A Phenomenology of Biko’s Black Consciousness

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Mabogo Samuel More (also known as Percy Mabogo More) has pointed out the philosophical importance of Steve Biko’s thought in the areas of Africana existential philosophy, and social and political philosophy. In the latter, Biko’s thought is distinguished by his critique of liberalism and his discussions of the political and epistemic conditions for black liberation. As for the former, much is offered from his readings of Hegel, Marx, Sartre, and Fanon, and Biko’s own creative understanding of social identities formed by political practice, that is most acutely formulated in his theory of Black Consciousness. This gathering notion has generated discussion in terms of its existential dimensions in the work of Mabogo More and the resources of psychoanalysis and deconstruction in the writings of Rozena Maart. This short essay will add some thoughts on its phenomenological significance.

Why phenomenology? Phenomenology examines the formation of meaning as constituted by consciousness where the latter is relationally understood as always directed to a manifestation of something. That Black Consciousness refers to a form of consciousness already calls for a phenomenological analysis. Biko is explicit about its inclusiveness, that Black Consciousness is not premised upon biology or birth but social and political location. Under the brutal system of apartheid in South Africa, whole categories of people were positioned below those who counted most—namely, whites. That system generated lower layers of subhuman existence ranging from Asians and Coloureds to blacks. The Coloureds were designations for mixed offspring of Afrikaner (white South Africans of Dutch descent) and indigenous blacks. The racial schema made British and indigenous
black offspring a problematic category. Among the Asians, the East Indian population was the largest, although Northeast Asians were also included below whites (except, at times, for the Japanese). As with American apartheid, Jews complicated the schema as they were generally seen as Eastern European and German Caucasian immigrants to the region. The South African Jewish story is complicated as there was also a group of descendants of Yemenite Jews who migrated there at least 1,000 years prior to the influx of Ashkenazi and small numbers of Sephardi during the later quarter of the nineteenth century. The work of Neil Roos has offered additional complications to the South African schema, since there were few white women (and in some communities none) among the Boers who eventually became the Afrikaners, which meant that the growth of their community had to be through sexual relationships with indigenous women. It is clear, argues Roos, that children who could "pass" made their way back into the Boer community and contributed to the line of contemporary whites, and those who could not assimilate fell into the world that became Coloureds.

Among Biko’s contributions is a generation of political myths that both offered a critique of racial formation through actively constructing an expanded and new conception of one of its categories. For him, East Indians, Coloureds, and indigenous blacks in South Africa all became blacks, a designation that reflected the reality of their political situation.

Biko’s addition offers a politically situated understanding of consciousness that lends itself at first to a Hegelian-affected model of racial relations and a semiological and, ultimately, existential phenomenological model that suggests more than the Hegelian one. The Hegelian narrative, as articulated in his Phenomenology of Spirit and with some additional considerations in his Philosophy of Right, is familiar. The self is not a complete formation of itself but a dialectical unfolding of overcoming through which selves and correlated concepts of domination, bondage, and freedom emerge. The self, so to speak, is always struggling with its own fragmentation and incompleteness in relation to a world that resists it and through which other selves emerge through such struggles. A point of realization is the understanding that the self cannot be a self by itself. In transcendental terms, the only meaningful understanding of selfhood and freedom is that manifested in a world of others. The semiological addition points out that the relations of meaning accompany such unfolding, which manifest a fragile balance at each point of identification. The matrix of such a system is often binary and it offers seductions in relation to each binary point. Consequently, much of the semiological discussion is about what happens between white and black, which everyone occupies always at a point short of an ideal. Hence, whiteness by itself is never white enough except in relation to its distance from blackness, which makes this domination also a form of dependency. Blackness is always too black except in relation to its distance from itself, which means that one is always too black in relation to white but never white enough. Coloured, Asian, and brown function as degrees of whiteness and blackness. The slipperiness of these categories means a system of unceasing conflict the subtext of which is a teleological whiteness. Biko’s notion of Black Consciousness demands shifting such a telos. To aim at becoming black undermines the legitimacy of whiteness, but it does so with an additional consideration. Whiteness, in spite of the historic and empirical reality of mixture (as pointed out by Roos and many other scholars in recent scholarship on white formation), works on a presumption of purity. Blackness, however, is a broad category that includes, as is the case in the New World from the Americas to North America—a mixture. Consequently, Biko was able to work with a range of peoples under the rubric of blackness that ironically includes some of those listed under old racial designations as “white.” The old racial designations supported absolute interpretations of such identities, but Biko argued for their permeability.

