Critical Consciousness and Cultural Emancipation in (South) African Heritages of Communication for Social Change

Consciência Crítica e Emancipação Cultural em Legados (Sul) Africanos da Comunicação para a Mudança Social

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ABSTRACT

In this article we recognize Freirean thought as pivotal to the articulation of one of four main streams of influence on South African approaches to communication for social change. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017) has contended that university scholarship in Africa has three civilizational influences: "Africa's own rich cultures/traditions, Islamic cultures/traditions, and Western cultures/traditions" (p. 54). This account of the influence of Freirean critical consciousness on the philosophy and practices of the Black Consciousness movement, which originated in South Africa in the 1960s, brings attention to Black Consciousness thought as a foundational framework for studies of communication and social change.
Keywords: Paulo Freire, Steve Biko, critical consciousness, Black Consciousness, South Africa

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RESUMO

Neste artigo, reconhecemos o pensamento freiriano como fundamental para a articulação de um dos quatro principais fluxos de influência às abordagens sul-africanas de comunicação e mudança social. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017) afirmou que os estudos universitários na África têm três influências civilizacionais: "As próprias ricas culturas/tradições da África, as culturas/tradições islâmicas e as culturas/tradições ocidentais" (p. 54). Este relato da influência da *conscientização* freiriana sobre a filosofia e as práticas do movimento Consciência Negra, originário da África do Sul na década de1960, chama a atenção para o pensamento do Consciência Negra, considerado um marco fundamental nos estudos de comunicação e mudança social.
Palavras-chave: Paulo Freire, Steve Biko, consciência crítica, Consciência Negra, África do Sul

INTRODUCTION

PAULO FREIRE'S CRITICAL pedagogy and ideas of critical consciousness have made major marks in the field of communication for social change, showing that once people can think critically about their own situation they can change their own lives and the ways in which they relate to the world (Freire, 1970/2017). In simple terms, critical consciousness leads to cultural emancipation.

Freirean ideas of critical consciousness and cultural emancipation are well entrenched in communication for social change, which seeks to use communication in order to advance socially desirable changes to people's lived realities. His ideas also find expression in African heritages of communication for social change. Recently, Sabelo Gatsheni-Ndlovu (2017) has contended that scholarship in Africa has three civilizational influences: "Africa's own rich cultures/traditions, Islamic cultures/traditions, and Western cultures/traditions" (p. 54). This dominant view fails to recognize a fourth tradition that was formed in the struggle against colonialism. We will argue that this fourth tradition is influenced by Freirean ideas and we will illustrate this with reference to aspects of the philosophy and political practices of the iconic leader of the Black Consciousness movement, Steve Bantu Biko. To this end, we note that Biko, under the influence of Freirean ideas, articulated a praxis of communication aimed at raising Black Consciousness.

It is worthwhile noting that in South Africa, Biko and Freire are both significant figures in the contemporary decolonisation debate. Their ideas are fundamental to how a plurality of intellectuals are seeking to imagine how a re-humanized society can yet be established in South Africa. Given the contentious debates around communication for social change and it's often cited grounding in Western impositions of cultural practices, reminding ourselves of the Freirean influences on Black Consciousness and in the extension the thoughts underpinning the community projects spearheaded by Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement and the fourth tradition that Black Consciousness represents, is of crucial importance for how we reimagine communication for social change from and within an African context.

AFRICAN HERITAGES

There are many African cultures. These cultures have similarities and differences, and they often contend and stand in contrast to each other so that when Africans assemble they are often meeting cross-culturally (Janz, 2009; Mudimbe, 1988). Nevertheless, recently, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2017) echoed, among others, Kwame Nkrumah (1964) in contending that university scholarship

in Africa has three civilizational influences: "Africa's own rich cultures/traditions, Islamic cultures/traditions, and Western cultures/traditions" (p. 54). Indeed, Nkrumah recognized that the idea of cohesive communities in Africa owes much to these three traditions:

> African society has one segment which comprises our traditional way of life; it has a second segment which is filled by the presence of the Islamic tradition in Africa; it has a final segment represents the infiltration of the Christian tradition and culture of Western Europe into Africa, using colonialism and neocolonialism as its primary vehicles. These different segments are animated by competing ideologies. But society implies a certain dynamic unity, there needs to emerge an ideology which, genuinely catering for the needs of all, will take the place of the competing ideologies, and so reflect the dynamic unity of society, and be the guide to society's continual progress. (p. 68)

Besides Nkrumah's work which proposes that African traditional cultures are socialist in orientation, the traditional philosophy developed by Africans has been explored and described by numerous intellectuals and thinkers who notably include Tempels (1959), Kaunda (1988) and Nyerere (1968) in a history of scholarship that since the work of Samkange and Samkange (1980) has been increasingly disciplined as evolving under the caption *ubuntu* (cf. Gade, 2012). But we do not propose to review this tradition and the literature about it here. We further do not propose to interrogate the history of Western modernity in Africa – which is Nkrumah codes as the tradition of Christianity. What we will merely do is to note that there is ample literature that discusses how the Western colonization of Africa was delivered in part with the agency of the missionaries who proselytized in ways that supported the colonial process (cf. Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991). Finally, we recognize that the idea of Africa is in some parts a product of historical linkages that involve Islam and its traditions (cf. Blyden, 1994; Mudimbe, 1988). Recognizing that in some part Islam has a colonial history that is older than that of Christianity in Africa, we neither intend to discuss the scope of the influences of Islam in Africa nor to weigh up the harms or gains of Islamic colonialism against those of Western colonialism. Suffice to say that, particularly in the South African context, the colonial heritage of Islam has had less of an impact, although Islam has a significant foothold in the country that presents compelling accounts of more recent slavery, colonialism, and apartheid (cf. Dangor, 1997).

Our argument is that the view that three traditions shape African intellectualism fails to recognize a fourth tradition that has informed scholarship in South Africa. It is our view that this fourth tradition entails blending the various traditions that have come before it in the process of working to rehumanize the oppressed and also their oppressors. To speak of this fourth tradition is, therefore, to attest to a racialized idea that has indigenous, Islamic, and Western influences. But here, one must be quick to note that many African cultures have solved the problem of the foreignness of Islam in complex ways, and over a much longer period than has been possible with Christianity whose recent violent emergence still often crystalizes "around the notion that the encounter between Christian dogma and the indigenous universe of signification was one of loss and splitting [*sic*] that led to the erasure of identity" (Mbembe, 2017, p. 100). Indeed, in the face of the recent history of South Africa and other parts of Africa, it is fair to say that the identities of many Africans bear Western-colonial signage (cf. Mudimbe, 1988).

We do not deny that Western colonialism tore apart whole social, political, economic, and psychological apparatuses by which Africans were able to live *with themselves as the centers of concern* (cf. wa Thiong'o, 1993, 2009). It replaced many extant arrangements and symbols with colonial ones that centered Western realities and needs. Concerning knowledge production, Mbembe (2001) has said that the effect of colonization is "that while we now know nearly everything that African states, societies and economies are not, we still know absolutely nothing about what they actually are" (p. 9) because we read with social and political imaginations that are Western and that *other* Africans (p. 11).

Similarly, Fanon (1986, p. 163) says, it is impossible to understand colonial and postcolonial identities and cultures without thinking about how the racialized identities and histories by which Africans compare themselves with other racialized peoples. This is also to say that African knowledges, even self-knowledges, are fundamentally bound up with colonial vestiges. So if contemporary African ways of belonging arise as quintessential postcolonial problems, it is also the case that the identities that Africans have crafted as solutions to the colonial problems they face are new syntheses that evidence the struggle against colonialism and apartheid (Chipkin, 2007). Even under conditions of colonial oppression, the agency of Africans has been expressed in how "both Christianity and Islam were encountered, absorbed, transformed, and reconfigured in Africa" (Dubois, 2017, pp. xii-xiii).

