

# DESTROYING THE TADPOLE PHILOSOPHY

by **ROBERT FATTON JR.**

**In this piece, Dr Robert Fatton Jr – the author of *Black Consciousness in South Africa: The Dialectics of Ideological Resistance to White Supremacy* (Albany: State University of New York Press: 1986) – analyses the Black Consciousness Movement in occupied Azania during the 1968–1977 period. Dr Fatton's distinctly Gramscian analysis is offered to you for criticism and debate.**

The repression unleashed by the white state in the early 1960s against the nationalist movements of African liberation created a political vacuum. The banning of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) in 1960 left the African population without any viable means of protest and internal opposition. This absence of challenge to apartheid profoundly shaped the political development of the mid-1960s. It provoked the ascendancy of a small class of white liberals bent on defending what it perceived to be the interests of a defenceless African population. It induced an African political opportunism manifested in the rise of a bantustan administrative elite. Finally, it permitted the consolidation of the repressive machinery of white supremacy.

## Birth of BC

Yet it was clear that neither white liberals nor Bantustan leaders obtained the support of the African masses. Not surprisingly new forms of resistance emerged and crystallized in the Black Consciousness Movement. Indeed, by the end of the 1960s a new generation of Black youth began to articulate the necessity of an intellectual and psychological liberation from white-bourgeois hegemony. Blacks had reached a stage of crisis by discovering a series of existential anomalies which deviated from the expectations generated by white liberal discourse. The existential anomalies had reached such massive and egregious proportions that Blacks abandoned liberalism altogether. It was in this context that the Black Consciousness Movement was born.

What I seek to do today is to analyze the ideological development and radi-

calization of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) of South Africa, which emerged during the late 1960s with the formation of the South African Student's Organization (SASO) and crystallized in the Black People's Convention (BPC). The whole movement was eventually banned by the white minority regime in 1977 in the aftermath of the Soweto Rebellion of 1976. Nonetheless, several organizations rooted in the tradition of Black Consciousness such as the Azanian People's Organization (AZAPO) and the National Forum (NF) crystallized in the late 1970s and early 1980s to fill the vacuum created by the banings.

## Moral Anger

The ideological manifestations of the Black Consciousness Movement are essential to any understanding of contemporary South Africa, for the content of this consciousness will have a lasting and decisive impact on the unfolding political and revolutionary struggle, as well as on the institution of a racially liberated South Africa. Indeed, such consciousness is a source of moral anger and self-affirmation which embodies an ethical and political standard that condemns the existing social order and offers the vision of an alternative society. Without such consciousness the likelihood of a comprehensive and sustained African challenge to white supremacy is remote. Structural changes in South Africa hinge upon the erosion of the relative legitimacy of white

domination and on the defeat of the sense of inevitability supporting the exploitation of the Black people. For, as Barrington Moore has argued:

*"People are evidently inclined to grant legitimacy to anything that is or seems inevitable no matter how painful it may be. Otherwise the pain might be intolerable. The conquest of this sense of inevitability is essential to the development of politically effective moral outrage. For this to happen, people must perceive and define their situation as the consequence of human injustice: a situation that they need not, cannot, and ought not to endure. By itself of course such a perception . . . is no guarantee of political and social changes to come. But without some very considerable surge of moral anger such changes do not occur."*

The Black Consciousness Movement contributed to such a surge of moral anger; its radicalization became an indispensable spur to Black revolutionary activity. The development of Black Consciousness as a counter-consciousness, channeling the unified opposition of the Black population to the dominance of the white minority, became a fundamental and necessary ingredient in the process of challenging white supremacy. As long as the ideological terrain remains the uncontested territory of the racial myth, few if any structural transformations can be expected.

