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Sub-Title: Continuity in the post-1994 era

South Africa is on the verge of going to its fourth national election since 1994.[1] The socio-political changes which have occurred in the country for past 15 years point to a dramatic failure to realise the dream of liberation as developed by Steve Biko. Here I develop an argument for why Biko, like so many, would not be voting.

BIKO'S CONCEPTION OF LIBERATION

Biko's idea of liberation is fundamentally anti-racist and anti-capitalist, as opposed to being anti-racialist, non-racialist and intergrationist – these latter conceptions of change naturally lead to the de-racialisation of capitalism and thereby the legitimisation of the white supremacist political, economic and social existence created over the last 350 years in South Africa. Biko's framing of the fundamental contradiction in South Africa as one of white racism emanates from his conception of capitalism as it emerged in the country as an inherently racist project. In his words then:

'[T]he color question in South African politics was originally introduced for economic reasons. The leaders of the white community had to create some kind of barrier between black and whites so that the whites could enjoy privileges at the expense of blacks and still feel free to give moral justification for the obvious exploitation that pricked even hardest of white consciences.'

For Biko this initial subjugation of black people for economic reason has over time created the 'white power structure'. This is to mean white racism, while based on the historical dispossession and oppression of blacks, has come to assume a position of relative autonomy, where whiteness normalises itself as a power dynamic based on a superiority complex linked to skin colour on the one hand and the supposed inferiority of blacks on the other. The actual existing circumstances of blacks (historically and systematically created) actually reinforce the reality of this white superiority and black denigration. These propositions are not merely mental states, they are material, and determine life chances and privileges. To be white is to be human as to be black is to be subhuman. Biko sharply makes the point that '[t]he racism we meet doesn't only exist on an individual basis; it is institutionalized to make it look like the South African way of life.'

It must be said that in fact the normalisation of racism is ingrained in the psyches of both whites (the beneficiaries) and blacks (the victims). It was on the recognition of this reality that Biko and his comrades argued for the 'conscientisation' of the blacks, because black people at the time 'often looked like they have given up the struggle'. Key to the conscientisation process was always the totality of black awareness and pride for the purpose of struggle. For Biko, 'Liberation is of paramount importance in the concept of Black Consciousness, for we cannot be conscious of ourselves and yet remain in bondage'.[2]

BIKO THE BLACK SOCIALIST

Throughout I write what I like we get snippets of Biko's attitude to capitalism and his attitude towards a brand of socialism. It remains a mystery why the Eurocentric neo-Marxist and other such 'Leftist' thinkers continue to cast Black Consciousness (BC) as somehow agreeable to capitalism. If we take seriously Biko's conception of apartheid South Africa as a country inflicted by a white racism founded on the development of its own brand of capitalism, it is hard to see how Biko could have

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been pro-capitalist. Let's let Biko speak for himself:

'[T]he poor shall always be black people. It's not surprising, therefore, that the blacks should wish to rid themselves of a system that locks up the wealth of the country in the hands of a few. No doubt Rick Turner was thinking about this when he declared that "any black government is likely to be socialist".'

Barney Pityana's echoing of the obviously erroneous view that Biko was not a socialist – or rather that he was an underdeveloped socialist – posits Biko's vision as at best one nationalist with a commitment to justice. Pityana says Biko 'had no language of socialism and as such never critiqued to any substantive extent the socialist ideology, save that he harboured intellectual suspicions about socialist ideologies and practice'.

It is my contention that even in his earlier writing Biko shows a favourable attitude towards socialism, rejecting Stalinism, social imperialism, white arrogance and liberalism. It's possible it is Pityana who is misreading Biko's position. Anyway, when Biko was asked, 'You speak of an egalitarian society. Do you mean a socialist one?', he answered:

'Yes, I think there is no running away from the fact that now in South Africa there is such an ill distribution of wealth that any form of political freedom which doesn't touch on the proper distribution of wealth will be meaningless. If we have a mere change of face of those in governing positions what is likely to happen is that black people will continue to be poor, and you will see a few blacks filtering through into the so called bourgeoisie. Our society will be run almost as of yesterday [emphasis mine].'

