

STEVE BIKO INTERVIEWED BY BERNARD ZYLSTRA, JULY 1977

ZYLSTRA: *What precisely do you mean by Black Consciousness?*

BIKO: By Black Consciousness I mean the cultural and political revival of an oppressed people. This must be related to the emancipation of the entire continent of Africa since the Second World War. Africa has experienced the death of white invincibility. Before that we were conscious mainly of two classes of people, the white conquerors and the black conquered. The blacks in Africa now know that the whites will not be conquerors forever. I must emphasise the cultural depth of Black Consciousness. The recognition of the death of white invincibility forces blacks to ask the question: 'Who am I? Who are we?' And the fundamental answer we give is this: 'People are people!' So, 'Black' Consciousness says: 'Forget about the colour!' But the reality we faced 10 to 15 years ago did not allow us to articulate this. After all, the continent was in a period of rapid decolonisation, which implied a challenge to black inferiority all over Africa. This challenge was shared by white liberals. So for quite some time the white liberals acted as the spokesmen for the blacks. But then some of us began to ask ourselves: 'Can our liberal trustees put themselves in our place?' Our answer was twofold. 'No! They cannot.' And: 'As long as the white liberals are our spokesmen, there will be no black spokesmen.' It is not possible to have black spokesmen in a white context.

This was realised readily in many black countries outside of South Africa. But what did we have here? The society as a whole was divided into white and black groups. This forced division had to disappear, and many non-racist groups worked toward that end. But almost every nonracist group was still largely white, notably so in the student world. Thus here we were confronted with the same shortcoming: the context of getting rid of white-black tensions was still a white context. So we began to realise that blacks themselves had to speak out about the black predicament. We could no longer depend upon whites answering the question: 'Who are we?' There had to be a *singularity* of purpose in that answer. The white trustees would always be *mixed* in purpose.

ZYLSTRA: *How does Christianity fit in with Black Consciousness?*

BIKO: I grew up in the Anglican Church, so this matter is an important one for me. But it is a troublesome question, for in South Africa, Christianity for most people is purely a formal matter. We as blacks cannot forget the fact that Christianity in Africa is tied up with the entire colonial process. This meant that Christians came here with a form of culture which they called Christian but which in effect was Western, and which expressed itself as an imperial culture as far as Africa was concerned. Here the missionaries did not make the proper distinctions. This important matter can easily be illustrated by relatively small things. Take the question of dress, for example. When an African became Christian, as a

rule he or she was expected to drop traditional garb and dress like a Westerner. The same with many customs dear to blacks, which they were expected to drop for supposed 'Christian' reasons while in effect they were only in conflict with certain Western mores. Moreover, although the social hierarchy within the church was a white/ black hierarchy, the sharing of responsibility for church affairs was *exclusively* white. This meant that the nature especially of the mainline churches was hardly influenced by black fact. It cannot be denied that in this situation many blacks, especially the young blacks, have begun to question Christianity. The question they ask is whether the necessary decolonisation of Africa also requires the de-Christianisation of Africa. The most positive facet of this questioning is the development of 'black' theology in the context of Black Consciousness. For black theology does not challenge Christianity itself but its Western package, in order to discover what the Christian faith means for our continent.

YLSTRA: Tell me about the Black People's Convention.

BIKO; In the 1960s, the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress had been banned, so the main realities we were confronted with were the power of the police and the leftist noises of the white liberals. Faced with these realities, we had to solve the question of how a new consciousness could take hold of the people. The government controlled the schools. There was a low output from the schools as far as Black Consciousness was concerned. We knew we had to seek for participation among the intelligentsia. But we also knew that the intelligentsia tend to look upon the masses as tools to be manipulated by them, so the change of consciousness among graduates of the black universities that we so focused on an identification of intellectuals with the needs of the black community. Here lies the origin of SASO – the South African Students' Organisation. It challenged the injustice of the existing structures, but it did this in a new way. As a matter of fact, since we stressed *Black* Consciousness and the relation of the intellectuals with the needs of the *black* community, we were at first regarded as supporters of the system. The liberals criticised us and the conservatives supported us. But this did not last very long. It took the government four years to take measure against us. Even today we are still accused of racism. This is a mistake. We know that all interracial groups in South Africa are relationships in which whites are superior, blacks inferior. So, as a prelude, whites must be made to realise that they are *only* human, not superior. Same with blacks. They must be made to realise that they are *also* human, not inferior. For all of us this means that South Africa is not European, but African.

