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## APPENDIX 2

Paper by Eddie Webster:

"Black Consciousness and the  
White Left"

## BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE WHITE LEFT

In this paper I want to explore the nature of the concept of Black Consciousness and its implications for the 'white left' within South Africa. Such a task seems necessary for three reasons:

- (1) It is popularly believed that Black Consciousness is a recent development in South Africa. While it is true that the term itself and the form it has taken is a new response by the Black intelligentsia to a specific historical situation, it is possible to trace similar tendencies in earlier responses by Blacks. In the 1920's the South African Communist Party felt at first threatened by Garveyism with its slogan of 'Africa for the Africans' as it seemed to challenge their basic premise of inter-racial class solidarity. It is interesting to note here that Garveyism, like B.C., was first articulated in Black America and it would be useful to trace more carefully the influence of America on the South African movement from the late nineteenth century onwards (See Hamilton and Carmichael Black Power). Again in the 1940's the emergence of the non-European Unity Movement with its emphasis on Black solidarity seemed to threaten the White left. Similarly, contained within the A.N.C. were the contradictory tendencies of Africanist and non-racial and consequently the A.N.C. showed an ambivalence, particularly marked at the level of organization. Thus the Congress movement was based on a 'pillar' structure comprising several different organizations, each racial in its membership apart from the trade union component. The A.N.C., the Indian Congress, the coloured Peoples Congress and the Congress of Democrats, restricted their membership in practice to Africans, Indians, Coloureds and Whites respectively. The arguments in favour of this pillared structure were similar to those used by SASO when withdrawing from NUSAS, except that SASO widened their concept of Black to include Indians and Coloureds within one organization. Likewise the breakaway of P.A.C. from the Congress movement in 1959 can be in part explained by the desire of Africans to 'go it on their own' and to escape what they saw as the domination of the White left and other 'minority group interests' in the Congress movement. Of course, I'm not suggesting that the B.C. movement is a front for these organizations. However, it does seem to be important to understand its similarities with tendencies that have been present throughout the Black man's struggle for freedom in South Africa.
- (2) A second reason why such a task is necessary is that "whites now have the opportunity of re-examining their own image and remaking it to fit into the new man envisaged by the oppressed people-----. In the long run the oppressed will have to free the oppressors who are unable (and unwilling) to free themselves".(1)
- (3) Finally, it is necessary to examine B.C. because in the long run some type of alliance with the White left will be necessary and the degree to which Whites have understood the implication of B.C. will be reflected in the specific type and quality of this alliance. (I hope this point will be made clearer later on).

### B.C. Proposition

- (a) that Blacks have certain common cultural and historical experiences arising out of colonialism which they need to articulate and become aware of, i.e. conscious.
- (b) that Blacks need to mobilize themselves as a group - show solidarity - in order to realize this new consciousness and translate it into the power necessary to overcome White racism.



Let me try and spell out more clearly the nature and implications of these two propositions.

In the course of the expansion of Europe and the development of European colonialism a systematic philosophy of white racism emerged. At the core of this philosophy was the belief in the innate superiority of those held to be genetically white and conversely the innate inferiority of those who were not white. Black became a symbol of inferiority consigned to nothingness. It is therefore in the first instance this common experience of colonialism and racial oppression that the people of Africa, America and Asia seek to become aware of through B.C. "In its negative form we recognise the fact of a specific form of suffering; that of having been a colonized people. It stands to reason that part of our consciousness of being black people amounts to a 'mutual knowledge' of this suffering at the hands of white domination". (2)

