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Rightful Power and an Ideal of Free Community: The Political Theory of Steve Biko

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Abstract

Steve Biko is one of the most important liberation activists of his time. Yet, his theoretical contribution is not well understood or appreciated. This article reconstructs Biko's political ideas and introduces a new integrated reading and interpretation of his writings, speeches, and recorded interviews. It argues that Biko's Black consciousness ideal should not only be read as engaging an activist movement or programme but, also, as encompassing an original theoretical framework grounded in a communalist ethos of Biko's own conceptual development. It argues that Biko's Black consciousness ideal sought to relate racialised oppression to a historically centred communalist solution framed by two interlocking structural elements—rightful power and free community. The article argues that only by a theoretical and normative consideration of these elements, on Biko's own conceptual terms, do we get a coherent understanding of Biko's distinctive view of free postcolonial society.

Keywords

Steve Biko, power, communalism, freedom and historical liberation, racialised oppression, Black consciousness

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Introduction

Pityana (1988) has noted that one "can hardly do justice to a political analysis of South Africa today without mentioning Steve [Biko]. That is because Black Consciousness ushered in a new era of political awareness, whereby the oppressed were themselves taking responsibility for their political destiny" (8). In fact, many programmes—like the Black Community Programmes and Black People's Convention—that formed a core of Black cultural and political organization in 1970s and 1980s South Africa arose out of Biko's activism (Hadfield 2017; Hill 2015, 117–22; Pityana 1988, 11–12; Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research 2021). As cofounding president of the South African Student's Organization (SASO) from July 1969, and as chairman of SASO Publications from July 1970—when "the monthly SASO Newsletter began to appear carrying articles by [Biko] . . . called 'I write what I like'" (Stubbs CR 1988a, 33)—Biko developed many of his Black Consciousness ideas through his activism. It is likely why they quickly developed into a broader movement (Hadfield 2017; Pityana 1988, 12–15).

We would, most certainly, be bereft of much of Biko's contribution had he not been one of the most important activists of his time and had he not expressed, through his activism, the imaginative depth of his political thought. Nevertheless, the tendency to condense his legacy purely into his activism underscores Pityana's (1988) observation among many of those to whom Biko is a cultural and political inspiration—of an "uncritical" glorification of Biko as more than human (3).[1] This tendency also explains why, despite steady documentation of Biko's political activism (Pityana 1988, 3), our theoretical, critical understanding of his ideas remains poor.[2] This article

1. Pityana notes that while it "was not for nothing that the Provincial Synod of the Church of the Province of Southern Africa . . . discussed a motion . . . for Steve Biko to be remembered in the Church's liturgical calendar," this "was accompanied by calls for him to be declared a martyr" (Pityana 1988, 3).
2. Given increasing attention to anti- and postcolonial thought and to thinkers like Gandhi, Fanon, Césaire, Du Bois, Cabral, and others, it is surprising that theoretical scholarship on Biko remains wanting (Ahluwalia and Zegeye 2001, 455). For some key representative texts see, Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2021); Anthony Alessandrini (ed.), *Fanon: Critical Perspectives* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999); Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2000); Bhikhu Parekh, *Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989); Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: the Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019);

introduces a new synthetic theoretical account of Biko's ideas, for which Biko himself indicates a theoretical view and method.

"Born shortly before 1948,"

> I have lived all my conscious life in the framework of institutionalized separate development. My friendships, my love, my education, my thinking and every other facet of my life have been carved and shaped within the context of separate development. In stages . . . I have managed to outgrow some of the things the system taught me. Hopefully, what I propose to do now is to take a look at those who participate in opposition to the system—not from a detached point of view but from the point of view of a black man, conscious of the urgent need for an understanding of what is involved in the new approach— 'Black Consciousness.' (Biko 1988d, 41)

Contained in Biko's statement is the outline of a method. Biko's is to be an unabstracted examination of the system of apartheid oppression, and of its opposition, by means of an internally reflective and historically critical procedure. In outlining the Black Consciousness ideal, Biko's arguments are not only about a practical activist programme. They are also theoretical arguments informed by distinct conceptions of oppression, freedom, and historical liberation. Biko also indicates that there is a normative position contained in his views that is central to the theoretical structure of his "new approach"—Black Consciousness.

This article develops the two interlocking theoretical elements that coherently structure Biko's political thought. First, it argues that rightful power is the active participation in the positive historical development and experience of one's identificatory communities and by whose internal resources a person intends to be persistently secured against their own oppression and enslavement. Further, rightful power is the continuous engagement of these communities, not only by one's individual efforts but by the collective efforts of numerous global—and historically attached—others, in the participatory development and understanding of one's very self.

I argue that the aim of rightful power is the development, maintenance, and fulfilment of a person's true, communally embedded self—their determined desires, needs, and aspirations, arising out of, and sustained by, the

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Musab Younis, *On the Scale of the World: The Formation of Black Anti-Colonial Thought* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2022); Aldon Morris, Walter Allen, Cheryl Johnson-Odim, Dan S. Green, Marcus Anthony Hunter, Karida L. Brown, and Michael Schwartz (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of W.E.B. Du Bois* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

historical liberation of their communities. In total, rightful power is the solution, in Biko's arguments, to both the historical and normative problem of communal powerlessness among the historically oppressed.

Further, I argue that underlying rightful power is a conceptually communalist understanding of freedom and liberation that leads to the second structural element of Biko's thought—free community. Free community is an ideal of participatory self-determination and attachment in which historical communities of experiential belonging sustain, and are sustained by, a continuously developed internal self-understanding and solidarity required for their own persistent liberation. Finally, I argue that Biko's ideas point to a normative ideal of free communal society in which, flowing from the bottom up, an internally generated mutual respect between the diverse and distinct underlying communities of political society are foundationally incorporated into the systemic intellectual, sociocultural, and historical understandings of well-reasoned postcolonial society.

This article's development of an integrated account of Steve Biko's political thought proceeds by interpretation and analysis of his written essays, recorded interviews, speeches, and known conversations, particularly those collected in the volume *I Write What I like* (Biko 1988a-m) and recorded in biographical work on him.[3] I take this approach because from March 1973, Steve Biko was placed under a banning order of the apartheid state. The order, in place till after his death, restricted Biko to his mother's house and banned him from all social, political, and group engagements (Dept. of Justice 1973, 1–2; Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research 2021). On September 12, 1977, Biko died from the "extensive brain" and other injuries (Woods 2017, 232) he sustained during his nearly month-long detention and torture by South African police (Hill 2015, xxiv; South African History Archive [SAHA], n.d.; South Africa: Overcoming Apartheid Building Democracy, n.d., 1; Woods 2017, 207).[4]

One result of Biko's banning and killing is that much of his thought during that politically active period was conveyed through personal, nonpublic

3. I am particularly focused on Biko's interview of July 1977 with Bernard Zylstra of the Canadian Institute for Christian Studies, published in Donald Woods *Biko* (Endeavour Press Ltd, 2017), and the transcript of Biko's final August 1977 interview published as "Our Strategy for Liberation" in *I Write What I Like*, ed. Aelred Stubbs CR (Penguin Books, 1988), 162–71.

