

Steve Biko: The Intellectual Roots of South African Black Consciousness

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Abstract

This research project examines the intellectual influences of South African anti-apartheid activist and Black Consciousness leader, Steve Biko using a history of ideas approach. Central to the project is G.W.F. Hegel's 'lord – bondsman dialectic' and how Biko applied the dialectic to the situation of blacks under apartheid. The lord – bondsman dialectic, introduced by Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, involves a struggle for recognition when two independent self-consciousnesses meet. The consciousness that succumbs to fear of death becomes the bondsman, while the consciousness that overcomes this fear becomes the lord. The lord desires recognition of his freedom through the bondsman's consciousness but this desire is self-defeating because the lord's consciousness cannot be recognized by a consciousness that has no freedom of its own. Biko's principles of Black Consciousness directly drew from this concept as he viewed psychological liberation as the first step towards black freedom. Viewing blacks' consciousness as dependent on white recognition, Biko viewed Black Consciousness as a means of developing a black way of thinking that would instill pride not contingent upon white recognition. Hegel's dialectical method was central to how Biko organized his anti-apartheid group, South African Student Organization (SASO). In this dialectic, the thesis is an accepted intellectual proposition that is actually incomplete or contradictory. The antithesis is the negation of the thesis, but it is also inadequate. The synthesis resolves the conflict through reconciling common truths and overcoming differences in the thesis and antithesis, forming a new thesis. Biko viewed the thesis of apartheid as white dominance over the inferior, dehumanized black subject. For Biko, the creation of SASO was a necessary step in creating an antithetical black movement to the thesis of white supremacy. Biko's reception of Hegel's ideas and their relevance was shaped Frantz Fanon's writing on how colonized people were to achieve recognition. Fanon's description of colonial power relations was more pertinent to Biko's evaluation of apartheid South Africa than Hegel's description of the bondsman. Hegel's bondsman could achieve self-recognition through seeing himself in his labor. Fanon did not think this was possible for the colonized subject; instead he would have to violently confront the colonist and prove his humanity by overcoming his fear of death. Biko was influenced by this sentiment; knowing the strength of the apartheid regime, he viewed physical liberation as the second step.

Keywords: Steve Biko, apartheid, Hegel

1. Introduction

Steve Biko was born in Tylden, Eastern Province (now Eastern Cape), South Africa on 18 December 1946. His father, Mzingayi Matthew, pressured Biko to excel academically, but Biko's education occurred simultaneously with the implementation of the Bantu Education Act. The Act was meant to shape young blacks like Biko into the future pool of unskilled laborers. Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd, legislator and author of the Bantu Education Act, believed that "There is no place for him [the Bantu] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour" and that black South Africans could not aspire towards "a future without back-breaking labour." Biko's political baptism came while he was in secondary school attending Lovedale Institute. His brother was jailed for

nine months for allegedly being a member of POQO, the militant wing of the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC). Interrogated by police and expelled from Lovedale, Biko was left with “a strong resentment towards white authority”¹ that shaped his future activism and philosophy.

The Black Consciousness Movement was the product and response to the increasing formalization of apartheid racism. Central to the justification of apartheid was the concept of white supremacy. While Biko critiqued the capitalist aspects of apartheid for causing poverty in the black community, he understood apartheid’s ideological foundation as centered on race as opposed to class. The economic interests of lower class whites were intrinsically linked to the continuation of apartheid because blacks were excluded from competing with whites for jobs. Biko explains in a student leadership publication, “There is for instance no worker in the classical sense among whites in South Africa, for even the most down-trodden white worker still has a lot to lose if the system is changed. He is protected by several laws against competition at work from the majority.”²

Biko’s philosophy did not develop within a vacuum; Black Consciousness was to function as the dialectical opposition to apartheid. Ghana’s first president and Africanist intellectual, Kwame Nkrumah explains this relationship between environment and ideas, “Social milieu affects the content of philosophy and the content of philosophy seeks to affect social milieu, either by confirming it or by opposing it.”³ If the structures of apartheid were centered on race, then black opposition would have to center on countering white supremacism and would have to be equally radical in opposition to apartheid. Africanist scholar Magobo Moore explains the relationship between this stifling political climate and the rise of an equally strong resistance, “Just as Karl Marx was ‘created’ by capitalism; Lenin by the Russian aristocracy, Gandhi by British imperialism, and Fanon by the colonised ‘Wretched of the Earth’ who were victims of white oppression, Biko was created by apartheid racism.”⁴

