoint there is an attempt to bring together the fragments of African experience. The elements of tradition and change, language and the sacred are to be combined in an inclusive African culture. Once the ideological constraints of the dominant over the African were stripped away, African culture—African dignity, community and communication—would emerge as a whole.

This notion of black totality could not be perceived nor appreciated by whites. In an important challenge to white social scientists and other intellectuals, Biko declares:

> Whites can only see us from the outside and as such can never extract and analyze the ethos in the black community (1987:53)

He develops an integral and organic perspective of black life and culture—an integrated oppositional system to the established white techno-political System of power.

African culture, he argues, is built around a Man-centred universe which sustain itself through a 'capacity ... for talking to each other': Africans are characterised by an easy communication which is 'inherent in the make-up of African people'. Such intimacy and communication exists in the conversation groups he sees so emphatically constructed around age and gender groups, that there could traditionally be no such thing as two friends, he asserts.

He weaves a positive perspective of African society and race: Africans are 'not a suspicious race', they believe in the 'inherent goodness of man' and always place Man first. Africans, he argues, are a 'deeply religious race' but the missionaries confused religion with the 'theology of the existence of hell' and projected a 'cold cruel religion', alienating the black man from his cultural values.

Furthermore, in African community and culture the interests of the community rather than that of the individual, predominate: 'action is usually joint community oriented action rather than individualism which is the hallmark of the capitalist approach'. The eagerness of black people to communicate is evident in Africans'

> love for song and rhythm. Music in the African culture features in all emotional states. When we go to work, we share the burdens and pleasures of the work we are doing through music (1987:42)

In African society, all songs are group songs and 'girls and boys never played any games without using music and rhythm as its basis'.

The African attitude to property had the village community as its basis: neighbours were invited to work on plots and this 'service was returned in kind and no remuneration was ever given'. In traditional African society, because of community, 'poverty was a foreign concept'.

This eulogy to African culture has a certain romanticism and nostalgia, but equally, having started from this standpoint and developing the points of continuity in culture, he feels able to develop a critique of black society which runs in many ways counter to this depiction.

The dynamic of black culture is its counter-assertion of values against the domination of whites. Biko argues that African culture had been reduced to barbarism by a white history which 'distorted, disfigured and destroyed' the African past. The new and modern African culture is

> a culture of defiance, self-assertion and group pride and solidarity This is a culture that emanates from a situation of common experience of oppression (1987:46).

Throughout his discourse, Biko develops the idea of an 'African personality' which relies on a concept of man rather than power to solve the problems of life. In Biko's writings culture is seen as a way of life, and the cultural politics of assertion and defiance a way of defending and extending the African way of life.

The development of an authentic African history is seen as a central task of the black consciousness grouping. The problem for an independent authentic history and culture, as Biko recognises, is that culture evolves in circumstances of domination and subjection. Biko sees that the culture of the majority group 'must ultimately determine the broad direction taken by the joint culture of that society'. However, it only prevails in the long term as 'cultures affect each other ... like fashions and you cannot escape rubbing against someone else's culture'. Despite the essentialisms of his analysis of black culture, Biko is highly conscious of the forms of exchange possible between different cultures. Though not with the entirely classless attributes Laclau (1990:164) implies, identity in the colonial setting retains its complexity.

There is a tension in Biko's discussion about culture between the assertion of the traditional strength and value of African culture and the recognition of the hegemonic force of 'white culture'. Biko feels that the experience of acculturation has been 'extremely one-sided' and that 'Anglo-Boer culture' was of such power as to cause the African to 'lose a grip on himself and his surroundings' and to slump into inferiority. So, tied in with his view of the continued integrity of African culture, is the annihilating possibilities of white culture.

The Heat of 'white' Technology?

Contrary to being a mere assertion of the racial inferiority of the African, the affirmation of white hegemony is more than a concentration on racism—it is achieved in the conditions of modernity which in South Africa took the form of racial capitalism. In a complex but critical point which explores the establishment of white hegemony over blacks, Biko foregrounds technology.

In his view, there is a complete dichotomy between the black world and the world of high technology:

> We come from a background which is essentially peasant and worker, we do not have any form of daily contact with a highly technological society, we are foreigners in that field.

'Black technology', he argues, is 'completely inadequate' to the modern world. White culture, he argues, solves many problems in medicine:

> you tend to look at it as a superior culture than yours . and this inculcates in the black man a sense of self-hatred (1987:102).

Here the bifurcation of race and a race-essentialist view of society leads into hilly terrain.