4. In 1997, during South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, five police officers "applied for amnesty" and admitted to Biko's torture and killing after he was detained for defying his banning order "to attend a meeting" of liberation movement organizations on August 17, 1977 (Hill 2015, 215, xxvi; SAHA, n.d.; South Africa: Overcoming Apartheid Building Democracy, n.d., 3–4).

conversations and interviews with international journalists and activists. It is likely that the restriction on Biko's communications—and the fact that beyond his short essays much of his thought had to be communicated informally (Stubbs CR 1988b, 181–82)—is, at least, partly to blame for both our poor theoretical understanding of Biko and the prevailing activist focus even within the existing literature that takes Biko seriously as a thinker (see Ahluwalia and Zegeye 2001, 459–66).

In this activist focus, however, existing scholarship has failed to look beyond the more obvious connections between Biko's ideas and better-known thinkers of anticolonial thought, especially where these were practically influential to the Black Consciousness Movement. It has seemed sufficient to Mabogo P. More, for instance, to interpret Biko's theoretical significance nearly indistinguishably from Frantz Fanon's simply from the fact that Biko and many students of the Black Consciousness Movement were reading Fanon's texts in the 1960s and 70s, and that Fanon himself was inspired by South Africa in his writings (More 2004, 83–84, 2014, 184–85). Without denying the influence of Fanon on many of Biko's ideas (though I will not be canvassing these), this narrow concentration misses not only the distinctive connections Biko draws between domination and power but, crucially, the defining communalist element that coherently frames and unifies the normative and conceptual components of Biko's arguments about freedom and historical liberation.[5]

Consequently, we have also a limited range of understanding about how Biko's ideas relate to, and are distinguished from, the arguments of other better-studied figures of anti- and postcolonial thought. For example, More rightly connects many of the ideas that Biko was working with to an intellectual history that traces from Aimé Césaire's Negritude movement to W. E. B. Du Bois's ideas on double consciousness and Frantz Fanon's anticolonial thought (More 2014, 173–77). However, in focusing almost exclusively on Biko's ideas about Black Consciousness—as these were tied to the general "leitmotif" of questioning what it meant to be Black—in relation to the practical liberatory struggle in South Africa, More leaves us with almost no distinctive theoretical substance about Biko's ideas and what is illuminated in

5. My approach regarding Fanon (i.e., to reference his ideas briefly and only where their theoretical connection to Biko is obvious and necessary) is purposeful. The deficiency of theoretical literature on Biko is not only with respect to its quantitative dearth but, further, regards the fact that it is almost entirely overrun by comparative examinations with Fanon. These comparisons have often proceeded without much substantive theoretical interpretation of Biko himself and have therefore done little to enhance our theoretical insights into either thinker.

them by the arguments of other thinkers, or vice versa. He declares, simply, that as well as being the impetus of a liberation movement, Biko's notions must "self-evidently" have been also philosophical because they shared in the intellectual focus of these other thinkers, upon whose philosophical substance we are agreed (More 2014, 177–78; see Cloete 2019, 106).

This hyper-condensation of Biko's theoretical contribution into his activism and the practical liberatory impetus of the Black Consciousness Movement, further, leads More to classifying Biko as an Africana existentialist philosopher (More 2004, 2014). This is because, More (2014) argues, the *Movement* was concerned with the "black person's coming to consciousness of herself as black" (177) and because in actualising itself as an activist liberatory movement, the Black Consciousness ideal emphasised the "the primacy of . . . lived experience" (More 2004, 2014, 178). This classification of Biko as an existentialist has wrongly overlain an unduly individualist structure on Biko's political ideas.

It is ironic that the historical, political, and thematic proximity of, and influence on, Biko's Black Consciousness (and on South Africa's anti-apartheid liberation struggles) to a seemingly more global history of Black resistance and thought, has led some scholars to conflating the theoretical substance of Biko's ideas into simply the practical programme of his liberatory movement (Cloete 2019, 104). More problematically, this conflation has overshadowed the depth of theoretical connection between Biko's arguments and other lesser-known scholars and figures of anti- and postcolonial thought. The fundamental consequence of which, has been to further obscure the distinctive structure of Biko's thought within global theories of racial oppression and resistance and, therefore, our substantive appreciation of what Biko's ideas offer our theoretical understandings of freedom and liberation.

Pal Ahluwalia and Abebe Zegeye note that "the names Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon have become closely interlinked" because both were intimately interested in the psychological mechanism of colonial and racial domination (Ahluwalia and Zegeye 2001, 455).[6] As these scholars also emphasise, however, prior to Fanon's influence in South Africa, the notion of a communal

6. For further resources on this comparison, see Mabogo P. More, "Biko: Africana Existentialist Philosopher," in *Biko Lives! Contemporary Black History*, eds. Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander, and Nigel C. Gibson (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 45–68; Lewis R. Gordon, "A Phenomenology of Biko's Black Consciousness," in *Biko Lives! Contemporary Black History*, eds. Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander, and Nigel C. Gibson (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 83–93. In his own writings, Biko also makes repeated references to Fanon (for example, Biko 1988f, 86).

humanism had begun to influence philosophies of "resistance in South Africa"—for instance, through the literary texts of Ezekiel Mphahlele (see Mphahlele 1962) and the philosophical and activist writings of Anton Muziwakhe Lembede (Ahluwalia and Zegeye 2001, 463). These influences also explain the depth of reference in Biko's writings to Africa's post-independence leaders such as Kenneth Kaunda (Biko 1988g, 58) and Sekou Toure (Biko 1988d, 46), whose political ideologies were also embedded in a communal humanist project (see Biko 1988g, 54–61; Kaunda 1966).

Indeed, the distinctly communalist structure to Biko's ideas about freedom is not at odds with the wider conceptual arguments of major philosophers of the African tradition, such as Kwasi Wiredu. For Wiredu, for instance, the kind of freedom that could secure and, in turn, be secured by a radically democratic reorganization of modern global society is one underscored by a communally based rationality (Ṣóyẹmí 2023). This is a rationality that grounds "a certain kind of behavioural ethics" and by which the moral dependencies of all those within a given community are made structurally sensible (Ṣóyẹmí 2023, 185; Wiredu 2005, 45). For Wiredu, this rationality demands a reconceptualization of freedom, not as something each person is morally capable of attaining solely for herself but as something for which each requires the active moral assistance of all others (Ṣóyẹmí 2023).

Further, the communalist underpinning of Biko's thought that establishes Biko's normative understanding about the kind of power that is required for true freedom, and for an historically persistent, self-reliant communal liberation, greater places many of Biko's ideas in line with those of another grossly understudied thinker of postcolonial society—Kwame Ture. Both Biko and Ture agree, in their respective analyses, that a particular type of power is required for Black people to be free in a more fundamental sense than simply their ability to be practicably assimilated into the dominating political and socioeconomic structures of those former colonial and colonising territories for whose upkeep their intellectual participation was deemed unnecessary (Ture and Hamilton 1992, 3–41). For both thinkers, only an internally developed *communal* psychological infrastructure is capable of delivering, for Black people, the kind of power that true liberation demands (Ture and Hamilton 1992, 39–56). But where Ture's ideas developed from the recognition that "the ethnic basis of American politics as well as the power-oriented nature of American politics . . . [called] for black people to consolidate behind their own" (Ture and Hamilton 1992, 47), I argue that Biko's arguments normatively reconstruct power such that it is only sustained by a participatorily reconceptualised understanding of the nonindividualist, communally embedded and resourced self.

