

**FOSTERING SOCIAL COHESION THROUGH KWAME
NKRUMAH'S PHILOSOPHICAL CONSCIENCISM: THE
SOUTH AFRICAN CASE**

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Abstract

Since apartheid was formally abolished in 1994, South Africa has had a complicated social environment. Even though the end of apartheid was a great achievement, this country is now facing a number of societal issues that affect social cohesiveness. These issues include high unemployment rates, racial conflicts, economic inequality, and land reform-related problems. In addition, South Africa has problems with crime, corruption, and service delivery, all of which erode public confidence in institutions and exacerbate social unrest. Rainbowism is one tactic employed to promote social cohesion; however, much debate exists about its capacity to deliver. Therefore, this study proposes Kwame Nkrumah's philosophical consciencism as a means of promoting social cohesion in South Africa.

Keywords: Social cohesion, Philosophical consciencism, Kwame Nkrumah, Rainbowism, South Africa

Introduction

In this paper, we propose Nkruma's philosophical consciencism as an approach or method of fostering social cohesion. Even though social cohesion is a topic of relevance to practically every country in the world, in this paper, we focus on South Africa. South Africa has a long history of racial and ethnic divisions and hierarchies among its people. For 342 years, between 1652 and 1994, this was made possible by governmental policies like colonialism and apartheid (KHATOON 2021; TAFIRA, 2021; NDINDA and NDHLOVU 2022). Lungelo Mbatha (2018, 71) has stated that "the usage of race throughout the history of South Africa, leading to certain evils like codified racism and apartheid, was grounded on the mindset that some races are inferior to others and thus, these inferior races should not benefit from the economy, politics, and social life of the country".

South Africa's post-apartheid era saw the start of a serious discourse on social cohesion. This discourse on social cohesion was primarily fueled by South Africa's shift from a form of government based on racial hierarchy and societal divisions to democracy. As Ivor Chipkin and Bongani Ngqulunga (2008, 61) point out; "[I]n a democratic society where decision-making happens through a deliberative process, trust (social capital) is required between citizens so that they might be willing to moderate their demands in order to reach agreements." They continue; "[S]tated abstractly, we might say that democratic societies presuppose the existence of affective ties among their citizens". In other words, social cohesion creates a favourable environment for the functioning of democracy by promoting trust, cooperation, inclusivity, stability, and respect for democratic values. A cohesive society is better equipped to address challenges, reconcile differences, and sustain democratic institutions over the long term. Therefore, social cohesion is essential in supporting democracy in South Africa.

Despite various attempts by the government, non-governmental organisations, policymakers, scholars, among others, to promote social cohesion in South Africa, the country remains seriously divided along racial and ethnic lines. While these various efforts are commendable, we believe more effort is needed to ensure

South Africa's social cohesion. In this light, we propose Nkrumah's philosophical consciencism as a means through which social cohesion could be fostered in South Africa. To achieve this aim, we structure this paper as follows. First, we define social cohesion. Second, we discuss Nkrumah's philosophical consciencism and engage with some of the criticisms levelled against it in the literature. Finally, we show how philosophical consciencism can foster social cohesion in South Africa.

The Meaning of Social Cohesion

Despite its ubiquity in the literature, social cohesion is a challenging concept to define. This is because there is little agreement on what constitutes this concept. As Ade Kearns and Ray Forrest (2000, 996) write; "Typically, [social cohesion] is used in such a way that its meaning is nebulous but at the same time the impression is given that everyone knows what is being referred to". Despite the lack of agreement on what this concept means, it has gained increased global traction since the new millennium.

The academic origin of the concept of social cohesion dates back to the works of the sociologist Emile Durkheim (1885; 1887; 1892; 1893; 1897) during the late nineteenth century when he talked about the social implications of modernisation. He argued that rapid social changes brought by industrialisation and urbanisation in the Western world create social fragmentation. Concerned about this, Durkheim proposed social cohesion. Jane Jenson (2002, 145) shows that, for Durkheim, a cohesive society "depended on shared loyalties, which citizens owed to each other and ultimately to the state because they were bound in ties of inter-dependency". Durkheim equated social cohesion to solidarity and trust, thus founding a long-lived academic tradition of thinking about these concepts alongside each other. For example, Chipkin and Ngqulunga (2008, 61) state that "social cohesion refers to a situation where citizens of the state share feelings of solidarity with their compatriots, and act on the basis of these feelings". Similarly, Rae Jewett, Sarah Mah, and Nicholas Howell n.d.n. (2021, 235) define social cohesion as "the degree of social connectedness and solidarity between different community groups within a society, as well as the level of trust and connectedness between individuals and across community groups".