Although Biko praised pre-colonial African culture and criticized the trappings of Western thought with its emphasis on reason, individualism, and materialism, Black Consciousness cannot be simply defined as an ‘Africanist’ movement or ‘African’ cultural renaissance. Biko was focused on developing a philosophy that would provide the framework for black liberation from apartheid and their own inferiority complexes along with establishing a mindset that would reconcile the differences between the races and allow South African to function as a unified, multiracial society. Black Consciousness operated as a philosophical analysis and political movement towards resisting apartheid, with the eventual goal of reconciling racial stratification. This paper will demonstrate how the Hegelian dialectical method provided the theoretical template for organizing Black Consciousness as an anti-apartheid movement. Frantz Fanon’s insertion of race into the dialectic was incorporated by Biko’s writing on the ‘lived experience of the black man’ and his inferiority complexes. The paper will conclude with an analysis of the role of violence in the struggle for recognition within the context of Hegel and Fanon’s philosophy as applied to Black Consciousness.

2. Black Consciousness

Steve Biko was the primary force behind developing Black Consciousness as a coherent philosophy and organizing it as a movement dedicated to resisting apartheid. Recognizing that “the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed,”⁵ Biko believed that psychological liberation would have to precede political liberation. Biko defined Black Consciousness in an article for a student leadership seminar as “the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their operation – the blackness of their skin – and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude...It seeks to infuse the black community with a new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their value systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook to life.”⁶

Black Consciousness emerged in the late 1960s as opposition to an increasingly cemented and strengthened apartheid regime. Apartheid in South Africa entrenched itself under the leadership of Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd and the Afrikaner Nationalist Party drafted legislation that disenfranchised black people by segregating them from enrolling in the same universities as whites and through allotting independent Bantustans (tribal reserves) to blacks. Resistance to this increasingly rigid form of apartheid culminated in the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 when South African police killed sixty nine black protestors who were marching against pass laws.⁷ Black political resistance came to a standstill after the Sharpeville Massacre as the two main sources of opposition, the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) were ‘banned’. Political scientist Robert Fatton characterizes the bleak situation of the anti-apartheid struggle, “This absence of challenge to apartheid profoundly shaped the political development of the mid-1960’s. It provoked the ascendancy of a small class of white liberals bent on defending what it perceived to be the interests of a defenseless African population. It induced an African

political opportunism manifested in the rise of a Bantustan administrative elite. Finally, it permitted the consolidation of the repressive machinery of white supremacy.”⁸

Black Consciousness rose out of this climate of fear and silence. Apathy gave way to misery and dissatisfaction among black people, setting the stage for a liberation movement. Biko captures the situation in a newsletter written for the South African Students Organization, “Ground for a revolution is always fertile in the presence of absolute destitution.”⁹ The increasingly oppressive manifestations of apartheid created the Black Consciousness Movement that would function as apartheid’s radical, dialectical opposition. The ‘tribal’ colleges, the segregated universities for blacks, were the breeding ground for the Movement. Postcolonial scholar Nigel Gibson describes how this rigid segregation created a fertile environment for radical politics, “Emerging out of the very colleges the government had set up to control black students’ minds, BC’s founders recognized the importance of the mind of the oppressed.”¹⁰ The segregation of black students at these universities created the conditions needed for a movement like Black Consciousness to emerge. Political scientist David Hirschmann explains, “In a very real sense the B.C. Movement was, therefore, a stepchild of apartheid. The completeness of their isolation, resentment at an inferior education, frustration at lack of academic choices, the oppressiveness of their controlled circumstances, and time to ponder these matters together, all combined with long-standing political anger to provide young black intellectuals with a fertile environment for envisioning and initiating a new political movement.”¹¹ In this early stage of the Movement, Black Consciousness not only opposed apartheid, but it was forced to crystallize its philosophical foundation in order to avoid its message being diluted by white liberals who also opposed apartheid.

3. NUSAS & White Liberalism

While the segregated universities reserved for black students like Biko proved to be a breeding ground for dissent, white liberal students also played a role in resisting apartheid. The National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) was the most committed of these student groups. Although the student union made an effort to establish itself as a multiracial organization, Biko’s biographer and anti-apartheid writer, Donald Woods characterized the organization as being comprised primarily of white, English speakers from the University of Cape Town, Natal, Rhodes, and Witwatersrand¹². Along with an attempt to establish itself as a multiracial group, the NUSAS took an integrationist, nonracial approach towards apartheid. It was this approach that caused Biko to break with NUSAS in 1969 and form the South African Students’ Organization (SASO).