Gradually this began to make sense. Black Consciousness gained momentum, but we were still faced with the practical issue that the people who were speaking were mainly students and graduates. There was no broad debate. For this reason we had to move from SASO to the organisation of the Black People's Convention so that the masses could get involved in the development of a new consciousness. The BPC was established in 1972. It was then that the government began to go into action. It banned individual leaders of the BPC. But today the BPC is getting wide support. The people are willing to sacrifice for it, with their money and with their time, as you can see from the packed courtrooms at trials

of black leaders and inquests into their 'mysterious' deaths in back rooms of police stations. In a sense, the Black People's Convention is the most powerful organisation among blacks, but this is hard to determine exactly, since the ANC and the PAC are banned as organisations, which means that they have a kind of generation-gap problem: there is a whole generation now that has not been influenced by the ANC and the PAC. In any case, the actual identification of people with the BPC is strong.

When I put it this way, I do not want to give the impression that the relation between these organisations is one of competition. There will be *one* movement of revolt against the system of injustice. To be sure, there are the usual divisions due to background, but in terms of the revolution there is unity.

ZYLSTRA: What about the homelands policy?

BIKO: Some blacks support the government policy of separate development in the homelands for the sake of peace, but not as a movement. Here we have to look carefully into the kind of support that Gatsha Buthelezi gets. He has a *tribal* following among the Zulus. He has managed to combine many elements as a *traditional* chief in a *non-urban* setting. He speaks up strongly against apartheid, but today he is the governmentally paid leader of the Zulus. In this way he manages to gain a following. We oppose Gatsha. He dilutes the cause by operating on a government platform. Because of this I see the danger of division among blacks. But we hope to avoid a real split on the basis of the BPC's great appeal to the younger generation. Gatsha is supported by 'oldies', for good reason, since Gatsha protects the stability that the older persons need. But we are young. We do not look upon the solution to injustice as an expectation but as a duty. Here lies the dilemma of the old – between duty and bread.

STRA: Where is the evidence of support among the younger generation for BPC?

BIKO: In one word: Soweto! The boldness, dedication, sense of purpose, and clarity of analysis of the situation -all of these things are a direct result of Black Consciousness ideas among the young in Soweto and elsewhere. This is not quantitatively analysable, for the power of a movement lies in the fact that it can indeed change the habits of people. This change is not the result of force but of dedication, of moral persuasion. This is what has got through to the young people. They realise that we are not dealing with mere bread-and-butter issues. In view of this the real momentum is on their side. I realise that the BPC has a problem of strategy in comparison with the homeland leaders. Gatsha can use the machinery of the government when he wants to organise a meeting. But this is not real power.

ZYLSTRA: What is your attitude to communism?

BIKO: This theme confronts us with many, many complexities. Let me mention a number of things, more or less at random. We within the BPC have made up our minds that we

must operate within the confines of the law or we will not operate at all. This means that the BPC is not and cannot be a communist organisation. To some extent organisations can operate underground, but for our kind of organisation it is much more effective to work openly above ground. Moreover, an above-ground movement must have an element of compromise about it, and we look upon that as an advantage. Further, a communist in South Africa today will be an instrument of Moscow, not of the black people. Some Marxist are more pliable, more realistic, but then we have to know precisely about whom we are talking.

While the BPC is non-violent, it should not be forgotten that we are part of a *movement* which will be confronted with new situations that may require different strategies. We begin with the assumption that rapprochement is necessary. The BPC is not a third wing among the blacks, next to the ANC and the PAC.

ZYLSTRA: Do South African blacks display the differences that have divided the blacks in other African nations, like Angola and Rhodesia [Zimbabwe]?

BIKO: Let me at least say this: we are not divided because of *personal* ambitions among the leaders. What are my own ambitions? I have no personal ambitions. I have *hopes*. I know my limits. I am not an administrator. My hope is to engage in doing justice in the South Africa of the future.

ZYLSTRA: What is your attitude towards the USA?

BIKO: Ah, this is a quick change! We begin with the assumption that from the international point of view South Africa is a pawn in the politics of pragmatism, in the game of power between the US and the USSR. We have no illusions about the African policies of either the US or the USSR. Russia has won the show so far in southern Africa. This is evident in Angola and Mozambique. So now the USA seems to be waking up and asks itself the question: 'Why are we so far behind Russia in gaining friends?' The reason, of course, is quite simple. The US has in the past maintained its links with the minority governments in Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia and South Africa. The situation within the first two has changed drastically in the last few years. It is rapidly changing in Rhodesia. This means that the main focus of Washington with respect to southern Africa is on Pretoria. This has the effect of making South Africa feel important. Investments must be protected. Trade must be expanded. Cultural exchanges must be maintained.

These developments of the last few years have placed the US in a vulnerable position. It realises that it hasn't done too well, so it now looks around to ask, 'Where do we get support?' And when Washington asks that kind of question, as a rule it puts the question in the context of the rift between communism and capitalism, between East and West, between the 'First World' and the 'Second World'. Can the problems of the 'Third World' be properly understood in the context of that rift? In any case, the Third World liberation movements have received support from Moscow, not from Washington. Moreover, many

persons within the liberation struggles look upon the Marxist analysis of oppression as the proper diagnosis of their situation. And on top of all this there is the overwhelming evidence of America's involvement in the Third World for the sake of its own economic self-interest. Russia has no investments to protect in Johannesburg. America does.