I found Biko's complex integration of technology, race and culture unexpected and in need of explanation. Did Biko really understand technology as permeated by race and as the product of 'white civilisation'? Was he backward looking and hostile to modern technique? It appears that he—like radical thinkers in the United States and Europe of the time—saw a close connection between technology and domination. The matter went beyond a more limited conception of surveillance and control. Habermas (1971: 81) links scientific and technical development to the concept of a progressive rationalisation of society. This led to social institutions being permeated by science and technology and being transformed in a manner which could often be judged as perverse and dehumanising. Marcuse, for instance, saw in rationality a 'specific form of unacknowledged political domination' which displaces the 'total social framework of interests'. Elsewhere he argues:

> Not only the application of technology but technology itself is domination (of nature and men)—methodical, scientific, calculated, calculating control . Technology is always a historical-social *project*; in it is projected what a society and its ruling interests intend to do with men and things (Marcuse 1969b.223f)

It is in this sense that Biko sees that technological advances are deepening the oppression and helplessness of black people.

Although not comprehensively developed, Biko presents a complex expression of the hegemony of 'white culture' through which domination is established both through a conscious and highly visible state repression (there are many biting attacks on the Security Branch) and the much more elastic and uncontrollable development of technology which leaves the black person vulnerable to a canopy of invisible controls. He uses this concept of

technology to explain changes taking place in society which are beyond (African) human control and direction.

While Africans stress the 'value of human relationships' and have a high regard for people, it is in the field of technology and economy that these values are most effectively challenged. The closest links are made between technology, domination and the modern material world. In a fervently idealist statement, Biko argues that African values must 'reduce the hold of technology over man ... reduce the materialistic element that is slowly creeping into the African character' and restore to blacks the importance of 'human relations, the high regard for people and their property and for life in general' (1987:71).

Running parallel and yet counter to his eulogy of traditional African values and their continuity into modern Africa, are the bitter truths about black spiritual impoverishment of the African man who is questionably (in Biko's words) 'a defeated person'. Even black unity is precarious: at one point he recognises the 'mountainous inter-group suspicions amongst the blacks'. Biko frankly points to the feelings of terror in the townships: 'rape and murder are very very common aspects of our life'. The old are assaulted by youngsters and 'thieving, housebreaking, stabbing, murdering, adultery, etc.' are a daily experience, all of which 'is a bitter reminder of the kind of violence that is there in our society' (1987:107). And again he returns to technology: African values are not understood by those 'made slaves to technology and the machine'. African culture and technology stand dramatically opposed.

Even while he makes these frank recognitions he argues that these phenomena are linked ultimately to poverty and migratory labour.

No one wants to completely condone abhorrent behaviour, but it frequently is necessary for us to analyze situations a little bit deeper than the surface suggests (1987:57).

This pointer to a deeper analysis of the real conditions of mass poverty and the potential for collective resistance are unfortunately not taken further by Biko. Indeed, he judges it as unimportant. These antinomies will be taken up in discussion of the black working class.

Black Man Seduced?

If nothing else is remembered of black consciousness' political strategy, possibly its opposition to collaboration with apartheid institutions remains: integral to its whole approach to politics was the resolute rejection of the

'toy telephone' institutions of apartheid. Its goal of a common organisation for African, Coloured and Indian rather than an alliance (an achievement which in the experience of the ANC came very late) was only possible on the basis of an absolute rejection of the institutions encouraging the collaboration of the black intellectual with the various ethnic enterprises of apartheid.

In South African politics the sophisticated strategy of the Russian Marxists in the period 1905-1917 was never followed—of revolutionaries participating in elections and taking seats in patently undemocratic bodies for the purpose of destroying illusions in progress from above, under the Chief Whip of the underground party. Neither have we had sufficiently strong revolutionary organisations with the theoretical strength to avoid all the pitfalls of the strategy. The justified suspicion of the common people of the institutions of divide and rule has challenged the very idea. Nevertheless, the life of Msizi Dube who returned from Robben Island and became a councillor and leader of mass resistance in Lamontville shows in our history the potential potency and complexity of such a strategy.

The general experience of the oppressed has been the farcical nature of these institutions and the venal crudities and corruption of those claiming to be their representatives. A strategy of boycott towards collaborative institutions has been the instinctive and traditional attitude of the common people, although not so certainly among their leaders.

Steve Biko and black consciousness came of age when the apartheid state was setting about consciously drawing the black middle class into the institutions of separate development. The black students of his time were faced by the challenge of being part of these institutions at one level or other or struggling for an independent existence. This was not a time of increased resistance. In Biko's view, the opposite was happening: 'the black world is beginning to be completely fragmented' as people 'are beginning to talk sectional politics' (1987:36). Of the various Bantustan leaders 'none of them see himself as fighting the battle for all black people' and, of course, none could genuinely claim to speak for the whole on the foundation of a crude compromise.

