

[Kunnie on Biko, 'I Write What I Like: Selected Writings'](#)

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Steve Biko. *I Write What I Like: Selected Writings*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. xxxiii + 216 pp. \$17.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-04897-0.

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Steve Biko: Irrepressible Revolutionary African Giant Still Relevant Today

I Write What I Like, a collection of writings and speeches from the work of South African/Azanian Black Consciousness pioneer, Steve Biko, originally published in 1978, remains one of the monumental pieces in the history of writing about black liberation in the world. As Lewis Gordon describes the book in the foreword, it is "a classic work in black political thought and the liberation struggle for all humankind" (p. vii). Desmond Tutu hails Biko in the preface as the "father of Black Consciousness," a movement that he argues was "surely of God," and Thoko and Malusi Mpulwana introduce the book by explaining that black solidarity is still urgently needed in the current context of post-apartheid society, particularly as erstwhile atomized identities from diverse segments of the black community vie for recognition in the shaping of a different society. They salute this re-publication of Steve Biko's writings as an apt tribute to the legacy of African heroes and heroines who sacrificed their lives for the cause of liberation from white colonialism: Albert Luthuli, Mthuli KaZhezi, Ongopotse Tiro, Mapetla Mohapi, Griffiths Mxenge, Victoria Mxenge, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, and the nameless others whose lives were snuffed out by apartheid's torturers and assassins. This book has timely significance especially in the wake of the discourse on a "raceless democracy" that has dominated South Africa since 1994, an uncritical euphoria propagated by the leadership of the African National Congress-led government that refuses to confront the reality of black landlessness and disempowerment twelve years after the country underwent its first democratic elections. Black people, though 86 percent of the population, still own less than 10 percent of the land that is held by the white minority and less than 1 percent of the nation's economy.

The book is specifically relevant for its publication of the perspicacious and candid insights by Biko, one of the most brilliant African thinkers of the twentieth century, whose life was literally beaten from him by apartheid police in September 1977. Biko was the unequivocal symbol of the radical segment of black resistance to apartheid colonization in South Africa. The Black Consciousness Movement that he, along with other black radicals, engineered in the late 1960s and through the 1970s was responsible for the eruption of the Soweto insurrection in 1970s, a watershed in resistance politics to white supremacy. The Black Consciousness Movement was underpinned by some of the most creative intellectual and political organizations of the time, such as the South African Students Organization, the Black Peoples' Convention (of which Biko was honorary president and which he helped found in 1972), and Black Community Programs in Durban (Thekwini) in the southeastern province of Kwa-Zulu Natal. He was banned by the apartheid regime in 1973, but refused to submit to the draconian system of banning and banishment. He continued to be active in his hometown of King Williams Town following his banning, founding the Zimele Trust Fund (Zimele means "Stand on your own feet!" in Xhosa) and the Impilo Community Health Clinic at Zinyoka outside King Williams

Town. The Impilo Community Health Clinic successfully provided medical services to the indigent Black community in the area, many of whom were deprived of basic health care under the insouciant system of apartheid.

I Write What I Like is not only a foundationally informative and instructive educational book; it also is poignant in that it recalls us to the days of one of Africa's greatest sons whose life could not be spared under any circumstance by colonialism, since he was too intelligent, too revolutionary, to be contained in any singular apartheid prison cell. Biko signified the most radical potential of clack confrontation with oppression, albeit in a non-violent mode. His appeal to the masses of the black poor, especially the youth, was irrepressible, the result of which inevitably was the fostering of subversive black revolution; he therefore had to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom, as Stubbs describes it, "a martyr of hope" (p.154).

The philosophy and rationale of Black Consciousness is clearly articulated in the book, with the detailed outlay of SASO (the South African Students Organization), its role and function in the rebuilding of a liberated Azania (the term used to describe a future and independent South Africa within the Black Consciousness and Pan Africanist movements, derived from the old African-Asiatic word *zang* that was used to describe the southern tip of the African continent by people from the fourteenth century). Biko's well known phrase, that "Blacks are tired of standing at the touchlines of a game that they should we playing ... They want things for themselves and all by themselves" (p. 15) marked a sharp repudiation of the totality of white supremacy in South Africa during the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, where Biko found it totally incredulous that "Not only have they (whites) kicked the Black but they have also told him how to react to the kick" (p. 66).