Kohn and McBride (2011) have, rightly, argued that the "measure of a foundation needs to be whether it is a story that provides a space for imagination

and then action" (33). Ultimately, my argument in this article is simple—Biko's political ideas constitute one such foundation, for in the imaginative end of his communalist ideal is the continuous, active, historical emancipation of all persons. In section 2, I account for the first of two structural elements to Biko's political thought—what I call rightful power. I argue that what emerges out of Biko's arguments about domination and oppression is a normative recreation of power that provides the solution to the communal problem of powerlessness. In section 3, I argue that a fundamentally communalist understanding conceptually grounds Biko's ideas about oppression and liberation and is at the core of his second structural element—free community. In section 4, I outline the communalist reconfiguration of political society that emerges from Biko's ideas and advance a preliminary set of critiques to his view. In section 5, I conclude that Biko's theoretical contribution is the reimagination of the communalist dimensions for free, liberatory, postcolonial society.

Rightful Power: The Normative Underpinnings of Biko's Political Thought

This section argues that Biko's political ideas advance a positive understanding of freedom grounded in a normative view of what the article calls rightful power and framed by a communalist conception of self-sustaining liberation. I argue that Biko's considerations of racial oppression and domination are a more substantive concern with the notion of powerlessness. Out of this latter concern, Biko reconceptualizes the kind of power that people require to be free from oppression not at a given time but persistently, and that entails having within themselves the communally sustained resources for their own historical liberation.

I should be clear that Biko's immediate problem is the apartheid oppression of Black South Africans. Indeed, the founding of the South African Student's Organization (SASO) was instigated by the 1958 passing of the Extension of University Education Bill and the 1959 Fort Hare Transfer Act (Biko 1988c, 23; Hill 2015, 2).[7] These policies made "it . . . criminal . . . for a non-white

7. As Biko would explain one year after SASO's formation in a February 1970 letter to other South African student organizations, the implementation of the Act and its desired effect of bringing Fort Hare under the system of racial segregation had made the formation of SASO necessary. The Act had led to the "dissolution of the [Students' Representative Council (SRC)] at Fort Hare . . . by the students themselves" (Biko 1988c, 23–24), and in "December 1968 a conference of SRCs from the black campuses decided overwhelmingly in favour of a black organization and in July 1969 . . . SASO . . . was formally founded" (Biko 1988c, 25).

student to register at a hitherto open university" (O'Malley n.d.) and created new segregated universities for "non-Europeans" (Tsotsi 2012, 2–3).[8] SASO was the solution of Black students and campuses to the "stringent measures" instituted against their freedom of association by the 1959 Act (Biko 1988c, 23-5). SASO was also the answer of young Black South Africans to a political void (Ranuga 1986) that was brutally cemented with, and after, the March 1960 Sharpeville Massacre (Hadfield 2017; Lodge 2011; Passemiers 2018; Pfister 2003). We should not underestimate how much Biko's ideas were a response to the practical "structures of oppression and . . . white domination" in South Africa (Cloete 2019, 109).[9]

Theoretically, however, Biko's arguments illuminate a normative conception of rightful power as people's active and persistent participation in the communities to which they are historically and experientially attached, and the belonging and resource of those communities *within* them. Rightful power, for Biko, is the paramount normative requirement for a positive ideal of individual freedom and communal liberation, and it is the purpose and defining element of all communities that seek and intend, historically, to maintain their liberation.

A True Humanity and the Rejection of Status Quo Power

At the base of Biko's arguments about freedom from white domination is an examination of the normative dimensions of power and powerlessness. "Freedom," Biko writes, "is 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

8. The 1959 Fort Hare Act provided for the transfer of the University of Fort Hare to the apartheid government under the "Minister of Bantu Education" (UNISA Institutional Repository 2012, 2). Fort Hare, at the time part of the University of South Africa, had been a historic institution of higher education for African and Indian students (UNISA Institutional Repository 2012). See also, "Profile of the University of Fort Hare," The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa, n.d. https://www.thepresidency.gov.za/national-orders/recipient/university-fort-hare-1916.
9. It is perplexing that even within the literature that acknowledges the richness of Biko's ideas about freedom, scholars sustain a negative interpretation of Biko's view as one that simply asked Black people "to stand up and be counted against the system" (Ahluwalia and Zegeye 2001, 460; Cloete 2019, 106–10). A theoretical view of Biko's arguments, however, highlights that while such a perspective might have been the starting point for Biko's considerations of oppression and domination, they were just that.

relationship to God and to natural surroundings. On his own, therefore, the black man wishes to explore his surroundings and test his possibilities" (Biko 1988b, 108).[10] Although Biko begins by framing his arguments about freedom as nondomination and moves quickly to its framing as the acquisition of one's own power, Biko is not concerned with the acquisition of simply any kind of power. He tells us that the kind of power that really concerns freedom does not currently exist. Biko writes, "the black man has got no ill intentions for the white man, the black man is only incensed at the white man to the extent that he wants to entrench himself in a position of *power* to exploit the black man [emphasis mine]" (Biko 1988k, 169).

The kind of power that interests Biko, therefore, is not the kind of power that has established and occupied the situation of whites in apartheid South Africa. Biko's ideas reject this status quo of power (Biko 1988b, 105). Built on undeserved privilege (Biko 1988h, 33), it is the power of the singularly dominating structure, of what Biko calls the "power-hungry" (Biko 1988b, 103). Indeed, Biko notes that his own practical rejection of the idea of "political integration," was not simply a "reactionary rejection of whites" (Biko 1988f, 82). Rather, Biko rejected the existing political and individualistically exploitative conception of power, which sought the competitive perfection of individual capacities at the cost of communal, "human relationship[s]" (Biko 1988f, 79; 1988g, 55–61).

Integration, Biko argues, into this kind of "power-based society" (Biko 1988g, 61) would simply extend the status quo of power (Biko 1988a, 65); it could not recreate or reimagine it. The ultimate result would be to further the oppression of Black South Africans by greater tying them into an "already established set of norms" (Biko 1988h, Black Souls, 38), which asks individuals to exploit each other and "to destroy with utter ruthlessness whatever" stands in their way (Biko 1988f, 75). This, for Biko, was the core feature of the existing structure of what he called the "totality of white power" (Biko 1988f, 75). As such, it could not supply freedom because it could not generate the kind of power necessary to freedom (Biko 1988f, 76). Biko writes,

> The concept of integration, whose virtues are often extolled in white liberal circles, is full of unquestioned assumptions that embrace white values. It is a concept long defined by whites and never examined by blacks. It is based on the assumption that all is well with the system apart from some degree of

10. It is worth noting that Biko's engagements with, and his scholarly contribution to, Black theology (Biko 1988b, 103) were an important component of his ideas about the communal, spiritual, and cultural self "realisation" and "re-awakening" among the oppressed (Biko 1988d, 45–46), and their active eradication of that oppression (Biko 1988j, 73–74).

