

Biko's Inheritance: Who Are the True Heirs? (A Response to Console Tleane)

Mcebisi Ndletyana

Console's paper is simply too intriguing to resist engaging with, and I doubt that Console intended his paper to be the last word on this subject. Frankly, Console makes assertions and inferences that are simply too specious and inconsistent not to invite a response.

Chiefly, Console's analysis shows a pitfall that one suffers when looking at history through today's eyes, driven by contemporary imperatives. The weakness is that he doesn't give due credence to the circumstances as they prevailed at the time, but downplays them because they don't validate his present thoughts and project. Console is interpreting history backwards, taking his present circumstance as the premise, then moving regressively, looking for everything that validates him, whilst belittling, if not ignoring, that which disproves his thoughts or political inclination.

The thrust of Console's argument is that, for the purpose of providing context, the Biko Foundation (hereafter, referred to as the Found) is not articulating Biko's ideas accurately. A proper articulation would be one that links Biko to a political project, particularly a socialist one. For, according to Console, Biko was a socialist. The evidence for this conclusion is: 1) Self-revelation through his own writing, and 2) Subsequent adoption of socialist ideals by peers, which means that Biko would have also taken the same path.

Does Biko's own writing reveal that he was a socialist? I took Console's wise counsel and read *I Write What I Like*. The boldness of the "Socialist Biko" assertion actually belies the supposed evidence. In his article: "Our Strategy for Liberation", which supposedly provides definitive evidence, is rather vague on this question. In fact, it locates Biko more on the side of the Charterists than the Socialists. Indeed, as Console cites, in this article Biko does decry the poverty of black people and suggests that: "... for meaningful change to appear there needs to be an attempt at reorganizing the whole economic policies within this particular country". Sounds socialist, doesn't it? But, don't rush to conclusions yet, for Biko wasn't done. He continued: "BPC believes in a judicious blending of private enterprise, which is highly diminished and states a participation in industry and commerce, especially in industries like mining – gold, diamonds, asbestos and so on... Now in the kind of judicious blending of the two systems we hope to arrive at a more equitable distribution of wealth".

Surely, this doesn't mean that Biko was a socialist. If so, then we may as well say that the Freedom Charter is a socialist document, as it stipulates the same thing as Biko. In fact, Biko could even be mistaken to have been reading from the FC. Nor, is Biko's statement any different from the RDP. On the contrary, it's in sync.

Let's cast our eyes at yet another supposedly authoritative piece of evidence, the "The Righteousness of our Strength" contained in the same book. Here

too, Biko denounces the parasitic nature of capitalism, citing Britain as an example: "...the few people who controlled industry in Britain went rampant throughout the country ... making themselves rich, and of course the government got rich, but the people didn't get rich. The people got poorer, and this is why in Britain now more than in any other country ... have been gradually returning a more socialist government, which is against exploitation of people. People are you know restoring the whole process, the wealth must come back to the people". Again, Biko's view hardly passes as evidence of a raving endorsement of socialist orientation. By returning a more socialist government, one assumes he was referring to the worker-friendly Labour Party, which was at the time by no means socialist. Yes, center-left and thus closer to the socialist ideal, but not socialist. The FC, which also called for the return of wealth to the people, was also informed by the very center-leftist orientation of the LP, which was quite dominant in the aftermath of the 2nd World War as a reconstruction measure and intended to cater for the large pool of the unemployed through welfare services and employment in state-owned enterprises.

The bottom line is that Biko's writing doesn't resoundingly affirm him as a socialist as Console so comfortably and authoritatively tells us. The author is seeing socialist intentions where none existed. Biko's political project and ideology appear to have been still in formation, not yet solidified. He admired a center-leftist project, (today's social democracy or thirdway) of the 1940s-60s LP, the same way the FC expressed. Again, if one sees Biko as a socialist, on account of the aforementioned writings, then the FC too would have to be clustered in that category. After all, I repeat, there's not difference between Biko's writing and the FC.

Console attaches Socialist ambitions to the young Biko because he's reading history backwards, nicely assenting some historical events over others in order to lend credence to his current political project. Take his treatment of the community projects (CPs), for instance. He attaches marginal importance to that, hurling all sorts of misnomers – i.e. backward and primitive. He ascribes the existence of community projects solely to the unresponsiveness of the apartheid state to black people's needs. True, but this is not the only thing to be said about CPs. They assumed a far greater significance than simple spin-offs arising from the failure of the state. CPs were an exercise in self-reliance and a demonstration of self-initiative, which apartheid alleged was non-existent in an African personality. Thus CPs were an actualization of a central tenet of BC, not marginal as the author suggests. This was an integral part of the cultural politics of the 70s. BC intended to re-awaken the mind and ready it for political action. The direction of that political action and ideological content were undefined. The transition from a cultural to political movement only followed in the 80s, but it was defined differently and none achieved hegemony even to this day. I elaborate on this later.