In his seminal work on the colonized masses and their struggles for national liberation, *The Wretched of the Earth*, postcolonial theorist Franz Fanon wrote that “For a population 98 percent illiterate, there is, however, an enormous amount of literature written about them.”¹³ Fanon’s encapsulation of white liberals in their endeavors of somehow assisting the colonized oppressed masses gain freedom is evident in Biko’s writing. He correctly identified the hypocrisy of whites leading blacks in an effort to establish an ill-defined ‘integrated’ society. Biko writes in a SASO article, “Why do they (white liberals) persist in talking to the blacks? Since they are aware that the problem in this country is white racism, why do they not address themselves to the white world? Why do they insist on talking to us?”¹⁴ This issue of white leadership and agency was an important aspect in Biko’s philosophy. Black Consciousness stressed the importance of blacks acting as their own agents of liberation. Along with instilling a sense of black pride, Black Consciousness was centered on providing the groundwork for blacks to liberate themselves and eventually coexist with white South Africans. Echoing Fanon, *Black Viewpoint*, a Black Consciousness publication edited by Biko, emphasized the need for blacks to act as their own agents, “So many things are so often to us, about us and for us but very seldom by us.”¹⁵ Adopting this logic, Biko and SASO broke rank with the NUSAS and pursued a course of resistance that was no longer limited to the campuses, but extended to represent the cause of black liberation throughout South Africa. SASO was to be a black students’ organization, while Biko still understood the NUSAS as a ‘national’ union representing South African students at large. Biko believed that black students understood the issues facing black society better than whites and could alleviate their own community’s issues better. In his rationale for the separation with the NUSAS, Biko wrote in a letter to the various English and Afrikaner student organizations that, “SASO adopts the principle that blacks should work themselves into a powerful group so as to go forth and stake their rightful claim in the open society rather than to exercise that power in some obscure part of the Kalahari. Hence this belief that our withdrawal is an end in itself.”¹⁶

In order to understand the logic behind Biko’s divorce from white liberalism and the NUSAS, the dynamics of dialectical materialism must be introduced. Karl Marx, who adopted many of Hegel’s concepts, frames the dialectic in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, “But once it (reason) has managed to pose itself as a thesis, this thesis, this thought, opposed to itself, splits up into two contradictory thoughts – the positive and the negative, the yes and the no. The

struggle between these two antagonistic elements compromised in the antithesis constitutes the dialectical movement. The yes becoming no, the no becoming yes, the yes becoming both yes and no, the no becoming both no and yes. The contraries balance, neutralized, paralyze each other. The fusion of these two contradictory thoughts constitutes a new thought, which is the synthesis of them.”¹⁷ Understanding the thesis of apartheid South Africa as white supremacy, Biko believed that the only antithesis capable of opposing this particularly cemented form of racism was a black-led response. Freedom is not something to be bestowed; it would come through the organization of the Movement and through the struggle against the apartheid government. Above-ground politicking and working within the system was not a viable option as leaders of mainstream political groups like the ANC and PAC were banned, imprisoned, exiled and even assassinated. The dire situation called for a resolutely strong black opposition movement that would shake apartheid to its core.

His divergence from white liberalism was due to his analysis of the underlying forces behind apartheid. White supremacy was understood by Biko as the ideological justification for apartheid. Biko explained the situation in a SASO newsletter that, “In terms of the Black Consciousness approach we recognise the existence of one major force in South Africa. This is White Racism. It is the one force against which all of us are pitted...Its greatest ally to date has been the refusal by us to club together as blacks because we are told to do so would be racist. So while we progressively lose ourselves in a world of colourlessness and amorphous common humanity, whites are deriving pleasure and security in entrenching white racism.”¹⁸ White supremacy in South Africa castigated blacks as uncivilized. Belief in the inferiority of blacks justified the implementation of pass laws and zoning laws, excluding blacks from living in the cities. It was the singular, operative force oppressing blacks and resistance to the apartheid system necessitated an equally strong response that challenged white supremacism on a fundamental level.

The integrationist, color-blind approach the NUSAS took was not the concrete dialectical opposition needed to resist a force as entrenched as apartheid. Color-blindness did not place race as the definitive thesis behind apartheid. It was to be this newfound sense of purpose, unity, and pride in blacks that would not only overcome apartheid, but eventually synthesize South Africa as a multiracial country. Biko explains, “The overall analysis therefore, based on the Hegelian theory of dialectic materialism, is as follows. That since the thesis is a white racism there can only be one valid antithesis i.e. a solid black unity to counterbalance the scale. If South Africa is to be a land where black and white live together in harmony without fear of group exploitation, it is only when these two opposites have interacted and produced a viable synthesis of ideas and a *modus vivendi*. We can never wage any struggle without offering a strong counterpoint to the white races that permeate our society so effectively.”¹⁹ Biko was not concerned with protesting individual pieces of apartheid legislation; he sought to develop Black Consciousness as the antithesis to the salient white racism bolstering the apartheid regime. In his analysis, white liberalism only obscured the dialectical tension between white supremacy and black consciousness.