## Prophetic Ideology

These structural transformations hinge upon the overall negation of the process of social reproduction. Initially such a negation assumes an ideological character which imparts a new moral and ethical vision of the feasible to the human subject. Hence, the importance of ideology cannot be minimized. While ideology may be functional to the exigencies of white supremacy, it need not be so. There may develop among the subordinate classes a counter-ideology, a prophetic ideology, which not only fails to correspond to these exigencies, but also contributes to the general dislocation of the social order. This general dislocation brought about by the convulsions of the ideological realm opens the avenues for profound structural transformation. This is not to say that white supremacy has no distinctive or limiting effect on the formation of this counter-ideology, but rather to maintain that in the revolutionizing of society, the counter-ideology of the subordinate classes weakens the power of the ruling class and propels society toward a revolutionary predicament.

Ideology in this sense must be considered as the expressive means through which men and women make their own history as conscious agents. This does not mean that ideology is completely independent from material conditions, but that it has an autonomy of its own which in turn conditions the historical transformation of society.

## Developing Ideology

In this perspective, the study of Black Consciousness as a counter-ideology of resistance to white supremacy is essential to any understanding of contemporary South Africa. For this consciousness and the forms and shapes that it has assumed will eventually condition the future situation of Black women and men. The evolving nature of the Black Consciousness Movement will also impart a conciliatory or revolutionary, a peaceful or violent, a bourgeois or socialist dimension to the confrontation be-



tween Blacks and whites. By eschewing violence and emphasizing Black cultural and psychological emancipation from white hegemony – to the relative neglect of economic issues – the Black Consciousness Movement was *initially* the vehicle of a Black philosophy of pride and self-affirmation invigorated by an ethic of "Christian Liberation."

Thus, the Black Consciousness Movement embodied the ideals of Negritude and the Christian message of salvation – the beginnings of the Kingdom of God to be struggled for here on earth as well as enjoyed in Heaven. The Black Consciousness Movement opposed the white ascendancy of apartheid on a cultural plane and it stressed self-help and the encouragement of cultural organizations. However, it gradually developed an understanding of the material conditions of life, and as such the Movement became much more than a mere cultural renaissance. While Black Consciousness drew its early inspiration from both Negritude and Christianity, it came to recognize the phenomenon of class struggle and the fundamental role of man in abolishing oppressive social structures. While the degradation and dehumanization of the Black person by white racism generated a reactive African consciousness which asserted the intrinsic worth of Black people and Black culture, the social gospel of a radical Christianity – a theology of liberation – encouraged the tradition

of African communalism while identifying with the poor against the exploitative structures of apartheid.

Developing against both the structures of capitalist exploitation and the dehumanizing culture of white racism, the Black Consciousness Movement crystallized as a synthesis of class awareness and Black cultural assertiveness. The result was a revolutionary ideology deeply embedded in the prophetic Christian tradition. The ideology, however, with its emphasis on Black culture, identity and self-love, could not by itself destroy the system of entrenched white privilege. While psychological emancipation from white supremacy was a fundamental and necessary stage for political action, it could become an end in itself and develop into a poor substitute for revolutionary strategy.

## Praxis

Black Consciousness, however, challenged the cultural hegemony of the white supremacist regime and it represented the ethico-political weapon of an oppressed class struggling to reaffirm its humanity through active participation in the demise of a racist and capitalist system. As such, Black Consciousness was a philosophy of praxis that attempted to eradicate from the Black intellect the inculcated submissiveness that contributed to its own enslavement. Not surprisingly, the Movement directed great attention to cultural and psychological is-



sues: it asserted that the liberation of the Black people would begin only when their mental constructs of their own inferiority ceased to guide their historical conduct. The Black revolution which the material structure made latent could only be activated by the transformation of the Black intellect. Thus, the revolution would occur only if the Black mind stripped itself from submission to white hegemony and erected on its own foundations the principles of the new moral order.

