

BLACK SOLIDARITY AND THE QUEST FOR A NON-RACIAL HUMANITY: BIKO'S ENDURING POLITICAL DILEMMA

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Steve Biko's philosophy of Black Consciousness argued that a racially defined black solidarity could bring about a nonracial future in South Africa. This apparent paradox calls for an examination of the dialectical thinking upon which it was built.

Black solidarity, "the realisation by blacks of the need to rally around the cause of their oppression – the blackness of their skin – and to operate as a group to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude" (Biko 2004, 100), is the political expression and manifestation of Black Consciousness, both historically and currently.

In 1968, students in black universities abandoned the multiracial National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) and founded the South Africa Student Organisation (SASO) on the platform of black solidarity (which embraced all ethnic groups that apartheid law had dubbed "non-whites"), under the intellectual leadership of Stephen Bantu Biko (1946–1977), who held the position of president until his house arrest in 1973.

As articulated by Biko and enshrined in SASO's 1973 constitution, the doctrine of black solidarity in the era of the anti-apartheid struggle argued for the self-withdrawal of politically conscious black people, as a racially defined collective, from opportunities of racial integration

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and specifically from cooperation with whites, however sympathetic the latter were with the struggle against structural anti-black racism. In the post-apartheid dispensation, this doctrine translates into a political praxis of the self-disengagement of black people from multiracial nation-building processes and social partnerships, thus militating against the prevailing social consensus of the ideal of a non-racial democratic polity.

It thus might seem paradoxical to put this together with Biko's (2004, 108) >>

epic declaration that

[w]e have set out on a quest for true humanity, and somewhere on the distant horizon we can see the glittering prize. Let us march forth with courage and determination, drawing strength from our common plight and our brotherhood. In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest gift possible – a more human face.

“Drawing strength” from a black solidarity that monumentalises collective racial experience, we “march forth” towards a future dispensation of non-racism: “a completely non-racial society without guarantees of minority rights, because minority rights implies a recognition of portions of the community on a race basis” (ibid., 149). Is this a latent contradiction? If so, how do we rationally account for it, and what are the practical political consequences?

In reaction to the controversy and discomfort that the ideology of Black Consciousness was generating, Biko turned to the philosophical technique of dialectical logic to justify its rejection of racial integration and multiracial alliances in the struggle against apartheid.

This rationale of Black Consciousness is set out in what Biko (in Moore 1973, 87) intimated was his best writing: the 1972 essay, “Black Consciousness and the quest for a true humanity”. Here, Biko adopts dialectical reasoning to expose the nature of racism in South Africa, effectively arguing that the seemingly negative practice of black group self-awareness is efficacious for the attainment of an inclusive and humane racial consciousness and equality.

The triad of thesis–antithesis–synthesis, as developed from the Socratic tradition into a logic of historical change by GWF Hegel (1770–1831), is thus plunged into the vagaries of the vexed question of race

relations. Mabogo More (2008), in the essay “Sartre and South African apartheid”, discusses Biko’s interest in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, which, for our purposes, explains Biko’s exposure to and interpretation of Hegel. We see similarities between Sartre’s 1943 references to “anti-racism racism” and Biko’s justification of an antithetical “black solidarity”. However, Biko’s “antithetical” racial self-assertion worked against the attainment of the “synthesis”, the ideal of a true humanity that he idealised.

To show this, this essay will assess how Biko’s thinking accords with Hegel’s dialectical system as the logic of socio-historical progress. It starts off with an appreciation of Biko’s dialectical reasoning and ends with a demonstration of how a judicious application of the dialectical method inexorably exposes the theoretical inconsistencies and practical contradictions of Black Consciousness as a political philosophy.

The resultant critique of the political instrumentality of Black Consciousness is meant as a contribution to the quest for a post-racial selfhood that is simultaneously cogent and revolutionary. The aspect of Black Consciousness as “an attitude of mind, a way of life”, a liberatory self-awareness against racial slave mentality, is not the subject of our critique. The point of contention is the practical engagement of this racial-black awareness with persistent white racism. It is in this respect that Biko brought dialectical reasoning into the fray.