In a 1972 interview Biko elaborates on his criticism of Moscow's social imperialism and the South African Communist Party's servile position to Moscow.[3] Biko furthermore demonstrates a deep appreciation of the competing Marxian tendencies, including the South African Trotskyite formations:

'[A] lot of young people see Moscow as revisionist in a sense, even in the communist context. You see what I mean?... [T]heir policies are revisionist. They tend to demonstrate a hell of a lot of the same things that one finds among imperialists at this moment. So in a sense they are not the kind of socialist direction that people would like to follow.'

I want to argue that throughout this conversation, Biko is developing a brand of socialism which I would like to call 'black socialism', for a lack of a better word. It's contextual and focused on the black experience as a whole. It's the kind of socialism which is anti-racist in nature, it takes into account that whiteness is pervasive and benefits whites irrespective of their political standing.

In the 1972 interview Biko summarises his mode of socialism:

'There are some leftist whites who have [an] attachment to say[ing] the same rough principles of post-revolutionary society, but a lot of them are still terribly cynical about, for instance, the importance of value systems which we enunciate so often, from the black consciousness angle. That 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 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 a socialist pattern. You still don't become what you ought to be. There's still a lot of dust to be swept off, you know, from the kind of slate we got from white society.'

ANTI-RACISM VS ANTI-RACIALISM

At the beginning we argued that Biko's vision of liberation was fundamentally anti-racist as opposed to anti-racialist. We also alluded to the fact that anti-racialism or non-racialism inevitably leads to accommodation with white supremacy, whilst anti-racism seeks to end the world as we know it. We find David Goldberg's formulation and articulation of these categories, and what political and strategic implications they hold, useful for our discussion.

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The 1994 watershed inaugurated the realisation in a formal sense of anti-racialism in South Africa. A moment best described as the birth of 'born again racism', to borrow from Goldberg. This is achieved at the point of abandoning the promises of liberation as a matter of structural transformation into a matter inclusion. Accordingly, this is realised through legal formalism, and dare I add the fetish of constitutionalism, which promises equality in the abstract as it provides the historically advantaged more avenues to protect their ill-gained privileges in the name of the rule of law. In the South African context this meant the sedimentation of reconciliation without justice into the DNA of our law and constitution. From this perspective, blacks can't claim reparations, can't ask for justice for past transgressions; blacks can't even simply speak the specificity of their black suffering. The black grammar of being, which is in essence a grammar of suffering, is actually not only socially frowned upon, it's outlawed.

Goldberg argues that '[B]orn again racism is racism without race, racism gone private, racism without categories of naming it as such.' It is indeed 'raceless racism', which chimes well with the colourlessness demand of non-racialism based on a proclaimed equality before the law. Anti-racialism, or in our case non-racialism, erases the category of race but not racism. It disables those marked out for racism by the colour of their skin to claim redress or the name the crime. Racism is not a criminal offence in South Africa.

The tragic consequences of anti-racialism in South Africa are felt everyday in the denial of recognising black exclusion, suffering and death. We can't even say that the people dying from wanton neglect in Baragwanath hospital are black. Nor can we say that the more than 100 children who died without a scandal in the Eastern Cape and Mount Frere hospitals are black, or that the life expectancy between black and white is so wide you would think they live in different continents. Nor can we say that the South African state continues differential treatment of people based on skin colour, or point out that the groans of blacks under the weight of racism – both individualised and, most importantly, institutionalised – has no resonance in the state's dominant discourse of democracy, freedom, nation building and economic fundamentals.

Anti-racialism has found fertile ground in South Africa Leftist politics, which has always refused to accept race as a legitimate category of analysis, existence and resistance. In the post-1994 era we have seen the development of at least three tragic consequences (for excluded blacks) as a result of this commitment to anti-racialism. Firstly, the retreat of radical scholarship from theorising the state; if the apartheid state was a racist, neo-Nazi, settler colonial state in the service of racial capitalism, then what is the post-1994 state? Have there been any fundamental ruptures? My own take is that the post-1994 state remains racist in character and serves white racism in the context of promoting accumulation and the reproduction of capitalism. Note I don't use the favourable 'post-apartheid'.

