

Black Consciousness and the Class Struggle

Black consciousness in South Africa is no longer in its infancy. A decade has already elapsed since this novel vision was advocated. Despite the initial optimism, the Herculean task of establishing an integrated conception of our reality remains incomplete. But a system of thought or an ideology is of little value if it can only be defined as a response to a particular period of historical crisis.

When an ideology is able to reflect the continuous process of change and conflict, then that ideology has the potential for challenging the dominant ideas of the ruling class. To say then that a set of ideas is incomplete is to accept the permanence of social change which can never be halted.

In this context, black consciousness is the attempt to understand the material conditions from a position of self-determination. When black consciousness emerged, it did so on a specific level and for a definite purpose. Not only did it describe the reign of conceptual blindness among blacks, but it stimulated an intense period of political opposition, inculcating a new sense of existence from which is growing an unparalleled unity of the oppressed. However, one of the aspects of conflict which black consciousness did not properly examine was the relationship of black workers to the productive forces at this stage in history. Such an analysis would no doubt raise the connection between black consciousness and the class struggle.

The question is not to view black consciousness within the class struggle but to find out the relationship of black consciousness and the class struggle within the pattern of social transformation in the country. I suggest that black consciousness does not conflict with the notion of class struggle. There are in fact no practical problems in this regard. To suggest otherwise would be to imply that a black worker does not exist as "colour-blind" orthodox Marxists wish to do. Theoretically, it is necessary to participate in this discussion if only for the sake of conceptual clarity. My starting premise — one which may incidentally surprise orthodox and dogmatic Marxists for it is from the founding father himself — is that: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, it is their social existence that determines their consciousness." To this should be added

the idea that consciousness, in turn, affects social existence.

It is against this background that a cursory analysis of black consciousness will be made. Let us first accept that black consciousness is an idea used to describe a whole set of experiences — experiences revolving around a certain relationship and structure. It is a ruler-ruled relationship. The structure formalises this relationship where the ruler is not visible. The awareness of both these processes is what we have come to call black consciousness. This relationship and structure influences and determines everyone — black and white alike. It socialises all — teaching the ethic of superiority to whites and perpetual subservience to blacks. In the formal structure of parliament, legislation like the Land Act, Group Areas Act and Influx Control, reinforces what may have existed only informally.

At the time when the government ruled by fear alone, black consciousness emerged as a direct challenge to the dictatorship. At the same time, it addressed itself to blacks urging defiance in the face of unrelenting oppression.

The aftermath of Sharpsville had dealt a devastating blow to black political development. The unspoken threat, the unseen omnipotent security police, the memories of pre-dawn swoops, all this was internalised becoming a feature of the psychological make-up of black people. The government had successfully conditioned people to accept their burden without question. This conditioning became the norm of existence in South Africa. The psychological "dwarfing" of the consciousness of black people clouded their perception of reality and they were unable to properly perceive alternative modes of opposition. The large majority of black workers involved in the process of production were policed into ensuring the continued well-being of the economy.

The sudden, dramatic expression of revolt — much to the dismay of dogmatic Marxists — came from an unexpected section of the black people. Those outside of the focus of the means of production and distribution, the students, searching for identity in an alienated environment, unleashed years of pent-up hopes and dreams by rejecting the false black-white student unity. The search for identity coupled with

political opposition began questioning the ruler-ruled relationship and its related institutions.

The age of political despair was at an end, and the ruler-ruled relationship stood under the imminent threat of collapsing. With this antidote to fear, a new process of de-conditioning started to take place. Refusing to be defined in white terms and rejecting white values, black consciousness stressed the ethic of creativity: think on your own terms. Define yourselves, for you are what you want to be, and you want to be free. In short, re-define yourselves in terms of your own reality. The decade of fear began to disintegrate and the event produced a sense of discovery, an inward severing of the psychological shackles of slavery.

The first condition for liberation took root when black consciousness ripped open the false consciousness of black people and allowed them to experience reality on their terms — to project a vision of liberation without the aid of the white man. The necessary condition for liberation was realised in the tenet that psychological de-conditioning was a crucial preparatory phase for involvement in the actual change of circumstances which enslaved blacks. Black consciousness brought the promise of re-humanisation — again on the black man's terms. Intellectually poverty-stricken, what was there for blacks to emulate in the West?

