

Black Consciousness 1977-1987; The Dialectics of Liberation in South Africa

by
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New Introduction to “Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1977-1987”

It so happens that the unpreparedness of the educated classes, the lack of practical links between them and the mass of people, their laziness, and, let it be said, their cowardice at the decisive moment of the struggle will give rise to tragic mishaps.

- Frantz Fanon, “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness”

This article was written 16 years ago in 1988 as an attempt to understand what had happened to Black Consciousness as an ideological force ten years after Steve Biko’s death. As a young anti-Stalinist, anti-apartheid, activist in London in the late 1970s I had been energized by the June 16, 1976 Soweto revolt and by Biko’s conception of Black Consciousness. At the time I was impressed by an important pamphlet written by John Alan and Lou Turner, “Frantz Fanon, Soweto and American Black Thought”¹ which articulated the importance of Fanon to Biko’s thought and considered Black Consciousness a new stage of cognition. Like Biko, they considered the Soweto revolt as a concrete expression of that new stage and underscored the importance of revolutionary humanism in Biko’s and Fanon’s thought.² The following ten years of revolt against the apartheid regime across the country, which sounded the tocsin for that regime, proved the validity of the hypothesis.

Black Consciousness, as Biko understood it, represented a new self-confidence and militancy, yet at the same time as an organization it failed to develop the idea after Biko’s death. By the early 1980s Black Consciousness (BC) began to be dismissed as little more than a “passing stage,” no more than a psychological necessity. After Soweto, many BC leaders joined the African National Congress (ANC) reinforcing the idea that BC was a “minor term,” reinvigorating the ANC as *the* organization of the struggle. Communists in the ANC and Trotskyists outside of it united in a kind of traditional left “told you so,” dismissing BC as essentially petty bourgeois in need of “class analysis.” Under the pressure of shoring up its ideology, the Black Consciousness organization, AZAPO (Azanian People’s Organization), attempted to incorporate Marxist class categories into its ideology. The history and debates of this period are discussed in “Black Consciousness, 1977-87,” including the strategic highpoint with the development of the National Forum. By 1987, however, I believed that despite earlier strategic successes, BC’s ideological reevaluation had been a failure and that there was a need to critically reconsider the project. If Black Consciousness was going to play a much needed progressive role, I argued, it was necessary to return to its humanist roots, and re-articulate its relation to Fanon’s revolutionary humanism.

I had been particularly taken with Fanon’s understanding of race and class in his critique of Sartre’s conception that negritude was a “minor term” in the dialectic. Fanon reacted

¹ John Alan and Lou Turner, *Frantz Fanon, Soweto and American Black Thought* (Detroit, News and Letters, 1978; Chicago, 1986). The section on Fanon was reprinted in my *Rethinking Fanon*, (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999).

² For a recent discussion of “revolutionary humanism” in Fanon’s thought, see Richard Pithouse, “‘That the tool never possess the man’: taking Fanon’s humanism seriously,” *Politikon*, Vol.30, No. 2 (2003), pp. 107-131.

to Sartre as if Sartre was another white leftist telling him to “grow up.” But more seriously, it showed Sartre’s failure to comprehend the dialectic of negativity. Black consciousness, Fanon insisted was not “a passing stage” but instead had to be understood as an absolute. In other words, Fanon’s conception of the dialectic of consciousness was radically different than Sartre’s and replaced Sartre’s abstraction with the existential concrete of the lived experience of the Black. Rather than a synthetic movement, Fanon was arguing for a more radical dialectic of negativity and indeed, therefore, a more radical notion of consciousness and revolution. This idea had an appeal to Biko and can be seen in the centrality he placed on the “mind of the oppressed” in his conception of liberation. Taking Biko’s idea of the “mind of oppressed” further means engaging in what Fanon saw as the major obstacle to Africa’s liberation movements, “the lack of ideology.” Post Biko Black Consciousness activists did not take the issue of the “lack of ideology” seriously, instead they thought they could simply touch up their own increasingly narrow Black nationalist rhetoric with a sprinkling of class analysis. Essentially they had taken a wrong, perhaps one might add, in Fanon’s terms, a “lazy” approach to Marx, embracing the crude and authoritarian materialism that went by the name of Marxism in South Africa instead of a confrontation with Marx’s Marxism and its concept of self-emancipation. Thus they were incapable of becoming a pole of attraction for militants in the burgeoning workers movement. The situation, however, cried out for a politics able to deepen and release the objectivity of the mind of the oppressed in a recapturing of Marx’s humanism. In other words, as I argued in 1988, it was important to reconnect to a Marxism that appreciated the power of ideas to grab the imagination and the mind of the oppressed to change the world (if not the world then at least the world of Southern Africa)³ I recognized that while some associated with Black Theology had taken a few tentative steps in the direction of Marx’s humanism, a more critical approach was needed. This approach to the idea of Black Consciousness was connected to a more ominous element of my work and, just as my work came ten years after Biko’s death, I am particularly interested in reviewing the methodological value of this approach ten years after the end of apartheid.

It is shocking to reflect on how many founding leaders of Black Consciousness (as well as, of course, the UDF, COSATU and the ANC) have “sold out” their principles for power, privilege and money. Barney Pityana had already left Black Consciousness by the early 1980s, but it was shocking to me that Saths Cooper, who I felt was an example of a critical type of attitude toward the types of theory and practice I was interested in, abandoned these ideas soon after.⁴ Today these betrayals make even clearer that the focus needs to be on the dialectic of ideas and objective conditions and the relationship of intellectuals to mass movements rather than the psychobiography of individual personalities. I think that the larger issue at stake in my analysis of Black Consciousness from 1977 to 1987 was the problematic of comprehending the degeneration of Black Consciousness not only as a betrayal of principle but in terms of *the logic* of that

³ Like many at the time, I believed (perhaps naively) that the end of apartheid in South Africa would open up the region to a new political and social order.

⁴ Perhaps readers could inform me of the actual details. But I was astonished when he became a co-founder of a new organization with links to Inkatha and then later (like Mosala) became a right-wing University manager.

betrayal.

Today one can point to the objectivity of the logic as capital – indeed feel its stifling heavy weight – as part of the reason the ANC so quickly abandoned its promises and the principles of the Freedom Charter and the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). Out of state power, (even if we emphasize the objectivity of the destabilization created by the bannings of its organizations and leaders) it is more difficult to comprehend the logic behind Black Consciousness’ degeneration in the 1980s. In other words, what I think is crucial to reiterate and to learn for today is the objectivity of *internal* dynamics and its relation to the external. By 1987 the Black Consciousness as an organization had become a pale reflection of what Black Consciousness was ten years before. However surprising this degeneration was it did not come out of the blue.

When Fanon had designated Black consciousness as an absolute rather than a “passing stage,” he was thinking in terms of a dialectic of experience. It did not mean that BC was not susceptible to dialectical negativity. Just as Fanon understood the degeneration of “national consciousness” into racism and narrow nationalism, he understood that a Black consciousness could also ossify and retreat to a Manichean standpoint. Fanon’s description of the “end of the dialectic” as a “motionless equilibrium” was exactly what happened to Black Consciousness. By the late 1980s it too had become “motionless” - reduced to slogan and rhetoric. Rather than developing anew from the ashes of bannings and imprisonments of the late 1970s, rather than nurturing BC as a vibrant idea, it began to perish and die. Politically the ANC became hegemonic but it was always at best strategic and always limiting in terms of ideas and discussion, never reflecting the philosophic potential of Black Consciousness. The ANC was never interested in radical humanism and politically is a pragmatic amalgam of “leftists” who consider “humanism” as bourgeois and pragmatist nationalists whose ideas are determined by the strategic immediate. The issue of a movement like Black Consciousness, on the other hand, was of great political consequence. On reflection, this issue, understood in terms of consciousness, movement and organization, is of considerable philosophical importance for any social movement seeking radical change.

I understand Hegelian-Marxian dialectic as a progressive and also a retrogressive movement. This is fundamentally important methodologically and challenges the often flaccid conception of Hegelian dialectic. For example, at the end of his monograph, *Hegel: Phenomenology and System*, the American Hegel scholar, H.S. Harris explains dialectic this way:

There is nothing in [Hegel’s] logical theory to warrant the belief that the motion of consciousness must always be progressive ... regression is just as possible as progress.⁵

The Marxist, Raya Dunayevskaya had earlier emphasized this point when she spoke of the difference between Hegel and Marx’s conception of dialectical movement: “Where Hegel’s Absolutes are always “syntheses,” unities ... Marx’s are always

⁵ H.S. Harris, *Hegel: Phenomenology and System* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1995) p. 107.

diremptions—absolute, irreconcilable contradictions... Where Hegel's Absolutes are always high points, Marx's are always collapses."⁶ Nevertheless, she continued to argue that even for Hegel the dialectic was far from a never-end progression. Speaking about Hegel's three Attitudes to Objectivity in Hegel's *Smaller Logic*, she argued:

Far from expressing a sequence of never-ending progression, the Hegelian dialectic lets retrogression appear as translucent as progression and indeed makes it very nearly inevitable *if* one ever tries to escape it by mere faith.⁷

This last point is incredibly suggestive for South African politics today, where "faith" in static forms such as The Party, The Struggle, The Leader, The Nation, Law, Culture, and so on, takes the place of critical thought and conceals the true condition of men and women suffocating what Biko called their "quest for a new humanity." For Hegel, Marx and Fanon, the dialectic moves, there is no such thing as a "stasis." If a political organization is not developing ideas in relation to a social movement it retrogresses and degenerates. Indeed, Fanon warned us of the consequences of such retrogression in the *Wretched of the Earth* over forty years ago and we continued to experience it.