Biko put the question of collaboration at the core of a black strategy of resistance because the prospects for participating in the system were being exercised with 'cruel relentlessness and also with seductive bribery'. At times he feels enveloped by the power of the System on those around him:

> all of us who want to fight within the system are completely underestimating the influence the system has on us (1987:37).

The problem of collaboration ran deeply into the life decisions of black intel-

lectuals. It threatened to make a mockery of all pretensions to national resistance which had to turn on those participating in the politics of ambiguity in order to engage the enemy. In national struggles, the most available targets for armed resistance are the collaborators—in the war of Algerian independence, for instance, by far most deaths were those of vulnerable appendages of the regime like those trying to straddle the divide or those living among the colonial people. Since the black intellectual was tempted into remunerative collaboration with the colonial System, Black consciousness can be understood as setting the scene for the battle of the mind. Steve Biko's writings and black consciousness itself were marked by a fierce opposition to all forms of participation in apartheid institutions and the leaders who advocated such a strategy—in particular Chief Gatsha Buthelezi (the name Buthelezi then used).

Biko notes that separate development had divided Africans in 'several tribal cocoons' and increased 'inter-tribal ill-feeling'. Yet, the oppressed had to rally around the cause of their suffering—their 'black skin'—and ignore the 'barrenness of the promise' of Bantustans. Biko contends that there was 'a lot of confusion' about strategy towards the Bantustans, which, he argues, were the 'greatest single fraud ever invented by white politicians'.

His denunciation of the role of Bantustan leaders is fierce: they 'are subconsciously siding and abetting in the total subjugation of the black people of this country'. He describes Buthelezi as the 'finest ambassador' of apartheid. Yet, these leaders were gaining stature among the common people since any points of criticism of apartheid they made were being transmitted and amplified by the white press.

Such stinging denunciation may appear to remove all ambiguity and contradiction from the assessment of black collaboration. But this is not the case. Biko withdraws the dignity of 'blackness' from certain black collaborators:

> I must state categorically that there is no such thing as a black policeman . . These are colourless white lackeys who live in a marginal world of unhappiness. They are extensions of the enemy into our ranks (1987:78)

These men are without humanity, without the redemption of colour, and exist outside the black world.

Yet, accompanying these denunciations, there is another strand of men who are black, recognised leaders, but involved in acts of collaboration:

> We have some men in these bantustans who would make extremely fine leaders if they had not decided to throw in their lot with the oppressors (1987:84).

And again:

These apartheid institutions are swallowing too many good people who would be useful in a meaningful programme of emancipation of the black people (1987:37).

It appears that the confident assertion of black unity is a facade. With the growth of the Bantustans, blacks were 'fast approaching an impasse'. Biko at times appears to be offering an olive branch to certain Bantustan leaders on the basis of an unstated and undefined alternative.

But the hammer blows of collaboration continued to strike against the resistance especially after Soweto. The most brutal dilemma for the black consciousness leader arose in the person of Chief Gatsha Buthelezi:

For me as a black person it is extremely painful to see a man who could easily have been my leader being so misused by the cruel and exploitative white world (1987:86).

In these phrases, Biko expresses many of the contradictions in his analysis: Buthelezi is sharply attacked for his collaboration but is presented as not possessing individual will or ability to resist misuse by whites. The white is active, the black passive, and somehow not responsible for his actions.

The final danger for the national struggle is that 'we cannot have our struggle being tribalised'. Simultaneously, however, the question arose as to what to do about those black leaders fighting for higher salaries and more land for themselves; those leaders who were taking a political direction inevitably undermining, if not destroying, the possibility of an organic black unity. Somewhat surprisingly rather than proposing an all-out resistance, Biko argues for *pressure* on 'bantustan leaders to pull out of their political *cul-de-sac*'.

In an open-ended but somewhat cloudy conception Biko predicts

that a time will come when these stooge bodies will prove very costly not only in terms of money but also in terms of the credibility of the story that Nationalists are trying to sell (1987:62).

Is he meaning that the Bantustans could become a platform for change despite the intentions of the regime or that they would be such catastrophic failures that the whole enterprise would be exposed? Biko is suggestive but imprecise.

Agency and Ideology: Black Intellectuals and the Masses

The interrogation of collaboration sharply raises the question of the measure of social force which has the capacity and which is needed to end the crime

of apartheid against black people. The problem is that Biko recognises that the collaborators have certain support (which he argues is the result of press exposure) while the black intellectual remains isolated. The question is not fully addressed in the book even though the threads of answers can be pulled together from the text. Black consciousness is defined as a form of spiritual and psychological liberation implicitly involving the regeneration of the black intellectual and the political organisation of black people to end *political* domination. Yet, paradoxically, social welfare and black economic projects seem to be the most immediate priorities.