> mismanagement by irrational conservatives at the top. . . This is the white man's integration —an integration based on exploitative values. It is an integration in which black will compete with black, using each other as rungs up a step-ladder. . . . It is an integration in which the black man will have to prove himself in terms of *these* values before meriting acceptance and ultimate assimilation. (Emphasis mine, Biko 1988b, 107)

In setting apart his own notions from "the white power structure" (Biko 1988b, 105)—whose only "motive is authority, security, wealth and comfort" (Biko, 1988b, 103), a power structure that has been necessary for the "arrogance that makes white people travel all the way from Holland to come and balkanize our country" (Biko 1988i, 102)—Biko's alternative is "a true humanity where power *politics* will have no place" (emphasis mine, Biko 1988b, 106).

Biko's ideas about power resemble the kind of power that also concerned Kwame Ture when the latter wrote of Black people in the United States, we "shall have to struggle for the right to create our own terms through which to define ourselves and our relationship to the society, and to have these terms recognised. This is the first necessity of free people, and the first right any oppressor must suspend" (Ture and Hamilton 1992, 35). As with Ture, Biko's ideas were not simply "a handbook for the working organizer . . . [to] tell him exactly how to proceed in day-to-day decision-making" (Ture and Hamilton 1992, xv–xvi). On this theoretical notion, also, that people require a particular understanding of power if their freedom is to be meaningful, both thinkers agreed.

But while Ture saw the help of white people "of good will" as instrumental to enabling the power of Black people (Ture and Hamilton 1992, 81), Biko is clear throughout his writings that he is neither practically nor theoretically concerned with the achievements of whites. He notes, while "it may be relevant now to talk about black in relation to white, we must not make this our preoccupation, for it can be a negative exercise. As we proceed . . . let us talk more about ourselves . . and less about whites" (Biko 1988b, 114). Underlying Biko's arguments here is the understanding that there *ought* to be more than just the kind of power that whites currently have. And further, that the imagination and creation of the kind of power that might *positively* sustain freedom and liberation cannot be secured through simply any means, by any simple collection of persons, but by a historically specific, communal attachment.

Where Ture argues, therefore, that whites have a role to play in Black liberation by disabusing themselves as a group, of those "attitudes of white superiority and black inferiority" that had underlain the oppression of Black people the world over (Ture and Hamilton 1992, 81–84), Biko argues that the true responsibility of whites regarding freedom was not, ultimately, toward Black

people but toward themselves. The remaking of power toward a true and sustainable freedom and liberation requires, for Biko, more than simply the coming of white people to their enlightenment in racial solidarity with Blacks. Rather, freedom's power requires whites as equally as Blacks to attend to reconstituting *their own* communal historical, intellectual, and sociocultural infrastructures, and to recalibrating their own internal understandings, not—in the first place—of others, but of themselves (Biko 1988, 36–40).

Solving the Prior Powerlessness

Mabogo P. More has previously noted the connections between Biko and Ture. However, More's (2004) analysis does not direct us at many of the key differences between each thinker's considerations of power, though these differences prove crucial to a theoretical appreciation of Biko's arguments. According to More (2004), for instance, Biko's ideas are connected to Ture's by Biko's definition of "racism as 'discrimination by a group against another for the purpose of subjugation or maintaining subjugation'" (87). But Biko does not get to his conception of the kind of power that is necessary for freedom simply by an examination of its dominating opposite but by an analysis, also, of power's absence.

Biko's examination of the practical circumstance of Black South Africans under apartheid is also a conceptual analysis of the notion of communal powerlessness. It is the distinctive connection that Biko makes between an examination of domination on one hand and an analysis of powerlessness, on another, that gets Biko to the understanding that real freedom ought to require power's remaking into something "just," communally active, and internally self-sustaining.[11] This kind of power would not only be sufficient to the enjoyment of a narrow political freedom but necessary, also, to a more substantive and historically persistent liberation.

"The black world," Biko writes, "is kept in check purely because of powerlessness . . . [and] [p]owerlessness breeds a *race* of beggars" (emphasis mine; Biko 1988e, 92). For Biko, this "powerlessness" is what made the oppression of Black South Africans possible in the first place (Biko 1988e, 89–93). If powerlessness was the conceptual means sustaining the oppression

11. In his 1977 interview with Bernard Zylstra, Biko makes a distinction between a "just" type of power and the narrower political power that was also attached to political distributions and "political equality." For Biko, "just power" or what I am calling "rightful power" precedes, and is required for, the proper functioning of "political power" (124).

of Black South Africans, then the dominating system of fear and oppression was, itself, not the ultimate cause of the suffering and enslavement of Black people; it was simply the practical mechanism through which the latter were executed (Biko 1988e, 87–93).

Biko agreed with thinkers like Fanon that the reason why the assimilation of Black South Africans into the existing political structures could not solve even the immediate problem of political and economic injustice and disenfranchisement was because it was not capable of resolving their more fundamental cause (Fanon 2004, 2021). Of his own South African reality, Biko writes, "all in all the black man has become a shell, a shadow of a man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery . . . an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity" (Biko 1988d, 43). "It is . . . fear," Biko writes in another essay, "that erodes the soul of black people in South Africa. . . . It is a fear so basic in the considered actions of black people as to make it impossible for them to behave like people—let alone free people" (Biko 1988e, 90, 87–94). Fear was the system's overriding mechanism, and it was at the core of maintaining the system's principle of ruthless power (Biko 1988e, 88–93).

"My premise," Biko notes

> has always been that black people should not at any one stage be surprised at some of the atrocities committed by the government. This to me follows logically after their initial assumption that they, being a settler minority, can have the right to be supreme masters. If they could be cruel enough to cow the natives down with brutal force and install themselves as perpetual rulers in a foreign land, then anything else they could do to the same black people becomes logical in terms of the initial cruelty. To expect justice from them at any stage is to be naïve. They almost have a duty to themselves and to their "electorate" to show that they still have the upper hand. (Biko 1988e, 88)

Biko, further, agreed that what made the system's domination total and effective was precisely that its operation of fear was not restricted to the psyche of Black people (Biko 1988e, 93; Fanon 2021, 118). However, of the mechanism of fear by which oppression was practically carried out and sustained, Biko's arguments point to an even more prior cause—a cause located in what oppression revealed about the fundamental, *historical* condition of the subjugated. For Biko, oppression was the outcome, fear was the mechanism, but the real cause was powerlessness. Powerlessness *allowed* for the dominating fear to be systemically, psychologically, possible at all, and this was because powerlessness was not borne merely individually but, more fundamentally, communally (Biko 1988b, Quest, 104).

"We are oppressed not as individuals," Biko states, "not as Zulus, Xhosa, Vendas or Indians. We are oppressed because we are black. We must use that very concept to unite ourselves to respond as a cohesive group. We must cling to each other with a tenacity that will shock the perpetrators of evil" (Biko 1988b, 113). For Biko, liberation and true freedom required the rejection of the "individualistic . . . approach to life" (Biko 1988b, 112) and in its place the recreation of an active and persistent communal agency over, and from within, the group's own self. This is Biko's outline to righting power, and it is the bedrock of his ideational solution to both the historical and normative problems of power and powerlessness.

For Biko, the opposition between the power of domination and the power required for freedom is underscored not only by the fact that the former is not internally, communally self-sustaining but, further, because for its own manifestations, the power of domination requires rightful power's absence. It is why Biko is not concerned with a simple, practical filling in of status quo power but with its conceptual remaking (Biko 1988k, 169). "We do not have" and do not want, Biko states, "the power to subjugate anyone. . . . Racism does not only imply exclusion of one race by another—it always presupposes that the exclusion is for the purposes of subjugation. Blacks have had enough experience as objects of racism not to wish to turn the tables" (Biko 1988b, 114).