Avoiding this retrogression necessitated an explicit humanist programme according to Fanon. In "Black Consciousness, 1977-87," I argue that one iteration was an engagement with Marxist humanism. I attempted to develop this idea in an essay called "Fanon's Humanism and the Second Independence in Africa," which was written in 1994, the year that the ANC gained power in South Africa:

There is a parallel between Marx's and Fanon's humanism. For Marx, the dialectic of liberation meant that communism (not the stratification of property that he called vulgar communism, which "negates the personality of human beings"), as the total freeing of all the human senses and attributes, was not the "goal" but the necessary presupposition for "positive humanism beginning from itself." For Fanon, national consciousness, not nationalism, was the presupposition for a genuine internationalism and a new humanism.

By insisting that Black self-consciousness means that Blacks not view themselves as "an extension of a broom or additional leverage to some machine," Biko had approximated Marx's critique of alienated labor under capitalism that Marx explained reduces the worker to an appendage of the machine. In Biko's terms the measure of a post-apartheid society, as not the goal but the presupposition of a truly free and human society, had to be the degree to which this material and spiritual alienation had been transcended. Fanon had also developed a series of guidelines to judge the success of the anti-colonial movement. The following (also from the 1994 article quoted above) could quite easily be applied South Africa as a further articulation of measure of its development "post apartheid":

⁶ Raya Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy and Revolution: From Hegel to Sartre and From Marx to Mao* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

⁷ *Ibid.* xliii.

Rather than worrying about the withdrawal of capital and “output in the post-independence society, Fanon writes, “it is a very concrete question of not dragging [people] toward mutilation, of not imposing upon the brain rhythms which very quickly obliterate and wreck it”. That was Fanon’s vision. Labor as self-activity and humanism as self-development remain tightly connected ... What kind of labor [people do] and how people work becomes the “form and body” of the post-colonial society. I think this emphasis remains valid, perhaps more so in an integrated world, as the only alternative to the freedom of the free market. Fanon’s goal is not the reform of society nor the takeover of existing institutions but the avoidance of another system of exploitation.⁸

Nevertheless, in 1994 the narrow and neo-liberal transition from apartheid which would guarantee “another system of exploitation,”⁹ did not dampen the excitement of Mandela’s election. Yet the speed of Mandela’s abandonment of the most limited socio-economic goals of the anti-apartheid movement was still a shock to even those who saw it coming, the greater tragedy was the silencing of oppositional voices (often in the name of “the struggle” as Fanon predicted).

The problematic of race, class and revolution which is key to “Black Consciousness, 1977-87,” was continued in my work *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination* (2003).¹⁰ What I considered Fanon’s conception of “three types of nationalism” were, in a sense, attitudes to objectivity. The first, represented by the flag waving comprador middle class which took colonialism as the basis of its conception of the world. The second, the radical anti-colonial nationalists, had a negative and oppositional stance toward colonialism but still took the global structure as their ground. Preoccupied with “development,” radical nationalists disregarded the people’s objective conditions, believing that the party, personified by the leader, could both harness the people’s energies, “remold their minds” and get them to work harder for the nation. Objective conditions would thus be transcended by sheer will. It was another form of primitive accumulation of capital based on the expropriation of the peasantry and workers, for the nation would “develop” through the voluntarism and increasing authoritarian administrative mentality of its leaders. If in the Cold War period, the bourgeois nationalists were led to the U.S. camp in the first example or the anti-colonial nationalist radicals to the Soviet or Chinese camp in the second, in the post Cold War world, there is no choice. All roads lead to global neo-liberalism. There is no alternative as Margaret Thatcher famously put it. Today, primitive accumulation is still the name of the game but the voluntarism of The Plan is heralded not by Maoist revolutionaries but by ex-radicals advocating for international finance institutions. In this context the rhetoric of “working for the good of the nation” (the Party, the Economy, the Leader and so on) has moved

⁸ “Fanon’s Humanism and the Second Independence in Africa” in Eileen McCarthy-Arnolds, David R. Penna and Debra Joy Cruz Sobrepeña (eds.) *Africa, Human Rights and the Global System: The Political Economy of Human Rights in the Changing World*, Greenwood Press: Westport, CT, 1994) pp. 23-34..

⁹ See my “Transition from Apartheid,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 36: 1 (2001) pp. 65-85; and “The Pitfalls of South Africa’s Liberation”. *New Political Science* 23: 371-386” also available at <http://www.nu.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,10,11,1088>.

¹⁰ Nigel Gibson, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination* (Oxford, Polity Press, 2003).

from tragedy to farce. The ANC “Marxist” and struggle rhetoric is simply a disciplinary tool to help impose the “imperialist economism”¹¹ of neo-liberalism.

How is it possible that these apparently radically opposed attitudes find an affinity? Quite simply as class attitudes toward subjectivity. Rather than relying on the masses that brought liberation, the radical leaders of nationalist parties start playing politics and stop having a dialogue with the masses.¹² The same can be said of Mandela and the ANC who quickly sidelined the mass movements that brought them to the negotiation table. Yet rather than an issue of strategy, let me return to the issue of objectivity in as far as that objectivity is understood as “objective/subjective” (or perhaps as Gramsci put it “objective always means ‘humanly objective’, which can be held to correspond to historically subjective”¹³). In other words the difference between the subject as accumulation of capital and the worker as pacified and objectified object subjected to that accumulation (an extension of a broom without a mind of her own) and an active subjectivity (in mind and body) that has absorbed objectivity and thus is a historical protagonist intent on changing the world. It is historically subjectivity in as far as it is the creativity of the masses and of an idea whose time has come and not the subjectivism of any particularly leader. Black Consciousness represented such an objective/subjective moment in 1976 and thus it was a new stage and as such a challenge to work out philosophically and organizationally the expression of that idea. That did not happen. Yet in today’s “self-limiting” politics defined by neo-liberal “realities” it shows another “reality” – what Fanon called “the absurd and impossible”¹⁴ – the concreteness of apparently outrageous revolutionary principles. The story of Black Consciousness is a crucial lesson for today’s anti-elitist activists and intellectuals, who have broken with the vanguard party for it shows the concreteness and seriousness of the development of ideas of freedom in and dialogue with the freedom movement which, through the struggle for freedom and its articulation, gets to know and cope with the objectively real.

Originally published in *Africa Today* in the United States, very few in South Africa were able to read it at the time.¹⁵ Thus, I am happy that 16 years later this article is seeing the light of day in South Africa.

Nigel Gibson
Boston (USA), April 2004.

¹¹ An apt phrase for today coined by Lenin to criticize Bukharin’s mechanistic approach to the national question in 1916.

¹² One can think of two radical anti-colonialists who fit this description: Nkrumah who shocked the British, Sekou Touré who shocked the French.

¹³ Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971) p. 445. It shouldn’t be forgotten that Gramsci (and perhaps this was a historic barrier) was unable to shed his concept of a vanguard party despite his notion of historical materialism as an “absolute humanism.”

¹⁴ *Toward the African Revolution* (New York: Grove, 1967), p.181.

¹⁵ Though six paragraphs were quoted without acknowledgement in the AZAPO journal *Frank Talk* by a certain “Rendane Madaba of Sibasa, Venda.” *Frank Talk* Vol. 3, (1989/90) pp. 114-115.

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In the colonies the economic substructure is also superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich... The native's challenge to the colonial world is not a rational confrontation of points of view. It is not a treatise on the universal, but an untidy affirmation of an original idea propounded as an absolute.

- Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

The February 1988 ban against all anti-apartheid organizations, including AZAPO (Azanian People's Organization), AZASM (Azanian Students Movement) and the trade unions, could mark the end of a second period in the history of the Black Consciousness Movement, the first period having ended with the death of Steve Biko and the banning of 17 Black Consciousness (BC) organizations in 1977. Little scholarly attention has been paid to the development of BC since 1977. Much has been written on its birth and growth as an idea in the 1970s, especially its relation to Soweto 1976. But today it is generally considered completely overshadowed by the ANC and UDF, which now include many of its former adherents. Those whom John Brewer calls the "radical wing of Black Consciousness," COSAS (Congress of South African Students), AZASO (Azanian Students Organization) and PEBCO (Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organization), and others, have moved to a "class analysis" and "joined the ANC camp."¹⁶ This essay seeks to assess BC's development over the last ten years, with special reference to its relation to Marxism, since, as will be demonstrated, both Marxist slogans and some dialogue with Marxist concepts have played an increasing role in the movement in this period.