Ultimately, the white liberal analysis sidesteps the crux of apartheid: race. The integrationist approach that Biko criticizes is both unrealistic considering the reality of South African society and is not radical enough in opposition to the thesis of apartheid. Without an equally counterbalanced antithesis to apartheid, blacks would enter a society that is integrated in appearance only. Black Consciousness served to eliminate the inferiority complexes in black people, allowing them to recognize their own humanity and the humanity of their white counterparts on an equal basis. Biko explains the pitfalls of the integrationist approach in a SASO publication, “In other words the people forming the integrated complex have been extracted from various segregated societies with their in-built complexes of superiority and inferiority and these continue to manifest themselves even in the “nonracial” set-up of the integrated complex. As a result the integration so achieved is a one-way course, with the whites doing all the talking and the blacks the listening...It is rather like expecting the slave to work together with the slave-master’s son to remove all the conditions leading to the former’s enslavement.”²⁰

Biko’s synthesis was a South African society where race did not matter. Negritude poet Aime Cesaire’s verse from *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* captures what this synthesis would entail, “And no race has a monopoly on beauty, on intelligence, on strength and there is room for everyone at the convocation of conquest.”²¹ Biko references this verse multiple times in a collection of papers and speeches compiled in *I Write What I Like* to dispel any accusations of Black Consciousness being a form of reverse racism. Whites were excluded from SASO because ultimately, they were beneficiaries of the apartheid system. Biko explains the issue in a SASO publication, “We are merely forced by historic considerations to recognise the fact that we cannot plan side by side with people who participate in their exclusive pool of privileges, to make sure that both privileges are shared.”²²

Along with resisting apartheid as its dialectical opposition, Biko believed that Black Consciousness could create conditions necessary for mutual recognition between whites and blacks in South Africa. This is the final aspect of dialectical materialism as the thesis (in this case, apartheid racism) and the antithesis (Black Consciousness) interplay and overcome their differences. Black Consciousness was a necessary step in the process of establishing South Africa as a pluralistic society. Biko’s conception of freedom for the black man meant overcoming not only

racism, but being recognized as a human being by white society. The type of integration expounded by white liberal groups like the NUSAS fails to overcome and challenge racism; it fails to place blacks at the vanguard of their struggle. Nigel Gibson quotes Biko's disagreement with this type of integration in a SASO article, "If on the other hand by integration you mean there shall be free participation by all members of society, catering for the full expression of the self in a freely changing society dominated by the will of the people, then I am with you."²³

Biko's definition of integration, cited above, illustrates a similarity to Hegel's view of freedom as Hegel believed that only free, independent self-consciousnesses could recognize each other and that freedom is contingent upon each consciousness mutually recognizing each other's freedom. The Self can only recognize its own humanity through acknowledging the humanity of the Other as Hegel explains in his *Philosophy of the Mind*, "Only in such a manner [pure recognition] is true freedom realized; for since this consists in my identity with the other, I am only truly free when the other is also free and is recognized by me as free. This freedom of one in the other unites men in an inward manner, whereas needs and necessity bring them together only externally. Therefore, men must will to find themselves again in one another."²⁴

Philosopher Robert Pippin explains that in Hegelian terms, "being a free rational agent consists in being recognized as one, and one can only be so recognized if the other's recognition is freely given; and this effectively means only if I recognize the other as a free individual, as someone to be addressed in normative not strategic terms."²⁵ This is the consistent with type of freedom Biko advocated as it was based on it was a freedom based on a complete, fulfilled self-consciousness. In one of Biko's more intellectual pieces of writing in a chapter called "Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity" in the book, *Black Theology: The South African Voice*, he writes that "Freedom is the ability to define oneself with one's possibilities held back not by the power of other people over one but only by one's relationship to God and to natural surroundings."²⁶

Opposing white supremacy and apartheid does not necessitate a negation of whites as a people. Black Consciousness' negation of apartheid is not a destructive act as the operative force oppressing blacks, racism, would first and foremost have to be eliminated before any actual racial equality could arise. In a paper presented at a conference for the main South African student groups, from the right-wing Afrikaanse Studentbond to the left-wing SASO, Biko characterizes the Movement as, "the most positive call to come from any group in the black world for a long time. It is more than just a reactionary rejection of whites by blacks...Being an historically, politically, socially and economically disinherited and disposed group, they have the strongest foundation from which to operate. The philosophy of Black Consciousness, therefore, expresses group pride and the determination by the blacks to rise and attain the envisaged self."²⁷ The movement, in this sense, was a historical prerequisite in the creation of a pluralistic South Africa. By negating the racism that created a black complex of inferiority, the positive means of creating an independent black self-consciousness could ascend, thus marking a beginning step in establishing the conditions needed for mutual recognition.

