

## Why Black Consciousness misses the mark

Over the years, young South Africans have distinguished themselves as the nation's conscience. At times of unrest – whether one thinks of Nelson Mandela at the Rivonia Trial of 1964, Soweto schoolchildren in 1976, or the Wynberg Seven in 1985 – young people of principle have not only shown the way but have been willing to pay the price. That is why their current discontent deserves to be taken seriously. The debate about transformation in higher education is, to be sure, another indication that something has gone wrong in South Africa.

Although student manifestos are drawing appreciably from the works of Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko, we may not yet have asked ourselves: *why?* Why Fanon and Biko, both of whom left us decades ago, in 1961 and 1977 respectively? One would have expected more contemporary heroes to have emerged, to counsel us on the agonies of the present. Perhaps, in these years of compromise – or, setting aside the circumlocutions, these years of broken promises – we cling to the memories of Fanon and Biko because *there is no one else*. When viewed in this light, Jonathan Jansen's description of the late Neville Alexander as “the last of the true revolutionaries” is no idle claim. Convinced that they have been betrayed, young people are looking elsewhere for a moral compass – in the past, to be exact – and for that, they can hardly do better than Fanon and Biko.

But how relevant is Black Consciousness in a post-apartheid polity that is now twenty-one years in the making? Indeed, what seems to have flown under the radar is that both Fanon and Biko endorsed the vision of a non-racial future. In *Black skin, white masks*, Fanon reminds his readers: “The Negro problem does not resolve itself into the problem of Negroes living among white men but rather of Negroes exploited, enslaved, despised by a colonialist, capitalist society that is only accidentally white... What is all this talk of a black people, of a Negro nationality? I am a Frenchman. I am interested in French culture, French civilization, the French people.” Fanon ends the book with an impassioned plea for a commitment to something higher than race: “I, the man of color, want only this: That the tool never possess the man. That the enslavement of man by man cease forever. That is, of one by another. That it be

possible for me to discover and to love man, wherever he may be. The Negro is not. Any more than the white man.”

Biko’s perspective is remarkably similar. In *I write what I like*, he states his position clearly: “We believe it is the duty of the vanguard political movement which brings change to educate people’s outlook. In the same way that blacks have never lived in a socialist economic system they’ve got to learn to live in one. And in the same way that they’ve always lived in a racially divided society, they’ve got to learn to live in a non-racial society.” Like Alexander, Biko hoped for a free, non-racial and anti-capitalist South Africa.

In contrast, the debate about transformation at the University of Cape Town – within which the voices of Black Consciousness advocates feature prominently – has seen the foregrounding of race and racism to the virtual exclusion of economic considerations. For example, when one reads the May 2015 issue of *Monday Monthly* – a UCT newspaper – discussions of class, the market, capitalism or economics in general are relatively absent in the course of nineteen reflections on the meaning of transformation at the university.

Admittedly, UCT is an elitist institution, so the oversight is not entirely surprising. Despite a populist idiom – talk of “decolonisation” is ubiquitous – transformation discourse at UCT is saturated with middle-class sensibilities, confirming the Marxist verdict on consciousness being little more than a reflection of one’s material existence. What we are witnessing, is a turf war between white and black elites. It is not about the tens of millions of impoverished South Africans whose systematised degradation has made this country – in terms of the Gini coefficient for income inequality – one of the most unequal in the world. And since their strategy is one of *black solidarity*, followers of Black Consciousness will find it that much harder to examine the one problem that can cripple our nation, namely, the cooption of black power by, for the most part, white capital. Unfortunately, with Black Consciousness the preserve, seemingly, of a black elite, the problem becomes virtually uninterrogable.

The situation was, of course, very different *during* the apartheid years, when a corrupt – albeit contradictory – alliance was forged between white power and white capital. Back then, black solidarity made sense. In her book, *Poverty knowledge in South Africa*, Grace Davie shows how the race analysis of black students and the class analysis of white students were mutually reinforcing. But the rise of Black Consciousness a generation *after* the fall of apartheid derives from a different rationality altogether, namely, a growing class antagonism among *black* South Africans. When the government implemented business-friendly economic policies that would benefit a small black elite, it was always going to alienate the working class. Thabo Mbeki and his inner circle recognised this – and proceeded to replace the reconciliatory rhetoric of the Mandela presidency with an Africanist-Bikoist vernacular, immortalised in Mbeki’s proclamation of an “African Renaissance.” In its post-apartheid iteration, Black Consciousness, with its fixation on white privilege, carries the perverse – but strategic – potential of anaesthetizing South Africans to the serial capitulations of a black government.

Our students have initiated an important conversation about the racist climate that pervades campuses across the country – but now is the time to broaden the terms of reference. With their iconoclastic spirit, we must begin the process of dispensing with such received wisdoms as have outlived their usefulness. Perhaps we can start with the corrosive belief that the stability of our country depends on the creation of a black middle class – because it doesn’t. The notion of a middle class that will “buffer” some people from “the masses” is not only offensive but mistaken. If South Africa is to prosper, then we have to provide millions of economic outsiders – that is, fellow citizens – with the life opportunities that we desire for ourselves.

What does this mean for UCT? For one, the university will have to decide where its loyalties lie. It can either continue pushing a largely middle-class agenda, or, if it wishes to remain relevant and guard against parochialism, it can participate in meaningful transformation efforts by placing itself at the service of pro-poor grassroots activism. History is littered with instances of revolutionary elites selling out – and that is why transformation should begin from the bottom, not the top.

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