The beginning of the 1990s saw the Western world adopting social cohesion into a political discourse. However, noticeably, despite the change of scenery, social cohesion was still equated to the notions of solidarity and trust. In the West, social cohesion became a political issue due to challenges associated with multiculturalism, racial diversity, and income equality, among other things. Social cohesion emerged as a solution that would effectively address these issues. For instance, in the mid-1990s, when Canada was dealing with issues of trade deficits, a shrinking labour market, and economic deterioration leading to difficulties maintaining its status as a welfare state, several social difficulties surfaced, in particular ethnocultural tensions (BEAUVAIS and JENSON 2002; HULSE and STONE 2007). In 1996, the Canadian government adopted social cohesion as a strategy through which ethnocultural tensions could be mitigated. Joseph Chan, Ho-pong To, and Elaine Chan (2006, 277) write that “[w]hen the Canadian federal government introduced “social cohesion” onto its official agenda in the 1990s, the idea was largely a new catchword for its long-time policy to promote multiculturalism”. This was also the case in Europe when a similar issue arose (NOVY SWIATEK and MOULAERT 2012).

However, in South Africa, the notion of social cohesion gained a new perspective. Following the first democratic elections in 1994, social cohesion was adopted as the framework through which the effects of a racist and exclusionary past would be precisely responded to and remedied. In addition to the ideas of solidarity and trust, social cohesion was inflated to incorporate other notions such as social capital, inclusion, equality, reconciliation, care, and constitutional patriotism. Stated differently, unlike in the Western world, the concept of social cohesion was treated as having the same meaning as nation-building within the South African context (see Palmary 2015) As such, pressing social issues like unemployment, racism, income inequality, civic responsibility were subsumed under the question of “how can South African citizens be brought to think and act in solidarity, in the interests of everyone and the nation as a whole?” (STRUWIG n.d.n. 2013, 401). Accordingly, social cohesion includes attempts at the solidification of the people and unification of the country to undo colonial apartheid legacies in South Africa.

Many commendable approaches have been taken by the South African government to promote social cohesion in the country. One

of such approaches is Rainbowism (see GQOLA 2001). This approach is based on the notion, first made popular by Desmond Tutu and then taken up by Nelson Mandela, that South Africa is a country made up of people from all backgrounds coming together in unity, much like a rainbow with its many colours. Informing this idea was the assumption that all South Africans are, “united by common historical experiences, shared ideas and a common destiny as the people of South Africa” (BORNMAN 2014, 11). Realising its potential, the South African government then adopted this idea as a policy and placed all the burden of promoting social cohesion on it. Hence, Nyx McLean (2019, 27) stated that “[t]he Rainbow Nation was an important project of solidarity to unite a divided nation and soothe a people, post-apartheid”. The goal is to build a nation that presents all South Africans as united through a shared history rather than interrogating the injustices of the colonial apartheid regime with the intent of bringing legal action, which might have further socially fragmented the country. This indicates that nation-building is a fundamental component of the concept of social cohesion in South Africa. Meaning that it is not only solidarity and trust in one another that describes social cohesion but also equality, tolerance, constitutional patriotism, and reconciliation.

Critics point out that South Africa’s nation-building-orientated approach of Rainbowism has not succeeded in promoting social cohesion on a lived experience basis. Scholars such as Phumla Gqola (2001), Melissa Myambo (2010), Vanessa Barolsky (2012), and Francesca Stella (2013), argue that Rainbowism stifled conversations on the disparities and differences between various racial and ethnic groups’ access to opportunities, power, and life choices. For instance, Barolsky (2012, 141) claims:

South Africans themselves are grappling with this contradiction in their own processes of subjectification within the post-apartheid state, which requires of them a series of normative values and dispositions oriented towards the constitution, while the conditions of life remain brutal and the economy continues to be a domain of vicious competition for small advantage. How in this context to become a ‘caring’ citizen?