BIKO AND HEGEL

“The *thesis*, the *antithesis* and the *synthesis* have been mentioned by some great philosophers as the cardinal points around which any social revolution revolves” (Biko 2004). Biko’s adoption of Hegel’s dialectic was not entirely accidental or culturally misplaced. In Karl



Black Consciousness should be conceived as a psycho-philosophical dialectical moment, a step towards the synthesis, the dream of a post-racist consciousness.

Marx’s inverted materialist form, embraced by the leaders of the 1917 Russian Revolution, Hegel’s dialectic has occupied a respected place far beyond the cultural and intellectual boundaries of European philosophy. It is lauded as the most comprehensive and compelling representation of the process of historical change and development of social institutions.

Hegel’s particular innovation was to conceive of logic as consisting not only in the validity of statements and their conformity to the ultimate laws of thought, an approach established by Aristotle and traditional logic, but as principally involving the process by which the *content* of statements derives from and relates to reality as the incarnation of Divine Reason (Hegel 1969, 64). In Biko’s thought, the content of the analysis determines its validity. Thus, to misconstrue the resolution of a dialectical process in a real social context is simply an act of irrationality, which manifests itself politically as an ideology.

To show how Biko’s dialectical analysis accords with these foundational attributes of Hegel’s system in a post-apartheid South Africa, we have elected to utilise *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* by Herbert Marcuse (1977).

According to the pre-Leninist dialectical perspective – which is our theoretical framework in this article – the “*what is*” is never reified. Because all reality is mentally conceived, so conceived reality is constantly remodelled by thought. This, in Marxian historical terms, translates into a proposition of perpetual revolution as the only true state of social institutions. Marcuse aptly expressed this in his anti-Stalinist epilogue: “Reason in its very essence is contradiction, opposition, negation, as long as freedom is not yet real” (ibid., 434). This isolation of reason-as-contradiction posits the antithesis as the most critical phase of a dialectical process.

DIALECTICS OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

In his theory of race relations in South Africa, Biko proceeded thus: “[f]or the liberals, the *thesis* is apartheid, the *antithesis* is non-racialism, but the *synthesis* is very feebly defined. They want to tell the blacks that they see integration as the ideal solution” (Biko 2004, 96; own emphasis). Biko rejects “apartheid” as the problem as simplistic; scorns the proposed antithesis of “non-racialism”, and views the corollary synthesis of racial “integration” is as inadequately justified.

Following Marcuse, the definition of the *antithesis* is our paramount focus. This is critical to a judgement of the theoretical cogency and political efficacy of Black Consciousness and its role in the actual historical manifestation of a dialectical revolutionary process. Correctly zeroing in on this, Biko rebuts and reformulates the elements of his dialectical tool thus:

The thesis is in fact a strong white racism and therefore the antithesis to this must, *ipso facto*, be a strong solidarity amongst the blacks on

whom this white racism seeks to prey. Out of these two situations we can therefore hope to reach some kind of balance – a true humanity where power politics will have no place. (ibid.)

The redefined thesis, the problem, is no longer the apartheid system. It is a “strong [deeply-rooted] white racism”. The redefined antithesis to negate it cannot be non-racial praxis but a “strong black solidarity”.



“The given state of affairs is negative and can be rendered positive only by liberating the possibilities immanent in it.” – Merleau-Ponty

For Biko, the root problem was not the objective politico-economic system of apartheid; it was racism as *an attitude of mind* among white South Africans. The antithesis should not be a zealous propagation of social integration across the colour bar. It has rather to be a self-conscious organised refusal by blacks to cooperate with all the manifested dynamics of this supremacist racial complex.