Console's analysis represents a classical example of selective reading of history guided by a current project. Console clearly has nothing but disdain for a non-interventionist state, which is what the apartheid state could be described as in relation to the African needs, whilst the opposite could be

said regarding whites. For Console to celebrate CPs, therefore, would be an endorsement of a non-interventionist state, which would of course stand in conflict with his political project. Thus he denies them of their significance to affirm his project.

Then, after sifting through Biko's thinking, Console quickly cautions that Biko should not be interpreted outside of the BCM. He was part of the collective and thus articulating, not his personal ideas, but that of the collective. Therefore, whatever ideological stance or political project that the collective subsequently developed, in the aftermath of Biko's death, can also be ascribed to Biko, for he was on the same wavelength as his peers. That's possibly true, one's ideas don't differ much from one's contemporaries. But then the problem is that his peers went on to posit different interpretations of what BC's political project should be. Some gave it an overtly socialist orientation – ie. Azapo. Others, reading BC as an endorsement of a center-leftist project, joined the ANC.

Now, here's the question: Whose interpretation is authentic? Who are the true heirs of the 70s BC legacy? On what basis does one decide some are true sons of BC and others imposters? Keep in mind that neither can claim precedence over the other. None can convincingly claim that the 70s was an unqualified support for either project, for a political project and ideological content, was undefined in the 70s.

Moreover, even the Socialist descendants of BC weren't sure if they had interpreted BC's political project correctly. As Console tells us there continues to be splits with some arguing for the return to CPs. This shows that the socialist orientation never attained hegemony even within the Socialist camp, hence several splits one after another. And each claims to be the true heir of BC. How do you decide?

Now, let's turn our attention to the Biko Foundation, which Console charges not only of distorting, but also of annihilating Biko's memory. The basis of this charge is that the Foundation is not linked to a socialist project, which Biko supposedly and undoubtedly espoused. The "Biko Socialist" claim, as I've shown above, is specious. Nor should we believe this claim simply on the saying-so of some of his peers, as Console wants us to. After all, some say he wasn't. Even those who say he was are themselves not unanimous on this claim, hence they continue to splinter into several formations with each claiming authenticity over the other. Therefore, some within the BC camp hold a similar interpretation of Biko as the Foundation. And who is to say that the matured Biko would have followed the center-leftist crowd? After all, there isn't a deterministic relationship from between adherence to BC and being a socialist. BC adherents, who held the same non-socialist views as Biko in the 70s, later went into different directions. Thus the conclusion that the Found.'s work is a gross distortion of Biko, is specious at best and deceptive at worse. The author simply allows himself far greater liberties than are warranted.

Console fails to prove what he set out to prove, but simply highlighted a

continuing dispute over ownership of Biko's memory and competing interpretations attached thereto. It's a good commentary on the politics of memory, but fails as a repudiation of the Foundation. The more the paper seeks to repudiate the Foundation, the more it reveals itself as a lobby for one interpretation amongst several, with each claiming equal ownership. I suspect the only reason that the Foundation has earned the author's contempt is that it is not validating his socialist project.

This brings me to my last and general point about the current use of the imagery of revolutionary/historical figures. Does their commercial use necessarily sap them of their revolutionary impetus? Not necessarily! The author is being highly reductionist here to the point of being myopic and thus oblivious to other gains. In as much as some exploit revolutionary icons for commercial gain, the popular use of their imagery does inspire causes that are revolutionary in other respects. The significance of revolutionaries goes beyond the cause for which they stood to a larger icon that epitomizes general defiance of the status quo in search of an alternative. Biko's imagery of self-definition, I would argue, has been harnessed, as Nthabiseng Motsemme brilliantly illustrates in her paper, by young black women to re-define black sexuality through fashion.

This is revolutionary on the feminist front as it defies patriarchal definitions of a proper dress-code for black women, which in most cases tended to de-sexualise women – a belief that promotes their genital amputation in some parts of our country and continent. Through fashion, these women are taking ownership of their womanhood, assenting a sexuality and independence that our patriarchal society has sought to suppress. Of course, there's a commercial gain invested in this venture for some and the attire also reflects one's class status, as Nthabiseng pointed out. But, this is not the only aspect to it, for a reductionist perhaps it's the only thing worth commenting on. A broader scrutiny of this phenomenon, however, shows that it also heralds a revolutionary move on the feminist front. The point is that a revolutionary icon can be harnessed for progressive causes other than the one initially intended. And this is not desecration of memory, unless of course one thinks that revolutions are needed just in one aspect of society.