

**RESPONSE TO THE SECOND STEVE BIKO COLLOQUIUM
(SBC) LECTURE BY PROFESSOR ES'KIA MPHAHLELE,
Sunday 11th September 2005, The Parktonian Hotel, Braamfontein,
Johannesburg**

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Opening remarks

Your invitation brings a double honour: the honor of participating in the remembrance of one of the greatest political thinkers in our nation's history, and one who had a profound influence on my life ... I refer of course to Steve Bantu Biko; and the honour of responding to one of the greatest literary intellectuals in our national history, and one whose *Down Second Avenue* was compulsory reading in my postgraduate training at Cornell and Stanford universities. I treasure this moment, and I thank you for this honour.

A biographical lens on black consciousness

I grew up in a family of committed evangelicals, amongst an assembly of people who trace their church origins to Plymouth, England (the Brethren; the Christian Brethren; the Assemblies). This experience had many positive influences on me—not the least of which was a stable family life. But it also had a destructive downside---an insular social and political life ('our citizenship is in heaven') and a religious experience defined by the worship of things white: the white missionaries from Ireland, Scotland and England; the white 'brethren' from the all-white churches on the peninsula; the whites sitting separately in the same church meetings ('conferences') and being served sumptuous food behind a separate entrance on the premises (e.g. the Maitland Town Hall) while blacks had to bring their own food and eat outside—only to rejoin after the break for the communal worship of one God!

Our house was in the same street as the church, and so it was common practice over the years for the visiting preacher to come home 'for a cup of tea.' When brother Logan, the chubby white preacher from Ireland was visiting, he would come home and take the two short steps from the lounge to the kitchen in this very small 'Council house.' The verdict of family and friends was unanimous: 'the brother is down-to-earth.' When the visiting preacher was brother Olifant, the African man from the sub-economic area euphemistically called *Parkwood*, he too would take the short journey from lounge to kitchen. Once again the verdict was unanimous, but different: 'that brother is forward (*voorbarig*)'

The many, many experiences of humiliation and dispossession gradually built a deep resentment within me towards whiteness and an equally deep struggle as a young man with matters of personal identity, self-esteem, self-understanding. It was within this experiential context that I encountered black consciousness, and it changed me forever. For what black consciousness did for thousands, if not millions, of my generation in the 1970s was to provide an emotional, spiritual and political anchor in the face of the debilitating power of whiteness in everyday aspect of South African life. It enabled black youth to speak back, to fight back and *to write what they like*. It restored confidence and self-worth during this time of the collective emasculation of black citizens by the white state.

I record here my gratitude to men like Ongokposte Tiro, Barney Pityana and of course Steve Biko for enabling me to dream, aspire and act in these ways. My first (edited) book—*Knowledge and Power in South Africa: Critical perspectives across the disciplines* (Skotaville Publishers, 1991)—was a direct result of the influences of these three persons on my life.

The need for new questions

But we are now 11 years into this new democracy and we need to pose fresh questions about the meaning and significance of black consciousness, now and into the future. I challenge you to take seriously these questions as you /we contemplate the life of Steve Biko and the legacy of black consciousness.

- What does black consciousness mean in a situation where the demographic majority is overwhelmingly black? (Contrast the situation of African Americans)
- What does black consciousness mean in a context where state power and governmental authority is, essentially, in black hands?
- What does black consciousness mean in the face of a resurgent white consciousness on the fringes of a democratic society, often under the banner of the Afrikaans language?
- What does black consciousness mean when equally powerful identities (other than blackness) begin to compete in shaping the identity and consciousness of post-apartheid citizens?
- What does black consciousness mean in the face of an increasingly visible white poverty and an increasingly visible black wealth in the post-1994 period?

- What does black consciousness mean given the growing evidence of the enormous psychological and emotional damage imposed on white people by apartheid?

I raise these as questions for deliberation, resisting the temptation to generate glib answers to some of the very complex dilemmas that must be engaged by black consciousness if this concept is to hold any meaning or relevance into the future.

The lingering significance of black consciousness

Even so, the state of our universities nevertheless suggest the need, at least for the moment, for 'a change of attitude or renewal of mindset' (if this constitutes the essence of black consciousness) if these institutions are to break with their racial sense of themselves. I would desperately like to believe that we have in our institutions dealt with the terrible legacy of race and racism but the composition of leadership in all the historically Afrikaner universities (every single vice chancellor is white, male and Afrikaans) and the emasculation of black leadership in the historically English universities, suggest otherwise.

One of the positive lessons from hurricane Katrina is that it demonstrated with a little water just how thin the façade of racial harmony and racial equality really is inside the world's richest nation.

Similarly, the devastating effects of whiteness and white supremacy are still powerfully felt in the academy despite professions of miracles in our democratic transition. The lack of productive and high-profile black intellectuals, scholars and academics within our universities enjoys ample description in both governmental reports and street-level anecdote.

One important reason for this lack of research excellence and research productivity has to do with the lingering emotional, psychological and political damage inflicted on black university dwellers by racism and apartheid.

Another reason has to do with the collective fraud being committed by some of our institutions—principally the universities of technology and the historically black institutions—who prematurely promote young academics to professorships thereby destroying promising academic careers and threatening the very renewal of our higher education institutions.

When blackness is an excuse for mediocrity, and white institutions either keep out deserving scholars because of entrenched racism or artificially promote young black scholars because of a misguided compliance with employment equity laws, then black consciousness needs to be reasserted.

How do we remember?

The challenge facing black consciousness is not *whether* or *what* to remember but *how* to remember the leadership and legacy of Steve Biko. Here I wish to be frank: our common humanity as earth dwellers in a very dangerous world requires that we find ways of remembering that bring us (black and white) together rather than tear us apart.

We have no choice but to remember in ways that embrace the tension between affirmation and inclusion, between retention and restitution, between caring and correction, between accommodation and assertion, between racial reconciliation and social justice.

In this way we begin to work towards that 'planetary humanism' of Paul Gilroy in which we start to imagine a society in which we are no longer defined by the accident of race but by the compulsion of our common humanity.

I thank you.