Black Consciousness was an important part of a new stage in the South African revolt in the 1970s. 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. At its inaugural conference at Turfloop in 1969 they redefined the word 'black,' to mean a new sense of unity and liberation of the oppressed and dropped the term 'Non-White,' which they viewed as a negation of their being.¹⁷

Over the last ten years BC has been a recognizable force and has obviously influenced the present situation. Most radicals, leaders of trade unions and popular organizations,

¹⁵ John Brewer, *After Soweto: An Unfinished Journey*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) Chapter 4. This is somewhat ironic as the ANC and UDF are nationalist and populist rather than working class parties. Although Brewer has some valuable insights, he makes too much of figures like Curits Nkondo when looking at AZAPO and plays down the post-1983 period when AZAPO was strengthened by figures like Saths Cooper and others from the SASO/BPC trial of 1976 who had just been released.

¹⁷ This point is made by Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane in his "Steve Biko Memorial Address," printed in *Solidarity (Official organ of the Black Consciousness Movement of Azania)* Number 7, 1981. p. 8.

even if not adherents, have roots in BC and have a relationship to its concepts and prescriptions, because BC did raise questions and did present a new concept of liberation. However it will be argued that although BC was a new philosophic point of departure for the liberation movement, its philosophic development has remained in a very preliminary stage. "It remains to be seen" Lebamang Sebidi writes, "whether it was a shift at the level of principles (ideology) or merely strategy and tactics."¹⁸ I will argue that the continual attempts to "broaden" BC by incorporating Marxism into its ideology have been a failure not because the concept is wrong but because it has taken on board very doctrinaire and narrow concepts of 'scientific socialism' that go by the name of Marxism. Much still could come from a discourse with Marx, especially Marx's Humanism.

Black Consciousness After 1977

After the banning in 1977, it seemed that BC had vanished into thin air. Many of its cadres who did not leave the BC camp moved away from the type of looser, decentralized organization that had characterized BC's earlier period towards a more "Leninist" type vanguard party based on the principle of "democratic centralism." These young militants started calling themselves the "vanguard of the working class." BC began to shift its emphasis with the "class question" in South Africa as its new theoretical point of departure. The leaders of this shift argued that a critique of capitalism was inherent in BC from the beginning. But for the most implacable critics, BC was a spent force, merely an expression of "cultural revolution in the minds of the subordinates... 'self-love,' 'identity,' 'cultural assertion'." ¹⁹ Once self-awareness had been found, they argued, BC could to be disregarded for "real political action."

This duality between black self-awareness and the liberation struggle runs contrary to the ideas of the most important theoretician of BC, Steve Biko. It is worth quoting him to get a full appreciation of this idea:

I must emphasise the cultural depth of Black Consciousness. The recognition of the death of white invincibility forces Blacks to ask the question: "Who am I?" "Who are we?" And the fundamental answer we give is: "People are people!" So "Black" Consciousness says: "Forget about colour!" But the reality we faced 10 to 15 years ago did not articulate this....One must immediately dispel the thought that Black Consciousness is merely a methodology or a means to an end.²⁰

The idea is not simple opposition to white society. The overall analysis, he wrote, is "based on the Hegelian theory." To understand what he means we must turn to Frantz Fanon, with whom Biko felt a close affinity. For Fanon the black/white conflict is in a

¹⁸ Itumeleng Mosala and Buti Tlhangale, *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free: Black Theology From South Africa*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986) p. 13.

¹⁹ Heribert Adam. "The Rise of Black Consciousness in South Africa." *Race*. 15. No. 2 (October 1973): p. 155.

²⁰ Bernard Zylstra interview with Steve Biko, published in *The Reform Journal*. (Michigan) Dec. 1977 and "The Definition of Black Consciousness" in Steve Biko's *I write What I Like*. (London: Heineman, 1979), p. 51.

philosophic context of transcendence of contradiction and self-liberation as a cognitive development: BC is not merely a passing stage in the revolutionary process; it is an actuality in which the transformation of reality is grounded.

Biko situated BC internationally, in the movements for freedom within the black world. “The surge towards Black Consciousness is a phenomenon that has manifested itself throughout the so-called Third World.” But he did not view liberation as inevitable. Two black American writers remarked, shortly after his death, “What is powerful and new about Biko’s ideas is that he always centers the possibility for change within the subjectivity of the oppressed person, and not simply within the South African economy or the hierarchy of the system.”²¹ In recognising that the “most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed,” Biko was speaking of the needed self-liberation of the black. Far from being a psychological exercise, he was speaking of the liberation of the whole person; a “quest for a new humanity,” where the black would no longer be thought of as “an extension of a broom or some additional leverage to some machine.” Against the force of the South African state Biko placed the force of the liberatory idea—the creative subjectivity of the black masses.

This appreciation for the African masses as a revolutionary subject with a unique historical contribution to make to humanity’s development was a characteristic element in the writings of many leading African intellectuals of the late 1950s and the early 1960s. It was true of Leopold Senghor who spoke of “Socialist Humanism” as well as of Fanon, who wrote passionately, “we must set afoot a new man.”²² But whereas Senghor’s abstract philosophic statements gave way to disillusioning power politics, Fanon, who died a young man, remained uncompromising in his critique of the new African rulers and the nature of their relationship to the masses. Steve Biko was powerfully affected by Fanon’s writings.²³

²¹ John Alan and Lou Turner, *Frantz Fanon, Soweto and American Black Thought* (News and Letters, Chicago 1986) p. 22.

²² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York, Grove Press 1967) pp. 7,8, and 222: “Towards a new humanism... Understanding among men... Man is not merely a possibility of recapture or of negation... Man is a yes that vibrates to cosmic harmonies... Yes to life. Yes to generosity. But man is also a No. No to scorn of man. No to degradation of man. No to exploitation of man. No to the butchery of what is most human in man: freedom.”

²³ Many have reduced Fanon to an “apostle of violent revolution.” One only has to look at the writings of some of the leaders of the American Black Power movement to find this. Even a writer like Robert Fatton – who calls his book *Black Consciousness in South Africa, the Dialectics of Ideological Resistance to White Supremacy* (Albany: SUNY Press 1986) – reduces Fanon to the “terrorist acts of POQO” (the Pan Africanist Congress’ military wing), see pages 24-6. What Biko found in Fanon is never mentioned. In contrast Sam Nolutshungu in *Changing South Africa: Political Considerations* (Manchester University Press, 1982) writes: “Although Fanon’s writings were read widely and his ideas of alienation in colonial society had much influence on many theorists of black consciousness there is little evidence that his ideas on violence were much discussed.”

The Theoretical Background: Fanon

Gail Gerhart states that the writings of Fanon were, “particularly influential in lending content and mood to the ideology of Black Consciousness.”²⁴ With that in mind it is instructive to look specifically at Fanon’s treatment of Hegel’s Master/Slave dialectic as well as his critique of Sartre. These writings illuminate Fanon’s impact on BC and offer a response to those who see BC as an “anti-racist racism.”

In the “Fact of Blackness.” Chapter Five of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon takes an excerpt from Sartre’s *Orphee Noir*, which speaks of black as particular and class as universal. “In fact Negritude appears as a minor term of a dialectical progression,” writes Sartre. Fanon replied:

I felt that I had been robbed of my last chance....He was reminding me that my blackness was only a minor term. In all truth I tell you, my shoulders slipped out of the framework of the world, my feet could no longer feel the touch of the ground. Without a Negro past, without a Negro future, it was impossible for me to live my Negrohood. Not yet white, no longer wholly black, I was damned.²⁵

It is this same section that appealed to the early BC intellectuals. Barney Pityana (a close associate of Biko) quotes Fanon at length in an essay written in 1972:

“I am a potentiality of something,” writes Fanon. “I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place inside me. My negro consciousness does not hold itself out as black. It IS. It is its own follower. This is all that we blacks are after, TO BE.”...This, therefore, necessitates a self examination and rediscovery of ourselves. Blacks can no longer afford to be led by and dominated by non-Blacks.²⁶

Fanon argued that there was something wrong with the abstractions of that “born Hegelian” Sartre, who “had forgotten that consciousness had to lose itself in the night of the absolute, the only condition to attain to consciousness of self ...Sartre’s mistake was not only to seek the source of the source but in a certain sense to block that source.”²⁷ For Fanon, Sartre had destroyed “black zeal....I needed to lose myself completely in negritude.” The problem with Sartre’s presentation is that it is so thoroughly technical. Although it is dressed up in Hegelian language, its form is highly schematic and reductionist, white = thesis, black = antithesis, and multi-racialism = synthesis.²⁸ It is the

²⁴ Gail Gerhard, *Black Power in South Africa: The Evolution of an Ideology*. (Berkeley: University of California Press 1978), p. 274. In her interview with Biko in 1972 his first words to the question, “which particular figures” were important to BC, Biko relies “Much more people like *Fanon*.” (p. 11)

²⁵ Fanon, *op. cit.*, pp. 133, 138.