Black Consciousness was critical in checking the onslaught of white liberals who both pretended and claimed that they fully understood the suffering under apartheid and how best to overcome it, an arrogance that Biko found abominable since whites were in a clear defined minority and were colonial invaders of a land belonging to Indigenous African people. White liberals were the people who, in the words of Biko, "say that they have black souls wrapped up in white skins" (p. 20). It is Biko's forthrightness about this anomaly of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa that is so cogent, when he asseverated that whites calling for integration and reciprocity was like "expecting the slave to work together with the slave-master's son to remove all the conditions leading to the former's enslavement" (pp. 20-21). Biko's incisive critique of the fundamental pitfalls of white liberalism that myopically refused to see the role that white liberals themselves played in apartheid's perpetuation and from which they all benefited regardless of class, philosophy, and culture, is a bitter pill to swallow for many white activists in solidarity movements with oppressed people of color today. Biko's rationale was crystal clear: the problem was not with black people, but with "WHITE RACISM," and that until such time that white liberals summoned the courage to challenge the edifice of white supremacy and the white racism of their own communities, they had no business in making pious recommendations for action to black people. Biko was adamantly opposed to any group of settlers determining the values and culture of an Indigenous people that the settlers have colonized (p. 24).

What Biko demanded was a vigorous opposition by the black community to the white colonial system as opposed to the existing reticence and diffidence that was characteristic of much of the black community in that era, a passive adjustment to the anomaly of apartheid as opposed to a ceaseless resistance against it. As he put it, black people had to face up to the truth squarely that they had

become complicit in the crime of allowing themselves to be abused in their ancestral land (p. 29). Hence his clarion call for the philosophy of Black Consciousness that "expresses group pride and the determination by the Blacks to rise and attain the envisaged self ... the realization by the Blacks that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed" and hence it "makes the Black man/woman see himself/herself as a being, entire in himself/herself, and not as an extension of a broom or additional leverage to some machine" (p. 68). Black Consciousness sought to inculcate independent standards for black civilization uncontaminated by the pathology of white oppression and colonialism, and to establish a liberated and independent society predicated on Indigenous African values and social evolution. Integration into white society that was predicated on exploitation was not healthy for black society, Biko argued (p. 90). It is in this vein too that Biko insisted, like Martin Luther King Jr., "no group however benevolent, can ever hand power to the vanquished on a plate" (p. 90). Black Consciousness called upon black people to take principal responsibility for their own freedom and to reject the "beggar tactics" imposed on the black community by white liberalism, armed with the SASO cry, "Black man/woman, you are your own!" (p. 91).

For those recent historical and contemporary critics who charge that Biko was obsessed with "racial essentialism" and that he did not fully advocate the overthrow of the capitalist system, it is critical to note that Biko rejected white values that were synonymous with the culture of domination, oppression, and exploitation as extant in colonialism and capitalism. This is precisely why he contended that the integration that whites were calling for and urging black people to join was fundamentally flawed: "an integration based on exploitative values ... in which Black will compete with Black, using each other as rungs up a step ladder leading them to white values ... in which the Black person will have to prove himself/herself in terms of these values before meriting acceptance and ultimate assimilation, and in which the poor will grow poorer and the rich richer in a country where the poor have always been Black" (p. 91).

Biko was conscious that those from the white capitalist world, the corporate world of "Coca-cola hamburger cultural grounds" (p. 91), were bent on defining what was best for Africa and for Indigenous people. The black solidarity that Biko called for was revolutionary, fully aware that there were elements within the black community who were willing to assume the role of middle men and women in the white man's system of slavery and capitalism. He would argue that a black policeman serving the forces of apartheid ceased to be "black." In this sense, he was instrumental in re-defining the ontological and existential meaning of blackness, from the superficial association of skin color and tacit acceptance of subjugation and subordination to a protracted tireless resistance to the concept of "non-whiteness" and its ineluctable derivative, oppression, imposed on black people by white supremacy and the apartheid system. Biko was also conscious that the Eurocentric system foisted on black people entrenched alien values of individualism and selfish materialism. For instance, he pointed out that universities were largely propagating such values in conditioning students to pursue individual vocations with money as the prize (p. 145).

The observations in my preceding paragraph underscore that Steve Biko (akin to Pan African revolutionary thinkers and strategists like Patrice Lumumba and Malcolm X, and in the tradition of freedom fighters like Nehanda and Sojourner Truth, Lilian Ngoyi and Harriet Tubman) was keenly aware of the manner that the capitalist system would tantalize and seduce members from the oppressed group with the perks offered by joining the ranks of the oppressor ruling class. His

interview in chapter 18 with a British journalist points to his insistence that the liberated Azanian society be an egalitarian society, rooted in a socialistic dispensation where there was a radical redistribution of wealth. He believed that if there was "a mere change of those in governing positions what is likely to happen is that Black people will continue to be poor and you will see a few Blacks filtering through into the so-called bourgeoisie" where "the society will be run as of yesterday" (p. 149). Biko's vision held that there would be a "judicious blending of private enterprise which is highly diminished and state participation in industry and commerce, especially in industries like mining-gold, diamonds, asbestos, and so on--like forestry, and of course, complete ownership of the land" (p. 149).