As a semiological notion, Black Consciousness is thus fluid. It becomes a term that can be understood as an identity of most people. It also brings under critical reflection the question of the formation of whiteness—there was not always, for instance, a Europe. That geopolitical notion emerged from the process that succeeded the expulsion of the Moors from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492 in the name of Christendom. The consequence unfolding of a political anthropology of hierarchical racial formation brought along with it the transformation of what was, in reality, the western peninsula of Asia into “Europe” as literally the home of white people of Europeans. (I will leave aside the current political dynamics in the formation of a European Union in the face of the multiraciality of nearly all of these countries.) The Hegelian challenge returns here through the fragility of these relations by virtue of their dependence on dialectics of struggle for recognition. There was no reason for Christendom to have considered itself white nor for Moorish Islam to have considered itself black, except for the unique consequences that led to the formation of Europe as the place of whites and Africa as the place of blacks. The Hegelian model affirms their mutual role in the formation of their modern identity. This point could be illustrated through the etymology of the word “race.” The term has immediate roots in the French by way of the Italian word razza, which in turn suggests origins in Spain or Portugal through the term raza, which, according to Sebastian de Covarrubias in 1611, referred to “the caste of purebred horses, which are marked by a brand so that they can be recognized... Raza in lineages is meant negatively, as in having some raza of Moor or Jew.” Yet, if we consider that Spain and Portugal were under-
Moorish (Afro-Arabic) rule for 800 years, a continued etymology suggests the Arabic word *rās*, which is related to the Hebrew and Amharic words *rōsh* and *ras*—head, beginning, or origin. One could push this history/genealogy further and go to the Coptic or to the ancient Egyptian/Kamitic considerations in the word *Ra*, as in the god Amon-Ra, which refers to the sun and, at times, the King of all gods or located in the origin stories of the gods. In short, the theme of origins, beginnings, and the rising sun, even when connected to animals such as horses and dogs, suggests the following narrative. The Moors introduced *rās* into the Iberian Peninsula (Andalusia) to articulate animals and to differentiate even themselves from the Christian Germanic peoples (Visigoths) they conquered and colonized. By 1492, the by then hybrid (Germanic-Afro-Iberian-Arabic) peoples who pushed out the Moors (mostly Afro-Arabic, but by this point probably Afro-Arabic-Latin-Germanic) in the name of Christendom, used the term that by then became *raz* and eventually *razza* to designate the foreign darker peoples within a theologically oriented naturalistic episteme who, in a holy war, were pushed further southward to the continent of Africa and into (as they imagined it) the Atlantic Ocean and the New World. Although both uses of the word and its mutation refer to foreigners, the indexical point is what has shifted in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern World, where *rās* may have once meant "I" and "we" who are from elsewhere, it became "they" who are not from here and who exemplified a deviation from a theological order in which being Christian located one in a normative and natural relationship with God. The discursive shift into what is often referred to as the "other" took shape. We see here the compatibility with the Hegelian model, since the term emerged, through struggle, to the effect of a mutual formation. But, as we will see, its slope was a slippery one, so its movement went beyond the threshold of "self" and "other."

At this point, a connection between Biko and Frantz Fanon might prove useful. In his critique of Hegel and the question of recognition, Fanon argued in *Black Skin, White Masks*, which he elaborated further in *The Wretched of the Earth*, that antiblack racism structures blacks outside of the dialectics of recognition and the ethical struggle of self and other. In effect, the semiotic structure of oppositions pushes the poles to a continued extreme in racist situations. The result is a struggle to enter ethico-political relations, ironically to establish the self both as "self" and "other." The self-and-not-other is characterized by Fanon as "the zone of nonbeing" in his early work, and in his final one, it simply means to be the damned of the earth. For our purposes, this racialized schema below the Hegelian model, when mastery/Lordship and enslavement/bondsman have been issued as overcoming, demands an approach that addresses contradictions that are not of a dialectical kind. The call for Black *Consciousness* already demands addressing a "lived reality," as Fanon would say, a meaning-constituting point of view, that requires acknowledging, although at the same time structured, as lacking a point of view. In effect, it is the point of view from that which is not a point of view. The consequence is the retort: At least the other is an other. To become such initiates ethical relations.

To arrive at such a conclusion, additional phenomenological considerations are needed. One must not only take into account the lived-reality of consciousness, but also how reflection itself already situates a relationship with contingent forces in a dialectics of freedom. Put differently, the self is posited as the self through the realization of others, which means that a social framework for selfhood is that upon which even identity (an effort to recognize the self) relies. Linked to all this is the communicative dimension of every process of recognition. At the basic level of conscious life, which we share with other animals, this communication is primarily signification for activities at the level of signs, but the human being also lives at the level of meaning with ambiguity, as Ernst Cassirer and Maurice Merleau-Ponty have argued. This other level is governed by symbols more than signs, of meanings more than signification. At this level, which is a fundamentally social level, the organization of meaning does not only affect life but also construct new forms of life. Fanon characterized this phenomenon as sociogenesis. Biko explored in more detail its political dimensions.