²⁶ N. Pityana, in H. Van der Merwe and D. Welsh, eds. *Student Perspectives in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Phillip, Publisher, 1972) p. 180.

²⁷ Fanon, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

²⁸ Hegel called this “formal thought,” “where the contradictory terms are held apart in spatial and temporal juxtaposition and thus come before consciousness without being in contact.” GWF Hegel. *Science of Logic* (London: George Allen and Unwin 1969) p 477.

externalization of philosophy, rather than the relationship of philosophy with a real subjectivity: the black, who in challenging the world, was the source of a new cognition.

Later, in chapter 7 of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon, referring to the section “Lordship and Bondage” in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, writes, “at the foundation of the Hegelian dialectic there is absolute reciprocity which must be recognised.” But when the slave is black, there is no reciprocity. The dialectic is deepened, instead of moving into the shoes of the master, the black slave must work out a completely new way of life. The revolution must not be the perpetuation of the old order with a black face. It must not be the “butchery of what is most human in man: freedom.”

Biko sought a continuation of this dialectic for South Africa. The black according to Biko “associates everything good with white....so you tend to feel there is something incomplete in your humanity, and that your humanity goes with whiteness.” But opposition to white society could not become a preoccupation. As “Black Consciousness develops there is a need to work out further the quest for a new humanity... What Black Consciousness seeks to do is to produce at the end of the process real Black people who do not regard themselves as appendages of white society.”²⁹ In terms of the dialectic, the negation of white racism is black unity. But the end is not a “synthesis” of white racism and black unity but a complete transcendence where race would not be a factor. Biko is against integration if that means integration into white society with its values and codes of behaviour maintained by whites. “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.”³⁰ This assertion of the positive role of BC, emerging through its process and resistance, had a powerful impact on the youth of South Africa in the 1970s, and it is this, rather than BC as a passing phase, that could have become the ground for further theoretic development in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Black Consciousness 1978 - 83

One month after the death of Steve Biko at the hands of the security police, the government declared 17 BC organizations, including the Black People’s Convention (BPC) illegal. The government was attempting to behead the movement that had come of age with the Soweto revolt of 1976-77.

Despite the banning of the movement BC had taken root in the country, and new organizations emerged. Under the threat of new bannings, a new BC organization, the Azanian Peoples Organization (AZAPO) was formed in April 1978 in Soweto at a meeting which included Bishop Desmond Tutu. Almost immediately, before a constitution could be drafted, police detained the organizers, including the chairman, Ishmael Mkhabela, and the secretary, Lybon Mabasa, under the Terrorism Act. They were subsequently banned for three years. A year later a number of other organizations

²⁹ Biko, *op. cit.*, p. 51

³⁰ *Ibid.*

inspired by BC were formed, including COSAS and AZASO.³¹ In October 1979 PEBCO (Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organization) was formed and grew quickly among the African townships in Port Elizabeth. Although it did not join AZAPO it shared BC principles.³²

AZAPO held its inaugural conference in September 1979. But it, too, was quickly thrown into disarray both by internal strife and police repression. Its president, Curtis Nkondo, was suspended by the AZAPO executive, its leading members were arrested and victimized. In less than three years, almost the entire leadership of the founding Black Consciousness movements was wiped out. Nine SASO/BPC leaders had been jailed at the end of 1976; Biko was murdered in detention; Pityana left the country. Many dropped out of the movement. Around 5000 young BC inspired revolutionaries fled the country and joined up with the ANC (African National Congress) and PAC (Pan Africanist Congress) guerrilla units.

After Soweto, the ANC was revitalized mainly by these young BC militants who left the country. Inside the country the ANC was again becoming a significant force, attracting important figures from the Black Consciousness Movement. Botha from PEBCO and Pityana from BCMA joined the ANC in exile. Later, Nkondo from AZAPO, and the whole of AZASO, went over to the UDF (United Democratic Front). Even the militant BC Media Workers Association split over whether to join the UDF, with some branches joining and some not. In the late seventies the government was entertaining proposals to encourage a black middle class, as well as granting blacks trade union rights. Inkatha was growing, and becoming a major force, using some of the terminology of Black Consciousness. The new situation handed a challenge to BC to work out radically new concepts.

From the 1979 AZAPO conference on, there were efforts to work out the race/class

³¹ AZASO is no longer in the BC camp, it defected to the Charterists in 1981 after Curtis Nkondo was suspended from his post as president of AZAPO when he tried to lead the organization in the charterist camp. In late 1986 it dropped the title "Azanian," re-naming itself the South African National Students' Congress. It now views "the system of exploitation of man by man and not...whites as such" as the main "cause of black oppression in South Africa." COSAS, founded in 1979, "stood in conscious opposition to those organisations which claim to be inspired by black consciousness." (See James Leatt, Theo Kneifel and Klaus Nurnburger, eds. *Contending Ideologies in South Africa*, (Cape Town David Phillip 1986) p. 116. In 1980 COSAS declared its support for the Freedom Charter, and sees its role as students "to support the struggles of workers." It is ironic that both these organizations, which identify with the black working class, should also take into their programs the Freedom Charter. In 1982 the Azanian Students Movement was formed to replace AZASO as the student organization grounded in black consciousness principles; it also sees itself as an organisation linked to workers' struggles. "If workers are on strike it is the responsibility of students to support that strike...When the NUM was on strike, members of youth organizations were out assisting with the strike ballots." Interview with a Sowetan youth, *News and Letters*, (Chicago) March 27, 1987.

³² The dismissal of PEBCO's chairman, Thozamile Botha, from the Ford Motor company (allegedly because of complaints by white workers for his involvement in PEBCO) started a major strike there. On January 10, 1980, five of PEBCO's leaders, including Botha, were arrested and given three-year banning orders. The repression by the state essentially temporarily destroyed the movement. Botha fled the country and received political asylum in Lesotho.

question, to “fuse Black Consciousness with class consciousness.”³³ But it was still sketchy. BC papers pointed to the Trade Unions as “an instrument that can bring about the re-distribution of power,” but instead of worker control they envisaged a future state where “capital and profits accruing from labour shall be equitably distributed.”³⁴

The question of the relationship between race and class has been the focus of much of BC writing. In a July 1981 AZAPO newsletter, Quraish Patel, editor of *Kwasala*, the official Media Workers newsletter, wrote:

A system of thought or an ideology is of little value if it can only be defined as a response to a particular period of historical crisis. When an ideology is able to reflect the continuous process of change and conflict, then that ideology has the potential for challenging the dominant ideas of the ruling class.

Black Consciousness had to become such a reflexive ideology which asserted its humanism. For Patel BC was

a negation of while superiority, not a negation of whites as people – black consciousness is at the same time a positive assertion of our being what we want to be.

He declared that BC wished to “restore our being human even if the environment is hostile and inhuman for it prepares us for participating in the historical movement towards a free society.”

Yet at the same symposium where the “positive humanism” of Black Consciousness in South Africa was being discussed, AZAPO resolved to “confirm that race is a class determinant in the current South African context.” Collapsing of race into class successfully avoids taking up the National Question’s relationship to Socialism, instead there were moves to incorporate “scientific socialism.”

In 1980 the external wing of BC, then chaired by one of its original founders, Barney Pityana, created a unified organization, the Black Consciousness Movement of Azania, committed to the “historical, political and organizational experience of the black working class,” and adopting “the theory and practice of scientific socialism to guide it in its struggle.” In October 1979, they had held an all-day symposium in London where “everybody seemed to agree that capitalism was the enemy and that the new order would have to be a socialist one.”³⁵ Taking power, however, “could no longer be taken for granted as progressive. Onward development should not just flow but should be the result of very conscious thought.”³⁶ Resolutions from the 1980 Conference, printed by the BCMA as “Our Urgent Tasks,” show how they tried to graft Scientific Socialism onto the philosophy of Black Consciousness.³⁷ Whilst they noted the “maturity of our population”

³³ *Johannesburg Star*. May 79 (cited in *South Africa: Time is Running Out*) (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1981) p. 200.

³⁴ *On Policy*. AZAPO document. Sept. 1979.

³⁵ *Post*, October 20, 1979.

