Call for Papers
Black urban responses to modernity: reflections on Steve Bantu Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement

This book project aims to situate the influence and impact of Steve Bantu Biko, and the Black Consciousness (BC) movement he was closely associated with, in South Africa’s past and present. As the tenth anniversary of the first democratic elections in South Africa draws near, it is necessary to re-examine what new versions of society and community have emerged since 1994. This project will engage and bring to the centre of knowledge production Biko’s conceptions of blackness, society, community and self. More specifically, it seeks to uncover the multiple urban social formations and fracturings which continue to define political and cultural life and identities in South Africa. While the symposium held in Harare in June 1990 on the ‘Legacy of Bantu Stephen Biko’ brought together activists, scholars and friends of the revolutionary, paving the way for studies on Steve Biko, a renewed rigorous scholarly reflection is long overdue.

A perusal of earlier works highlights powerful themes such as political activism, the cultural politics and capital of BC for a number of urban grassroots movements, as well as the philosophical underpinnings of BC ideology which linked it to the wider diasporic movements of Negritude and the Black Power movements of the 1960s. Furthermore, violence, culture, identity, and restoring the black man’s pride also featured as predominant concerns. This project aims at both reflecting anew on these questions and others, but also inviting the interrogation of a new set of questions. How can we mobilise Biko’s reflexive intellectual insights on activism, freedom, self and community to examine the multiple political and cultural formations taking shape under the new democracy? In employing this reflexive theoretical positioning, Biko also surfaced and gave voice to the need to integrate the often split subjectivities of the ‘cultural self’, ‘gendered self’, ‘oppressed self’ and ‘modern self’. How do we take these insights further? Given that it was Biko who problematised the hegemonic racial hierarchies and identities as established by the state by inserting an inclusive notion of Blackness, how can we utilise these assertions to conceptualise the ‘new’ South Africa’s relationship to issues of economy, new patterns of privilege and hierarchy; new forms of identity and community; new violences; emerging femininities and masculinities; the receding importance of race and the ascendance of ethnicity; a deepening and rapid ‘Africanisation’ of...
South Africa; and shifting political solidarities? In other words, how can Biko’s insights help us uncover the constitutive narratives of post-apartheid? Let us take this a step further. If we consider his explicit desire to create a liberated modern black self within one of the most historically racist regimes, how can we productively employ Biko’s mediations to re-imagine and re-write formulations that occur in everyday life for South Africans?

There is no doubt that the memory of Biko continues to fuel and texture political, cultural as well as social life in South Africa. What precisely continues to live is his thirst to highlight the ways in which the self becomes reproduced via a complex matrix of power relations, and in response to this, he carved empowering meanings of Blackness under conditions of banal violence and scarcity. But how do we insert Biko into conversations about the 'contemporary'? What is at stake in this exercise? Clearly after 1994, old maps of identity and wealth have been contested as geographies of economic, political and cultural power rapidly emerge. The receding importance of 'race', the re-ethnicisation of South African society in some quarters, and the emergence of a visible Black middle class all register a crisis in the idea of 'bounded selves and communities'. It is these changes that invite us to rethink and search for new assertions of personhood and community in spaces that go beyond our conventional understandings of politics and the 'public space'. At this moment, any theoretical reflection that privileges essentialism and singularity becomes an inadequate conceptual tool to capture these fluid movements of identity, power and affiliation. How do we read these emerging contexts, particularly their generational ruptures? When we introduce these ideas, new questions emerge. For example, as hegemonic notions of blackness and solidarity disintegrate, what new anxieties are generated and circulated in everyday life? As the geopolitics of townships, suburbs and cities change, we are tasked with redirecting our questions regarding violence. What are the new spaces and expressions of violence under democracy? How do we conceptualise the increasing nihilism, which mainly includes feelings of being 'left behind' and 'lost hope', experienced mainly in urban ghettos, squatter settlements and poor white communities? That is, how do we interrogate and account for the discrepancy that many feel after ten years of what was wished for before the fall of apartheid, and what is their reality today?

Finally, how can we incorporate the field of popular culture to generate knowledges of how Biko ‘lives’ for particularly young South Africans? How are images of Biko and the rhetoric of BC appropriated and remoulded to memorialise the freedom activist, particularly in a context often heavily inscribed by commodification and consumerism? Does the cultural arena offer any revealing instances that help us rethink the making of contemporary selves and communities in South Africa? What new assertions of freedom, politics, culture and material privilege are being formulated in this arena?

This book project intends to centre these discussions, as well as many others, that critically employ the formulations of BC. Its purpose is also to contribute to the development of a body of critical enquiry that utilise the works of the
organic intellectual. Finally, we hope that the legacy of Biko’s intellectualism and the cultural and aesthetic injection it gave to the resistance praxis, will inspire us all to continue to imagine selves and communities that celebrate the full expression of all South Africans.

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In order to address these issues the UNISA Sociology Department (Nthabiseng Motsemme, Karen Appelbaum, and Abebe Zegeye) invites proposals from a diversity of local and international scholars, whose interests are informed by the works of Steve Biko and BC. Since the objective of the project is to re-examine existing themes as well bring to our attention new questions, we will especially welcome contributions with an interdisciplinary approach. Other forms of writing such as photo-essays and interviews will also be considered.

A limited number of contributions will be selected. Those wanting to participate should send a one page abstract to motsen@unisa.ac.za, no later than 31 August 2003. Each abstract should also include a title, list of authors and affiliation. Those whose abstracts are selected will be informed by 30 September 2003.

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