Hegelian thinker, Alexandre Kojève, explains in a series of lectures on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, how a new reality can arise out of negation, "But negating action is not purely destructive, for if action destroys an objective reality, for the sake of satisfying the Desire from which it is born, it creates in its place, in and by that very destruction, a subjective reality. The being that eats, for example, creates and preserves its own reality by overcoming of a reality other than its own."²⁸ Black Consciousness was not simply a means to an end by this account, as the movement went beyond merely opposing apartheid politically, it would liberate blacks and whites psychologically, freeing blacks from their inferiority complexes and whites from their racism and burden of supporting an isolated, minority-ruled regime. Biko was perceptive enough to see the risks white South Africans faced in their support of a system that was inevitably going to collapse. By refusing to compromise with leaders in the movement, then their disciples, the radical, young urban youth could ignite a race war. Biko explains his anxiety concerning this possibility in an interview with John Burns, *The New York Times*' correspondent for South Africa, "Blacks are going to move out of the townships into white suburbs, destroying and burning there. It's going to happen. It's inevitable. When that happens, there will be white panic...A faceless army which destroys overnight will introduce far greater feelings of insecurity than an organized military force on the border, which you can confront and defeat."²⁹ This pessimistic examination of the situation illustrates Biko's concern for white South Africans. Pippin quotes Hegel's *Encyclopedia's Philosophy of Spirit*, "It is only when the slave becomes free that the master, too, becomes completely free."³⁰ Supporting the apartheid regime and furthering South Africa's status as an international pariah state was a dangerous burden for the white community in South Africa. Through acknowledging the humanity of blacks and striving towards an egalitarian, participatory state, white South Africans would no longer have to rely on the police state tactics of the apartheid regime to repress the vast majority of their national counterparts, who were black.

The integration proposed by groups like the NUSAS is not true integration according to Biko. Black Consciousness would have to provide the foundation for eliminating the inferiority complexes in black people

before they would be able to recognize and be recognized by whites as equals. Ultimately, the blame for apartheid racism is placed solely on white society; black people would have to be independent agents for their liberation. Self-consciousness would be unattainable without blacks first recognizing that they are oppressed by apartheid society because of their blackness and that blacks will have to free themselves. White liberalism never embodied the total dialectical opposition to the central thesis of apartheid, white supremacy. Biko evaluated the phenomenon of white liberalism as taking agency from black people, "We can only generate a response from white society when we, as blacks, speak with a black voice and say what we want. The age of the liberal was such that the black voice was not very much heard except in echoing what was said by liberals. Now has come the time when we, as blacks, must articulate what we want, and put it across to the white man, and from a position of strength."³¹ He was opposed to integration if that meant integration into white society with its values and codes of behavior maintained by whites.

4. Black Identity & Self-Consciousness

The South African apartheid government established four main racial categories based on both an individual's appearance and behavior. The classifications determined where an individual could legally live and what political rights they possessed. The main categories were white, Asian (Indian), Coloured (mixed-descent), and Bantu (black African). Sociologist Susan Star explains the Afrikaner Nationalists' political motives in establishing this classification system, explaining that the "word Bantu was chosen in preference to African (or black African), partly to underscore Nationalist desires to be recognized as 'really African.'"³² The term 'non-white' was also used synonymously with the definition of 'Bantu' which was a term Biko took issue with.