³⁶ *Ibid*.

and spoke of “the initiative of the masses themselves, their self-activity which is the prerequisite and precondition for self emancipation,” these concepts are not the point of departure for theoretical development: Instead “Scientific Socialism” is adopted as the “guide to the struggle” while BC would “have a mobilising role.”³⁸

It is surprising that by pinpointing the black working class as the major force of revolution, the BCMA felt compelled to adopt “scientific socialism,” what seems to be an opposing ideology, as its guide. Were they now projecting class rather than black as the major term? There was a great deal of ambiguity as to what relationship “scientific socialism” had to the philosophy of BC. With the emphasis on “scientific socialism” as the “guide” to the struggle BC seemed an abstraction. How could the “idealism” of BC be united with the “materialism” of scientific socialism?³⁹

An attempt to move the debate past this duality was made by Buti Tlhagale, a Sowetan priest in the Black Consciousness Movement, at an address delivered in May 1978 and subsequently printed in issue number 5 of the London-based BCMA journal *Solidarity*, titled “A Further Determination Of Black Consciousness.” The Black Consciousness Movement had done little “to bridge the gap between empirical consciousness of alienation and radical action to uproot the causes of alienation,” he wrote. To be radical, according to Tlhagale, both economic exploitation and racial discrimination have to be addressed. “Within South Africa capital is made possible by the collective effort of black workers. It is cheap labour that keeps the capitalist monster alive.” It is black labor, specifically, that can herald in a new epoch. “The mobilization of black workers [is] a radical solution,” writes Tlhagale, “for it strikes at the very root of exploitation and alienation.” Once black labor is recognized as a central category in the black struggle, BC ceases to be just an attitude of mind, it becomes a material weapon in the struggle, “an organizational power aimed at combatting the violence of the state.”

By sharpening his critique so that it struck specifically at the alienation of labor, which results because “labour is converted into a commodity,” Tlhagale searched for the principles of social reorganization which are based on the uprooting of alienated labor and give “hints as to the nature of the future state.” For Tlhagale the term “proletariat” specifically referred to black workers because white workers enjoyed the protection of the state. But in elevating black labor he did not neglect the continual importance of the

³⁷ Scientific Socialism is a name that Engles used for “Marxism” and is popularised in his *Socialism, Utopian, and Scientific*. It is the generic name for the mechanistic materialism that passes for “Orthodox Marxism.”

³⁸ “Our Urgent Tasks” in *Solidarity* No. 4 (London) October 1980.

³⁹ Lebamang Sebidi writes in *Mosale and Tihangaie, op. cit.*: “Race analysts are strategically mind oriented, class analysts focus almost exclusively on the material conditions of life... The Black Consciousness philosophy, particularly at the beginning, made it explicit that it would refuse to be derailed from viewing the South African problematic from the race-analysis point of departure... which led political scientists like Sam C. Nolutshugu to think that, despite some uneasiness with capitalism within the Black Consciousness philosophy: “...there was no systematic economic analysis of class, nor, even a political account of what the interests and roles of the various classes might be in the process of liberation... It was in the aftermath of the October 1977 bannings that objections against this idealistic approach were openly and persistently raised within black political circles, in favour of a materialist methodology. Matters have reached a stage where one is either an idealist in one’s approach or a materialist.” pp. 24, 29.

students who, he said, gave “rise to the Black Consciousness philosophy,” spelling out the “student-worker alliance [as] part of the total modus operandi in the black liberation struggle.”

By 1981 AZAPO saw itself as an activist organization which had “taken Black Consciousness beyond the phase of Black awareness into class struggle... [leading] the workers in their everyday struggle... [giving] clear priority to mobilising the worker not only in the factory but in the ghetto.”⁴⁰ But this development was not based on Tlhagale’s analysis of alienated labor.

The fusion of a class analysis into black consciousness received a boost under the influence of Saths Cooper’s prison studies⁴¹ and the work of Neville Alexander who introduced into BC the concept of “racial capitalism,”⁴² which became part of the theoretical focus with the Hammanskraal Manifesto,⁴³ the draft manifesto of the National Forum.

The National Forum

In prison Saths Cooper and others in BC studied the “economic and other issues” that they had not had time to study in the preceding years. “We debated very intensely, roping in the PAC, the Unity Movement and ANC, different groups at different times would pull out, but our development continued.”⁴⁴ After release from prison they decided to create a forum where different tendencies in the liberation movement could air their views. The idea of the Forum was to narrow some of the differences between the liberation groups. As Cooper put it: “[There has been] a tremendous degree of ideological ferment and confusion. We think we need mature, sober consideration of all the issues in the liberation struggle; and while principles should not be sacrificed, partisan approaches should take a back seat.”⁴⁵

In 1981 the Cape Action League, in which Neville Alexander is a key figure, circulated a document, “Let Us Build the United Front,” and in the Western Cape this was put into practice with the formation of the Disorderly Bills Action Committee against the Koornhoff Bills in 1982.⁴⁶ It included ex-Unity Movement people, BC and others. “By October 1982 we were working towards a national organization to oppose the Koornhoff

⁴⁰ This was asserted in a 1981 AZAPO Conference paper, quoted in Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945*. (Essex: Longman 1983) p. 345.

⁴¹ “Young adherents of Black Consciousness who are prisoners on Robben Island now refer to themselves as Marxists. In exile, some Black Consciousness activists who have not joined the ANC claim a more radical position by virtue of new found “scientific socialism.” *South Africa: Time Running Out. op. cit.* pp. 199-200.

⁴² This is seen most clearly in the first draft of the *Azanian Manifesto*. Put simply “racial capitalism” is a system by which the state and capital maintain their economic hegemony by means of racial oppression.

⁴³ See, Graham and Leach, *South Africa* (London: BBC Publications, 1986) and Heribert Adam and Kogila Moodley, *South Africa Without Apartheid*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) p. 97.

⁴⁴ Interview by author with Saths Cooper. New York, April 1987.

⁴⁵ *Christian Science Monitor*. June 30, 1983.

⁴⁶ The so-called Koornhof Bills concerned the freedom of movement of black people in South Africa.

Bills and the President's Council," says Alexander,

Saths Cooper and others recently released had joined AZAPO. They came to Cape Town...Cooper agreed to be Convenor of a Conference for all 'oppressed people' to organize a national agenda. At first there was a good response from all across the spectrum, including Tutu, Charterists... up to this day Boesak hasn't resigned from the NF Committee. But a month or two later, all the known Charterists withdrew. The thing was getting all the hallmarks of a large popular movement, and they [the Charterists] didn't want to let that gather behind a Black Consciousness initiative.⁴⁷

The call for the creation of the National Forum (NF) was made at the fifth AZAPO congress in February 1983. Its rallying point was opposition to the new Constitution. In June 1983, 800 delegates representing 200 organizations met at Hammanskraal. At the end of the two-day discussion delegates voted unanimously to adopt the Manifesto of the Azanian People, a document that identified "racial capitalism" as the enemy and was based on four basic principles: Anti-racism, anti-imperialism, anti-collaboration with the ruling class, and independent working class organizations. At the July 1984 conference the Manifesto was endorsed with slight changes, the most important being that the "system of racial capitalism" was changed to "the historically evolved system of racism and capitalism," and the principle of anti-sexism was adopted. This Manifesto became the article of faith for the National Forum and AZAPO.

Saths Cooper views the National Forum as the most important political development in South Africa since the All African Congress. AZAPO views the Manifesto as superseding the "other two historical documents, namely the Freedom Charter and 'Towards a Free Azania – Projection: Future State' of the now banned Black People's Convention."⁴⁸

The National Forum is not a "Black Consciousness front," although it is widely perceived as being such. AZAPO is the largest political organization in the Forum yet it does not dominate it.⁴⁹ The Forum represents a wide range of opposition tendencies, from BC, to Africanism, workerists and the Unity Movement.⁵⁰ It accepts white membership but does

⁴⁷ Non-verbatim notes from an interview with Neville Alexander by Gail Gerhart. Cape Town, November, 1985. (Followers of the Freedom Charter are referred to as charterists).

⁴⁸ "For the Record" in *Solidarity*. Number 11/12 1985.

⁴⁹ The major constituents of the National Forum are: AZAPO, claimed membership, 110,000; AZACTU (Azanian Congress of Trade Unions, now part of the National Congress of Trade Unions, NACTU), 11 union affiliates, claimed membership, 95,000; AZASM claimed membership, 80,000; AZAYO (Azanian Youth Organization), claimed membership, 12,000; AZANYU (Azanian Youth Unity), membership not available; CAL (Cape Action League), membership not available; CUSA (Council of Unions of South Africa, now part of NACTU), 12 union affiliates, claimed membership, 180,000.

⁵⁰ "Workerists" refer to those in the trade union movement who stress workers' issues in the factory over community issues and were represented especially by the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU). This term has become a little more indeterminate over the past few years, especially since 1984 when militant FOSATU unionists became more involved in community politics. However, they would emphasize the importance of worker leadership and democratic structures developed in the unions as important for community struggles. For an interesting analysis of the comparison of stayaways in the

not accept affiliate organizations made up “predominantly of the ruling class.” An official National Forum publication states: “To suggest that the NF excludes whites on the basis of their ‘whiteness’ or any other superficial criterion is a gross misrepresentation of many NF adherents and the anti-racist project and method of struggle adopted by the NF.”⁵¹

Those involved in the National Forum see themselves as a non-sectarian tendency on the left, and do not believe in a one-party approach.

