

Book review

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Biko: Philosophy, Identity and Liberation, by Mabogo Percy More, Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2017, pp. 306, ISBN 978-0-7969-2571-8

The challenge of systematising and corroborating the philosophical status of Black Consciousness, and of mounting a credible installation of Steve Biko, its most systematic proponent, into the canon of academic social philosophy is a task that has haunted South African black philosophers for many years. Mabogo Percy More has finally grasped the nettle of this challenge with the publication of *Biko: Philosophy, Identity and Liberation*.

Inexorably, in establishing Biko as a philosopher, More had to take the further step of situating him within a particular philosophical tradition. In the Introduction to the text he discloses this: “This book, following Lewis Gordon’s extensive phenomenological work on Frantz Fanon, seeks to locate Bantu Stephen Biko within the philosophical terrain - more pointedly, the Africana existentialist tradition” (p.2). In seeking to locate Biko thus, his thought is re-read and recast through the doctrinal postulations of Goerg W. F. Hegel, Jéan-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon, and even Martin Heidegger, with, of course, the theoretical apparatus of the author of *Bad Faith and Anti-black racism* (1995), Lewis Gordon. Biko was a Sartrean, according to Mabogo More.

In this book, Mabogo More delves with the passion of a teacher into an elucidation of nearly all the cardinal categories that have framed the debates around Black Consciousness as a philosophy and political praxis: race and anti-black racism; the meaning of blackness and situated consciousness; theoretical and genitive connections between the USA Black Power movement and continental anti-colonial African nationalism; black solidarity and self-segregation; liberalism and the role of whites in the struggle against apartheid; the race-centric versus class-centric analysis of black experience in racialised societies. The book is in this sense encyclopaedic and informative to those seeking a philosophical entry point into Black consciousness, albeit from the polemically suggested Africana existentialist vantage point.

The text is laid out in nine chapters in which all the aforementioned themes are taken-up. Unfortunately, they are treated in a rather eclectic way as opposed to a neatly grouped and systematised themes. The reader needs to read in full or peruse the entire book before jumping into a criticism of a particular point More posits or some deficiency spotted in an early chapter. For example, in Chapter 4 with the heading “Biko and Philosophy”, an explanation of the influence of Hegel’s writings on Biko’s thought is made (pp.85-86), but Biko’s pivotal usage of the Hegelian dialectic as a theoretical framework in analysing South African racism is not

elaborated. This systematic discussion of the dialectic and how Biko utilised it then crops up in Chapter 9 titled “Biko and Liberation”, in pages 250-255.

The nine chapters of the book begin with an introduction of Biko as “a rebel” in the tradition of Albert Camus, an “ontologico-existential” rebel (p.9). This assertion is somehow controversial, given Camus’ fractured relationship with Sartre when coupled with More’s overarching argument that Biko was a Sartrean (Royle 1982). The subsequent chapter gives the rather mandatory rendition of the history of Black Consciousness as a political movement, which is immediately followed by a lecture on the meaning of Philosophy (Philosophy Contextualised, pp. 58-82). The latter’s deliberately academic discussion of Philosophy lays the ground for a subsequent chapter on “Biko and Philosophy” (pp. 82-98). Besides him being portrayed as a Camusian rebel, there is very little that is directly on or of Biko in the first three chapters. There is much more on Sartre, and More’s opinion on what Philosophy is supposed to be, which pivots around his appreciative exposition of Agnes Heller’s *A Radical Philosophy* (1984).

The crux of the text is Chapter five, which bears the proclamational title “Biko’s *Africana* existentialist philosophy”. The discussion here is a philosophical reflection on Heideggerian and Sartrean human ontology, and on the problematisation of racism from the global African-American vantage point, rather than about the mapping of the germination of Biko’s thought concerning the dehumanising oppression and brutal repression of the apartheid system. In this chapter, More devotes many pages to “deal with the popular charge that black philosophers, including Biko, are primarily obsessed with racism . . . rather than with problems of metaphysical or epistemological universal significance” (p. 117). The unintended consequence of this exercise leads to an academicisation of the Black Consciousness movement. It gives an impression that the latter emerged as a deliberate effort directed at intervening in academic debates about the abstract meanings of race, humanity, authenticity, *et cetera*, and not as a political-ideological force.