Biko sought to reappropriate the label of 'black' by turning it into a positive identity. Hegel's influence can clearly be seen as he wrote in his masterwork, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* that "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged."³³ The identity of non-white cannot create a self-consciousness 'existing in and for itself' as it is dependent upon a negative trait: not being white. A social group whose identity is contingent upon existing in relation to a group that establishes itself as superior can never actualize its self-consciousness. Especially in terms of blackness in apartheid South Africa, the process is self-defeating as no matter how articulate or how cultured white society deems a black man, he cannot escape the color of his skin. He ultimately can never be white. As Frantz Fanon explains the static aspect of skin color in his psychological evaluation of racism, *Black Skin, White Masks*, "I am a slave not to the 'idea' others have of me, but to my appearance... The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I am fixed."³⁴ This evaluation of race being a fixed aspect of identity is also relevant to Biko's disagreement with a Marxist, class centered evaluation of the apartheid system. Fanon quotes existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre's *Black Orpheus*, "But nevertheless the notion of race does not intersect with the notion of class: one is concrete and particular, the other is universal and abstract... the first is the product of a psycho-biological syncretism and the other is a methodical construction emerging from experience."³⁵ While race is a socially constructed identity to a degree, blackness was a fundamentally static component of identity as one could not change his physical appearance or skin color.

While many whites were against apartheid, such as Donald Woods, Biko's biographer, they still benefitted from apartheid institutions, be it unrestricted movement to and from the cities or access to better education. A white dissident could attend a radical discussion group and then drive home to a safe, well-furnished home in the city center unmolested by the police, while blacks were forced to carry pass cards and were expelled from living in urban centers. Even if a black person was articulate and spoke the white languages, English and Afrikaans, they were ultimately still black which made them subject to the legal, institutionalized subjugation that was apartheid. Total assimilation into white society was impossible for South African blacks due to its peculiarly rigid racial classification system as he explains in an article concerning the use of fear by the apartheid regime, "Unlike the rest of the French or Spanish former colonies where chances of assimilation made it not impossible for blacks to aspire towards being white, in South Africa whiteness has always been associated with police brutality and intimidation, early morning pass raids, general harassment in and out of townships and hence no black really aspires to being white."³⁶

Blackness was not demarcated as a racial definition by Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement however, as it was reappropriated into an identity that denoted oppression due to apartheid. Recognizing in his chapter in *Black Theology* that, "We are oppressed not as individuals, not as Zulus, Xhosas, Vendas or Indians. We are oppressed because we are black. We must use that very concept to unite ourselves and to respond as a cohesive group",³⁷ Biko sought to include members from other disenfranchised groups such as Coloureds and Indians. Apartheid

scholar Thomas Ranuga explains how the movement constructed the term as one that denoted a socio-political status as opposed to a racial one, “The term black therefore was not intended to describe skin color per se but to delineate a social category of people who occupied a subordinate position in a capitalist and racist system.”³⁸

The real non-whites were the Africans who aspired to be white, the ones who whitened their skin and collaborated with the authorities. Fatton explains how South Africans who may have had black skin, were not defined as such by the movement, “Accordingly, the Black Consciousness Movement condemned the African bureaucratic elite of the Bantustans for its incorporation into and acceptance of the political structures of apartheid...Being African was not a sufficient condition to qualify as a black; to be black implied a determined antagonism to apartheid and the political will to eradicate it.”³⁹ Biko wrote in a paper titled “The Definition of Black Consciousness” that, “The interrelationship between the consciousness of the self and the emancipatory programme is of paramount importance,”⁴⁰ it becomes clear that psychological liberation and the attainment of self-consciousness were crucial steps in Biko’s approach towards dismantling the apartheid system. This was a call for mental liberation that would overhaul the entire apartheid system. It was not a political program of reform. A synthesized, pluralistic South Africa was the goal of the Movement, Biko wrote how the movement was a necessary step in creating the conditions needed for mutual recognition, “In other words, the ‘Black Consciousness’ approach would be irrelevant in a colourless and non-exploitative egalitarian society.”⁴¹ This type of liberation was not a demand for individual rights; it was liberation that was Hegelian in the sense that Biko was focused on producing a movement that would make blacks see themselves as human beings and working towards a society where the humanity of all races was recognized. As Robert Pippin explains Hegel’s concept of freedom, “‘being free’ is not being treated as an essential or really any sort of property...but throughout all Hegel’s Encyclopedia formulations, as an achievement; the collective achievement of a state, a state of intra-psychic and social being, wherein instead of natural dispositions subjects have come to be able to constrain their conduct on the basis of norms.”⁴² The Hegelian construction of freedom is in line with how Biko defined freedom as his speeches and writing show a desire for blacks to be recognized as human beings that have a right to contribute to South African society as equals. South African philosophy professor Charles Villet explains how mutual recognition allows two consciousnesses to exist as free beings, “Mutual recognition allows both self and the Other to have freedom and agency in the development and attainment of their own self-consciousness, in other words a cognitive awareness of the self and its relation to the Other (and also the world).”⁴³ Biko’s calls for black liberation were less rooted in an a priori claim of natural rights and were more based in a notion of freedom grounded in sociability.