In remaking power, Biko's focus is distinctly communal. He notes, "in oppression the blacks are experiencing a situation they are unable to escape *at any given moment.* Theirs is a struggle to get out of [an historical] . . . situation and not merely to solve a peripheral problem as in the case of the liberals. This is why blacks speak with a greater sense of urgency" (emphasis mine, Biko 1988h, 37). Biko's historical experiential understanding of communal belonging, and of suffering, further grounds his conceptions of true liberation's internally communalist basis. There is "the false premise," Biko writes, "that because it is difficult to bring people from different races together . . ., therefore achievement of this is in itself a step forward towards . . . total liberation. Nothing could be more irrelevant and . . . misleading (Biko 1988h, 36). For Biko, the historical and experiential communality of oppression required, also, a distinctly internal, communalist conception of freedom and liberation (Biko 1988h, 39).

Out of Biko's arguments emerge a positive reimagining of power as part of a communally active, internally sustained solution to both domination and powerlessness. We are a "people existing in a continuous struggle for truth," Biko notes, "we have to examine and question old concepts, values, and systems" (Biko 1988b, 108). If the apartheid South African reality

revealed anything theoretically, it was that the achievement of Biko's Black Consciousness ideal of a "completely non-racial egalitarian society" depended on a communalist reconceptualization of true freedom's source (Biko 1988k, 169).

An Ideal of Free Community

In this section, I argue that a communalist ethos underlies the second interlocking structural element of Biko's thought. Notably, this ethos was also ingrained in the philosophical writings of Anton Muziwakhe Lembede, with whom Biko had been immersed "even before Fanon came onto the scene of anti-colonial writing" (Ahluwalia and Zegeye 2001, 463; More 2014, 191; Pityana 1988, 9).

The "Universe," writes Lembede, [is]

> one composite whole . . . an organic entity, progressively driving towards greater harmony and unity whose individual parts exist merely as interdependent aspects of one while realising their fullest life in the corporate life where communal contentment is the absolute measure of values . . . life strives towards unity and aggregation; towards greater social responsibility. (Lembede 1996a, 59)

This understanding, Lembede would later note, should not be confused with the "'materialistic conception of History that conceives of Man as essentially an economic animal'" (Lembede 1996b, 85). A similar understanding seems to inspire Biko when he states, "I must emphasise the cultural depth of Black Consciousness. The recognition of the death of white invincibility forces blacks to ask the question: 'Who am I? Who are *we?*'" (emphasis mine, Biko 2017, 118). Biko goes on, in "our search for a just system we . . . speak of collective enterprises" (Biko 2017, 123–24)—a new "communalism" that rejects the dominating enterprise of both capitalism and communism (Biko 2017, 123–24). Conceptually, what Biko calls a "new model" places all society's historically distinct and underlying communities in internally sustained relations of sociocultural, intellectual, and political equality with one another (Biko 2017, 124).

Through his analysis not only of South Africa but of racial domination in places like France and Spain, where a so-called minority rights had also enabled the demarcation of the African populations there into both a demographic and an *ethical* minority status (Biko 1988e, 90–91), Biko is clear that the racial oppression of Black people was a historical condition precisely

because their powerlessness was a *communal* characteristic that had bound them to "*perpetual* servitude" (emphasis mine, Biko 1988b, 108).

The communal nature of powerlessness meant that the question, for Biko, could not be freedom from domination by any subset of persons, at a given time, but freedom sustainably, historically, all together communally. Biko's Black consciousness ideal conceptualises an historical liberation that is not delimited by any geo-temporality but that enables a continuously self-sustaining emancipation for all persons and communities. In Biko's theoretical structure, it is by the resource of an historical community that people are made either rightfully powered and persistently secured in the potential of their freedom or powerless and perpetually enslavable.

Indeed, Biko's concern with communal power is instrumental of a more fundamental reconceptualization of freedom, for the purposes of historical liberation, as communally constituted. For instance, Biko's distinctions between the "heart" as the seat of freedom and the "mind" as the tool of an oppressor's manipulations is also a distinction between the communality of liberation and an active individual mental consciousness and participation in the establishment and maintenance of the communal terms of that freedom (Biko 1988b, 108).

Again, echoing Lembede that man "is body, mind, and [communal] spirit" (Lembede 1996b, 85), Biko's arguments search for what makes a man "free at heart"—in other words, what makes a person free communally, such as to prevent them not from enslavement in a single instance but from enslavability *in essence* (Biko 1988b, 108). Biko repeatedly voices this concern with the notion of an *enslavable* humanity—questioning "what it is in him [the black man], that is lending him to denigration so easily" (Biko 1988d, 42–43; 1988k, 163). This denigration—although felt individually, convincing the black man "of his own . . . inabilities" (Biko 1988d, 42)—is, in Biko's thought, a "spiritual," communal "poverty" (Biko, 42). A poverty endured in the lack of an active participation by Black people in their own "schemes, forms and strategies" relating to "all aspects," sociocultural and historical, for "life" (Biko 1988b, 108–109, 112).

Communal Introspection and Historical Liberation

In Biko's theoretical framework, a communal enslavability is countered only by the collective thought and participation of the oppressed, such as to make the "black man see himself as being *complete* in himself"—that is, in his individual *and* communal self (emphasis mine, Biko 1988b, 103, 108).

Biko notes, "the first step . . . is to make the black man come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity; to remind him of his complicity. . . . This is what we mean by an inward-looking process. This is the definition of Black Consciousness" (Biko 1988d, 43).

This introspection, however, is not primarily of the individual self but is a fundamentally communalist procedure. "One of the basic tenets of Black Consciousness," Biko emphasizes, "is totality of involvement" (Biko 1988b, 113). The oppressed, Biko states, must "rally together . . . and . . . operate as a group to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude" (Biko, 108). For Biko, historical liberation requires not simply a generalised solidarity but "a strong solidarity" among the oppressed in their own communal understandings, definitions, and innovations to the "status quo" (Biko 1988b, 106–12; 1988d, 43–44).

The communalism of Biko's thought gives deeper meaning to "Biko's constant critique of [white] liberal oppositional politics" and his dismissal of the anti-apartheid stance of white progressives (Cloete 2019, 111). "No one," Biko writes, "is suggesting that it is not the business of liberal whites to oppose what is wrong. However, it appears to us as too much of a coincidence that liberals—few as they are —should not only be determining the *modus operandi* of those blacks who oppose the system, but also leading it. . . . To us it seems that their role spells out the totality of . . . white power structure" (Biko 1988b, 105–106). I disagree with existing interpretations that see Biko's view as simply the outcome of his "resentment of white domination" and its dismissal of the "significance of language for the African self-understanding" (Cloete 2019, 109). A more coherent understanding is that Biko's arguments here are an integrated part of the communalist structure to his examinations of power, powerlessness, and the self-sustaining possibilities for historical liberation.