As Steve Biko, the father of the Black Consciousness Movement, explained:

*"Black Consciousness is an attitude of mind and a way of life . . . Its essence is the realization by the Black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their oppression – the blackness of their skin – and to operate as a group to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It is based on a self-examination which has ultimately led them to believe that by seeking to run away from themselves and emulate the white man, they are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them Black. This philosophy of Black Consciousness therefore expresses group pride and the determination of the Black to rise and attain the envisaged self . . . On his own . . . the Black man wishes to explore his surroundings and test his possibilities – in other words to make his freedom real by whatever means he deems fit. At the heart of this kind of thinking is the realization by Blacks that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed."*

From Biko's perspective then, Black Consciousness and Black morality meant the realization of an understanding that the emancipation of Blacks and the liberation of society as a whole required the mental renaissance of the Black intellect. This understanding also meant the development of a Black political will which, if necessary, would generate a massive insurrection culminating in

the overthrow of white supremacy and the ushering in of Black hegemony.

The Black Consciousness Movement effected therefore a massive process of intellectual and moral reform. Such reform represented a profound cultural transformation whose objective was to change the masses' conception of life, politics, and economics. Accordingly, it sought to usher in a new social and moral vision and to restructure the role and place of the hitherto subordinate and dominant classes. Such massive transformation embodies what the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci called in a different context the "cathartic moment" of liberation. This is the moment when the "structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives."

## New Hegemony

The "cathartic moment," however, is neither spontaneous nor mechanical; it requires the dissemination of a new hegemony and hence the emergence of a new intellectual elite. This elite constitutes the thinking and organizing group of intellectuals who articulate the programmatic aspirations of one of the fundamental classes of society. Accordingly, these intellectuals clarify the ideas and objectives of the class to which they are organically linked. They contribute to the transition of a class in itself into a class for itself. Therefore, the organic intellectuals generate a new and potentially revolutionary self-consciousness. Again, let me quote Gramsci:

*"Critical self-consciousness means, historically and politically, the creation of an "elite" of intellectuals. A human mass does not "distinguish" itself, does not become independent in its own right without in the widest sense, organising itself; and there is no organisation without intellectuals, that is without organisers and leaders, in other words, without the . . . existence of a group of people "specialised" in*

*conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas. But the process of creating intellectuals is long, difficult, full of contradictions, advances and retreats, dispersals and regroupings, in which the loyalty of the masses is often sorely tried."*

It is this complex and difficult process of intellectual renewal and creativity which fundamentally characterized the Black Consciousness Movement. The youngsters who comprised the Movement represented the ascending organic intellectuals of the coming Black revolution.

Thus, it would be wrong to equate the Black Consciousness Movement with a mere cultural renaissance; it was indeed more than that. Black Consciousness recognized the centrality of the material conditions of existence and it was precisely because of these that it rejected collaboration with whites – however well intentioned they may have been. Because whites did not experience first-hand and could not 'feel' the predicament of being Black – not simply because of their pigmentation, but above all because of their exclusive and abusive bourgeois privileges – they could not join in the struggle of the Black masses. Being Black was not determined by colour alone; it was determined by the daily experience of enduring oppression as a class of exploited peasants and urban workers. A white could sympathize with a Black, yet economic advantages almost inexorably kept him white; as such, he remained at best a paternalistic reformer and at worst, a conscious exploiter.

In this perspective Black Consciousness rejected the multiracialist strategy advocated by the African National Congress. Black Consciousness perceived the idea of alliance and collaboration with whites as unrealistic and indeed impossible. Rejection of multiracialism, however, did not imply acceptance of the Africanism espoused by the Pan African Congress. Unlike Africanism which emphasized an exclusively African struggle against white supremacy, Black Consciousness went beyond the confines of race and Africanness.

The notion of 'Blackness' which decisively moulded the Movement's outlook, was embedded in both the consequences of being Black in a white supremacist state and the realities of material exploitation derived from a racial capitalism. As such, the concept 'Black' came to encompass all of the exploited, irrespective of their Africanness. Asians and "Coloureds" – people of mixed racial descent – were previously regarded with skepticism and ambiguity by the Africanists, but were fully integrated into the Black Consciousness Movement provided they accepted their Blackness. Moreover, the term 'Black' was not attributed to all Africans. In fact, the Movement reserved the pejorative term 'non-white' to define those Africans, Asians and "Coloureds" who collaborated with white authorities. Accordingly, the Black Consciousness Movement condemned the African bureaucratic elite of the bantustans for its incorporation into and acceptance of the political structure of apartheid.