Before the government even had time to react, white liberals, aggrieved at being cold-shouldered, wagged accusing fingers at a phenomenon that they were unable to comprehend. "Racists," they shouted from the steps of their expensive homes. Strange that when people of colour experiencing varying degrees of oppression unite against a privileged minority, the label of racism is flung in their faces.

Being black is not being a race; it is being conscious that people of colour are the downtrodden, the wretched of the earth and that only they can liberate themselves. We decided to define ourselves. According to the white frame of reference, not being white is non-white. That's their definition. We said black.

Hence, black consciousness can be given a two-edged definition. On the one hand, as the awareness of people of colour of the problems facing them in the social, political and economic structure and on the other

hand, it is the attempt to re-humanise black people whose dignity has been stripped away by the master-slave relationship and the institutions supporting this relationship. A negation of white superiority — not a negation of whites as people — black consciousness is at the same time a positive assertion of our being what we want to be.

This is the humanism of black consciousness. It wishes to restore our being human even if the environment is hostile and inhuman and by proclaiming black solidarity, it prepares us for participating in the historical movement towards a free society. But to be prepared for liberation means establishing the basic preconditions for a revolutionary ideology which challenges and transcends the dominant one of the ruling class. Therefore black consciousness can become a truly liberatory ideology when it also focuses on the economic sphere of activity.

Its main thrust was on the psychological and cultural level but a few years ago it became obvious that unless the economic infra-structure of social organisation was taken into account, black consciousness will be confined to clenched fists and protest poetry.

We don't need an economics degree to know that of about 10 million economically active people in the country, 8 million are black. Moreover, the top 20 percent of the population take 58 percent of the national income while the bottom 20 percent get only 2 percent. It's easy to see that the majority of the economically active workforce, black workers, produce the bulk of the wealth which is distributed among a minority. The pride of being instilled by black consciousness is only half the story. For the oppressed one of the most essential values — because it is the most concrete — is land: the land which will bring wealth and above all, dignity. But blacks hardly own any land. Can we forget how the Land Act drove hundreds of thousands of blacks off their land forcing them into the cities to become proletarianised? So, one of the principles of black consciousness revolves around the struggle for the repossession of land. Another says that since we are the major producers of wealth, we have a right to share in the rewards. Without the just redistribution of wealth, political power is meaningless — substituting a black owner of the means of production for a white one does not

solve the problem of labour exploitation.

How can a black worker feel any sense of pride when he is waging a constant battle against starvation? On this score, black consciousness by committing itself to a re-organisation of the structure of society carries the implication that liberation must also involve the elimination of economic exploitation. Why? Because in the way in which the economy is arranged, the owners of capital by extracting surplus profits rob the worker of his labour. Black workers as victims of colour prejudice and economic exploitation are the force without which capital cannot grow and accumulate.

Since black consciousness expresses the reality of life for black people, it is not a pre-conceived doctrine. The task of black consciousness can now be extended to articulate the problems of black workers. And what is their main problem? Exploitation of labour. The conflict between black workers and capital in South Africa is evident almost daily. When the conflict reaches breaking point, you can be sure of a strike.

Where capitalism is faced with an acute crisis, it tends to move in the direction of a dictatorship. Where a dictatorship exists, there you will find a severe social crisis. And only that class involved as victims in the capitalist-worker relationship can make any real change. In South Africa, it is the black worker. His revolt against capital is also a revolt against a system which denies him the right to determine his future. And, his protest against conditions in the township, is also a protest against the system of capitalism which has actively aided in creating cheap labour reserves.

The existence of a large number of strikes involving black workers attests to the fact of discrimination on the basis of colour in the economy. The division of the labour market along colour lines, supplemented by the segregation in housing and education and reinforced by the white ethic of superiority, perpetuate the low class economic status of blacks. Since the majority of black people are workers, i.e. sellers of labour to owners of capital, black consciousness preaches black solidarity and the power of labour in the economy. What is it but black worker solidarity that is demonstrated when black workers don tools in sympathy with black workers in another industry? Is this not the awareness of black workers' unity? Or, when

students come out on boycott with students from another university? Is this not black student unity?

The consciousness of the power of black workers is gradually taking root. Is this consciousness of the power of black workers anything other than black consciousness operating in the sphere of labour? This is merely a labour-directed view of black consciousness.