The second consequence has been that black leadership has taken over the levers of white supremacist institutions. This mirrors the sort of comedy we see in the functioning and symbolism of our parliamentary processes and courts. The annual opening of parliament is significant in its dramatisation of the neo-apartheid nature of our body politic, a red carpet against colonial iconography and statues. The whole scene is dominated by colourful African dress, basically dressing up the colonial and apartheid power structures in African colours. The essence remains white racist. The same ethic plays itself out more visibly in the university environment. You have black heads of white and often racist universities. The faculty is dotted with blacks, but the curriculum, the culture and ethos remain white. Claims of racism from students and black faculty are mediated by blacks on top, thereby enacting a situation of black-on-black violence in preserving the whiteness of these institutions. Basically post-1994 inaugurates a neo-colony.

The third and sad consequence of the triumph of anti-racialism is the 'recruitment of people of colour to act as public spokespersons'. There is a curious development in this area, because some 'committed' black African public intellectuals have in essence become ironic spokespersons of anti-racialism in the name of either defending democracy, promoting 'cosmopolitanism' or nation-building, or as the defenders of a new sense of progressive identity.

My take is that Biko's conception of BC is fundamentally anti-racist and stands inimically to anti-racialism and the terms of the post-1994 constitutional dispensation. To reiterate, Biko's conception of black liberation is predicated on the obliteration of white racism –itself a product of capitalist

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accumulation present since the white and black violent encounter in 1652 - which continues to reproduce the same prejudice (as both individual and institutionalised racism), 1994's changes notwithstanding. In a sense there is no possibility of obliterating white racism, without fundamentally changing how things are around here.

CONTESTING BIKO

In our book, *Biko Lives!: Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko* (2008), we identify at least three ways in which Biko is contested today. The first is the black business class, second the state-linked political and bureaucratic classes (the 'bureaucratic bourgeoisie'),^[4] and finally the excluded majority (for whom 1994 miracle remains a rumour).

I have alluded to the fact that the post-1994 political terrain is punctuated more by continuity than rupture. I tried to further show that the post-1994 moment has inaugurated a born-again racism which finds expression in constitutional precepts, laws, and opportunities in general within South African society. This reality stands opposed and in deep, sharp contrast to what Biko stood for. I want to argue that the racist state formation inherited by the post-1994 political managers should be a central consideration for staying away from the electoral process. If you arrive at this position, then whoever participates in the elections must explain how their participation does not provide legitimacy to the post-1994 racist state form.

Biko's non-participation echoes what for now appears to be a position of the margins, a doing politics differently, but still a minority position from the 'public eye'. This minority is part of the millions who abstain from the electoral process for various reasons, which range from disillusionment to deep cynicism. Then there are the vocal, conscious and principled boycotters, such as the myriad social movements ([Abahlali baseMjondolo](#) [2], the [Anti-Eviction Campaign](#) [3]), with their cries of 'No land, no vote! No housing, no vote! No electricity and water, no vote!'

This cry started in the last election, and has been growing; it's part of the 20,000 or so protests recorded in the past few years. These are principled boycotters whom I think Biko would be marching with, burning tires with, blocking roads with, and swearing at the pompous and over-fed politicians with. There are groups like the counterculture group Blackwash, which is part of the loose collective of groups under the 'Nope' initiative.

These groups collectively frown upon the whole electoral circus, and respond with messages such as 'Fuck voting!' and 'Our dreams don't fit in your ballots'. As a loose collective they have come to accept that our post-1994 liberal democratic process is a decoy for the elaboration of power. The Nope initiative for instance counters the sterility of political parties' empty rhetoric with their own 'manifesting', a form of counter-manifesto. Those refusing in this way operate decidedly outside of the mainstream; they don't even hear the threatening rebuke of the IEC (Independent Electoral Commission), 'Don't vote, don't complain'. They place their hope in manifesting over manifestoes, which are about the mediation of desires and the permanent postponement of promises. The Nope manifesting cautions against pinning our hopes on manifestoes that cannot:

'...escape their framing by capitalism's own manifesto. A manifesto that is felt everywhere by everyone. A manifesto that has taken hold in our everyday lives. That tries to get under our skins, and make us live in ways alien to our desires, the fulfilment of these always a matter of hope'.

Against the empty promise of hope we can't cope:

'But as a sore festers, the wounds inflicted on the poor, the homeless, women, children, the unemployed, those of us excluded from learning.'