From this vantage point, the discussion that will follow, of Biko's views regarding Black Consciousness can be read as celebrating that something has

survived of African heritages and perspectives. Instead, far from the colony having been a site for the utter destruction of African cultures, histories and cosmic perspectives, the colony can be thought of as a melting pot in which cultures, histories, and cosmic perspectives draw upon each other to give rise to something new (wa Thiong'o, 2012, p. 52). At the same time, native and colonial cultures, histories and cosmologies remain recognisable so that one can say that:

In their struggle, the imperial lord and the colonial bondsman leave marks on each other, but with the difference that the bondsman can appropriate the best of the imperial input and combine it with the best of his own into a new synthesis that assumes the "globe for a theatre". The postcolonial embodies this new synthesis. While having its own particularity, like all other tributaries to the human, the post-colonial is an integral part of the intellectual history of the modern world because its very coloniality is a history of interpenetration of different peoples, cultures, and knowledge. (wa Thiong'o, 2012, p. 51)

To repeat and to emphasize the point, from this vantage point, the fight against colonialism and its legacies involves the (re)claiming of the subjectivities of the oppressed to "appropriate the best of the imperial input and combine it with the best of his own into a new synthesis appropriate the best of the imperial input and combine it with the best of his own into a new synthesis" (wa Thiong'o, 2012, p. 51). Steve Biko (1987) put this well when he said:

you know, cultures affect each other, you know like fashions and you cannot escape rubbing against someone else's culture. But you must have the right to reject or not anything that is given to you. At the moment we exist sort of as a limb of the white culture. (p. 130)

To understand Biko's contribution to the decolonial project we need to locate him in a broader tradition of opposition to colonialism. This broad tradition of radical southern influences is not of a piece with the rich African cultures/traditions, Islamic cultures/traditions and Western cultures/traditions that Ndlovu-Gatsheni writes of – it is instead a new synthesis of these earlier traditions wrought through engagement with the work of powerful radical black and southern scholarship such as that of Fanon and Freire.

BIKO AND BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

The iconic leader of the Black Consciousness movement, Steve Bantu Biko, drew on the anticolonial thought of Franz Fanon and Paulo Freire to make a vital contribution to the articulation of a fourth heritage that underpins scholarship in South Africa. But, we need to be careful to not omit how Biko's native cultural context influenced his thought. Indeed, Manchu (2017), in the second chapter of *Biko: A Biography*, makes this point strongly in pointing out how Biko's resistance to colonial domination is a continuation of a tradition of resistance that included Xhosa heroes and renowned global leaders such as Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, and one can argue that Black Consciousness is an extension of the Black Radical Tradition that manifests across the globe wherever people of African descent have faced slavery, colonialism, apartheid and other forms of modern Western domination (cf. Modiri, 2017; Robinson, 1983).

Indeed, Black Consciousness was developed in the late 1960s by gatherings of young black people who were avid readers of texts that sharpened their thinking about their budding involvements in the student politics of the time. Their readings spanned the work of writers such as Paulo Freire, Amilcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr, Chinua Achebe, and James Ngugi (Pityana, 2008). Black Consciousness also drew upon ideas of the black power and civil rights movements in the United States, from early African nationalist movements, the negritude of Senghor and others, and upon influences of the Pan-African movement to put forward a way of life that challenged colonial domination (Pityana, 2008). But, in the view of Joel Modiri (2017, p. 102), who has written a magisterial doctoral thesis on Biko's jurisprudential thought, the concerns of Black Consciousness, self-reliance, unity, and liberation were drawn from the work of Paulo Freire and in particular, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (cf. Modiri, 2017, p. 102). For, as Freire wrote:

> No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption. (Freire, 1970/2017, p. 54)

While it is interesting to note that Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2017) was, at least in some part, in dialogue with Fanon's (1963) *Wretched of the Earth*, the key thing is that Biko used both sources to articulate a praxis aimed at liberation (cf. Gibson, 2011, p. 8). For Biko realized that to

survive colonial oppression, many blacks resorted to forms of consciousness, which sought to make life bearable. This can be illustrated in the following story that Biko narrated:

> to accommodate the existing problems, the black man develops a two-faced attitude; I can quote a typical example; I had a man working in one of our projects in the Eastern Cape on electricity, he was installing electricity, a white man with a black assistant. He had to be above the ceiling and the black man was under the ceiling and they were working together pushing up wires and sending the rods in which the wires are and so on, and all the time there was insult, insult, insult from the white man: push this you fool – that sort of talk, and of course this touched me; I know the white man very well, he speaks very well to me, so at tea time we invite them to tea; I ask him: why do you speak like this to this man? and he says to me in front of the guy: this is the only language he understands, he is a lazy bugger. And the black man smiled. I asked him if it was true and he says: no, I am used to him. Then I was sick. I thought for a moment I do not understand black society. After some two hours I came back to this guy, I said to him: do you really mean it? The man changed, he became very bitter, he was telling me how he wants to leave any moment, but what can he do? He does not have any skills, he has got no assurance of another job, his job is to him some form of security, he has got no reserves, if he does not work today he cannot live tomorrow, he has got to work, he has got to take it. And if he has got to take he dare not show any form of what is called cheek to his boss. Now this I think epitomizes the two-faced attitude of the black man to this whole question of existence in this country. (Biko, 1987, pp. 102-103)

The aims of Black Consciousness were therefore directed at getting the oppressed to authentically experience the world critically in ways that would invariably lead to demanding changes that could bring about the end of colonialism. During the so-called SASO or Black Consciousness trial as it became known, nine young activists stood trial in South Africa on charges of treason, as a witness, Biko took the opportunity to expand on the tenets of Black Consciousness and stated:

> basically Black Consciousness refers itself to the black man and to his situation, and I think the black man is subjected to two forces in this country. He is first of all oppressed by an external world through institutionalized machinery, through laws that restrict him from doing certain things, through heavy work conditions, through poor pay, through very difficult living conditions, through poor education, these are all external to him, and secondly, and this we regard as the most important, the black man in

himself has developed a certain state of alienation, he rejects himself, precisely because he attaches the meaning white to all that is good, in other words he associates good and he equates good with white. This arises out of his living and it arises out of his development from childhood. (Biko, witness statement given during the SASO trial, May 1976, as cited in Arnold, 1979, p. 22)

The liberation ethic of Black Consciousness that flowed from this therefore prioritized, first, the emergence of a critical and creative culture of struggle that could marshal the oppressed towards a humanized future, second, the liberation of religion and theology so that they would not act as soporifics which dulled people's abilities to become critical consciousness agents of struggle against colonial oppression, and third, an ethic of black solidarity that manifested itself in community development projects that also, in turn, sought to conscientize students and teachers. These programs "began with literacy training, using the Paulo Freirean psycho-social method of pedagogy. Students later ran clinics and were soon building schools and community centers" (Pityana, 2008, p. 9).

After being expelled from the University of Natal program for training black medical doctors, Biko instead worked on three Black Community Projects which were set up by the Black Consciousness movement: Zanempilo Clinic, Njwasa Home Industries, and the Ginsberg Education Fund which were located at Zinyoka, a rural village in what is now the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.

The move of the Black Consciousness movement to set up clinics to promote Black Consciousness stands in some contrast with the move of Fanon, who in 1956 decided to resign from the Psychiatric Hospital of Blida Joinville, Algeria. Fanon's (1994) primary reason was that "the objective conditions under which psychiatry is practiced in Algeria constituted a challenge to common sense" (p. 52) as the abnormal conditions of colonial rule made it abnormal for one to be psychologically well in the Algeria of the time. Indeed, speaking as a witness at the South African Students Organization/Black People's Convention trial of 1963/64, Biko said the Black Community Programs, including the Zanempilo Clinic, were intended to help communities to overcome defeatist attitudes which the racist logics of colonialism and apartheid inculcated by showing that blacks could do anything they set their minds to – that it is not true that all that is good comes from White society (Arnold, 1979).