Incidentally, when we refer to the "white working class" we do not intend a class description in the classical European sense because white workers — whites who do not own capital — are by the very nature of South African history a "labour aristocracy". Since white racism expresses itself most clearly in the workforce, and since black consciousness is regarded by white workers as the chief antagonist, a clash is inevitable. Those who hope that black and white workers will unite and fight and dream of solidarity between them do not realise that whenever white workers have struggled or supported a struggle in this country, it has not been a struggle for liberation — but a struggle to get something for themselves. Moreover, white workers are a privileged labour aristocracy, i.e. they enjoy the benefits of black exploitation, they have the vote and the right colour. The social and political arrangements which make white workers into a labour aristocracy decide that their labour, because it is white, is worth more than black labour. White workers' awareness of their status compared to blacks inspire their superiority ethic.

When white workers become aware of themselves as a class and realise that the wealth created by the majority should be shared among all, then only will it be possible to reconsider the labour-orientated view of black consciousness. Until then, they must be excluded from the struggle of the true working class for liberation from economic exploitation and political oppression. Black workers are the historical force for the liberation of this country. It is this class that holds the future in their hands.

The only whites who profess to want to join black workers are those who are economically most secure: university students, professionals and a handful of intellectuals — individuals who represent no significant social force.

Black workers are confined to

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direct the struggle within the framework of the law, but each time the struggle reaches an explosive pitch, more workers are driven to recognise that the things they are fighting for cannot be achieved within the system.

Among black people, there are but a mere handful who own some meagre form of means of production. That they are part of the struggle for liberation is beyond doubt. But, by virtue of their involvement with capital and its accumulation, the black consciousness movement must guard against them taking control and redirecting the struggle away from the ideal of economic reorganisation in the interests of the producers of wealth.

It has often been said that black consciousness is a way of life. It is an attempt to search for a lost identity, it is a rejection of a foreign value system and a belief that unless society is completely organised in the interests of black workers, liberation will remain an unattainable ideal.

The more powerful the black workers' protest, the more they will move towards black solidarity and the greater the chances of the whites accepting large-scale changes. On the other hand, the more the black protest and challenge is weakened and diluted by class collaboration (black and white unite and fight) the more chance there is of the white workers remaining counter-revolutionary.

When we speak about black consciousness in relation to the class struggle we are referring to the

workers of colour who live in the reserves and townships subject to the daily humiliation of pass raids, inhuman living conditions, high transport costs and a barbaric form of education for their children. At work, its low wages, bad working conditions and little, if any, bargaining rights.

With his low wages, there is little hope of him improving "the quality of his life". Conditions in the township also prevent him from enjoying the benefits of recreation, even if he was paid enough at work. Caught in this vicious circle, is it any wonder that severe problems at work become "community issues" when workers down tools?

I make bold to suggest that this entire experience is a description of black consciousness operating in all spheres of life. I am not saying that this should be the case theoretically because it is a description of the phenomena that exists. I only describe what is happening, what is the case.

In so accommodating the various levels of the black experience, black consciousness is able to posit the contours of a possible alternative. By transcending the existing status quo and projecting the aspirations of blacks into a system in which wealth and power are equitably distributed, black consciousness truly raises the hope of liberation and so carries the seeds of meaningful change. Without this projection of an alternative, black consciousness would be a mere reaction to the status quo.

Since this is not the best of all

possible worlds, black consciousness must at least also provide some thoughts on what it wants — not only what it rejects. The struggle for liberation is often defined in terms of the alternative — and what is the alternative of black consciousness?

I don't intend to fool myself by believing that I can offer any assistance in this regard. But I do know that unless the alternative includes the decisive feature of worker control, liberation will remain a mere catchword for meaningless reforms.

The surge of a black worker consciousness appears to be dominating the political spectrum. When that consciousness becomes political, the demands of workers will go beyond wages, working conditions and trade union recognition — for a political black worker consciousness means that the producers of wealth finally realise that to achieve a better life would involve a direct struggle for political power.

How black workers will then use their economic muscle depends entirely on the black solidarity built up in all those little strikes across the country, in those boycotts, at those mass meetings and during those community protests against rents and mass removals.

In the meantime, black organisations will serve the purpose of popularising pertinent issues and acting as training grounds for building that unity required for the ultimate and concerted national struggle waged against a regime that appears to be plunging towards its own destruction.



Police keep watch on hundreds of black people marching in protest.