

Whither the black consciousness movement: exploring the theme of black consciousn...

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The current discourse around #FeesMustFall is often fuelled by Biko's philosophy on being black and the role of white people in the struggle. The piece "Whither the Black Consciousness Movement?" (1977) is Mandela's response to these views from inside prison. He praises Black Consciousness in some regards and also criticizes it. His praises pertain to more specific practicalities, such as the movement's success in taking initiative towards projects and implementing effective strategies of engaging with the black community. His criticisms on the other hand deal with more concrete and ideological points such as its originality, its approach to white people and its tactics for liberation. However, these criticisms ignore some fundamental points made by Biko. The most pertinent of these points is that the black man should psychologically emancipate himself, it is not possible to realize independence while being led to this realization by those who benefit from the system of oppression. I first unpack Mandela's praises and then his criticisms.

Mandela praises the Black Consciousness Movement for its quick call to action and for timeously advancing "beyond plan-making and [taking] a bold initiative on a wide front" (Mandela, 1977). He also commends the movement for achieving great support amongst the youth and for its ability to carry out many mass projects with success. He says that what makes this achievement even more impressive is that it emerged during a time when "the enemy had become ruthless" (Ibid.) and "mass political activity had been stamped out" (Ibid.). The BCM defines somebody as black, not only if they are African, but if they are of colour meaning that they suffer the oppression and subjugation of the apartheid system. Mandela sees this as a

very strategic move as this decision to make its membership accessible to any person who falls into this definition of blackness defies “ government policy, which seeks to restrict the development of each ethnic group within the framework of its separate enclave” (Ibid.). Mandela goes on to criticize the fact that the BCM rejects the claim that white activists can protest apartheid in the with the same strength as black people and that the movement believes all white people to be complicit in the oppressive system. However, he commends that the result of this distinction between black and white for it has meant that “ the black youth had finally broken the links with liberal white student opinion” (Ibid.) and how this means that the government gave BCM more leeway. The Black People’s Convention published magazines like ‘ Black Review’ and the bulletin ‘ Inkululeku YeSizwe’. Respectively, these sought to observe, engage with black peoples live and also encourage self-reliance. Mandela recognizes that “ these publications constituted a powerful propaganda machine and brought the BCM into close contact with various sections of the black community” (Ibid). He also notes that this is just one of the movement’s innovations with regards to politicising black people and spreading their message. Another technique of politicising that Mandela note as being powerful and necessary is the use of art and culture as he agrees that this form of activism can be extremely inspiring. On this point he seems to agree with Steve Biko that “ the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed” as he praises the publications and artwork which seek to liberate the black mind from the clutches of whiteness. It is clear that Mandela does praise the Black Consciousness Movement for achieving practical success

and shows a reasonable degree of recognition for its significance during the political climate of the time.

Despite these apparent praises, Mandela ultimately is highly critical of the Black Consciousness Movement. The reason why I say that his criticism outweighs his praise is because the nature of his criticisms attack the fundamental ideals of the movement while his praises deal with more superficial practicalities. He objects to the Black Consciousness Movement on three points. The first is its originality, the second is its position regarding white liberals and finally he implies a degree of naivety. On the point of being original Mandela refutes the idea that Biko's definition of black and the unity of people of colour is a great change. He notes the strong relationships between the African People's Organisation, Natal Indian Congress and the African National Congress. A further blow on the point of originality is that Mandela claims that "the concept of Black Consciousness advocated by the BCM is imported from America and swallowed in a lump without regard to our concrete situation" (Mandela, 1977). It is true that black South African's have a different history to that of African Americans; however, it is not true that the Black Power Movement of the USA and the Black Consciousness Movement of South Africa follow homogenous doctrines. The BPM possessed the defining feature of militancy as a reaction to white supremacy. Whereas BCM does not purport the use of violence in any form. It is more philosophically inclined than BPM and highlights the psychology of the average black South African while BPM focuses more on prominent figures in the African-American community. Mandela makes the claim the claim that

the two are extremely similar because of their attitude that all white people are beneficiaries of apartheid and therefore their fight against racial inequality cannot take on the same form of activism. He says that white activists have, in the past, sacrificed their lives for the struggle against apartheid and that “ to dismiss such martyrs as oppressors is a crime most South African freedom fighters find difficult to excuse” (Ibid.). This point does not truly deal with BCM’s position on white people. No where does Biko say that white people cannot join the movement, but he does say that it will be with less urgency than their black counterparts because white people are not fighting for their right to be treated like a human, but rather fighting on the grounds of morality. Even though white people may oppose the system, even die in for its destruction, they still continue to benefit from it while “ the system derives its nourishment from the existence of anti-black attitudes in society” (Biko, 1978: 97). Furthermore, even Mandela notes the difference in police treatment towards whiten and black activists. Mandela also states that BCM is driven primarily by rhetoric and slogans and that there is “ plenty of arrogance in their speeches” (Mandela, 1977). He claims that they are driven primarily by youth and that their ideas are “ peddled by youngsters who entered politics only in the 1970s” (Ibid.). He also criticizes them for not mobilizing in an army, as he claims this is the effective way to overthrow apartheid. This criticism is not sound as it is not necessarily true that a youthful participation is inseparable from naivety. Furthermore, he seems to ignore the fact that BCM is not a political party, but an ideological movement which does not see the antithesis as apartheid, but rather deep roots of white supremacy, and the thesis not as an assimilation into South Africa, but

a total reimaging of the system. Although Mandela's points of criticism attack more fundamental ideas in BCM, they are not strong objections.

Mandela's objections to BCM are not sound. In fact, he even appears to contradict himself on the point of the expectations of white liberals by explicitly noting how they are treated differently by the police. His point on originality in terms of unity amongst people of colour in South Africa does hold, however; he overestimated the similarity between BPM and PCM. He also seems to ignore the ideological goals of the movement, while expecting them to act in the manner of a militarized political party. His praises do not deal with such concrete points, but his ultimate praise is that BCM has managed to maintain its legality by separating itself from white liberal students. Although his criticisms attack more substantial points, the manifesto of BCM is more robust than Mandela's criticism of it.