This is a vindication of the implausibility of doing politics with a racist polity. The state form itself must be obliterated for new possibilities to emerge; it's not about defending the constitution but about defending life and the liberty of the those who haven't tasted any as yet.

Frowning upon the politics of manifestoes and ballot box democracies, Nope laughs at these ugly, demented rituals:

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'The mandatory manifesto. Every party has one. Every organisation. Every campaign. Lists of demands to be delivered, visions to be attained in some future always on the horizon. A ritual. A routine whose rhythms refuse the possibility for any ways of being political other than the vesting of hope in a vote. And that lock us in an endless cycle of reading our desires off the possibilities imagined by others for us all.'

We hear clearly the call for responsibility, discipline, hard work, respect for the dead and yesterday's heroic sacrifices, all reduced to 'people died for the vote'. I'm not convinced, neither do I think Steve died so that we could have the vote. We had bigger hopes and bigger dreams than 4x4s, arms deals, Johnny Walker blue edition, the vulgarity of buying islands and the everyday violence of existence. On the other hand, the millions who in election after election draw an X in the cubicle of hope, sight an ultimately deflated hope and can't cope with their basic desires, walking back to misery and exclusion.

The Nope manifesting process locates itself in the Armageddon predicted by Strini Moodley, 'the coming implosion':

'Today the system struggles, itself nursing injuries from our fights, our individual and collective refusals against the mantras of commodity, payment, fiscal discipline, conservation, restraint, indigent management... The burns stretch from the eyelid to the ankle of the globe. They cannot grow any bigger. But they can still deepen.'

I'm saying that Biko's politics at the time of his death ran fundamentally in a different direction to what is being offered by the electoral process today, a process predicated on the preservation of our racist state, itself an outcome of the 1994 miracle. So quite apart from the fact that of all political parties playing the game right now, none is for Moodley or Biko's Armageddon, there is the fundamental question of the legitimisation of a state which is fundamentally against black people, even as it gives them an RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) house, a grant here, a pension payout there, inferior education and a health system which is dangerous to the health of the many. No, to say '94 changed fokol', as Blackwash proclaims, is not to deny that some things have been done, it's rather to protest at just how low the threshold has been placed. I mean, not even an apartheid government's matchbox house?

To be outside right now gives you a fighting chance to be part of the solution. In or out is the question; it's not difficult to see where Biko would stand, if we pay attention to what he stood for.

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* Please send comments to editor@pambazuka.org [4] or comment online at

<http://www.pambazuka.org/> [5].

NOTES

[1] This contribution is an abridged version of a lecture, which is now a booklet, and was first delivered at the University of Johannesburg, then Rhodes University. It will be subject to discussion at the South African Human Rights Commission this Friday.

[2] The 1976 uprising can be said to be a philosophical uprising, that is to mean resistance which is conscious of itself - black power! The uprising's war cry is unmistakably black consciousness. The 1980s, rendering South Africa ungovernable, were in some way an uprising which didn't think for itself save for the brilliance of resistance itself. The consequences were big; when Lusaka and Robben Island said 'stop', that resistance fizzled out and deferred all its disruptive capacity to the disciplining powers of the 'leadership', meaning a deal could be cut between two elite camps.

[3] This interview was discovered a few years ago at the William Cullen Library at Wits, it was done conducted by Professor Gail M. Gerhard, on 24 October 1972 in Durban. It is published for the first time in Biko Lives!

[4] To my knowledge this conception was coined by Issa G. Shivji.

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(function(d, s, id) { var js, fjs = d.getElementsByTagName(s)[0]; if (d.getElementById(id)) return; js =
d.createElement(s); js.id = id; js.src =
"//connect.facebook.net/en_US/sdk.js#xfbml=1&appId=1465091963738031&version=v2.0";
fjs.parentNode.insertBefore(js, fjs); }(document, 'script', 'facebook-jssdk'));
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Article-Summary:

cc As South Africa nears its fourth election since 1994, Andile Mngxitama laments the country's overall lack of progress toward genuine black liberation in the post-1994 era. Highlighting Steve Biko's emphasis on 'conscientisation' to counter the normalisation of black people's material and mental subjugation to the entrenched white power structure, Mngxitama decries th...[read more](#) [8]

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