ZYLSTRA: Does the Carter administration represent a basic change in American foreign policy toward the Third World?

BIKO: The emphasis on human rights appears to spell a shift away from the policies of [US presidents] Nixon and Ford. It seems to us that the USA is now elevating morality to a higher level in its own power struggle, in its present attempt to recover influence in the Third World as a whole. With respect to South Africa, in order to realise its long-term policy America has to find a group with which it can be allied. In order to find such a group, the US is becoming more outspokenly critical of Ian Smith's regime in Rhodesia and also of Vorster's in Pretoria. It appears to us that this is also the reason why Carter chose Andrew Young as ambassador to the UN, and why he sent him to southern Africa. In this way Carter hopes to develop a new complexion, acceptable to the Third World in general and to South Africa in particular. Carter uses Andrew Young's colour as special passport to the Third World. But Young has no programme except the furtherance of the American system. That's why he plays tennis in Soweto. Carter is doing more skilfully what Nixon and Ford did: to make the American system work more efficiently.

But in being so critical of the economic self-interest in the Third World on the part of American capitalism, I at the same time have no illusions about Russia. Russia is as imperialistic as America. This is evident in its internal history as well as in the role it plays in countries like Angola. But the Russians have a less dirty name: in the eyes of the Third World they have a cleaner slate. Because of this, they have had a better start in the power game. Their policy *seems* to be acceptable to revolutionary groups. They are not a 'taboo'. Here we are probably faced with the greatest problem in the Third World today. We are divided because some of us think that Russian imperialism can be accepted as purely an interim phase while others, like myself, doubt whether Russia is really interested in the liberation of the black peoples.

ZYLSTRA: Would you explain black communalism?

BIKO: The Black Consciousness movement does not want to accept the dilemma of capitalism versus communism. It opts for a socialist solution that is an authentic expression of black communalism. At the present stage of our struggle it is not easy to present details of this alternative, but it is a recognition of the fact that a change in the colour of the occupier does not necessarily change the system. In our search for a just system we know that the debate about economic policy cannot be 'pure', completely separate from existing systems. In our writings we at times speak of *collective* enterprises because we reject the individualistic and capitalist type of enterprises. But we are not taking over the Russian models. I must emphasise that in our search for new models we

are necessarily affected by where we are today. For this reason also it is impossible to present details about the transition stage that will be here after the dissolution of white domination. It is far too early for that.

ZYLSTRA: Has black Christianity influenced black communalism?

BIKO: Only indirectly. Perhaps we should look toward developments in South America, where the Christian-Marxist dialogue seems to move toward an alternative, a middle position. You should not forget that in dealing with these highly complex questions we are intensely handicapped because our best thinkers are outside of the country or banned or imprisoned.

ZYLSTRA: What of the future. Any predictions?

BIKO: This again is a difficult issue. I am now getting to the position where I expect an overall escalation of the conflict. Just consider the various angles. To begin with the Afrikaners have manoeuvred themselves into an extremely vulnerable position. They have made up their minds that sharing of political power with blacks is out of the question. Since a sharing of power is imperative if we are to have a just society, this position of the Afrikaners makes conflict inevitable. If Afrikaner leaders backtrack, they come into conflict with earlier positions and lose credibility among their supporters. Hence the Afrikaner is committed to maintain a *lie*. Because of the position that the Afrikaner has got himself into, conflict seems inevitable. The conflict will not be the result of the black position. For the same reason, a round-table situation seems impossible, since that presupposes the political equality of the blacks. Then there is another complicating factor for the Afrikaner. They have no 'homeland' to go to, as the Portuguese did when Angolan became independent. And these Afrikaners control political power. They are thus a *vital* part, not only of the problem, but also of the solution. After the solution to our problem, the Afrikaners will be here. And therefore goodwill has to be maintained.

ZYLSTRA: Can't the Afrikaners change?