The *antithesis* to the real thesis of white racism is *black consciousness expressed in the political form of black solidarity*. This implied a self-withdrawal from multiracial liberal formations in order to galvanise resistance on the basis of black lived-experience of white racism. In historically poignant

terms, therefore, for Biko, the negation to apartheid racism could not be the multiracialism espoused by supporters of the hegemonic Freedom Charter of Nelson Mandela’s ANC. Drafted in 1955, the Charter’s most famous phrase was incorporated into the Preamble to the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa:

South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white... black and white together – equals, countrymen and brothers – adopt this Freedom Charter, and pledge ourselves to strive together... until the democratic changes here set out have been won.

Significantly, Biko (2004, 96) emphasised that “it is much more important for blacks to see this difference [the new identification of the problem] than it is for whites”. This was crucial because their action is the negating principle that should induce the attainment of the end goal. He consequently admonished that “[w]e must accept that the limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those who they oppress”. Because “the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed”, so the mental liberation of blacks from a sense of racial inferiority would be the trigger for dialectical movement.

The end goal, the synthesis, appears to motivate and inspire Biko’s assertion. However, in our view, the ingredients and the recipe for this ideal are poorly conceived.

According to Biko’s analysis, racial consciousness should essentially be viewed as a negative. It is a false consciousness, a denigrated sense of being human. A white person with a self-conception of racial superiority is as much in a state of inhumanity as a black person with a racial inferiority complex. To lump these together hastily, without the necessary self-humanising anti-racist protest by >>



The social, cultural and intellectual self-isolation of the black aggrieved cannot realise the synthesis of a humanised South Africa.

victimised blacks, would lead to the perpetuation of false consciousness: a pervasive false humanity that leaves the white value system intact and revered by un-black-conscious blacks. The blacks thus assimilated would be the elite that had been found acceptable by the white-supremacist psyche. It would be “an integration in which black will have to compete with black, using each other as rungs up a step ladder leading them to white values” (ibid., 100).

Only with the refusal of black people, individually and collectively, to be racially abused – that is, with the attainment of their true humanity – would South Africa be a free and human country. Black solidarity is the antithesis, the engine of the history of South Africa. The condition *sine qua non* for the attainment of national humanity is “the determination of the blacks to rise and attain the envisaged self” (ibid.). With this tone of reflective satisfaction, Biko closed his “Black Consciousness and the quest for a true humanity” with his vision of bestowing “upon South Africa the greatest gift possible – a more human face” (ibid., 108).

NEGATION OF THE SYNTHESIS?

Biko’s cogent identification of the pathological nature of white racism as

the thesis is unquestioned; equally so, his teleological vision of a South Africa not obsessed with race. However, his dialectical scheme raises the question of how the antithesis – a dis-engaging black solidarity – is sustained within a political movement that is seeking a non-racial end. At a crucial point of his thinking, Biko has glibly stated that the synthesis, the alternative to racial complexes, is “some kind of balance – a true humanity where power politics will have no place” (ibid., 96). How is this “true humanity” to be achieved in a political context that could generate this resolution from SASO’s 1973 Policy Manifesto?

We believe that in all matters relating to the struggle towards realizing our aspirations, whites must be excluded... that in pursuit of this direction, therefore, personal contact with whites, though it should not be legislated against, must be discouraged, especially where it tends to militate against the beliefs we hold dear. (in Frederikse 1999, 116)

The political *modus vivendi* of a programme that promotes racially defined self-grouping while purporting to serve a post-racialist conception of humanness raises a series of ethical and strategic questions. As expressed by Biko and SASO – and in the current post-apartheid residual incarnation as the Azanian People’s Organisation (AZAPO) political formation – the Black Consciousness movement appears to contradict its intention, its *end*.

In dialectical terms, if black solidarity is inimical to the achievement of authentic non-racialism, it appears that Biko’s philosophy provides an antithesis (black solidarity) that frustrates and contradicts the envisioned synthesis (true humanity realised in non-racial selfhood and an egalitarian society).