In our view, the fundamental problem with Rainbowism is its failure to address the problem of social fragmentation informed by a colonial apartheid history of racial oppression, ethnic violence, and gross inequality. By failing to address this problem, Rainbowism upholds unity at the cost of history. The current state of social cohesion in South Africa is that of a historically conditioned social fragmentation. The deep-seated socio-economic disparities brought forth by colonialism and apartheid persist in a pervasive manner, illustrated by the conditions of poverty, joblessness, and crime that affect the majority of the citizens. Given the historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid, we argue that the idea of social cohesion in South Africa should be disentangled from the imposed notion of nation-building and turned away from the approach of Rainbowism towards a more historically sensitive approach.

Social cohesion needs to be viewed as a desire or willingness to cooperate with each other without coercion. Or as Dick Stanley's (2003, 9) puts it, social cohesion is "the sum over a population of individuals' willingness to cooperate with each other without coercion in the complex set of social relations needed by individuals to complete their life courses". We contend that there ought to be different degrees through which social cohesion is understood. This is because social cohesion will always be determined by existing historical conditions, which then necessitate varying degrees of social cohesion. As a result, we argue that in South Africa's context, this idea of social cohesion amounts to a desire or willingness to cooperate, rather than the actual existence of absolute cooperation. In other words, in a country where racial and ethnic divisions are sometimes violently demonstrated, we argue that the mere demonstration of the desire to cooperate (along with the necessary ideas for cooperation like tolerance and trust) indicates social cohesion.

To go beyond this and include the notions of care, nation-building, constitutional patriotism, inclusion, equality, and reconciliation, is not to take seriously how deeply entrenched the legacies of apartheid and colonialism are in the everyday lived experiences of South Africans. Therefore, as can be seen, this notion of social cohesion is not static; it can progress in degrees as the material conditions themselves change. In the historical context of South Africa, it is sufficient to think of or define social cohesion as the willingness to cooperate. As a result, once we understand social

cohesion as the desire or willingness to cooperate, then achieving social cohesion requires taking people's histories seriously, without which such desire or willingness will diminish.

Therefore, approaches such as Rainbowism failed because they did not consider the history and lived experiences of South Africans, which included the injustices of the past apartheid system. Rather Rainbowism imposed an ideal of a united South African nation without the people being united. But if social cohesion is a matter of the desire to cooperate and an attempt to trust, then it is a function of individuals feeling involved in the goals of the state for which they are required to trust one another and cooperate with each other. In other words, what inspires this desire and willingness to cooperate is feeling represented by the goals of the state. A way to involve individuals in the goals of the state is if the goals of the state show sensitivity towards the histories and experiences of citizens. We believe that Nkrumah's philosophical consciencism does this. In the next section, we will critically engage with Nkrumah's philosophical consciencism.

On Nkrumah's Philosophical Consciencism

Philosophical consciencism, according to Nkrumah, can be viewed as a metaphysical, ethical and political theory. Metaphysically, it is based on materialism that proffers matter as the fundamental substance of reality, without denying the existence of mind. As Paulin Hountondji (2017, 55) explains it; “[I]t is essentially a materialist metaphysic that responds to the age-old question of the origin of being by asserting the priority of matter over mind. This does not mean, says Nkrumah, that matter is the only reality but merely that it is the fundamental reality from which all others derived”. Also, as both an ethical and political theory, philosophical consciencism advocates for egalitarianism and socialism respectively. As Hountondji (2017, 55) puts it; “In this respect, Consciencism...adopts the central demand of nationalist ideology by reaffirming the right of self-determination for all peoples on the one hand and calls for the construction of socialism in a liberated Africa on the other”. In this paper, we only consider the political aspect of Nkrumah's philosophical consciencism. Specifically, we consider consciencism as a political theoretical method or approach to social cohesion.

The ultimate objective of philosophical consciencism as a political theory was to liberate Africans from oppressive colonial forces. In Nkrumah's (1970) view, for there to be social cohesion and the eventual liberation from colonialism, there needs to be instruments or institutions that take diversity seriously, and these instruments must be based on shared values. He believes that one of these instruments for social cohesion and liberation is philosophy. In his words; "Philosophy, too, is one of the subtle instruments of ideology and social cohesion. Indeed, it affords a theoretical basis for the cohesion" (NKRUMAH 1970, 66).

