**POL 3013: South African Political Thought**

**Lecture 41: Mandela’s Critique of Black Consciousness**

**1. ANC and BCM on Robben Island:** The Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) emerged after 1968, filling the vacuum left by the crushing of black political organization after Sharpeville and Rivonia. It began among rebellious youth, rather than respectable elders, and in a much-restricted political space. This surely impacted on BCM ideas and strategies. If we examine Biko’s writings, however, we can also see a conception of liberation---as active self-definition through collective projects—that is clearly different from the ANC’s traditional concern with representation, legislation and rights. But when ANC and BCM met on Robben Island around 1976, their initial conflict was around responding to prison authorities, then organization and alliances among prisoners. Mandela’s long essay on BC may be seen as an attempt at historical assessment and a defence of ANC authority.

**2. Mandela on BCM as heroes and traitors:** Mandela’s essay begins by putting contrasting views into the mouths of unnamed supporters and critics of BCM. But he then expresses (or strongly implies) equally conflicting views himself. On the one hand, BCM has “a shrewd plan, a powerful ideology and an able youth leadership” (p. 26) and has “caught the imagination of the youth” through its “many positive mass projects” (p. 28). On the other, BCM leaders are big talkers (p. 38) with fanciful plans (cf. Azania, p. 51), a “racialistic” sect (p. 41) in thrall to the bourgeois philosophy of existentialism (p. 42), “swimming in money” provided by US business or the CIA (p. 45; cf. 21).

**3. “Five hundred years of our freedom struggle”:** Mandela refutes the claims of BCM by putting them in a historical perspective which suggests they represent the enthusiasm of youth—a passing phase which will be outgrown. Thus, BCM “fills a vacuum” and “prepares the ground” (p. 26), is a “mere patrol” (p. 37); or it repeats what Mandela and others did in their ‘younger days” (p. 38). But the historical perspective is itself somewhat contrived, going back not to 1912, say, but to 1492 (p. 27) and continuing for five hundred years (p. 37). Similarly, BCM’s idea of creating black unity is said to go back to 1795 (p. 57). The argument that the ANC is the true heir to this long history is probably most emphatic in Mandela’s headcount of political prisoners, showing that the ANC has made the greatest sacrifice (p. 50).

**4. Taking sides in the Cold War:** In ANC political debates on Robben Island, Mandela was known as the leader of the nationalist camp opposed to a Marxist group led by Govan Mbeki and Harry Gwala. But both sides saw the SACP and the Soviet Union as allies. In his assessment of the BCM, however, Mandela defends the Soviet Union not only as an ally but as a model, “a blueprint of the most advanced social order in world history” which has achieved “the removal of all kinds of oppression for a third of mankind” (p. 43). Mandela argues that “class struggle is the driving force of the development of society and to sharpen it is the duty of all revolutionaries” (p. 43). Do these formulations represent Mandela’s real beliefs in 1978? Or is it his way of outflanking BCM on the left, as defined by philosophy of history, in response to their attempt to outflank the ANC on the left, as defined by militancy of personal style?

**5. Digressions on race, homelands, and elections:** Mandela touches on a range of other topics apparently unrelated to the central dispute. For examples, he defends the reality of race (p. 49); he argues for ANC participation in homeland politics (p. 54); he questions the need for free elections in a context which recently unbanned organizations would be at a disadvantage (p. 55). It’s possible that these briefly-sketched arguments are intended to respond to positions not fully indicated in the text. The issue of participating in homeland politics was hotly contested among the ANC prisoners, with Mandela probably in a minority. The argument for the reality of race, which can be seen “with the naked eye” is probably a response to Neville Alexander, who was released from Robben Island around that time.

**6. Two concepts of liberation?** Mandela’s text presents the differences between ANC and BCM at various levels. When comparing ANC and BCM perspectives, he tends to caricature the BCM. The closest he comes to recognizing different conceptions is his contrast of existentialism with dialectical materialism. If there are significant differences between two conceptions, he is unwilling or unable to recognize them. Liberation requires an army; anything else is ineffective (p. 39, 64 et passim). The role of SASO is to “rally [youth and students] behind the liberation movement” (p. 63). It can act as “auxiliary” to the ANC and should not “see itself as the prophet of a new South Africa” (p. 64). As it happens, Biko is often seen today as a prophet whose ideals have been betrayed by the corruption and top-down structure of the post-apartheid order!