For Biko, achieving success with the Zanemphilo Clinic was a way to challenge the ongoing history of how black sovereignty was lost to colonialism

and apartheid domination. In this sense, for blacks to show that they could master Western medicine was a radical act of resistance. Indeed, one study of oral histories collected mainly in 2008, shows that: "Testimonies reveal that, although short-lived, Black Consciousness activists succeeded in improving the economic and physical health of Zinyoka and restoring a sense of human dignity in its residents." (Hadfield, 2010, p. 80). This is particularly significant given that in colonial settings, black practitioners of Western medicine may be seen by fellow colonized peoples as symbols of their loss of sovereignty, as representatives of the project of Western rationality (cf. Fanon, 1970, pp. 111-112) who therefore merit to be met with both pride and hatred (Fanon, 1970, p. 113). In these lights, the setting up of Zanempilo says a great deal about how Biko should be read as a continuation in black radical traditions which have assumed the mantle of taking the best and most useful of Western innovations and therefore of modernity itself – to realize the liberation of oppressed blacks (cf. Masilela, 1996; Modiri, 2017).

Yet, whereas Hadfield (2010, p. 80) is conclusive that Zanempilo was a success, it has to be acknowledged that this success was only based on the Black Consciousness Movement seeking and accepting funding from white people. The funds to build the clinic were sourced from a German woman who could not externalize her funds to Germany and most of the operational funding to operate the clinic came from white benefactors, including Anglo-American Corporation (cf. Manchu, 2017, p. 13). Indeed, Njwasa Home Industries – which manufactured leather goods and clothing apparel, and the Ginsberg Education Fund – which sourced bursary funding to enable outstanding students to continue with their studies also relied heavily on white sources of funding (Stubbs, 2017, pp. 190-191). This creates the impression that the Black Community Programs that Biko was involved in were not marked by the kinds of black self-reliance that Black Consciousness espoused and that they were therefore failures.

However, one must also see that Biko and the Black Consciousness movement were not only involved in programmatic engagements that aimed at upending colonial domination. They prioritized the recovery of the humanity of those whose lives had been made shells of humanity by these systems. In other words, Black Consciousness, as Gordon (2008) and More (2008) note, has a fundamentally existential dimension under which the ontological resuscitation of humanity began with restoring the dignity and worth of the black oppressed. From the vantage point, success is gained to the extent that strides are made towards what President Mbeki later called an African Renaissance (cf. Reddy, 2009) and to the extent that contemporary calls for

decolonizing higher education in South Africa are underpinned references to Biko and Black Consciousness (cf. Khati, 2020; Sokhaba, 2020).

Black Consciousness, therefore, emerges epistemically as a series of practices that are fundamentally about communication that seeks social changes by enabling the oppressed to experience their situations in ways that enable them to, with critical consciousness, act with agency to achieve the change they need. It is in this sense that Black Consciousness highlights the role of emancipation in communication for social change.

COMMUNICATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Chasi (2020) argues that communication of and about pain is an underlying concern of communication for social change. On this view, communication for social change draws on social measures to ameliorate people's conditions of life – by raising critical consciousness of and building capacities for dealing with it and its causes so as to enable people to prevent pain and its causes.

Biko (1987, pp. 64-65) repeatedly excoriated communicative practices that, not only emphasised cultural emancipation among blacks, but also produced plays of images and practices of integration between South African races, describing them in some instances as soporifics for how they dulled the painful experiences of unjust segregation and subjugation.

Something of this concern to enable people to relate to the pain of their situations – so that they can question the situation and change it too, is captured in the closing words of Fanon (1986) *Black Skin, White Masks*: "O my body, make me always a man who questions" (p. 232).

Black Consciousness is fully engaged with the historical implications of the historical, political, social, and economic disinheritance of blacks, so its episteme positively calls for black solidarity to build the capabilities needed to overcome systems of colonialism and its subjugations. Indeed, for example, in his criticisms of blacks who aligned themselves with the system of apartheid authority, Biko (1987) bewails them as "dummy platforms, these phoney telephones" (p. 84) – for he understood that what is at stake is the miscommunication of the pain and suffering of the oppressed that consequently lead to the inability to make the case for the humanization of society.