For Nkrumah, philosophy can be used as a subtle means of achieving social cohesion by providing a political philosophy that society can pursue as a whole. As a result, from Nkrumah's approach, it seems that consciencism is an instrument – a political philosophy – that has the potential to foster social cohesion because it looks to take the history of all people within the territory seriously, and then emerge with a way towards social cohesion that comes from these distinct but interconnected histories. This historical approach is shown when Nkrumah argues that a history interpreted from the perspective of Africans would work best to find the appropriate way to unite African diversity into an ideology aimed at social cohesion and liberation. To this point he states that "African society must be treated as enjoying its own integrity... That is to say, the European contact needs to be assessed and judged from the point of view of the principles animating African society" (NKRUMAH 1970, 63). Thus, according to him, for social cohesion to happen, there need to be instruments like ideology and philosophy that drive this search for unity. However, whatever these instruments may be, they need to be grounded in the history of that particular society seeking cohesion.

We can understand Nkrumah to be saying that any method or approach towards social cohesion needs to be historical and take seriously the experiences of that society. Magobe Ramose has shown that philosophical consciencism is a liberatory/emancipatory philosophy. As he (2017, 201) shows; "According to Nkrumah, Consciencism is the philosophy that takes the historical experience of the African peoples as its fundamental point of departure in the struggle for emancipation. In this historical context, the attainment of emancipation shall not be limited to Africa. It shall be the "emancipation of man"— the entire human family".

Nkrumah provides the sources or contents that make up history to be taken seriously when seeking social cohesion in Africa. These sources include Islamic, Christian, and traditional African beliefs and practices. All of these sources of African history represent competing ideologies for Nkrumah, and it is important for an ideology to emerge that unites all of these histories. (see NKRUMAH 1970). Nevertheless, for Nkrumah, while the ideology that is to foster social cohesion in Africa – consciencism – needs to take seriously all three aspects of African history, such an ideology must be based on the original understanding of persons that traditional Africa held. “With true independence regained, however, a new harmony needs to be forged, a harmony that will allow the combined presence of traditional Africa, Islamic Africa and Euro-Christian Africa so that this presence is in tune with the original humanist principles underlying African society” (NKRUMAH 1970, 70). He continues, “The African personality is itself defined by the cluster of humanist principles which underlie the traditional African society” (NKRUMAH 1970, 79). This implies that the traditional African society is inextricably communal and individuals are defined by their capacity to participate in communal relationships.

Furthermore, Nkrumah argues that philosophical consciencism favours socialism. He believes that socialism, unlike capitalism, fits well with the humanistic principles that are inherent in African communalism. Nkrumah’s idea of socialism was characterised by three ideas. Steven Metz (1982, 388) states that “Nkrumah’s definition of a socialist society contained three essential elements: (i) the control of the state by a class-conscious vanguard; (2) industrialisation and the ensuing growth of the proletariat; and (3) pan-Africanism and the destruction of neo-colonial dependency”.

Therefore, Nkrumah’s philosophical consciencism is a theory that seeks to liberate Africans from colonisation by taking seriously their Islamic, Christian, and traditional histories. Philosophical consciencism aims to unite these historical events into a political theory that fosters the social cohesion required to create a socialist egalitarian society. This social cohesion will form through the unification of the diverse histories informing African experiences, a unification that will eventually be based on a communal understanding of persons, which Nkrumah sees as the proper articulation of traditional Africa and an apt antecedent to socialism.