Biko's ideational exclusion of white oppositional politics is a "coming down" in the structural power of whites because it involves their removal from the communal participatory space of Blacks. This interpretation gives deeper meaning to Biko's understanding, stated earlier, that racism "presupposes . . . exclusion . . . for the purposes of subjugation" (Biko 1988b, 114). The exclusion of whites from the liberatory space of Blacks is integral to the understanding that the historical liberation of Blacks must be determined on the basis of *their own* internal participation within their own communities (Biko 1988k, 163), just as the liberation of whites requires from them, also, an internally communalist focus.

"All true liberals," Biko writes, "should realize that the place for their fight for justice is within their [own] white society. The liberals must realize that they themselves are oppressed if they are true liberals and therefore they must fight for their own freedom and not that of the nebulous 'they' with whom they can hardly claim identification" (Biko 1988f, 80; 1988h, 40). The communal identification for Biko is not simply ideational but historical and experiential (Biko 1988a, 67; 1988g, 60; 1988h, 34). And it is what explains Biko's understanding that it "is not as if whites are allowed to enjoy privilege only when they declare their solidarity with the ruling party. They are born into privilege and are nourished by and nurtured in the system of ruthless exploitation of black energy" (Biko 1988f, 80).

This power of unearned privilege is the status quo power sustaining unfree, exploitative society. It is a power not internally, communally self-sustained but expressly feeding off the "deliberate oppression, denigration and derision" of others (Biko 1988f, 75–80; 1988h, 35). Ultimately, the power sustaining unfree society is the power to participate in and to define the terms of communities to which one, neither historically nor experientially, belongs. It is the power to usurp the self-determining agency of others over, and within, their own communities (Biko 1988d, 43; 1988f, 75–80; 1988h, 33–35; 1988k, 163).

Biko's thought proposes an ideal of liberation through a complete communal participatory reconfiguration (Biko 1988a, 63) that sees the communities of Black and of white South Africans, for instance, forming a true "synthesis" of mutually rightful power held by all persons in an honest, internally generated, and complete understanding of each individual and communally sustained self (Biko 1988b, 106–8).

Biko notes, one "must immediately dispel the thought that Black Consciousness is merely a methodology or a means towards an end. What Black Consciousness seeks to do is to produce at the output end of the process real black people who do not regard themselves as appendages to [oppressive] white society" (Biko 1988a, 65). Black Consciousness, therefore, is an end in itself—an ideal in which all persons are meaningful "co-architects of a normal society where man is nothing else but man for his own [individual and communal] sake" (1988h, 35; Biko 1988g, 55–61).

With respect to the liberation of whites, therefore, Biko notes that the white "liberal must apply himself with absolute dedication to the idea of educating *his white brothers* that the history of the country [will] . . . have to be rewritten at some stage" (emphasis mine, Biko 1988h, 40). If South African society was serious about real equality, about a genuine freedom, then white

South Africans would also need to be *collectively* serious about knocking down their own false and harmful sociohistorical, cultural, and intellectual understandings that they had sustained about *themselves* and that had resulted not simply in the instance of the apartheid structure but were part of its very historical possibility (Biko 1988a, 62–67; 1988b, 106–107; 1988h, 33–34). It was on this communally self-regarding participatory basis alone that both communities could establish a "mutual respect" of each other as equals in rightful power (Biko 1988h, 35; 2017, 119–20).

The Participatory Responsibility and Resource of Free Community

Out of the communalism that underpins Biko's thought and his ideal of Black Consciousness emerges an ideal of free community. These are communities of historical and experiential belonging through which each and all persons are kept liberated—by their own active and continuous participation —from the historical possibility of their oppression. Free communities are those whose historical, sociocultural, and communally educative redevelopment form the basis of a true and truly free "humanity" in Biko's thought (Biko 1988b, 103–14).

It is important to emphasise that Biko's ideas were not concerned with freedom and liberation solely as they related to apartheid South Africa. It is clear that Biko's ideas are also motivated by wider historical and conceptual considerations when he notes that the "importance of black solidarity to the various segments of the black community must not be understated" (Biko 1988a, 66; 1988f, 86). This globally conscious communalism is at the centre of what Biko called a "correct perspective" and understanding of oppression, freedom, and liberation (Biko 1988d, 42).

This perspective, Biko notes, did not simply focus on the present moment of apartheid (Biko 1988d, 41). Nor did it "waste time dealing with [the immediate] manifestations of material want of the black people" (Biko 1988b, 106; 1988d, 42). Rather, it focused on the problem of oppression as a fundamental "spiritual," communal condition (Biko 1988d, 41–42; 1988e, 90). The real problem to be solved was not liberty—economic or otherwise—here and now but a historical perspective to communal and individual emancipation. Embedded in Biko's Black Consciousness ideal is a new historical procedure for systemic transformation, motivated by the search for a truer, communally based sense of freedom (Biko 1988d, 41–46).

But it is the history of South African apartheid that most substantively frames Biko's conceptions. The fundamental reason, Biko notes, why Black

South Africans had endured "300 years of deliberate oppression" was not because they were legally, politically, and economically repressed; this was just the *observable* subjugation (Biko 1988h, 35). Underlying this was a more fundamental lack of a communally self-determining sense of freedom by which each individual could be internally secured (Biko 1988h, 35).

If Black people were not free individually, at the root was the fact that they were not active participants to free communities. Their understandings of themselves, individually and as a group, were no longer derived from, and sustained by, their own "strong," persistent, bottom-up "grassroots" participation (Biko 1988h, 35) in the continuous historical understanding and development of "their efforts, their value-systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook to life" (Biko 1988a, 63). In fact, they were no longer part of communities where each was jointly at the centre of society, where people were not—individualistically—divided in competition against one another and against themselves, where intimate communication about all aspects of life was shared and enjoyed "for its own sake," and where each action jointly oriented toward the "quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life" (Biko 1988g, 55–57).

In being unwedded from free community, Blacks were also bereft of an active and "complete" sense of "freedom of [communal] self-determination" (Biko 1988h, 35) that could ground each person's ability to be free also, *in* themselves (Biko 1988a, 63), to be "judged in terms of standards" for which they were—participatorily—"responsible" (1988g, 60; Biko 1988d, 44). The ideal of free community that gives structural and conceptual coherence to Biko's ideas is that in which all persons, by their own participation, become capable of a communally self-generating and, therefore, historically sustainable protection against their own enslavement and oppression.

By this internal communal participatory procedure is the historical liberation of each community guaranteed. For Biko, this is the historical function of any community and one's identification with that community—to guard against one's own *enslavability* and the historical possibility of a people's eradication. As Biko argues, "further implications of Black Consciousness are to do with correcting false images of ourselves in terms of Culture, Education, Religion, Economics. . . . We must, therefore, work out schemes not only to correct this, but further to be our own authorities rather than wait to be interpreted by others" (Biko 1988a, 66–67).

This is the Bikoan basis of the ideal of free community. "The output" of which are to be "real . . . people . . . who are . . . aware [by the participatory terms and standards of their own communities] that they too are people"

(Biko 1988a, 65). This interpretation gives greater meaning to one of the most famous parts of Biko's final public interview of August 1977. He states, "we don't believe . . . in the so-called guarantees of minority rights. Because guaranteeing minority rights implies recognition of portions of the community on a race basis. We believe that in our country there shall be no minority, there shall be no majority. There shall just be people. . . . It will be a completely non-racial egalitarian society" (Biko 1988k, 169). For Biko, this egalitarian nonracialism, bringing all persons back to a *single* "human" line (Biko 1988b, 114), is achieved only in a fundamentally communalist society, where each is capable of determining and sustaining their personhood by "full expression" of each internally generated communal self-understanding (Biko 1988h, 38).