At bottom, what is positive about Black Consciousness is that it involves calling the oppressed, not to mere "reactionary rejection of whites", but to engage in the "game of power politics" by building strong institutional foundations from which to operate, "to rise and attain the envisaged self" (Biko, 1987, p. 68). As Ndebele (2017) says:

"The envisioned self" was Biko's futuristic concept by which he called for more than just the recovery of a human essence dismembered, distorted, disoriented, oppressed, but also for how that essence could be recovered and remoulded under new historical circumstances spanning more than one hundred and fifty years of a painful yet purposeful effort of seeking to reconstitute it into a new human being. (p. x)

The Black Consciousness quest to end colonialism and apartheid requires recognition that all human cultural activity involves the communicative enactment of common grounds and norms on which people construe and act out the good. Black Consciousness, therefore, stands against colonial apartheid narratives and practices that wrongfully take blacks to be different and therefore bad, evil, deviant, harmful, or dangerous. Under colonial apartheid, blacks were marked as grossly different, and their blackness was foregrounded as a catalyst for feelings among whites that they were the subjects of a *swart gevaar* (black danger). This kind of marking out of *out-groups* justifies and produces what communication accommodation theory calls *divergence* in societies (cf. Gallois and Callan, 1991: 264) and is, therefore, the grist of colonial and apartheid Manicheisms – as well told by Fanon (1986) in his *Black Skin, White Masks*. In the words of Biko (1987) himself, Black Consciousness is:

the realization by the blacks that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed. Once the latter has been so effectively manipulated and controlled by the oppressor as to make the oppressed believe that he is a liability to the white man, then there will be nothing the oppressed can do that will really scare the powerful masters. (p. 68)

Black consciousness, Biko (1987) contends "makes the black man see himself as a being" and he will no longer "tolerate attempts by anybody to dwarf the significance of his manhood" (p. 68).

However, separating people into *in* and *out* groups is not what distinguishes colonial and apartheid societies from others. Instead, apartheid is misanthropic in the ways it paradigmatically attacks what Tomasello (2010) has called the uniquely human capacity for altruism, i.e. the basis for how humans are uniquely informative, sharing and giving in ways that allow unique human communication and culture. Thus, albeit pejoratively, in everyday situations one hears agreement that anything that diminishes a person's ability to demonstrate altruism, culture, or communication is an

attack on the afflicted individual's humanity. In attacking the possibility for human communication and culture, colonialism attacks the fundamental possibilities that shape the form and function of humanized societies. Black Consciousness recognized therefore that ending colonialism and apartheid is quite simply indispensable to any endeavor to achieve societies that have a more human face. Concerns that forms the basis for cultural emancipation as foregrounded in communication for social change in the African/South African context.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Together with others such as Biko, Freire is a name that prominently comes up in South African discussions about how social realities may be changed to achieve more desirable ends. Indeed, Freirean thought has significantly shaped and informed South African debates and actions that have an interest in processes to do with education and emancipation.

Thus, in light of contemporary decolonisation debates and calls for the decolonisation of all spheres of society we do well in evoking and understanding the thoughts underpinning Black Consciousness. Importantly, Black Consciousness marks a way of thinking about African futures that is significant not only in the ways it foregrounds emancipation but importantly also for the praxis of communication for social change. The envisioned self that Black Consciousness articulated is one that aspires to humanize the world. Black Consciousness demands the complete transformation of the system in ways that end dehumanization. In line with Freirean thought, Black Consciousness says that once people are conscientized, they are compelled to use their capabilities to make the world more desirable and therefore more humanized, "for we cannot be conscious of ourselves and yet remain in bondage. We want to attain the envisioned self which is a free self" (Biko, 1987, p. 49). We do well in recalling this in contemporary calls for decolonisation and in communication for social change. As such Black Consciousness grounded – important respects – in Freirean thought as well as other traditions from within Africa and the global South, merits serious scholarly engagement. Seen through this lens, Black Consciousness stands to add to both the theorisation and praxis of the field communication for social change. M

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