At various points Biko identifies the black intellectual as plainly the leader of the nation. While never explicitly discussing the question, he seems to see the self-conscious black intellectual as the main agency for change. Not unexpectedly, most of his writings deal with the strategies for the student movement. With the formation of SASO, 'students appear to be a power to be reckoned with in this country' and students could become central in the emancipation of their community as

> the isolation of the black intelligentsia from the rest of the black society is a disadvantage to the black people as a whole (1987:18)

Later he talks unproblematically about 'the vanguard political movement'.

Nevertheless, the question is not fully explored. Biko was well aware of the interest of white intellectuals in the organisation of black workers as the fulcrum for resistance to apartheid and capitalism. But he shows an astonishingly casual attitude towards material questions: 'one should not waste time here dealing with manifestations of material want of the black people' (1987:28). As he sees it, a vast literature already exists and he is concerned rather with spiritual poverty. Such insouciance leads to an idealist *cul-de-sac*.

In a discussion of black impoverishment, Biko argues that cheap labour has helped to make South Africa what it is today and that it is 'very expensive to be poor'—i.e. that blacks had to pay more for paraffin, private doctors and for school books. Workers are reduced to labour units. Biko quotes a worker saying: 'I no more work in order to live, I live in order to work'. But the answer he immediately proposes is the need for blacks to 'establish our own banks' a project also championed by Buthelezi among others. The trade unions which were then being established curiously remain unmentioned.

Throughout his writing, there is the expression of opposition at a psychological level, the pleasure of youthful resistance and the sheer joy of defiance. Yet, even though the *realpolitik* of production is absent, this is tied up with a common understanding that 'blacks relate their poverty to their

blackness' and 'the poor people shall always be black people'. Clearly he sees one side of the equation: that wealth and race are linked.

> It is not surprising, therefore, that the blacks should wish to rid themselves of a system that locks up the wealth of the country into the hands of a few (1987.63)

But the problem of black social emancipation is a matter for the distant future. He approvingly quotes a statement by Rick Turner, the white radical, that 'any black government is likely to be socialist'.

Surprisingly, these conclusions do not lead to a positive understanding of the productive role of the black worker and the strategic power of the black producers. At times, Biko declares himself hostile to class theory—that black and white workers share common material interests and should unite. Undoubtedly, this is an important aspect of Marxist understanding. Moreover, even though labour history has retrieved the points of class unity between black and white, the main emphasis of class theory has been to develop the productive and political role of the black worker. This, however, Biko presents as just another argument for racial integration at another level of society: class, he argues, is a 'red herring'. The white liberals (who he incorrectly states share the same view as the Marxists) 'tell us that the situation is a class struggle rather than a racial one'. The liberals of the Institute of Race Relations of upper Houghton, of big business and the universities would certainly be surprised at this equation! To the contrary. Liberalism as the liberal Charles Simkins (1986:4) acknowledges, 'is a first-line defence of a capitalist system marked by great inequality'. In building an ideal-type of racial polarisation, Biko does not see the distinction between liberalism and Marxism—which also means that he cannot anticipate the fruitful, if not entirely equal, relationship which sprang up at the time of his writings between white intellectuals influenced by Marxism and black workers. Instead of turning back to the white community as Biko had advised them, those influenced by Marxism ambitiously looked for the motive force of the South African revolution in the latently powerful black working class. This, of course, carried its own contradictions, but it did finally lead to powerful and permanent mass organisations now led by black people while black banks have had a somewhat different future.

Biko's analysis of class relations under apartheid is based on a realistic perception of power relations. He states that blacks are 'the only real workers', but instead of exploring this productive relation, he asserts that no class solidarity is possible because white workers have an 'exaggerated reactionary attitude'.

> Hence the greatest anti-black feeling is to be found amongst the very poor whites

> whom the Class Theory calls upon to be with black workers in the struggle for emancipation (1987:50)

There is, of course, a truth in this perception: the white worker has been first in line to lose privilege in a changing political order. He rejects class theory as the 'twisted logic' of liberal thinking because of such evident anti-black feeling among poor whites. But the other side of the question is that the white capitalist class, while at times liberal in sentiment, is gorged on the exploitation of the black worker. There is a blindness to this side of the question. The white worker may not be an ally but s/he also does not determine the contours of the cheap labour system. It is the capitalist class which has been its beneficiary.