Black Consciousness emphasized not merely race as a decisive factor in the struggle against white supremacy; it also stressed the interracial linkages preserving and enhancing the given racist reality. Thus, class as well as race occupied a privileged position in the BCM analysis of South African society. In this sense, the BCM departed from the purely racial attitude and strategy of Africanism. Being African was not a sufficient condition to qualify as a Black; to be Black implied a determined antagonism to apartheid and the political will to eradicate it.

## Tadpole Philosophy

Thus, the economic structures of apartheid maintained white minority solidarity, and tended to divide Blacks into opposing but not necessarily antagonistic strata. In their endeavour to preserve their newly acquired status of wealth and power, Blacks of the urban petty bourgeoisie and especially those of the bantustan administrative elite, strove to become whites. Yet, always emasculated and rejected by white racists they degenerated into a particular hybrid – the 'non-white.' The non-whites emulated everything

white and repudiated everything Black. They were, to use Tawney's terminology, the "tadpoles" of history, for they thought that it was possible to:

*" . . . reconcile themselves to the inconveniences of their position, by reflecting that, though most of them will live and die as tadpoles and nothing more, the more fortunate of the species will one day shed their tails, distend their mouths and stomachs, hop nimbly on to dry land, and croak addresses to their former friends on the virtues by means of which tadpoles of character and capacity can rise to be frogs . . . "*

Obviously this concept represented a false conception of apartheid society, for to become a frog in contemporary South Africa the tadpole would have to be born white. The tadpole philosophy, however, sustained the belief in the possibility of material advancement through unfettered personal achievement – though it offered little of either. For a small Black elite, it provided a way out of the misery engendered by a racist capitalism. It did not matter that few Africans escaped from poverty; those who failed to do so had only themselves to blame. Deeply etched in the Black intellect, these myths helped to support and even legitimize economic disparities and white supremacy. No wonder that, bent as it was on transforming the social awareness of Black men and Black women, the movement sought to destroy the hegemony of this bourgeois tadpole philosophy.

Black Consciousness aimed at transforming the stultifying white colonial theology into a Black theology of liberation and, therefore, it attempted to instill in the Black intellect a radical ideology of hope – an ideology without which the recovery of Black self-respect and humanhood was impossible.

## Ideology of Hope

This preoccupation with the creation of an ideology of hope from which a new Black culture would spring, ex-

plains the emphasis that the Movement placed on the solidarity of the oppressed. For, economic and political liberation, indeed Black liberation itself, required Black cultural hegemony. Black Consciousness sought to create a social order in which the Black way of life and thought would be dominant, a social order in which the Black concept of reality would be diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all taste, morality, customs, religious and political principles, and all social relations, particularly in their intellectual and moral connotation.

Hence, the goal of the Movement was the ultimate hegemony of Blackness as an ethico-political conception of liberation. As Biko recognized, the issue was not integration in the existing white-dominated system, but rather to revolutionize the system into a Black creation:

*"Blacks no longer seek to reform the system because so doing implies acceptance of the major points around which the system revolves."*

*"Blacks are out to completely transform the system and to make of it what they wish. Such a major undertaking can only be realized in an atmosphere where people are convinced of the truth inherent in their stand. Liberation therefore, is of paramount importance in the concept of Black Consciousness, for we cannot be conscious of ourselves and yet remain in bondage."*

Thus, Black Consciousness became a revolutionary theory. Its immediate task was to make possible the complete transformation of the white system and the liberation of the Black people. The problems involved in this restructuring of society as a whole were immensely complex, requiring much more than the mere negation of the negativities created by institutionalized racism. Black Consciousness was in fact the antithetical stage in the long and difficult process of dialectical liberation. As such it contradicted the thesis – white racism – and yet, it remained conditioned by white racism itself. This is why Bennie Khoapa understood the Movement



as a series of "transcendent negations":