5. Recognition: Fanon & Hegel

Black Consciousness was a necessary step toward creating the synthesis required to overcome apartheid. The racist structure of apartheid created an incomplete sense of humanity among blacks. In his testimony as an expert on Black Consciousness during a trial where nine young blacks were charged with subversion, Biko explained to defense lawyer, David Soggott that, “The black man in himself has developed a certain state of alienation; he rejects himself precisely because he attaches the meaning white to all that is good.”⁴⁴ If blacks failed to see their own humanity, they could hardly be expected to recognize the humanity of whites, the collective oppressors, in South Africa. Recognition, in terms of blacks seeing themselves as complete in their humanity and achieving the recognition of whites is best framed through Hegel’s lord-bondsman dialectic.

In Hegel’s magnum opus, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, he describes how self-consciousness actualizes itself through the domination of another outside consciousness. Hegel writes that when two consciousnesses meet “they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle. They must engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being for themselves...And it is only through staking one’s life that freedom is won.”⁴⁵ Consciousness must prove it can exist outside of itself by risking its existence. After the initial conflict, the consciousness that acquiesces to the fear of death becomes the bondsman and the consciousness that overcomes the fear of death establishes itself as the lord. The lord actualizes his self-consciousness through the bondsman but the lord’s self-consciousness is an incomplete one because it is contingent on the bondsman who is an unconscious subject. Hegel’s bondsman is dependent upon the lord for survival due to his fear of death. He exchanges labor for security which is the initial step in the creation of the bondsman’s self-consciousness. As Hegel explains, “Through work, however, the bondsman becomes conscious of what he truly is...the bondsman realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that acquires a mind of his own.”⁴⁶ The bondsman can see a reflection of his own consciousness through work and the manipulation of his external surroundings. Kojève captures this aspect of the dialectic, “Therefore, it is by work, and only by work, that man realizes himself objectively as man. Only after producing an artificial object is man himself really and objectively more than and

different from a natural being.”⁴⁷ South African blacks were fundamentally alienated from themselves due to not only state repression, but a culture of racism that actively sought to strip black people of their self-worth. Apartheid not only served to materially impoverish blacks through economic exclusion, but it also spiritually impoverished them as Biko explains in one of his earlier SASO news columns, “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...His heart yearns for the comfort of white society and makes him blame himself for not having been ‘educated’ enough to warrant such a luxury.”⁴⁸ Fanon paralleled the status of blacks in the colonies to Hegel’s bondsman while the white colonist was equated with the lord.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon frames the struggle between the black subject and the white master in the context of Hegel’s lord-bondsman dialectic, although Fanon arrives at a different conclusion than Hegel regarding the act of recognition due to Fanon’s insertion of race into the dialectic. While the status of lord and bondsman are established after an initial struggle unto death in Hegel’s philosophy, Fanon writes that, “There is no open conflict between White and Black. One day the white master recognized without a struggle the black slave. But the former slave wants to have himself recognized.”⁴⁹ Whiteness becomes the condition required for a fulfilled self-consciousness, while the black subject exists in comparison as explained by scholar Nigel Gibson who quotes Biko in an article on Black Consciousness, blacks “associate everything good with white...so you tend to feel there is something incomplete in your humanity, and your humanity goes with whiteness.”⁵⁰ This aspect of Biko’s thought can be seen in Fanon’s analysis of the inferiority complex and resulting desire to be white amongst black people.

Fanon uses a hypothetical sexual encounter between a black man and a white woman to show this desire to be white, writing, “I want to be recognized not as Black, but as White. But – and this is the form of recognition Hegel never described – who better than the white woman to bring this about? By loving me, she proves to me that I am worthy of a white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man.”⁵¹ While Hegel’s bondsman desires to be recognized as an independent self-consciousness that exists independently of the lord, Fanon’s black subject does not possess this desire and cannot find meaning through work a la bondsman. Fanon explains this fundamental difference from Hegelian recognition, using the term ‘slave’ synonymously with black subject, “For Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master scorns the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work. Likewise, the slave here can in no way be equated with the slave who loses himself in the object and finds the source of his liberation in his work. The black slave wants to be like his master...For Hegel, the slave turns away from the master and turns toward the object. Here the slave turns toward the master and abandons the object.”⁵² This aspect of desiring to take the place of the white master was not readily adopted by Biko as explained previously in his article on fear as a political weapon in apartheid South Africa. Biko believed that white society had committed to a path of oppression to the extent that blacks could only respond with contempt.⁵³ With this background in Fanonian and Hegelian theories of recognition established, it is vital to understand the role of violence and its relation to the Black Consciousness Movement.