Finally the NF does not follow any existing socialist system:

We have no models, in that we do not espouse the Soviet or the Chinese or any other existing system...we see the move towards socialism as a process of dealing with specific local problems and issues on a principled basis. Because the NF is coherent as to its goal, it can tolerate differences in approach, tactics and strategy.⁵²

In fact Cooper sees the movement strengthened when different opinions are allowed to be aired within it and regards the National Forum as a structure that encourages dialogue.

AZAPO-1983 Onwards

BC faced two problems as the 1980s began; its image as an “intellectual” tendency with no influence in the working class; and the flow of BC people into the ANC (which claimed a monopoly of active resistance by virtue of an established military wing). By 1983 the BCM was strengthened with the release of many who had been sent to jail following the pro-Frelimo Rally.⁵³ Twenty Robben Island graduates were present at AZAPO’s 1983 conference, three gave keynote addresses: Muntu Myeza, former President of SASO, Saths Cooper, founder member of BPC, and Neville Alexander of the National Liberation Front. Most of the new leadership of AZAPO in the early and mid-1980s are prison “graduates,” and the release of these people was a turning point for AZAPO. Cooper points out:

Up until 1983 there really wasn’t much of a development besides the race/class adoption... I think AZAPO was put on the defensive right from its initiation by other forces, particularly former BC adherents who may have adopted pro-ANC or pro-PAC positions and the organization tended to be, from 1978 to 1982, largely defending itself, defending its position, defending its right to exist.⁵⁴

Transvaal, 1984, with Port Elizabeth-Uitenhage, 1985, and their relation to union and community politics, see Mark Swilling, “Stayaways, Urban Protest and the State” in *South African Review* 3 (Johannesburg: South Africa Research Service 1986).

⁵¹ “Know Your Forum,” a NF document, p. 2 (quoted in Zwakala’s 1986 National Forum paper).

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ On September 25, 1974 SASO and BPC organized rallies to celebrate the installation of the Frelimo government in Mozambique. Despite police bans the rallies went ahead. Nine BPC/SASO leaders were charged under the Terrorism Act and after a seventeen month trial were given sentences from five to ten years.

⁵⁴ Interview with Saths Cooper, April 1987.

Asked how he thought things had changed since he was in prison, Cooper said, “when we left, there was a unity of purpose and a clear political direction. When we came back, we found these two elements missing.”

Neville Alexander’s involvement in the 1983 Conference was an important development. Only a few years earlier he had been sharply critical of BC.⁵⁵ At the Conference he read a paper on the National Situation, referring to the New Constitution:

The rulers of South Africa are faced with the most severe crisis that their system of racial capitalism has yet to contend with...the alliance with the white workers is to be downplayed in importance. Instead, the junior partners in the new alliance are to be the black middle class.⁵⁶

Replying to an article in the *City Press* he wrote of his new attitude to BC:

I consider Black Consciousness an important nation building and liberatory idea based on the community of oppression of all those people in the country whom the regime classifies as ‘black,’ ‘coloured,’ and ‘indian.’ It is NOT an ethnic idea based on prejudice and division but rather a unifying solidarity of all the oppressed and exploited people of our country.⁵⁷

In his 1983 address Cooper characterised AZAPO as “the vanguard of the people’s struggle” and accused the system of attempting to buy off a section of the movement by trying to create black Capitalism. In analyzing the class nature of the struggle, Cooper re-emphasized that AZAPO stood:

committed to the fact that the struggle will continue to be manifested in colour terms. The soul force of our struggle, its blackness, must be shouted from the rooftops.

The dominant altitude in BC in the early ‘80s was that philosophy had been formulated and political activity was all that was now needed. The theoretic void within BC on the question of labor was answered initially in an almost instantaneous manner with “Scientific Socialism.”⁵⁸ For BC there has been no further development of the philosophy of Steve Biko. Nor is there evidence of a perceived need to do so. A new AZAPO journal, *Frank Talk* came out in 1981, first as the official organ of the Natal region of AZAPO and later authorized by the Central Committee of AZAPO. Its first issue carried two articles by Biko and summed up the years since 1977 as those in which AZAPO had “succeeded in working out the dialectic between race and class.” AZAPO views “black nationalism as the driving force of the Azanian struggle,” and believes that “AZAPO’s coalition of the National Question and the Social Question has been thorough

⁵⁵ In his book *One Azania, One Nation* written under the pseudonym No Sizwe (London: Zed Press 1979).

⁵⁶ AZAPO conference issue February 1983, p. 18.

⁵⁷ *City Press*, March 20, 1983.

⁵⁸ In an interview with me in New York, February 1987, a young Black Consciousness militant asserted: “Our struggle is unfortunate that we are not afforded the opportunity of fully engaging into guerrilla warfare and labour becomes the next alternative.” It seems to suggest that some reluctantly adopted labour as a force of revolution.

and cogent.” This kind of assuredness seems to be the result of making class and race synonymous whilst adding some Marxian phraseology. It is not a very thoroughly developed framework of ideas and shows a marked preference for addressing tactical needs over the broader political questions. Another feature of the journal was its curious shift in ideology towards the narrowest nationalism. An extreme example is the printing of an eight page article from Louis Farrakhan, and the subsequent editorial “Israel has no right to exist.” [Vol. 1, No. 5, (Nov. Dec 84) and Vol. 1, No. 6 (Feb. Mar. 85)].

While the black nationalist tendency is dominant in *Frank Talk*, its columns also reveal the strength of certain anti-intellectual attitudes in BC. In an interview with this author, a BC unionist made this lack of debate into a virtue:

According to our belief, we do not have to publish...we do not have to write volumes on BC. I can write what I like about BC. Anyone can claim a publication is BC, that is the danger. BC is not an ideology that you can write down like Marxism. It is a philosophy. There is no importance in writing about philosophy.⁵⁹

I do not assume that this is the official attitude but it certainly betrays a lack of philosophic rigor in BC itself. A philosophy, if it is vibrant and lives, must be discussed, written and argued about. Without this it becomes merely a popular ideology and an empty shell of one at that.

The major AZAPO campaigns of the 1980s include the 1981 Northern Transvaal school and bus boycott⁶⁰, the launching of the National Forum in 1983 and the campaign against the Kennedy Tour in 1985. Under the banner “Socialist AZAPO versus Capitalist Kennedy” AZAPO showed itself as a non-collaborationist tendency mobilizing a large section of the youth outside its ranks, who did not want Kennedy to speak for them. But this was only a tactical, albeit principled, stand.⁶¹ It gathered around it many different tendencies, outside of the UDF, who shared this non-collaborationist position. At that moment it did correspond with a broad layer of opinion in the country. It made harsh criticisms of the UDF for telling the people to boycott, rather than seeking the views of the people. But how AZAPO gauges what the “people” are thinking is unclear.

On the whole AZAPO seems to be moving more towards a black nationalist position while drawing on Marxist phrases about “class struggle,” in effect, taking over the position of the earlier Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), with emphasis on the black

⁵⁹ Interview with Author. Pandelani Nefolovhodwe, the co-ordinator of AZACTU, answering a question about the split in MAWU (Metal and Allied Workers Union) said, “The question is not white intellectuals, but intellectuals period.” (See Zwakala, p. 15) However, he wasn’t simply being anti-intellectual; he wanted to establish a new relationship between intellectuals and workers, especially in the unions. He said in an interview in *Work in Progress* (WIP) 33 (Braamfontein: South African Research Service). “If intellectuals won’t admit that’s what they are, they are going to be useless organisers. If you truly accept what you are, you work at interacting with workers, listening and accepting. Then you can systematise and form the ideas that project working class aspirations.”

⁶⁰ See “We Don’t Need No Education” in *Solidarity* Nos. 5 and 6.

⁶¹ It should be noted that the fratricide between the ANC and AZAPO can be traced to this campaign. The government made the most of the opposing positions over Kennedy by stirring up differences.

working class. It appears that BC has moved away from the language of “consciousness” to the language of “scientific socialism.”

In the September 1987 issue of *Frank Talk*, its staff writers spelt out BC as a “scientific ideology”:

focuss[ing] on the material conditions in occupied Azania for the ultimate causes and directions of every event and phenomenon therein; comprehends these phenomena in their *changingness* and development and their interaction with other phenomena.⁶²

These phenomena, which are really the struggles of live human beings, become the objects of their “scientific” investigation. They continue by saying, “the goal of ‘scientific socialism’ was defined by Black Consciousness...and unambiguously asserted by AZAPO.” This “science” is what they believe must be “applied towards transforming spontaneous resistance into conscious revolution.” Scientific Socialism has become the code phrase for today’s Black Consciousness Movement, and with it they herald the “leadership of the Black working class,” maintaining that the 1970s generation who moved into the UDF “constitute a deformed BCM.” But the leadership of the black working class is nothing but the “phenomena” for the “vanguard party’s” leadership; the science they speak of is nothing but a rehash of the old left’s “diamat,”⁶³ containing nothing that would stamp it as uniquely BC.