In all philosophical dialectic traditions from Socrates to Marx, the antithesis is a negation of the thesis; it cannot be a negation of

the synthesis. The thesis (here, the white racial superiority complex), on the other hand, is always the corruption of the synthesis (non-racial humanity). The antithesis has to realise the potentiality of the original reality. Otherwise, as in this case, it becomes an illogical dead end, a self-contradiction, a defeat of the purpose. This would be the reversal of the dialectical process: a logical confabulation that renders Biko’s theory even nonsensical.

Our observation is that black solidarity, the antithesis, is monumentalised as a permanent, static reality in black consciousness theory. In Hegel’s idealism, the antithesis is not a spatio-temporal reality. It is *the logic of the motion of reason*, of negation, the self-negation of the thesis. Hence, it is erroneous to posit black solidarity, self-grouping, as a politically and socially necessary antithesis. Black solidarity could be a *principle* of the progression to non-racialism: an attitude of mind working on and against white racism.

What is paramount, and logical, is the end-goal/synthesis, the non-racial selfhood that Biko calls “true humanity”. Emphasis should be placed there, on overcoming the negativity in the thesis, and not on the hypostasised antithesis itself. This point is clarified by Marcuse (1977, 66): the negativity everything possesses is the necessary prelude to its reality. It is a state of privation that forces the subject to seek remedy. The dialectic process receives its motive power from the pressure to overcome the negativity.

The instigation and reason for the motion is the achievement of the new, idealised reality. This occurs *through the process* of self-negation. The self-negation does not itself become the principal agent. It is a mistake to reify the antithesis into a necessarily

permanent feature of a revolutionary process. Even Marx (1974, 29) deemed it necessary to emphasise that Hegel's dialectic,

in its rational form, is a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom... because it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence; because it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary.

In our considered view, black pride and group self-awareness can be asserted only as an antithesis to white racism as a *transitional* moment, because the antithesis is bound to achieve its goal. Black Consciousness, *qua* consciousness, should be conceived and communicated as a psycho-philosophical dialectical moment, a step towards the synthesis, the dream of a post-racist consciousness. The ahistorical persistence of "anti-racist racism" is both logically and ethically untenable and strategically self-defeating.

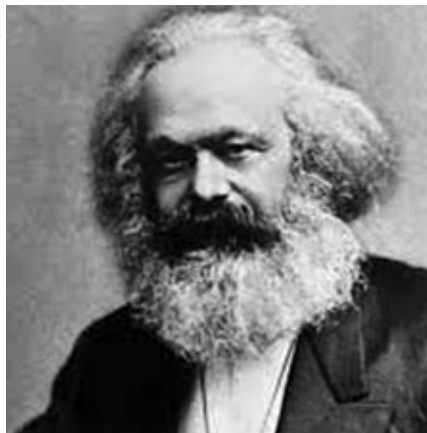
UNITY OF OPPOSITES

It is common sense that every idea or opinion can be contradicted, but this simple contradiction is not dialectics. The dialectical form is constituted by the appreciation that what is opposed is involved in the opposition itself. There is a connective unity between the thesis and its antithesis.

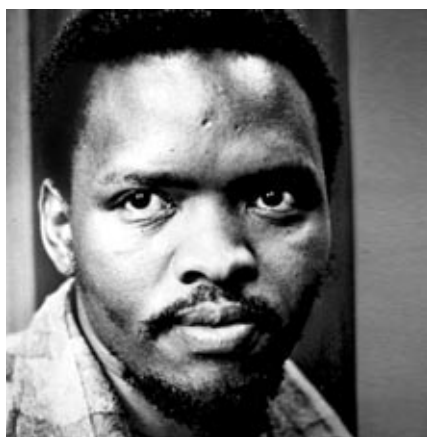
The Marxian contribution to the Hegelian dialectic was to highlight or reify the "temporal" disunity of the subject and object as an actual occurrence in history: in capitalist production, the labourer (subject) is alienated from the fruits of his labour (object), paradoxically sowing the seeds for a revolution leading to the ideal/synthesis of socialised labour. The antagonism between subject and object must be conjoined, with the



Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel



Karl Marx



Steve Biko (Source sahistory.org.za)

one issuing out of the other, a negative instigating its positive. This "causal" connection is also emphasised by Merleau-Ponty:

The dialectic embraces the prevailing negativity as well as its

negation. The given state of affairs is negative and can be rendered positive only by liberating the possibilities immanent in it. The last, the negation of the negation, is accomplished by establishing a new order of things. (cited in Marcuse 1977, 315)

For our argument, "strong white racism" has to be taken as an object, from Biko's vantage point, and "strong solidarity among blacks" has to be taken as the subject ("the determination of the blacks to rise and attain the envisaged self"). Such a black solidarity that does not also have actual engagement with white racism – that is, a subject with no contact with its object – can result only in an atrophied black self-isolation.

The two need to be in a dialectical relationship, to interact with each other, to impel the hypostasised subject to induce the negation of the imperfect thesis. This view includes the reality of each group's seclusion from the other, while at the same time imposing a theoretical obligation for a strategic contact between them. The new order can be realised only when the object (white racism) is not thought of as independently fixed apart from its subject (defiant black consciousness), but as enlightened by the expressions of black minds freed from their inferiority complex.

With such a perspective of the subject-object pair, Biko could have easily argued that, in Hegelian terms, these antagonistic racial complexes will dissipate as the white supremacist complex is starved by the absence of blacks ready and willing to be ordered around and marginalised.

The antithesis is an assertion of "black self-awareness" that is engaged with, fused with, and dissolves the thesis of "strong white racism"; not an assertion of a ossified racial consciousness in eternal conflict with white racism. It is the thesis, and not the synthesis, that has to be negated. ➤

BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS TO NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

From a purely political pragmatic perspective, dialogue is synonymous with the dialectic method, as demonstrated by Plato's Socrates. Holding the tension of opposing viewpoints is a sacrosanct intellectual principle in the dialectical tradition. Inflexible dogmatic positions are inimical to its very essence. Therefore, the social, cultural and intellectual self-isolation of the black aggrieved cannot realise the synthesis of a humanised South Africa. The very principle of dialectical thinking signals an engaged, robust and open-minded approach to seeking solutions to problems, and to seeking the truth.

Within a "relational" conception of opposites, the assertion of "a strong white racism" and "a strong solidarity among blacks" can only be a tactical posture and not an ontological one, in strict materialist terms. We can then conclude that, to the degree that it can be argued that Black Consciousness is necessary, its necessity can be justified only as a transitional attitude that is

dispensed with when consciousness is attained, life is "pumped back" into the black soul, and both the structural and mundane exertions of white supremacy are defied and thus rendered ineffectual.

It is significant that Biko (2004, 105) used the phrase "coming into consciousness", to describe the attainment of a state of black consciousness, writing that "a lot of attention has to be paid to our history if we as blacks want to aid each other in our coming into consciousness". A black person who has thus *come into consciousness* is then able to embrace the challenges of creating and living in a culture in which people are experienced not as racial but as rational beings. In a practical sense, this works against the tendency to withdraw into an ideological ghetto with one's (racially defined) own, with "our people".

This view of Black Consciousness as a stage in the political development of black persons accords with the view expressed by Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, the current chairperson of the African Union Commission and a prominent ANC politician, who was vice-president

of SASO in 1976. Twenty years later, she stated (in Frederikse 1999, 116):

I did not understand BC as an end in itself... it was like being a growing child. You need to crawl before you can walk, and so BC was just one of those stages that you needed to grow up through in politics. But you could not be BC forever – and there was no other alternative except the ANC. NA

NOTE

Sections of this paper are revised versions of a paper, MJ Lamola (2016) "Biko, Hegel and the end of Black Consciousness: A historico-philosophical discourse on South African racism", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 42:2, 183–194.

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