What did the common suffering under colonialism involve? It involved the distortion and disfiguring of indigenous history. "The whole history of the Black people is presented as a long lamentation of repeated defeats ..... a lot of attention has to be paid to our history if we as Blacks want to aid each other in our coming into conscious. We have to rewrite our history and describe in it the heroes that formed the core of resistance to the White invaders. These have to be revealed and the stress has to be laid on the successful nation-building attempts by people like Shaka, Moshoeshe and Hintsa". It involved the systematic destruction of African religious beliefs by missionaries who were unable to distinguish between basic Christian principles and Victorian culture and customs. These culture-bound missionaries thought it their duty to impose European cultural traits such as styles of dress and worship on their converts. They were unable to see that the rituals of European Christendom had potential meaning only in the context of European culture. In fact African ontology challenges the central European philosophical contention of the separation of mind and matter. Senghor observes that "for the African, matter in the sense the Europeans understand it is only a system of signs which translates the single reality of the Universe: being, which is spirit, which is life force. Thus, the whole universe appears as an infinitely small and at the same time an infinitely large network of life forces which emanate from God and end in God who is the source of all life forces". (3)

Manganyi observes "that as a result of a number of historical (e.g. colonialism) and social-cultural contingencies such as the missionary effort, most of the valuable aspects of African ontology were undermined. The colonizers waged a total war on negritude mainly through the missionary thrust". (4) Consequently B.C. has meant the attempt to develop a specifically black religious response Black Theology is a theology which attempts to reflect the condition of being black.

The colonization process involved the destruction of African culture through European education and the spread of materialistic and individualistic capitalist values. Julius Nyerere writes that "colonial education was motivated by a desire to inculcate the values of the colonial society and to train individuals for the service of the colonial state ..... (to satisfy) the need for local clerks and junior officials .... (it was) modelled on the British system, but with even heavier emphasis on subservient attitudes and on white-collar skills. Inevitably too, it was based on the assumption of a colonialist and capitalist society. It emphasized and encouraged the individualistic interests of mankind instead of his co-operative interests. It led to the position of individual material wealth being the major criterion of social merit and worth". (5)

Thus B.C. culture and in the Black Intelligent culture do inheritance past either of the aware the hegemony suggested of the Black white world artist was The vast because his North or in the white purged. the poet was for the Black of whites for acceptance whiteness.

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Thus B.C. involves an attempt to draw on some aspects of indigenous culture and to blend it into the day-to-day living experience of life in the Black social world. To date it is evident that the Black intelligentsia have failed to develop an authentic African national culture drawing on the rich texture of the Nguni, Sotho and Venda inheritance. With few exceptions African urban culture has in the past either expressed itself in derivative American movie form or of the awareness of the need to develop a culture which can challenge the hegemony of liberal assimilationism (6) A SASO member recently suggested two reasons for this failure to examine the 'true public' of the Black artist. "Firstly the Black artist was accepted into the white world and was then defined as an artist. Secondly, the Black artist was conditioned into preparing his works for white readership. The vast majority of Black people were unaware of the black artist because his paintings hung in the carpeted mansions of Parktown North or the Berea; the poetry was being avidly published in the white liberal magazines so that the white conscience can be purged. And the Black elitists follow suit and criticise and appreciate the poet who can emulate Keats, Shelly, Shakespeare. The standard for the Black author has been laid by Alan Paton and that company of whites who capitalize on the black experience and black suffering for acceptance into the white world - and thus aspire more and more for whiteness.

The second proposition involved the assertion that if Blacks want to reach this new consciousness they have to develop a pride in being black and mobilize as a group. This has led to two misunderstandings.

Firstly, it is held that this is a type of racism in reverse. This seems to me to be a nonsense-statement as something must either be racist or not racist - it can't be racist in reverse! The essential misunderstanding seems to arise from the fact that racism emerges when one group stigmatizes another as inferior in order to facilitate its exploitation while maintaining a monopoly of power over it. Thus central to a racist position - as distinct from racial prejudice - would be the possession of exclusive power over another racial group. Blacks have been forced to mobilize around race because it is on the basis of race that Whites have maintained their power over Blacks. Thus Manganyi writes that "skin colour itself is insignificant. What is important is what the skin actually signifies in sociological and psychological terms. We are being called upon to change the negative sociological scheme imposed upon us by whites". It seems important therefore to distinguish between the race prejudice of the whites - which in large parts acts as a rationalization for exploitation, inequality and privilege - and the growing awareness of the Blacks of their identity and the need to mobilize as a group to assert that identity. It must be accepted that this Black awareness will sometimes manifest itself in racial hostility to individual whites - while such a response is politically immature as it confuses the colour white with a social system, it must not be confused with the race prejudice of the whites as it is based on real grievances and a collective awareness of centuries of European colonialism and racial domination. When the grievances are removed the perception of the conflict in racial terms will in large part disappear, therefore there is no logical reason why whites should expect to be discriminated against in a democratic South Africa because of their whiteness. Thus, "while 'colour blindness' may be a sound goal ultimately, we must realize that race is an overwhelming part of life in this historical period. There is no black man in this country who can live 'simply as a man'. This blackness is an ever-present fact of this racist society whether he recognizes it or not".