Fanon’s analysis of the black subject-white master dialectic negated any possibility of work providing a means of creating black self-consciousness. Without the option of work as a path towards self-consciousness, the black subject would have to resort to violent confrontation with the white master as he strives to take his place. Just as Biko predicted physical confrontation between whites and blacks in South Africa if white society did not attempt reconciliation, Fanon wrote in his iconic work on violence and decolonization, *The Wretched of the Earth*, that, “The greater the number of metropolitan settlers, the more terrible the violence will be.”⁵⁴ This cyclical understanding of violence in the colonial context was clearly relevant to apartheid South Africa as it was home to the most people of European descent on the African continent.

Without work and the addition of the abject domination of white overlords, Fanon believed that violence would constitute the path towards the development of consciousness as explained in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “The work of the colonist is to make even dreams of liberty impossible for the colonized. The work of the colonized is to imagine every possible method for annihilating the colonist...But it so happens that for the colonized this violence is invested with positive, formative features because it constitutes their only work.”⁵⁵ As previously explained, Fanon believed that the white colonist established his dominance over the black subject without a struggle unto death, unlike the conflict between lord and bondsman as described by Hegel. This struggle to exhibit a consciousness that is free demonstrates itself by dominating others according to Fanon as he writes, “Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose himself on another man in order to be recognized by him.”⁵⁶ Examining Biko’s support of violent means in the struggle against apartheid is nuanced when comparing his writing calling for pluralism and statements that appear to only support non-violence due to political pragmatism.

Biko believed that the mission of Black Consciousness extended beyond merely instilling pride in black South Africans; the Movement could create the viable conditions necessary for mutual recognition allowing the rights of all races in South Africa to be respected. In an interview with an unspecified source published in *I Write What I*

Like, Biko explains the lofty goals of the Movement, “We see a completely non-racial society. We don’t believe for instance, in the so-called guarantees for minority rights, because guaranteeing minority rights implies the recognition of portions of the community on a race basis.”⁵⁷ However, this idealism gives way to a realistic perspective on why Black Consciousness should be a non-violent movement. Biko’s biographer records a verbatim report by journalist, John Burns, who interviewed Biko on the subject of violent struggle, relaying that Biko said, “We haven’t debated violence so far. We are confined to operating peacefully precisely because we operate aboveground. That doesn’t mean we preclude it.”⁵⁸ While Biko contributed to the empowering philosophy of Black Consciousness, his ideas were ultimately meant to be used in a political struggle against the apartheid regime which made them subject to considerations of political expediency. He understood not only sheer security muscle of the apartheid regime as too great to challenge violently, but also recognized the issue in using force as a solution to racial conflict. In a conversation with Woods, Biko explains, “Violence brings too many residues of hate into the reconstruction period. Apart from its obvious horrors, it creates too many post-revolutionary problems.”⁵⁹ With these statements presented, Biko appears to comprehend the ethical and practical issues with violence, but also understands that blacks could only withstand the yoke of apartheid for so long.

6. Conclusion

Biko personally embodied his philosophical outlook in the struggle against apartheid, displaying a consciousness unafraid of death. In an interview given only a few months before his death, he displays an emblematic courage that shook the foundation of apartheid to its core. The interview was with an American businessman before his last arrest and death, but it was not published until 7 January 1978 in *The New Republic*. On the subject of death, the still young Biko said, “You are either alive and proud or you are dead, and when you are dead, you can’t care anyway. And your method of death can itself be a politicizing thing. So you die in the riots. For a hell of a lot of them, in fact, there’s really nothing to lose – almost literally, given the kind of situations they come from. So if you can overcome the personal fear of death, which is a highly irrational thing, you know, then you’re on the way.”⁶⁰ Chillingly foreboding, Biko was arrested at a police roadblock on 18 August 1977, interrogated and beaten for 22 hours, then loaded, naked, onto the back of a Landrover for 1,100 km, dying from a brain hemorrhage caused by the security police’s torture in Pretoria.⁶¹ Overcoming his fear of death, Biko displayed a consciousness ‘existing in itself’ and ‘for itself’, overcoming what Kojève called the ‘animal fear of death’. He proved his existence by risking it, but this did not have to be a necessary act in the process of mutual recognition as Hegel wrote, “we must here remark that the fight for recognition pushed to the extreme here indicated can only occur in the natural state, where men exist only as single, separate individuals; but it is absent in civil society and the State because here the recognition for which the combatants fought for already exists.”⁶²

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