Biko: In part, yes. But they need 50 years, and that simply is too long. And the Afrikaners are not the only element in the dynamics of change. The second factor in looking at the future is the escalation of conflict at the borders of South Africa. In the past there were border states that acted as a kind of buffer. But that is changing rapidly now. The change has occurred in Angola and Mozambique; it is occurring in Namibia and Zimbabwe today. This means that external military pressure on South Africa will increase. To this we must immediately add the third component: the protracted activities inside South Africa, especially within the numerous Sowetos. The masses of black people within the country will become increasingly defiant. A new generation of blacks is coming to the fore which is not motivated by fear. This internal pressure from the blacks will strengthen a fourth component that will favour change, namely international public opinion. This is already a most important factor which the Pretoria government has to take into account. Finally,

the fifth element that one will have to look at is real change among whites in South Africa. In our struggle, useful coalitions between blacks and whites can be formed, with a view to the elimination of race as the basis of our society. This will be mainly with English-speaking elements of the population, but also with some Afrikaners -not those who occupy positions of leadership in the churches but those in the universities. They are beginning to sense already today that the age of Afrikaner nationalism is over. They know that the future should not be dictated by the *volk* but shaped by the best that can be maintained by meaningful compromise.

ZYLSTRA: In the light of all these factors – which are certainly not exhaustive – what can one expect of the government?

BIKO: As I said, I expect an escalation of conflict, also on the part of the police. And if the Afrikaner regime becomes even more intransigent, we as blacks will have to reassess our strategy. It is true that the government is powerful and that it can last a long time, but precisely because it, too, is aware of the escalation of conflict on all sides, the *sobering* effect of force (at the borders and in the urban townships), the pressure from international public opinion, and a change of attitude among whites – all of these factors combined may well make the Afrikaner regime change its mind. Once people begin to flex their muscles, they won't stop.

ZYLSTRA: What about the pressure for a one man, one vote political system of representation, especially from abroad?

BIKO: Today the one man one vote solution would spell disaster, economically, for the black masses. For the white man it would be the greatest solution! It would encourage competition among blacks, you see, and it would eliminate the most important ground for critique from abroad of the present regime. But it would not change the position of *economic* oppression of the blacks. That would remain the same.

ZYLSTRA: Why can't the blacks do today what the Afrikaners did in the forties and fifties with respect to their economic position in South Africa?

BIKO: Because they had an organised vanguard. The blacks need this before a transition is possible. Hence restraint among blacks today is necessary. The frustrating difficulty is that the situation does not allow blacks to develop an organised vanguard. This is not only a result of the fact that many of our leaders are imprisoned or banned but also because of the fact that blacks are excluded from many of the essential disciplines needed for the formation of a vanguard: the natural sciences, engineering, and many other areas. Without a competent, organised vanguard the black population cannot properly assume the responsibilities which by right they ought to exercise.

But if the future transition is not to end in chaos, the white population must also be prepared for radical change within their midst. The whites will have to accept a political

constellation in this country in which the blacks have full participation. What I mean can perhaps be illustrated by the struggle for civil rights by American blacks in the fifties and sixties. *They* demand the implementation of the existing Constitution. *We* demand a new Constitution. Such a new Constitution cannot be imposed upon blacks by whites. It must be the result of mutual exchange. It must stipulate the role of all South African citizens, including the white man, after transition. White participation is imperative. We favour proportional representation. The future political system of this country must not be racist in any way. This also means that blacks must not revenge themselves on the whites, but equity will require a substantial economic sacrifice on the part of the whites. It is impossible to say today precisely what that sacrifice would mean. It might require that the salaries and wages of whites be frozen for a period of five years. It does not mean that blacks would take over the homes of whites, but it would certainly entail the opening up of residential areas to all groups, as in Gaborone, the capital of Botswana. These are only a few suggestions. An economic upheaval must be avoided.

ZYLSTRA: What can the United States and other nations do to contribute toward the necessary transition?

BIKO: Let us look once again at the relationship between the United States and South Africa. The most important phenomenon in South Africa today is the blacks' legitimate struggle for freedom. What is needed in Washington and in the other capitals of the Western world is an open acknowledgement of this, and in the context of that acknowledgement, the US can and must influence the political direction within South Africa. But it can do so meaningfully only if its concrete steps aid the blacks' struggle for freedom. Here are a few suggestions: In the first place, if that struggle is to be forthright, well directed and consistent, the blacks need proper literature and freedom of mobility. If the Carter administration means business in its human rights policy, it should put pressure on Pretoria to guarantee freedom of the press for blacks and freedom of movement for blacks. Moreover, if the Carter administration is to know what spirit lives among the blacks, it will have to establish contacts with those persons who are accepted leaders of the blacks, even if they are imprisoned on Robben Island.

In the second place, Washington can exert such economic pressures on South Africa that it will become considerably less profitable to invest in South African industries. The argument is often made that loss of foreign investment would hurt blacks the most. It would undoubtedly hurt blacks in the short run, because many of them would stand to lose their jobs, but it should be understood in Europe and North America that foreign investment supports the present economic system and thus indirectly the present system of political injustice. We blacks are therefore not interested in foreign investment. If Washington wants to contribute to the development of a just society in South Africa, it must discourage investment in South Africa. We blacks are perfectly willing to suffer the consequences. We are quite accustomed to suffering.