Is this misunderstanding of class integral to a nationalist understanding of social relations or is this an unfortunate misunderstanding? It is certainly a curious side of historical development, calling for some sociological explanation. The fact that black intellectuals have by and large ignored exploring the history, working conditions and political perspective of the black working class is certainly true. In superficial assessments, the middle-class black Bantustan leader may still have a saving grace, but the working-class black policeman is pure dross!

There is a curious disjuncture between the flowering of class analysis—a peculiarly creative intellectual epoch among white intellectuals building common cause with African workers—and the theoretical explorations of black consciousness. Black consciousness never attempted to appropriate this line of theory and the proletarian resistance it espoused. The lines of departure were absolute, and the theoretical gulf very broad.

This misunderstanding had, of course, tragic consequences for the practice of radical black nationalism. This emerged not so much because of the social gulf between the rising black middle class and working class, but because of the overall dynamics of resistance in which for a historic period (from 1973 and beyond), the black workers have constituted the primary social force against apartheid. The militant school youth of the black working class families became an advanced detachment largely on their own.

It is also curious that despite the call to action in relation to history, few adherents to black consciousness have taken up a serious attitude towards the discipline in comparison with the writings of the Unity Movement which at times have been very influential—e.g. Dora Taylor's *The Role of the Missionary in Conquest* (Majeke 1986). Beyond a demand to recognise black leaders as heroes and a certain necessary inversion of racist historiography, not much more is said. Moreover, nationalist historiography often has an ambiguous attitude towards Christianity and missionaries. An intellectual or vocational void still exists between the protagonists of a radical history and the African historian.

Are we trapped in the conundrum of the sociology of knowledge?

These questions remain after putting down the book. We have to recollect that Steve Biko was murdered at the age of 31 when the sharper outlines of the meaning of class politics were not yet clear. Biko tested out his ideas against the common understanding of the people and at times honestly reflects self-doubt: 'I thought for a moment I do not understand black society'. Biko was a master of political debate, often responding to the cut and thrust of argument with new formulations. He had a deep insight into the nature of the Bantustan politics of the Transkei, for example—which unfortunately never seems to have been written up—and other diverse interests. In 1973, just after he was banned, he asked me to gather clippings and other information on the conditions of farm and rural workers. His interests were diverse although directed more to potential in rural areas.

In the end, the reader gains the outline of a whole argument, a holistic approach to white oppression rather than a single desperate cry of rage. Biko's incisive intellectual radicalism and political vision is shown in understanding that South Africa was ripe for revolution but he stood firmly against white hatred which 'leads to precipitate and shot-gun methods which may be disastrous for black and white alike'. Yet, the outlines of a strategy for power are not drawn beyond an apparent strategy of the slow accumulation of black institutions created around a common black identity.

A final audit of the achievements of black consciousness still has to be undertaken. For the better part, the black university student movement gave ground to the steeled working class township youth which carried the initiative as comrades from 1976 and beyond. While at times very influential in its ideas and in setting the language of black politics, black consciousness has also to be judged by its permanence in organisational form and its 'graduates': Among the latter there are Cyril Ramaphosa and Zwelakhe Sisulu but also Ben Ngubane, one of the founders of SASO and someone who fairly quickly moved from the SASO policy of non-participation in Bantustan politics to being leader of Inkatha. Although only a small minority of its past adherents still espouse its basic tenets, its latent opposition to present compromises endures. Even though Biko's criticism of Aimé Césaire for expressing a desire to show magnanimity in victory may be a yardstick, his attitude towards the current dispensation can only be guessed at.

Biko and his tradition are not the inheritors of the present, nor the architects of the present dispensation. Yet, they were integral to the resistance which precipitated the settlement. Identities were constructed in the 1960s and 1970s, mainly in terms of difference. Yet, paradoxically, this discourse marked the beginning of a long period of erupting antagonisms in South Africa, a point developed in Laclau (1990:140). Today the language of politics is very different and identities are being reconstructed in discourses

of reconciliation and the appropriation of white symbols (such as the Springbok) in frank distinction from the sharp edge of difference. It appears that those attending the liberal teaparties, the white progressive taking to the platform and functions of those 'collaborators' who deplored the excesses of youth politics, are among the beneficiaries of the present.

The black consciousness playwright Maishe Maponya has stated (in the *Mail and Guardian* 26 July-3 August 1995):

> Once I dreamt that 'revolution' was the only way to solve our problems, now a negotiated settlement is a reality I am still asking, though, at whose expense that settlement was reached

That question will return in the future and prompt a variety of answers, although I fear none to the satisfaction of the questioner.

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