

LIBERALS AND CONSCIOUSNESS

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The 'specific exclusion' of white persons in black institutions sounds counter intuitive to a theory or philosophy that aims to dismantle racist ideology. For the former notion at first glance seems too imply an opposing racist or racial ideology of anti- white or reverse apartheid. What the essay will aim to do is flesh out what Steve Biko meant about the specific exclusion of white people and outlines the context of South Africa in 1970 which support this claim. Furthermore the project will discuss the justification of this claim and the possible objections to black consciousness.

Apartheid South Africa in 1971 is a highly racialized and racist society; South Africa at the time is a society rife with racially motivated metaphysical, epistemic and moral injustices.¹ Miscarriages of justice in the forms of death squads and undefined detentions without court order, socio-economic injustice where the factors of production and means for economic appropriation are unequally divided or concentrated in the hands of the white minority.² There is systematic discrimination of black people institutionalised in the migrant labour systems and Bantustans policies, aimed to firstly segregate blacks and whites socially but also use black people as means to white economic ends. The immorality act and separate amenities act aimed to separate amenities to distinguish white superiority and enforce black inferiority. Along the same vein these acts perpetuate a white purity through anti-miscegenation laws, and further assert the black man's subservient and sub

citizen place in apartheid South Africa. The Bantu education act systematically aimed at the creation of the quintessential "non-white person" in South Africa, trained to obey and not 'know' his place and role in society, according to Biko to serve white goals in body and in soul.³

This describes a society which formulates all its structures whether on economic, political or social structures based on an ideological foundation of racial segregation and in that a hierarchical relationship of subordination. Drawing from Miranda Fricker's ideas on hermeneutical injustice a theory that suggests that in an imbalanced society where power is dominated by a specific interest group. All knowledge and structures such as courts, parliament and legislature that form the resource pool that society use to understand themselves in relation to their society and their own personal identity.⁴ Render, usually but not exclusively, marginalized peoples intelligible in understanding or communicating their grievances.⁵

For example if in a patriarchal society male dominance is espoused as a norm and in that woman play a subordinate role in society. Woman in this society are thus deprived of generating knowledge and by virtue of their exclusion in hermetical resources generation are potentially rendered incapable of forming concepts for their experiences in society. For example in a patriarchal society, a woman who is sexually abused or raped 'within marriage', insofar as the society sees woman's as a subordinate to men's will or desires. Would not recognize this abuse as a real violation of a person's rights, that has moral implications and in that requires to be noticed. This is because according to Miranda Fricker, it is not in the interest of the group in power to recognize these problems thus they ignore or warp the ability for



woman to conceptualize their violation.⁶ In that, limit woman's ability to use/ form what is now known today as 'marital rape' as a permissible concept and tool to rectify and communicate their problems to others and themselves.⁷

If Biko holds that, yes identity is self-determined but external factors such as social position, in this case pigmentation, act strongly to what contents are included in self-determination.⁸ Then Bikos argument follows that the process of interpretation of self, metaphysically and morally are different for white and black people due to the nature of the systems they live.⁹ The contrasting narratives of black and white in the apartheid system ran parallel to one another in that the former and latter only had their own perspectives to understand themselves. Biko suggested that South African society created a black man who was spiritually disempowered.¹⁰ This was due to Biko's notion of 'spiritual poverty' – derived from an inability to act freely and think individually.¹¹ For insofar as he is treated as an 'object' in that given sources of understanding of his being that are "flawed", not generated by his own process of social hermeneutical resources generation. The content of his identity is morphed or stripped from him thus, his

human potential of freedom or autonomy of creation of self is undermined.

By that very logic Biko suggests that the black man in a warped social, economic and political structure sees himself as inferior for all 'injustices are imposed on him' as a result of his 'blackness'.¹² The white man on the other hand was within a structure where all legislature and forces were at his disposal. He was, or at the least had the potential and capacity to be involved in the process of hermeneutical resource structuring. In that he could plea violence or civil rights violation at any of the injustices that the black man suffered.

The value of 'identity' or more correctly understanding of self informs both our understanding of personal identity.¹³ Further it informs our perception of others identity that then informs our interaction with other people. Biko thus highlighted the structure of apartheid South Africa, which through a process of socialization, created a system where black and white were habitually separated and in that understood each other in a vertical relationship of inferior and superior.¹⁴

Biko suggested that due to this 'vertical relationship' the resources of understanding that inform interaction placed white and black in different positions in society.¹⁵ Thus the liberal white could not make or understand the black problem of oppression because the system gave him potentials and rights that did not subject him to the injustices suffered by those perceived as black.¹⁶ It is important to note the injustice is placed on those who are black because they are black and the privilege to those who are white because they are white. The white man thus could sympathise, but never fully be because he was white in a system which structurally and ideologically informed

the white man of his dominance and privilege and the opposite thereof for the black man.¹⁷ Thus the black experience can only be had by black people therefore a white person can never by virtue of the apartheid system know what the experience is.