Political phenomena are those governed by discursive opposition. To understand this, one should think about the etymological roots of politics in the *polis* or ancient city-state. Although the term is Greek in origin, the activity is much older. Walls to protect them surrounded ancient cities. This encirclement established a relationship between those within and those without, and in each instance different governing norms emerged. The relation to without is primarily one of war; this relationship within would dissolve the city, since it would be a civil war. It is not possible for people within the city to live without disagreement, however, which means that opposition, short of war (between states), is needed. The shift to the discursive, recognized in ancient times through to the present as "speech," initiated or produced new forms of relations, identities, and ways of life that became known as politics. The question asked by Fanon and Biko (and most modern revolutionaries, but especially so by African ones and their Diaspora) is the role of politics in the context of political formation. In other words, what should one do when the place of discursive opposition has been barred to some people? What should those who live in the city but are structurally outside of it do if they do not accept their place of being insiders who have been pushed outside? Their questions pose the
possibility of politics for the sake of establishing political life. It is an activity that is paradoxical. They must do politics in order to establish politics, where politics is recognized according to norms that will always respond to them as illegitimate—as violent—by attempting to change what is already recognized as the discursive limits. Put differently, one group wants to claim benevolence to those whom they dominate, and the other must seize its freedom. Echoing Frederick Douglass, Biko writes:

We must learn to accept that no group, however benevolent, can ever hand power to the vanquished on a plate. We must accept that the limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress…. The system conceives nothing without demand, for it formulates its very method of operation on the basis that the ignorant will learn to know, the child will grow into an adult and therefore demands will begin to be made. It gears itself to resist demands in whatever way it sees fit. When you refuse to make these demands and choose to come to a round table to beg for your deliverance, you are asking for the contempt of those who have power over you.²

We see here, then, a conflict not simply between politics (in the city) and the nonpolitical (beyond the walls of the city), but also about the very notion of politics itself. There are those within the city who are structured as though outside of it, which means the city has to explain why discursive opposition with certain inhabitants is not the continuation of politics instead of the feared attack on social order. Biko’s pseudonym “Frank Talk” situated this opposition in apartheid South Africa. Why was the response to him, as the embodiment of speech, the brutal assertion of the state? His assassination was not simply one of a man but also an effort to suppress an activity and an idea, of political entities outside of the narrow framework of those defined by the state in terms with more political consequences than political activities. In other words, the apartheid state was not only a war on people of color, it was also a war on politics.

Biko understood this. His genius included rendering politics black. By fusing the apartheid state’s opposition to blacks with its opposition to politics, he was able to pose a genuinely revolutionary question of social transformation. The question of citizenship instead of rule, as Mahmood Mamdani has formulated for the opposition, became a question, as well, that interrogated white legitimacy in political terms. I stress political terms here because of the bankruptcy of the anperiodic groups found in the assertion of ethical terms. Recall that the ethical already presupposed the self/other dialectic. Biko’s (and Fanon’s) challenge was to show that much had to have been in place for ethics to be the dominating factor. To assert the ethical, consequently had the effect of presupposing the inherent justice of the political situation when it was circumstance itself that was being brought into question. The political conflict with ethics in this sense, then, is the reality that colonialism has left us with a situation that requires political intervention for ethical life. In Biko’s words: “In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest gift possible—a more human face.” What Biko also showed, however, is that such a structure and encomium render politics black.

Black Consciousness is thus identical with political life, and those who are willing to take on the risk of politics in a context where a state has waged war on politics, are, as their opposition mounts, blackened by such a process. As a political concept, this makes the potential range of Black Consciousness wide enough to mean the collapse of the antidemocratic state. The moving symbol of this was the expansion of that consciousness in apartheid South Africa and its spilling over into the international community with the consequence of a response that required more than the question of inclusion instead of the construction of a different state. The new state, as Fanon would no doubt argue, now faces its social struggles and, as scholars such as Ashwin Desai, Richard Pithouse, and Nigel Gibson have shown, the poor have emerged as a new dimension of that struggle in the postapartheid government’s effort to put the brakes on democratic expansion; a move from possible socialism and de facto liberalism to neoliberalism has brought with it renewed tension between citizenship and rule.

I would like to, at this point, explore further in phenomenological terms the significance of the gift of “a more human face.” The phenomenological dimensions of politics are that discursive opposition requires communication, that in turn requires intersubjectivity. There is, thus, a social dimension of political life, and much of the oppression has been an effort to bar social life and hence political life to certain groups of people. Phenomenology also demands that one examines consciousness as a lived, embodied reality, not as a floating abstraction. What this means is that consciousness must always be considered as indexical and in the flesh. Speech should not, from this perspective, be considered an expression of consciousness but instead as symbiotically related to the bodies by which, through which, and in which it is made manifest. In human beings, this phenomenon is manifested in our entire bodies, but it is most acutely so in our face and hands, our primary sites of signification, although the entire body is symbolic. It is no accident that oppression often takes the form of forcing its subjects downward, to look down, so their faces cannot be seen, and even where there is nothing they can do, their hands are often tied. In these instances, oppression is an effort to erase the face and eliminate the gestural capacity of hands; it is an effort to render a subject
Notes


3. Ibid., 98.

Bibliography