*"Paradoxically, a prerequisite for human solidarity is a feeling of non-solidarity with men who stand in the way of solidarity. Paradoxically, the oppressed can only bring about a future of universal brotherhood in proportion as they feel and exhibit group solidarity with the enemies of human solidarity . . . History has charged us with the cruel responsibility of going to the very gate of racism in order to destroy racism – to the gate not further."*

Thus Black Consciousness was not merely an attempt at establishing a total cultural hegemony, it was also a radical cry for the transformation of the capitalist structures supporting apartheid. In addition, the Movement was a situational philosophy of praxis and as such subject to modification, progression, and retrogression. Finally, Black Consciousness entailed the necessary reaffirmation of the humanity of Black people and the indispensable rediscovery of the rich history of Africa.

## Revolution

The hegemony of the white ruling class which installed into the Black mind a sense of inadequacy and inferiority had to be eliminated, and a new Black identity had to be constructed to take its place. A general political crisis had to be engineered to contest the foundation of white supremacy and ultimately to strip it of its aura of legitimacy. In this context, the first phase of the revolutionary emancipation of Black South Africans resided in the struggle for ideological hegemony; a struggle which had to erode the colonial mentality established by years of white domination and which had to usher in an entirely new system of beliefs. In a theoretical context, it is at this juncture that consciousness becomes a revolutionary force. In the words of Antonio Gramsci:

*"Man is above all else mind, consciousness – that is, he is a product of history, not nature . . . Man has only been able to acquire a sense of*

*his worth bit by bit, in one sector of society after another . . . And such awareness was not generated out of brute physiological needs, but out of intelligent reasoning, first of all by a few and later by entire social classes who perceived the causes of certain social facts and understood that there might be ways of converting the structure of repression into one of rebellion and social reconstruction. This means that every revolution has been preceded by an intense labour of social criticism, of cultural penetration and diffusion."*

Such an "intense labour of social criticism, of cultural penetration and diffusion" was precisely the task that the Black Consciousness Movement had set for itself. In doing so, it sparked the revolutionary awakening of the Black intellect and challenged the structures of apartheid. Accordingly, the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement indicated that white supremacy was showing signs of vulnerability and exhaustion, and it announced the coming emancipation and liberation of the African masses.

This coming liberation, however, will not constitute an easy process. On the contrary, in spite of its evident and mounting weaknesses, the white regime is still powerful enough to repress dissent and revolt. The future then appears to be full of promises of change, and drastic change, but it is also pregnant with danger and morbidity. Black forces, as of yet, lack the resources and organization to overthrow white supremacy, and simulta-

neously white supremacy no longer has the hegemony to impose its order on an increasingly militant Black opposition. This relative stalemate can only be temporary; in the not too distant future the stalemate will inevitably give way to some form of Black majority rule. Black South Africans will have to determine on their own whether such rule will be socialist or bourgeois, revolutionary or opportunistic, popular or elitist.

What seems certain, however, is that the travail of the BCM has contributed and continues to contribute to the awakening of a socialist, revolutionary, and popular consciousness. While there is no guarantee that such consciousness will result in the ultimate victory of socialism, there is the certainty that it will remain etched on the collective memory of Black South Africans, and thus that it will block the ascendancy of opportunistic and reactionary forces. There is also the certainty that Blacks are no longer prepared to stomach being the victims of apartheid, they are no longer prepared to remain passive, they have become angry and they seek with passion to end their misery. As William Butler Yeats put it: "All changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born."

I am therefore afraid to conclude that violence will be the inevitable detour in the long and painful journey leading to African freedom. This is so because apartheid like slavery cannot be reformed, it can only be abolished, and abolished it will be. **Thank you.**