Supplemented to this Biko purported, that due to the inability to be black and thus understand the gravity of the 'black' grievance.¹⁸ The White man implicitly or explicitly uses his white perspective and frames a black narrative and direction for emancipation based on his ideology or 'false or insufficient' 'understanding of the black struggle'.¹⁹ Thus for Biko and Miranda in order to raise consciousness about the black emancipation the grievance must be put forward by black peoples.²⁰ For in a society that oppresses black people because they are black people the institutions that aim to raise consciousness about these grievances must be black.²¹ For to form hermeneutical tools and resources to assist in understanding the cause and the means by which to achieve black emancipation - those who are oppressed must consolidate and understand what their grievance is and in that how and who they must fight against to overcome this grievance.²²

Then white liberals cannot in the system of apartheid necessarily 'identify' with black people and thus articulate and communicate to themselves and others the black grievance. This speaks to the dissonance that Miranda speaks of where for example in the patriarchal system, if woman band together to raise consciousness about the abuse against woman.²³ It would follow that woman as the victims of abuse are then the ones who are able to fully articulate or describe the grievance.²⁴ If men were the parties articulating what they perceived as the grievance for woman within an institution for woman abuse - there

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is a tension between how far a man can articulate a grievance that only a woman can experience within the context of the marital rape example. Therefore in the same way white people who are not black and thus cannot know oppression cannot lead institutions that are meant to generate knowledge about the oppression.

Biko suggested the white liberals went as far as to describe or proscribe the means, methods and goal for black people's emancipation.²⁵ This passive engagement directed by the white liberal firstly narrates the black struggle in a false path of independence, based according to Biko on the false premise that a colour blind society will change South Africa.²⁶ This assertion reduces the black struggle to a plea which presents its case to the white powers - who then will decide what to do with the black problem.²⁷

Liberals aim for integration without destroying an imbalanced system, attacks the straw man of apartheid for the problem is the systems and how do you integrate people whilst the system designed to separate still exists?²⁸ Thus white involvement is counterproductive to conscious raising and the black liberation struggle. In that white people cannot grasp the black struggle because they are not black and thus cannot by the hermeneutical structures that be fully, fight for the black struggle in the same way as black people 'must'. This statement suggests white people can fight for the struggle thus they are not excluded but must do so in their own way.²⁹ Biko suggested that if the white liberal aimed to assist the black person

he should begin to challenge and change the white misconception of superiority and not to control the black institutions.³⁰

The question that is usually posed to black consciousness is whether it fosters black exclusivity. This question I argue is unfairly placed, for in an imbalanced society balance is gained though a counterweight not by adding feathers to the other side claiming there is something on the other end but in actuality those things make no difference. That is the agenda of creating a colourless society without tackling the real systemic issues. Thus to counter balance the misconceptions of black culture history and identity real concepts should be created by a black institution to add to the black identity. The question is how far does black empowerment go and when do all colours become equal?

Another question then is – are other ‘races’ unable to understand or conceptualise the oppression of other races and in that assist on the basis of morality? The essay suggests that one must first distinguish your goal and then decipher whether this stance is logically true or is it justified by other means. To deal with the former the essay holds that although it may be difficult for the oppressor to identify with the oppressed for their experiences are not the same. The oppressed can in particular cases identify a moral injustice and act in kind for example Mr Schindler in the Schindler’s list a German man who assists Jews in a Nazi regime with his financial resources. Thus even though he was not Jewish he could still identify an injustice and in that acted on a moral judgment. Although moral identification may be possible why can white people not on moral obligation join the institutions?

If Biko’s goal is the strengthening of the black man to regain his independence and in that of black



institutions This is a mission to identify with being ‘black’ (defined as all those who are oppressed) not to discard pigmentation as if this will bring real change.³¹ This aimed to recognize ‘black oppression’ as not only a conceptual injustice but a process or subject that includes different economic social and political injustices.³² The flaw of the liberal apart from falsely purporting to know the black struggle is the goal for integration.as if pigmentation and all concepts and socio-economic factors that are connected to it will disappear with a shift in ideology or attitude in how peoples perceive one another.³³

Thus by Biko’s definition of black peoples as those who are oppressed economically, socially and politically through the apartheid system.³⁴ Then the essay would suggest he is justified. In excluding liberal whites on two levels, A, the tension of dissonance, whereby in order to be in a black institution one

needs to be black in order to articulate the experience. Secondly in the feather analogy in order to build conscious real understanding of self must follow to counterbalance the misconstrued understanding of self that the apartheid system has induced. The essay holds this justification insofar as you have a divided system like apartheid South Africa where the disempowerment of black people and the root of their ‘spiritual poverty’ is living lives of dependence on white persons and system. Thus white participation in black institution is reproducing this dependence and subtly a case of spiritual poverty.

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ENDNOTES

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4 Miranda Fricker, Chapter 7, ‘Hermeneutical Injustice’, of *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing*(Oxford University Press, 2007), p.150-151

5 Ibid.p.167-168

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