By the end of 1987 it seemed that BC as seen through AZAPO is something radically different from its origins. As an idea originally situated in the subjectivity of the oppressed, which refused to comply with narrow “Marxist” applications, it is now merely the projection of another Marxist-Leninist tendency. Black is the substance rather than the subject of revolution, the “phenomena” of material conditions. As substance, AZAPO believes, the black working class needs the leadership of the “vanguard party” in order to acquire revolutionary consciousness. The fact that the “consciousness” of the worker is a mere reflection of material conditions necessitates, according to AZAPO, the “vanguard party.” AZAPO has followed another “Leninist” principle with its attitude to the trade unions: “The Black working class has to transcend trade union consciousness in order to acquire revolutionary consciousness.” Presumably that “revolutionary consciousness” has to be acquired from outside, from AZAPO.

What began as a very new revolutionary idea in the early 1970s seems to be little more than an application of Lenin’s analysis of Russia in 1902. The dualism between black nationalism and socialism was not expressed by BC’s earlier theoreticians. Even if they did not spell out the form of organization best suited to expressing BC ideas, it was not to be a simple application of the vanguard party. They wanted more flexibility to express their ideas, to ask new questions,

encourage a new consciousness, and to suggest new forms which express it....Black Consciousness constitutes a revolution of ideas, of

⁶² *Frank Talk* (Domerton) Vol. 2, Sept. 1987.

⁶³ The abbreviated term used by Stalinism for “dialectical materialism.”

values and of standards.

They wanted to engage black people in the emancipatory process. To cry out “to the black in the factory, at home, on the train, in the shebeen, at the playing fields, in the classroom.”⁶⁴

But the answer is not merely to oppose the earlier generation to today’s. Saths Cooper, considered one of the leading intellectuals of BC in the eighties, does not think the rhetoric of Scientific Socialism has much content:

I think that shouldn’t be taken too much, its been mentioned in only one document and is not really policy –It depends from which angle in the whole body of Socialist thought one is going to interpret. It is quite problematic considering the BC approach. I think there are many unresolvable issues. I think Scientific Socialism is almost like a slogan without much consideration. The BCMA adopted it in 1980 and spelt it out in certain of their rhetoric but practically what that means hasn’t been developed.⁶⁵

In considering what possible direction BC might take in the future, it should be noted that much could come from its connection with Marxism. Thus far, the connection has been somewhat superficial. I have shown that the trend towards Marxist concepts flowed from the reality of South Africa, especially in view of the labor struggle. Baruch Hirson writes of young people searching for socialist literature which had been systematically banned since 1950. The Marxism they found came from old Stalinist texts like Emile Burns’ “What is Socialism” and Leontiev’s “Political Economy.”⁶⁶ It is this crude materialist type of Marxism that appeals to many BC thinkers.⁶⁷ To consider Marx a materialist counterposed to idealism is a mark of a poor reading, but it characterizes many of the “Marxists” in South Africa.⁶⁸ Heribert Adam has written: “Marxist (materialist) interpretations of South Africa rarely go beyond the notion of base and superstructure. By mechanically relegating the realm of ideology to a mere reflection of underlying interests, Marxists usually ignore the subjective reality. A peculiar sterility – therefore –characterises much of the recent leftist writing on South Africa.”⁶⁹

What has been a decisive determinant to any analysis of South Africa over the past five years has been the trade union movement, which has kept itself independent of both BC and the UDF, and any revolutionary theory must take this new independent workers’ movement into account. However, there is not space to delve directly into that question here. We turn directly to a consideration of the future of Black Consciousness, especially

⁶⁴ Barney Pityana quoted in Donald Woods, *Biko* (London: Paddington Press 1978) p. 33, and in *Africa News* (Durham North Carolina) June 1979.

⁶⁵ Interview with Author, April 1987.

⁶⁶ Baruch Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash* (London: Zed Press 1979), p. 328.

⁶⁷ One can see this type of thinking especially in the Black Nationalist wing of BC. See, for example, the 47 page critique of Mokgethi Mothabi’s *Black Resistance to Apartheid*, by Matthew Nkoana published by the BCMA London region Fall 1985.

⁶⁸ See Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* (1945) for his critique of both materialism and idealism.

⁶⁹ Heribert Adam, quoted in Mosale and Tlhagale, *op. cit.* p 30.

in relation to the ideas of Biko, Fanon and Marxist-Humanism.

The Future of Black Consciousness: Biko, Fanon and Marx's Humanism

A leading BC activist, now in the U.S., Jongilizwe, appreciates the creativity of the spontaneous movements, but he also emphasizes the need for a "theoretical structure" to constantly evaluate actions. This is a very difficult thing to do he says:

Because every moment there is a new campaign, action or struggle that people are involved in...people have not really had the opportunity to sit back for little periods of time and assess the situation...Being in the maelstrom of activity, the question of the relationship of theory to praxis has been difficult to look at... The humanist approach to analysis of our society...needs to be developed...Our task is to root ourselves in the people, have a relationship to material reality and begin to develop the future country we have envisioned.⁷⁰

Biko was searching for a vision of the future when he stated that he did not want to opt for "capitalism or communism but a genuine African Communalism." He envisioned a society centered on 'man,' not only his material conditions "but just man himself with all his ramifications." Africa's gift will be "giving the world a more human face."⁷¹

There was much here that needed to be elaborated as Biko recognised: "There is a certain plasticity in this interpretation precisely because no one has yet made an ultimate definition of it."⁷² Biko deliberately did not make an "ultimate definition" because he believed that doing so would only divide people. Many have criticized his statement that, "BPC believes in a judicious blending of private enterprise...with state participation," but have ignored the fact that Biko did not want to create a blueprint but wanted the future society determined by the oppressed themselves, however there was "recognition of the fact that a change in colour of the occupier does not necessarily change the system."⁷³ For Biko liberation and with it the complete transformation of the system were of paramount importance to the concept of Black Consciousness.⁷⁴ Many Marxists have been quick to call for state ownership and take it as the measure of socialist transformation. Other Marxists, especially Marxist-Humanists, not associated with a state power, have shown what was central to Marx was not the property formation as much as the actual human relations at the point of production. For Biko, also, the alienation and fragmentation of the black worker was part of the oppression. Barney Pitso said at

⁷⁰ Jongilizwe, in *News and Letters*, December 1986.

⁷¹ Steve Biko, Interview with Barnard Zylstra, *op. cit.* pp. 46-7.

⁷² Biko, quoted in Woods, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

⁷³ Biko interview with Zylstra, *op. cit.*

⁷⁴ In an interview with Gail Gerhart in 1972 he explained that the goal was deeper than getting rid of a capitalist economy: "It is not only capitalism that is involved; it is also the whole gamut of white value systems which has been adopted as standard by South Africa, both by whites and blacks so far. And that will need attention, even in a post-revolutionary society. Values relating to all the fields – education, religion, culture, and so on. So your problems are not solved completely when you alter the economic pattern to socialist pattern. You still don't become what you ought to be. There is still a lot of dust to be swept off, you know, from the kind of slate we got from white society." (Durban: October 24, 1972) p. 34.

Howard University in May 1979:

We have seen how capitalism at home has led to racism; destroyed by this two-edged malady we found we rejected most categorically all the premises of capitalism. We noted with Karl Marx that it produces in us, the poor, alienation from the self and our fellow man. We have become mere cogs in the inexorable wheel of human destruction...⁷⁵

This question of what happens after the revolutionary party takes power is not only a philosophical question but also a practical question with life and death implications. This was evident with what happened in Ghana, which was the first African country to win independence from Britain under the leadership of Nkrumah. When a general strike broke out two years later, the leadership was surprisingly quick to put it down and arrest the worker-leaders. It was evident in Cuba where Castro had taken power and declared the revolution "humanist." After he suppressed the independent trade unions, calling their convention a "madhouse," he embraced the Communist Party to help him transform the unions into "pliant tools of the new armed state."⁷⁶

There are, admittedly, a number of analyses of what happened to the African revolutions. However, one writer, Raya Dunayevskaya, needs to be singled out for the very penetrating analysis she has made of the "tragedy of the African revolutions" which

began so soon after the revolution had succeeded because leaders were so weighted down with consciousness of technological backwardness...The isolation from the masses deepened so that the new rulers began to look at them as mere labor power.⁷⁷

Frantz Fanon spoke out against those leaders who "want to send the people back to caves" and the party that forbids the "free flow of ideas between people and the government:

The single party is the modern form of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, unmasked, unpainted, unscrupulous and cynical...The party leaders behave like common sergeant majors, frequently reminding the people of the need for 'silence in the ranks'... 'Leader': the word comes from the English verb 'to lead,' but a frequent French translation is 'to drive.' The driver, the shepherd of the people, no longer exists today. The people are no longer a herd; they do not need to be driven.⁷⁸

In AZAPO the two questions of leadership" and the importance of ideas have lain side by side as is exemplified in the two following quotes from Lybon Mabasa. Speaking at the fifth annual AZAPO conference he had this to say about AZAPO's role:

⁷⁵ In *Africa News*, June 1979.