In an attenuated pursuance of its main project of defining Biko as an existentialist *Africana* philosopher, the remaining four chapters find themselves trapped into the uniquely South African debates Biko provoked on the participation of white liberals in the anti-apartheid struggle. Mabogo More thematises this issue under the headings of Liberalism (in two chapters) and “the Leftists”, which is his explication of Marxists (p.237)

Ultimately, in our critical assessment, the approach of hinging its project on casting Biko as an *Africana* transatlantic thought-leader, and the *leitmotif* of fitting him into the hegemonic philosophy canon, renders the book as overly vindicationist in tone, and in being less a book about Biko’s philosophy, than one on More’s interpretation of Biko through the African-American Lewis R. Gordon and the French Jean-Paul Sartre. Until halfway through the book, one struggles to find enough references to Biko’s direct words and ideas, one has to search for Biko’s voice throughout in the many, mainly American voices that More brings into play in his disquisition (for example, pp.116-139)

In embracing and working with the concept of *Africana* philosophy Mabogo More methodically eschewed the generally held framework of *African* philosophy that is being

developed by thinkers operating from the African continent. Notably, he does not merely operate with this term as denoted by Lucious Outlaw as an engagement with the philosophic concerns of African-descended peoples both on the continent of Africa and its diaspora, globally (Outlaw 2017). For More this Africana philosophy, and the Africana philosopher Biko ostensibly was, is specifically Africana Philosophy as articulated by Lewis Gordon in his *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (2008) as an intrinsically existentialist-phenomenology that functions as a philosophical anthropology of diasporic African being-in-the-world (see More, pp 34, 116). As a result, the critical grounding of the thesis of the book gravitates away from the South African-experience-of-being-black from which Biko operated. This South African black lived-experience is ephemeralised into the global discursive space of the African diaspora. As an extension of its foundational critical paradigm being Gordon's philosophy, the book is excessively replete with references to African-American political history, which is hermeneutically paralleled with the situation in South Africa. At some points, the text reads as though it was written for an American audience; or rather a USA market.

A disturbing feature of this apparent eagerness to make South African Black Consciousness consonant with the American political scene is the discernible ill-treatment of Marx and Marxism which, in my view, unwittingly assuages the anti-communism angst of the American academy. Dismissive and erroneous premises such as, "like Hegel, Marx is also known for having supported colonial subjugation of the black world" (p.221) are posited as a prelude to an extensive critique of a 1979 *African Communist* article that privileges "class analysis" over "race analysis" of apartheid (222-225). The flaws in More's treatment of Marx can unfortunately not be explored here.

Black Consciousness is an historical and universal psycho-political phenomenon and political movement among black peoples of African descent with roots from Ethiopianism, Pan-Africanism and the Négritude movement. Biko's articulation and thought is a South African revolutionary black consciousness that is crafted out of the explicit lived-anguishes expressed by Black South Africans as victims of settler colonial dispossession and apartheid. Specifically, here the "Black" is redefined and weaponised, so to say, to include Coloured and Indian South Africans. More based on his African diasporic vantage point, mounts an express objection against Biko's and the whole South African Black Consciousness Movement thinking in this regard, stating that this position was "enthusiastic and overambitious" (p.52). His heterodoxy from Biko's thinking is particularly focused on the inclusion of Indians into Blackness, and to buttress his argument, he cites Gordon in a page long footnote (p. 52n11).

More's project violates the sacred hermeneutic horizon of the realities of the struggle against apartheid. Acting against the sacrosanct principle of historical contextuality which is one of the kernels of Sartrean existentialist-phenomenology he is thinking through, his Gordonian-Africana hermeneutic pole diffuses the existential specificity of the experience of the horrors of apartheid racism by black South Africans which instanced their responsibility for *national* liberation, into a global transatlantic grievance. Steve Biko the politician, strategically delimited his philosophical articulations away from the rhetoric of Pan-Africanism, for this specific reason.

The book leaves room for more work that can let Biko's thought and voice be heard in its own right from its soil, not as an echo of Hegel, Sartre, Fanon and Gordon. Under the vindicationist mission of More's project, it was perhaps necessary to prove that Biko's voice echoes well within the chambers of the hegemonic colonial academy: "Biko, from Hegel to Gordon". As a research output emanating from the community of black scholarship, More's work is a monumental achievement; that accolade cannot be taken away despite my critical review. The book should be read, critiqued and appreciated as a gallant scholarly effort.

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