However, philosophical consciencism has been heavily criticised by scholars like Pauline Hountondji, who might find our proposal of deploying it as an approach to social cohesion in South Africa problematic. For instance, Hountondji claims that “[i]t is on the basis of this triple simplification that Nkrumah then makes the following (ideological) observation...In short, the arch-enemy is pluralism, and the crisis will be overcome only if we can evolve a new ideology charged with the function of effecting a synthesis of the three old rival ideologies. This synthesis will be ‘consciencism’.” (HOUNTONDJI 2017, 51-52). This implies that Nkrumah downplays the diversity of traditional African societies by maintaining that a single ideology governs them. Hountondji claims that this downplaying of Africa’s diversity allows Nkrumah to push his philosophical consciencism as a resolution to the competition between Islam, Christianity, and traditional African religions. He concludes that “[t]his is the measure of the frailty of Nkrumah’s doctrine, which to his mind will, by tomorrow, if it is not already, be the collective philosophy of Africans, the African philosophy. The crucial weakness of the project resides in the basic assumption that Africa needs a collective philosophy” (HOUNTONDJI 2017, 52). For Hountondji, philosophical consciencism is a doctrine of unanimity.

However, this is an uncharitable way of reading Nkrumah’s philosophical consciencism. Nkrumah harmonised Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religions to undo the doctrinal conflict that divides these religions and, in turn, Africans. In this way, philosophical consciencism stresses their similarities to promote African solidarity.

Social Cohesion through Nkrumah’s Philosophical Consciencism

We argue that as a theory that takes history seriously, philosophical consciencism fosters social cohesion by uniting this history into a singular theory that articulates the goals to be achieved by citizens through different forms of cooperation. We are of the view that in relation to South Africa, there are many historical influences outside of the Islamic, Christian, and traditional African aspects. Nevertheless, consciencism requires a serious look at all the histories of South Africans in order to create goals on which citizens can cooperate.

This is because once we understand social cohesion as the desire to cooperate, then approaches or methods of achieving it which do not take people's histories seriously will diminish such a desire. This is because people may feel less involved and less considered in ahistorical methods, resulting in such approaches feeling like impositions. If method or approach is simply understood as the way in which resources are utilised to yield the desired results, then an approach to social cohesion that does not take seriously the history of the people will not involve people in a serious way, and this will decrease any desires to cooperate. Philosophical consciencism's approach, in our view, would take all the histories of South Africans seriously in order to create goals on which citizens can cooperate because it is a theory that starts from the histories of Africans and emerges with a unificatory theory.

Therefore, approaches such as Rainbowism fail because of not deliberating with the injustices of the past thoroughly enough in order to emerge naturally from these deliberations. Rainbowism imposed an ideal of a united South African nation before the actual people united themselves. As a result, we argue that the flaw in the approach of Rainbowism and other similar approaches is that it did not take seriously the historical conditions animating South African realities and then proceeded to emerge with a political goal from these conditions.

Phrased differently, if social cohesion is a matter of the desire to cooperate and an attempt to trust, then it is a function of individuals feeling involved in the goals of the state for which they are required to trust one another and cooperate with each other. In other words, what inspires this desire and willingness to cooperate is feeling represented by the goals of the state. A way to involve individuals in the goals of the state is if the goals of the state show sensitivity towards the histories and experiences of citizens, and a lack of sensitivity to these diverse histories discourages the will to cooperate. It is for these reasons that Nkrumah's conceincism serves as a veritable approach to social cohesion in South Africa.

This reasoning is particular to the South African context because the failure of Rainbowism, as noted above, is that it sought to cover the old wounds rather than deal with them. Of course, we agree that South Africa's history is complicated as it is made up of a multitude of races who themselves are made up of diverse ethnic

groups. Such diverse populations have gone through dehumanising historical experiences like colonisation and apartheid, along with the current effects of poverty and unemployment, affecting the majority of these people in different ways. Such a complex history may discourage theorists from engaging it thoroughly and lead to the imposition of approaches such as Rainbowism, which articulate the goals towards which citizens are to cooperate without considering how these goals match the diverse histories of these citizens. Such approaches to social cohesion are doomed to fail from the start because they do not take the experiences of most citizens seriously. What is required is an approach that is not going to dismiss the past but rather emerge from having dealt with it. We are of the view that Nkrumah's consciencism can be such a historical approach towards social cohesion because it seeks to start by taking seriously all the histories animating South African experiences.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that it is by taking African history seriously that philosophical consciencism fosters social cohesion. We have shown that consciencism proposes a critical consideration of South Africans' histories and lived experiences in order to create goals on which citizens can cooperate. However, we have noted many historical influences outside of the Islamic, Christian, and traditional African aspects that should be considered in the South African context, and we call for further research on this.

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