⁷⁶ See Raya Dunayevskaya, "The Cuban Revolution: The Year After" in *News and Letters*, December 1960.

⁷⁷ Raya Dunayevskaya, *Philosophy and Revolution: From Hegel to Sartre and From Marx to Mao* (New Jersey: Humanities, 1982), p. 218.

⁷⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968) pp. 165, 183-4.

If the masses were a conscious mass then we would have had a revolution a long time ago... It is our duty as leaders and members of the movement to give decisive leadership... to create the momentum of a continuous offensive towards revolutionary objectives.

A year later at the presidential address to AZAPO, he said:

In our country, Black people are faced with the task of having to defeat an enemy armed to the teeth with destructive weapons of modern technology... The final outcome will not be decided by the massive accumulation of weapons, however genocidal, but by the local and historical consciousness of the masses... prov[ing] the old saying that 'ideas and men are stronger than weapons.'

These two concepts, voluntarism (momentum and decisive leadership) and the power of ideas (consciousness of the masses) are two elements of BC that up until now have not come into contradiction.

The power of ideas has always been a characteristic of the revolutionary movement in South Africa. As far back as 1951 I.B. Tabata spelt it out as "the weapons with which you cut your path in the barbaric jungle of South African society today. We fight ideas with ideas... Our struggle, here in South Africa, is part and parcel of the struggle of humanity as a whole."⁷⁹

What was compelling Steve Biko was to develop a philosophy of liberation, what BC calls "a way of life." It is not merely a question of reading other philosophers and it would be elitist to measure Biko's attempt to create a philosophy of liberation by the amount of reading he did. His stature as an original thinker is not the only contention. What is unfairly passed over is the passion for total vision which pervades his writings, the standpoint which captured the attention of at least one generation of youth.

Some BC theologians have seized on an interpretation of Marxism contrary to established Marxism, emphasizing Marx's humanism. Itumeleng J. Mosala writes of Black Theology becoming a "theoretical weapon in the hands of the oppressed." "In this respect," he says, "we take our cue from the words of Marx when he says, 'To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But for man the root is man himself'."⁸⁰ Biko's affinity with Marx consisted of the centrality of the human subject struggling to be free. Fanon, too, wrote, "let us work out new concepts, let us set afoot a new man..." He believed this needed a new relationship between theory and practice, a theory that is grounded both in the aspirations of the black masses as they strive for freedom and in a philosophy of revolutionary humanism. This does not mean nobody is digging into the humanism of Marx and Fanon. In an interview, Saths Cooper was very clear on his relationship to Marx, revolutionary humanism and the new society.

⁷⁹ Tabata's opening address to the first conference of the Society of Young Africa. Dec. 20, 1951 in *From Protest to Challenge: a Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1964*, edited by Thomas Karis and Gwendolen Carter (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1973), document 98.

⁸⁰ Mosala and Tlhagale, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

I think the aspect of Marx that is often overlooked is his humanism, many tend to cotton on to his economic concepts and exclude Marx from Marxism, because Marxism is essentially humanist, and I'm not talking about any liberalism. I am talking about mankind, humanity having its humanity restored rather than being chattelised, being work horses in the service of capital. I am talking about living life to the full, not merely being production animals. In our country you will find that is how apartheid has been conceptualised, I think it is Verwoerd who said it, "There is no place for the Bantu above certain forms of labour." You can see the restoration of humanity to people is very very important. Fanon mentions that at the rendezvous of victory we cannot have half human beings, you cannot have Uhuru without people having had their humanity restored in the process of creating that Uhuru, otherwise you are going to have half human beings and you are going to have all these problems post Uhuru. Psychological liberation is very important. Of course we are fighting for physical liberation but what physical liberation is it where you are psychologically unprepared to handle that liberation and have full national self determination.⁸¹

Bonganjano Goba, another Black theologian, summing up the importance of BC philosophy, said of those who want to subsume blackness within the class question, "They tragically underestimate the uniqueness of the black situation and experience as a whole." He challenges the Black Consciousness Movement of which he feels he is a part, "to spell out what kind of society we envisage and how we will work for it, given our present political situation. For example, if we are committed to a socialist state, what do we mean by that." He sees the need for a vision, not as something abstract, but as something "that emerges within the prophetic vision of those who engage in a concrete struggle. Therefore there is a sense in which BC is part of this prophetic vision..." Goba wants to "explore the real meaning of Black Consciousness as an ideology of the black struggle." Like Biko before him, he feels the attraction of Fanon:

In redefining consciousness for ourselves there is need for us to go back to Frantz Fanon and examine three important aspects of his philosophy. These are: 1) the rural base of the revolution; 2) the nationalistic character of our revolution; 3) the fundamental problem of violence in the revolutionary process.⁸²

Though Goba has a different emphasis about Fanon than Biko did it is quite clear that he is not talking only of theology:

we need a much more comprehensive analysis of our own situation, one that avoids ideological reductionism current in some of the vulgar materialistically orientated approaches to our situation. We need a critical perspective that will force us as black theologians to question existing categories of thought.⁸³

⁸¹ Interview, April 1987.

⁸² Bonganjalo Goba, "The Black Consciousness Movement: Its impact on Black Theology," in Mosala and Tlhagale, *op. cit.* pp. 65-66.

⁸³ *Ibid.* p. 69.

While Goba questions existing categories of thought in the context of a philosophic framework, i.e. Black Theology, other black theologians, for example Itumeleng Mosala, have looked to Marx's Humanism for their approach:

The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace the criticism of weapons; material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses... To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But for man the root is man himself.⁸⁴

Mosala criticizes Black Theology for not having become a weapon in theory because it has not yet "gripped the masses." The point is not Black Theology, however important that is in the liberation movement, but "how does a philosophy 'live' with the lives of the people?" BC did grip a generation in the 1970s, but where does it stand in the 1980s? I have tried to show that BC's interest in Marx is a valid one, one that has tried to come to terms with the important workers' movement of the eighties, but their approach has often times been pragmatic and they have been happier with Marxist jargon rather than an engagement with Marx's ideas.

Mokgethi Motlhabi challenges not only all the black political organizations but also the trade union movement for its seeming "lack [of] a strong theoretical base that can enable it to analyse the situation meaningfully."⁸⁵ At the conclusion of his book he argues that to work out the relationship between economic and political change needs to be grounded in Marx rather than any simple application of what is called Scientific Socialism. He goes on to quote Marx, "the emancipation of the workers contains universal human emancipation... because the whole of human servitude is involved in the relation of the worker to production."⁸⁶ While Motlhabi argues that black South Africans have to work out their relationship to Marx, he stresses the "contribution they can make in trying to shape their future" but the "knowledge of the situation is not sufficient to help bring about change in it." To work out a new "praxis," a new unity of theory and practice, is no easy task, it requires great labor, patience, and openness to ideas. One essential ingredient is criticism, and criticism, as Wole Soyinka put it, "begins at home." I have argued that the early expression of BC did contain a critique of capitalism, and through its encounter with the dialectic in Frantz Fanon could have found a bridge to the humanism of Marx.⁸⁷ This encounter could help work out both the race/class dialectic and the relationship between consciousness and organization.

Ironically, the critique made by those who have left the Black Consciousness Movement,

⁸⁴ Marx quoted by Itumeleng Mosala in Mosala and Tlhagale, p. 176.

⁸⁵ Motgethi Motlhabi, *The Theory and Practice of Black Resistance to Apartheid: A Social-Ethical Analysis* (Braamfontein: Skotaville Publishers 1984) p. 274.

⁸⁶ From Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, quoted in *Ibid.* pp. 273-4.

⁸⁷ Some in BC, who do not consider themselves Marxists, do appreciate that he stands for more than a photocopy theory of materialism. "We can understand," wrote a group of South African revolutionaries, quoted in Allen and Turner, *op. cit.*, "why the Marxist-Humanists felt a need to call themselves not just Marxists but Marxist-Humanists, because the humanism has been removed from Marx to such an extent that people thought they could come with certain theories and ideas just from the top – the intellectuals theorizing and telling the people how to liberate themselves."

that BC is just a passing stage, is one that has been taken on board by AZAPO. They believe they have passed that “earlier” stage adding to their philosophy the language of Scientific Socialism. Yet, although BC has shown seriousness in the debate of theory, whether the radicalism of BC’s own concepts can be deepened remains to be seen.