The struggle of the Black Consciousness Movement was for an independent Azania where the stolen land of South Africa would be returned to the Indigenous people, where wealth would be radically redistributed in a socialistic dispensation of social and economic justice, and where race would no longer be used as a point of reference. Biko argued that the Black Consciousness Movement provided no guarantee for white minority rights; rather, those whites who desired living in South Africa would need to live as Africans do, and on African terms, to undo the anomaly that made South Africa "like an island of Europe in Africa" (p. 145). What Biko was urging was a non-racial redefinition of South African society that was so psychologically wounded, economically tortured, and socially atomized by white racism and exploitation that an entirely new socio-economic foundation had to be constructed--one that was located in the heart of Indigenous Africa and one which all people who were not Indigenous would need to wholly embrace and live within.

Black Consciousness is more urgent in post-apartheid South Africa today than ever before, especially in its successful ability to unify the diverse segments of the Black community into a cohesive black unit, so that "Coloreds" and "Indians" see themselves as black (now curiously only full-blooded Africans are viewed as "black" in the post-apartheid order) and in its refusal to accommodate "neo-liberal" capitalism (or what I call "neo-colonial" capitalism) that has been the framework for the post-apartheid ANC-led government in South Africa leading to the continuing impoverishment of the black working classes, ongoing landlessness, and enrichment of a tiny black managerial and corporate class. It is still unacceptable that a public holiday in honor of Steve Biko has never been deemed fit by the South African authorities even though Biko's Black Consciousness Movement was the singular most important force to propel the youth of the nation into becoming actively involved in the gyration of the liberation struggle and that produced the climate for the emergence of "post-apartheid democracy" as we know it.

Biko's lucid psycho-social analysis of the condition of black oppression and white racism recalls the historic and irreplaceable critiques of theorists like Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, and W. E. B. Du Bois. His explication of concepts of black theology as a rebuttal to white colonial Christianity and his critical insights into the role that coercion and terrorism (chapter 12, "Fear--An Important Determinant in South African Politics"), his thoughtful repudiation of the Bantustans as an extension of apartheid colonialism (chapter 13), and his fearless testimony at the trial of the nine members of the Black Peoples Convention and SASO who were charged under the "Terrorism Act" (a testimony that became part of the Manifesto of Black Consciousness), cumulatively make us realize what an intellectual giant he was, even while being a towering physical and community figure. His assassination was a deep and unforgivable loss to all liberation-seeking people in the world, especially black and other indigenous peoples. His spirit lives on, yearning for a liberated Azania and

Africa.

The one oversight that *I Write What I Like* reflects is the book's disregard of the central role of women in liberation struggles, an area that all of us who are revolutionaries now fully understand in hindsight. Unequivocally, Biko was a product of his time, like all freedom fighters. Had he lived today, I am convinced that he would be deeply sensitive to the question of the oppression of women, the cornerstone of all revolutionary movements. This was a weak point in the overall movement of Black Consciousness that also weakens its thrust today. The question of Indigenous African women and the culture of African women are still cardinal points in the advancing of revolutionary struggle and signify one of the most decisive avenues of extricating South Africa from the clutches of Western economic and cultural imperialism and the doldrums of the desperate but surely moribund capitalist system, for black working-class women are still the carriers of revolutionary culture, always doing much with little resources available.

Ultimately, in the words of Biko himself, the Black Consciousness struggle was about humankind's essential right to a life in fullness and wholeness, a philosophy with which the majority of the world (85 percent of them who remain colonized and without telephones and computers) can wholeheartedly identify. "We have set out on a quest for true humanity, and somewhere on the distant horizon we can see the glittering prize. Let us march forth with courage and determination, drawing strength from our common plight and our brotherhood [and sisterhood]. In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest gift possible--a more human face" (p. 98).

The ANC-led government in this new millennium needs to urgently ponder this profound statement and its leaders would do well to recall their own ancestral African roots in the projection of the future South Africa/Azania. The preventable deaths of hundreds of thousands of people from AIDS and millions of people with HIV, is a scourge upon the face of Africa, in Africa's wealthiest country. Steve Biko's spirit cries out for justice for these, the most vulnerable and oppressed in the continent of the cradle of human civilization.

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