The internal work of free community is concerned with an educative historical restoration, with the persistent renewal of the community's historical memory and knowledge of the collective self, and from which an intellectual, sociocultural, and mental "pride" (Biko 1988a, 63) is resourced. "Thus," Biko notes, "a lot of attention has to be paid to our history if we black *want to aid* each other in our coming into consciousness" (emphasis mine; Biko 1988b, 111). Contained in this collective effort (Biko 1988b, 113) is the recreation of power both as the individual's ability to be free simply *in* themselves (that is, by their participation in the communally substantiated understandings of their own standards, values, and ideas), and the collectively sustained emancipation of those very communities in whose positive development each person is actively, rightfully engaged (Biko 1988d, 44; 1988h, 35).

It is this theoretical substance that also seems to underlie Biko's practical considerations, when he notes, as president of SASO, that part of SASO's core aims would be "where possible to put into effect programmes designed to meet the needs of the non-white students and to act on a collective basis in an effort to solve some of the problems which beset [us] . . . individually" (Biko 1988m, 17). More expansively, Biko notes there "is a lot of community work that needs to be done in promoting a spirit of self-reliance and black consciousness among all black people" (Biko 1988l, 52). This collective participatory development would entail, among the oppressed, the reconstruction of their history. Biko states,

> part of the approach envisaged in bringing about Black Consciousness has to be directed to the past, to seek to rewrite the history of the black man and to produce in it the heroes who form the core of the African background. To the extent that a vast literature about Gandhi in South Africa is accumulating, it can

> be said that the Indian community already has started in this direction. But only scant reference is made to African heroes. A people without a positive history is like a vehicle without an engine. (Biko 1988d, 44)[12]

Not only would the redevelopment of free community need to be focused on the substantiation of a pride-giving history, it would need also to be concerned with a "concrete" cultural restoration (Biko 1988b, 111). This, for Biko, would need to "relate the past to the present and demonstrate a historical evolution of the modern black man" (Biko 1988b, 111–112). Biko notes, there "is a tendency to think of our culture as a static culture that was arrested in 1652 and has never developed since. The 'return to the bush' concept suggests that we have nothing to boast of except lions, sex and drink" (Biko 1988b, 112).[13] "We must seek to restore to the black people a sense of the great stress we used to lay on the value of human relationships" (Biko 1988f, 85) for the "oneness of community . . . is at the heart of our culture" (Biko 1988d, 44). For Biko, if true liberation and freedom requires historical reeducation, this reeducation requires, also, communal refounding.

It is by the notion of free community that Biko's theoretical ideas about the historical reeducation of the oppressed, and their self-sustained liberation, are held together. Ultimately, it forms the conceptual foundation for his solution to historical and communal powerlessness and is the communalist fulfilment of his Black Consciousness ideal. The ideal free, liberatory community is formulated neither on a stagnant historical view of itself nor on a passive sociocultural view of its members. Rather, it inspires, and is inspired, by, the moral, intellectual, and sociocultural innovations of its members (Biko 1988b, 112), and it informs the honest and "freely changing society" (Biko 1988h, 38).

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12. By a "positive history" Biko means an honest history. That is, a sociocultural, religious, and political history of Africa and its peoples that is correctly shaped by their own conscious understanding and participation and not by the centered perspectives of others. This is not a history that wishes to paint a false picture of itself and is therefore liable to, itself, becoming oppressive. It is rather a history of a more honest, "concrete," *human* form (Biko 1988b, 109–14).
13. Biko's arguments here substantiate the major point of my disagreement with Cloete's Cabralian interpretations (Cloete 2019, 112). I do not think Biko was interested in a return to a romanticised vision of African history but, rather, in a continuously developing reconfiguration of morally resourceful communities that are drawn out of a correct human understanding of Africa's historical past (see also Biko 1988g, 54–55).

Such communities are "free," not by the say-so of others but by the degree to which—by their own active participation in the development, recreation, and "determined" use of the historical, moral, intellectual, and sociocultural resources of that very community—those who belong to it stand unafraid and unenslavable in the world (Biko 1988f, 82). In sustaining the deserved power of each member, the free community, in Biko's ideas, is that which is capable of protecting from an historical servitude, precisely because it is by a *collective* participation that all persons are assured of their freedom *in* themselves.

Such communities, therefore, have very specific educative, historical, and liberatory functions that are also the aim of their identificatory attachments—they sustainably resource the psychological, historical, and moral resilience, strength, and "energy" of those who belong to them (Biko 1988g, 57). These communities fulfil these functions to the extent that they are, in fact, free—that is, by the extent to which they are actively and internally determined by the sustained participation of those whose self-understanding is experientially and historically embedded in that same community (Biko 1988b, 103–14; 1988i, 102). Through individual uncertainty, free communities supply the spiritual "solidarity" needed to secure each person's freedom in who they are (Biko 1988d, 42–43; 1988l, 53).[14]

Biko's Image of Free Society: A Preliminary Critique

In this section, I briefly outline the image of society that emerges most coherently from Biko's ideas and offer three challenges to his view. The social structure that emerges from Biko's theoretical ideas about what he calls "the freely changing society" (Biko 1988h, 38) is distinctly communalist. Indeed, the society that could be founded on Biko's ideal of free communities without reproducing systems of racial hierarchy and division is that in which "mutual respect" among all free communities forms the foundational, developmental

14. It is not my intention to place Biko within that part of the African philosophy literature that construes African political philosophy and thought to be categorically defined by a concern with community that overwhelms all moral appreciation of the individual (Metz 2007). As Biko states, the culture of Black Consciousness "above all implies freedom on our part to innovate. . . This innovation is part of the natural development of any culture. . . . We are experiencing new problems every day and whatever we do adds to the richness of our cultural heritage as long as it has man as its centre" (Biko 1988b, 112).

basis of all national infrastructures of education, heritage, sociocultural and political dissemination and organization (Biko 1988h, 35).[15]

Mutual Respect and the Joint Communal Reconfiguration

There could be no single national culture in this image of society (Fanon 2004)—Biko is clear that his ideas oppose assimilation into existing structures (Biko 1988h, 38). Moreover, what makes up the "the joint culture of. . . society" (Biko 1988h, 39) are not simply to be those parts among the underlying communities that are determined, from the top down, to be compatible with a dominant ideological order or standard (Biko 1988c, 27; 1988g, 60). Biko declares, the "myth of integration as propounded under the banner of liberal ideology must be cracked and killed because it makes people believe that something is being done when in actual fact the artificial integrated circles are a soporific on the blacks and provide a vague satisfaction for the guilt-stricken whites" (Biko 1988h, 36).

Against this liberal multiculturalism, Biko's ideas suggest a sociostructural reconfiguration whereby, from the self-determining, bottom-up participatory reconstruction of each internal community, a broader interdependent—complexly overlapping—supracommunal integration is evolved. The political ramifications are that out of the "mutual respect" that develops between free communities, in acknowledgement of their self-determining and self-sustaining elements (Biko 1988h, 35), each and all communities become participatorily, in the *fullness* of their communally embedded selves, constituted within all the sociopolitical structures of the joint society (Biko 1988g, 55–61; 1988h, 38–39).

