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Black consciousness and non-racialism : contradictory or complementary?

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Abstract

The Black Consciousness philosophy with its focus on black solidarity, the exclusion of whites from the black struggle for liberation, being consciously black and black self-determination, amongst some of the principles espoused by the Black Consciousness philosophy may prima-facie seem to be advocating a parochial politics of race or even a racially exclusionist politics obsessed with cultural authenticity and racial peculiarity. Black Consciousness from such an optic may seem to be more in line with other race centred systems such as apartheid based on white superiority as opposed to a politics that rejects a race centred approach to political life. Certain readings of Black Consciousness reflect the philosophy as espousing a more regressive as opposed to a progressive liberatory politics. Furthermore, Black Consciousness with its focus on race its critics will argue is not in line with a politics of non-racialism which seeks a total rejection of race.

However, such an understanding of non-racialism is a very limited and unsophisticated one as it entails a rejection of race without first engaging with the concrete reality of race, while also assuming that a rejection of race entails integration. Indeed, it may be a great goal to attain a society in which race does not matter and in which it is not a determining factor in the life of any individual. Yet, to not see race when race has had and continues to have a profound impact on South African society, especially the poor black majority, may serve to be more regressive than progressive. In a society where inequality manifests along racial lines a hastily sought integration may not serve to attain the desired outcome of a genuine non-racial society. Equality thus becomes a central perquisite to make possible the attainment of a non-racial society unhindered by the limitations of white superiority and black inferiority. With the persistence of inequality accompanied by white domination and acquiescing blacks a non-racial society will serve to be an illusion.

Biko, through his articulation of the Black Consciousness philosophy sought the attainment of a radical egalitarianism; this from the Black Consciousness optic being the condition upon which a non-racial politics and society could be forged. Black Consciousness has the ability to create a truly non-racial subject, its sophisticated conception of race which conceives of race as being consciously contrived can serve to illustrate the implicit non-racial outlook of the Black Consciousness philosophy. Through the project of Black Consciousness the end goal could indeed be perceived as being a radical egalitarian non-racial society. The overall tenor is that Black Consciousness complements non-racialism more than it contradicts it.

Key words: Black Consciousness, Non-racialism, Steve Biko, race, blackness, whiteness.