**POL 3013: South African Political Thought**

**Lecture 38: The Structure of Biko’s Political Thought**

**1. Biko as martyr and icon:** Since his death in detention in September 1977, Steve Biko has been a national (and perhaps global) icon. He was young, charismatic and articulate, and embodied the aspirations of a generation untainted by the corruption that often comes with power. He came to represent their idealism and courage. For that reason, many want to claim him as their own. His legacy has been much contested and his thought oversimplified and misunderstood. We don’t know what he would have thought of the Biko industry that has arisen after 1990.

**2. How Biko’s thought is most easily misunderstood:** The easiest way in which to misunderstand Biko is to reduce his thought to a specific *strategy* of organizing black people (including coloureds and Indians) as blacks, and ensure that white liberals (or radicals) do not speak on their behalf. Once his thought is reduced to this one strategic innovation, it is easy to see it as an *interim* measure, necessary only until blacks have regained confidence. Biko can then be presented as the emblem of all who support black participation in South African society, and whatever agenda has most vocal black support claims his legacy as their own. Biko’s strategy had other, equally important components, and it was inextricably linked both to a critique of “power politics” and to a specific conception of liberation. His thought has a conceptual and logical *structure*, outlined briefly here.

**3. Biko’s critique of liberal hypocrisy:** Biko’s political career began as branch chairperson of NUSAS (National Union of SA Students) at the University of Natal’s black medical school, and found a new direction when he led the SASO (SA Students Organization) breakaway from NUSAS in 1968. SASO was at first cautious in its critique of NUSAS, and Biko himself remained friendly with white NUSAS leaders and churchmen all his life. But his critique of the hypocrisy he encountered in NUSAS remained essential to his politics. It is conspicuous in his early writings for SASO, in which he objects to “the dichotomy between principle and practice” (*I Write What I Like*, p. 5; cf. p. 14), the “bias problems” in organizations in which one group “is from the oppressor camp” (p. 11), the dishonesty of “token and artificial non-racialism” (p. 18). This critique is extended to homeland leaders and others “working within the system” (pp. 41, 43, 95), to “integration” (pp. 26, 100-01) and “power politics” more generally (p. 96, 99; cf. 101). His critique of liberal hypocrisy was not primarily focused on liberalism, but on its hypocrisy. Whether liberalism is intrinsically hypocritical is another question!

**4. Biko’s conception of liberation:** Biko stood for the overthrow of the apartheid order by the oppressed majority. Although he could not openly say that in so many words, the entire thrust of his thought makes this clear. But it is equally clear that, in his view, a popular black government did not in itself represent liberation (cf. p. 101). Liberation required a fundamental transformation of social relations and values. Elements of his conception of liberation included:

1) Liberation is the product of an openly-declared commitment to values of freedom and equality and openly-declared rejection of domination and exploitation. Systems of domination and exploitation cannot be fought “from within”. Whoever attempts this will end up “selling our souls” (p. 43).

2) Liberation is the product of honest self-examination and clear self-definition; “the ability to define oneself with one’s possibilities held back not by the power of other people over one but only by one’s relationship to God and to natural surroundings” (p. 101).

3) Although each individual is responsible for attaining what Biko calls “the envisaged self” (pp. 53, 74, 101), the individual always defines her or himself in the context of a community. “In all we do we always place man first and hence all our action is usually joint community oriented action rather than the individualism which is the hallmark of the capitalist approach” (p. 46; cf. 106).

4) Liberation is the product at the same time of individual self-definition and rootedness in community, because community is essentially a modernizing force, according to Biko. He describes “the new and modern black culture” as emanating “from a situation of common experience of oppression” and conveying values of “defiance, self-assertion, group pride and solidarity” (p. 50) and elsewhere as a source of innovation (p. 106).

**5. Black Consciousness as strategy:** This conception of liberation informed Biko’s strategic thought. The strategy of Black Consciousness did not have only one or two central tenets, as is often believed. At least four components seem essential to it:

1) The best known element of BC as a strategy was its focus on organizing black people (defined to include coloureds and Indians) as blacks, rather than organizing on a non-racial (or multi-racial) basis. “Black man, you are on your own!” (p. 100).

2) Closely associated is BC’s emphasis on taking pride in black achievement for its own sake, and not seeing it as imitation of whites. From the character of BC community projects, it seems that this pride had to be earned by work and sacrifice, rather than being based on race alone.

3) Promoting such black pride began invariably in a local context. Self-reliance had to be promoted in the community rather than in national structures (p. 42). It was especially important to organize among black students, conveying the role they should play “in the emancipation of their community” (p. 19; cf. 13).

4) Perhaps the strategic innovation of BC which had most impact was its principled avoidance of hierarchy within its organizations, its renewal its leadership (no-one could be president of SASO for more than a year), decentralization of power, and emphasis on the activity of becoming conscious rather than holding the “correct line”.

**6. Biko, Turner and the structure of 1970s radicalism:** Biko referred approvingly to an early sketch of Turner’s *Eye of the Needle* in a 1971 article (*I Write What I Like*, p. 68). Turner wrote an article in support of Black Consciousness (“Black Consciousness and White Liberals,” *Reality*, July 1972, pp. 20–22). Biko and Turner both testified for the defence at the first major BC trial in 1976. But their thought also shares a certain conceptual structure, despite its differences in content. In each case they begin by identifying a specific obstacle in the way of the realization of a central human capacity, then describe how that obstacle can be overcome through an ethical choice, which can be embodied in an individual life and also become an example to others. Each seeks to empower the individual and engage them politically, rather than guiding them to conform to an impersonal historical process. They inspired movements for liberation which did not pretend to be governments-in-waiting. Their focus was not mainly on state power. This was surely in part the result of having to start developing a political consciousness in conditions of repression. But it remains an important legacy for the present.