This notion of "mutual respect" is crucial to any structural understanding of Biko's image of society. Biko notes, it

> will not sound anachronistic to anybody genuinely interested in real integration to learn that blacks are asserting themselves in a society where they are being treated as perpetual under-sixteens. One does not need to plan for or actively encourage real integration. Once the various groups within a given community have asserted themselves to the point that mutual respect has to be shown, then you have the ingredients for a true and meaningful integration. At the heart of true integration is the provision for each man, *each group* to rise and attain the

15. This idea is also reflected in Ture's thought when he notes, let "black people organize themselves first, define their interests and goals, and then see what kind of allies are available. . . . There will be clearer understanding of what is sought; there will be greater impetus on all sides to deliver, because there will be *mutual* respect of the power of the other" (*Black Power*, 81).

> envisioned self. Each *group* must be able to attain its style of existence without encroaching on or being thwarted by another. Out of this mutual respect for each other and complete freedom of self determination there will obviously arise a genuine fusion of the life-styles of the various groups. This is true integration. (Emphases mine; Biko 1988h, 35)

Biko's ideas about the correctly integrated, freely constituted, socioculturally enjoined society is structurally underpinned by this mutual respect among equally and rightfully powered communities. And by means of which respect "shall be free participation by all members of a society, catering for the *full expression* of the self in a freely changing society" (emphasis mine, Biko 1988h, 38).

It is by this respect also—flowing naturally up from what is instilled between self-determinedly reconfigured communities—that society structurally sustains its underlying communities. In other words, by the mutual respect between all free communities, so too is the *foundational* order of society reconstituted to be informed by the joint structural participation of all communities in its wider historical, sociocultural, and intellectual systems of understanding.

Persons are not engaged in this society simply through the state's distributive powers. While all members must have civil and political rights (Biko 2017, 126–127), the society of Biko's theoretical framing is centred around the free, communally self-determined, genuine *enjoyment* of such rights on the basis of the substantive intellectual, historical, and sociocultural participation of all communally enjoined persons within all those parts of the society that establish, *foundationally*, a "set of norms and code[s] of behaviour" (Biko 1988h, 38). In this society, the persistent, historical participation of all persons is *intrinsic* to those sociopolitical structures, the equitable enjoyment for which individuals require the rightful power of belonging in free communities. By the mutual respect of free communities, then, is Biko's "colourless and non-exploitative egalitarian society" (Biko 1988b, 104)—where "people" are simply "people" (Biko 2017, 118)—structurally sustained.

Three Preliminary Critiques

My first concern is that the image of society that emerges from Biko's ideas places a great deal of responsibility on the capacity of human reasoning—whether individually or all together. Biko's thought seems to assume that simply on the basis of the internally regenerated community, *others* will see that, by that self-determination alone, the community and its members are due the kind of respect that grants a wider array of participatory rights.

Some of Biko's arguments presage this problem. For instance, Biko laments the political situation in South Africa where whites, including liberals, could not be counted on in the "progress towards peace, prosperity and a sane society" (Biko 1988e, 91) because, Biko notes, there would be those "who are governed by logic for four and half years but by fear at election time" (Biko 1988e, Fear 91). This lack of stable reasoning keeps the system going in a "vicious cycle" perpetuated by fear, and political and material interest (Biko 1988e, Fear, 91–92). Yet, Biko's arguments do not seem immediately to solve the problem.

Second, there is not, in Biko's arguments, an adequate theoretical solution to the potential for divisiveness *within* communities. The development of free communities, Biko recognises, requires the coalescing function of interdependent civil, historical, and political organizations within each community. These establish the broad intellectual, sociocultural, and historical understandings within and outside each respective community (Biko 2017, 120–21). However, Biko is unclear by what precise criteria we might discern between competing visions and understandings as these arise within each community.

Given Biko's adherence to the notion that a positive freedom must be also nondominating (Biko 1988h, 35–39), it is surprising that his arguments do not as systematically deal with the kind of domination that might arise internally to communities. Indeed, it is a core part of Biko's communalist structure that "all blacks must sit as one big unit, and no fragmentation and distraction from the mainstream of events be allowed" (Biko 1988b, 113). First, such an argument departs from the type of unromanticised thinking about African history that much of Biko's thought embraces (Biko 1988g; Wiredu 1997, 303), never mind with respect to the histories of all historically oppressed peoples. Second, it seems to undermine the key communalist element of Black Consciousness's liberatory procedure that is concerned with an honest historical reconstruction if—for oppression's resolution—South Africa's ethnolinguistic groups, for instance, must speak undivided and not "as Zulus . . . Xhosa . . . Pedis" (Biko 1988k, 165–66).

One coherent explanation is that because, for Biko, "the common experience of oppression" is the main experience that unites and communally binds all Black and historically oppressed peoples, whatever historical and sociocultural distinctions as exist among these must, nevertheless, be purposed to a *collective* emancipation (Biko 1988g, 60). Still, in the ideal "colourless" society that is, yet, organised on the basis of sociohistorically distinguishable communities, it is not clear by what fundamental set of values, standards, and aspirations even those within groups will extend the power of participation to

one another. Thirdly, therefore, it is also unclear by what criteria each community will be made externally, societally respectable.

Biko's arguments are not insensitive to the problems faced by his ideational structure. With respect to my latter queries, Biko notes plainly that there have been "a lot of suggestions that there can be no viable unity among blacks because they hold each other in contempt. Coloureds despise Africans because they (the former), by their proximity to the Africans, may lose the chances of assimilation into the white world. Africans despise the Coloureds and Indians . . . Indians not only despise Africans but . . . also exploit [them]" (Biko 1988a, 66). Much of the strength of Biko's arguments, however, rely on an insistence that simply because the Black Consciousness ideal could be necessary to understanding and solving historical oppression—about whose experience many among the oppressed might be agreed—the ideal would be sufficient, also, to *generating* the kind of moral understanding and respect within, and between, the diversely constituted free communities "sane" postcolonial society demands (Biko 1988e, 91).

Conclusion

This article aims to deepen our critical appreciation of Steve Biko as an original political thinker whose substantive theoretical contribution to our understandings of historical oppression and resistance is the reimagination and reconfiguration of the self-sustaining communalist dimensions of freedom and liberation in participatory postcolonial society. The article introduces a new synthetic reading and interpretation of Biko's political ideas and argues that they were framed by two interlocking structural elements—rightful power and free community. I argue that a theoretical and conceptual understanding of both elements lead to a normative reformulation of the kind of power, and the communal structures and resources, required not only for solving historical powerlessness and racialised oppression and domination but also for sustaining the individual's freedom and her communal liberation. Both elements, I argue, are at the substantive core of Biko's Black Consciousness ideal, the positive outcome of which are people who, by their own active participation—and that of numerous collective others—are persistently secured in a free, self-determined, self-sustaining understanding of themselves and their communities. By the historical liberation of these communities do Biko's ideas also secure the social, political, foundational, and participatory integration of all persons into the sane postcolonial society.

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