## B.C. and the White Liberals

The second misunderstanding arises from a popular view that the central thrust of B.C. is aimed at the White liberals. This seems to miss the point - B.C. is essentially an attack on the White power structure of which they quite correctly see the vast bulk of whites as part of. B.C. involves two separate but related points about White liberals. Firstly, that liberals are politically impotent and therefore blacks must not rely on them for their liberation. Hence, the important emphasis of B.C. on the fact that the Black is on his own and that he must not become dependent on the White liberal to protect or advance his interests. We find in SASO's policy statement the premise that before the Black people should join the open society, they should first close ranks to form themselves into a "solid group to oppose the definite racism that is meted out by the White society, to work out their direction clearly and bargain from a position of strength".

Their second point levied against the White liberals is that they are essentially hypocritical and many are still imbued with essentially racist assumptions. Here, interestingly, the B.C. shares common ground with some Afrikaans critics of White liberals. Michiel le Roux raises this criticism at NUSAS whose "abhorrence of the present situation is also regarded with suspicion in consequence of their acceptance of the material benefits which the system offers them, as members of the White group. The moderates see NUSAS as being a group of living-room liberals who are part and parcel of the present situation but who, wishing to ease a guilty conscience and follow Western trends, pretend to be the sole defenders of democracy and the rule of law in South Africa and to promote a non-racial society" (7) I think an analysis of S.A. liberalism and its institutions would tend to bear out the essential dichotomy between theory and practice. One example will suffice. Much has been made over the last two decades of the so-called Open Universities and much energy has been devoted to defending them. Only Wits and UCT ever had academic integration and then it was only a token number who were always socially segregated. Natal has always had a separate section for blacks and Rhodes has always been a tribal University.

### The Rejection of Multi-Racialism

Two important points emerge from the second proposition of B.C. and they both relate to the liberal-assimilation model. Firstly, that there was a premature insistence on non-racial organisations in the past, at a stage when the experience and life styles of Africans and non-Africans were widely different. This tended to stunt the emergence of African interests because Africans too readily accepted coalition with non-Africans. (8)

It often had the unintended consequence of recreating internally some of the race hierarchies of the larger society. Both black and white found it difficult to emerge from their background of dominated and dominator. The importance of this criticism has been underlined again recently with the failure of the multi-racial experiment at Wilgerspruit. That failure of multi-racialism was blamed on the different life styles and different experiences that precluded any genuine communication. Dale White is quoted as saying that "our old assumptions about multi-racialism don't hold anymore. We have to find a new basis for working together. Whites have to change to a point where they aren't asking Blacks to support their way of life, but are willing to respond to the adaptation that Blacks are asking of them. This basis can only be found when both sides become secure enough and strong enough to confront each other" (9) The basic difference in strategy between the liberal and the B.C. movement lies simply in this: where the liberal sees non-racialism as the antithesis of racism B.C. asserts that strong solidarity among Blacks is the antithesis of white racism.

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Clive Nettleton summarized the position succinctly. "The present state of consciousness of black and white makes separation inevitable in order that the groups may each find an identity strong enough to enable constructive encounter between the two to take place. Ultimately it is unlikely that separation will prove satisfactory but it is a necessary interim state. At present, encounter would be between 'unequals'; change in power relations could be the forerunner of real change. There can be no meeting as between co-equals until such time as blacks have sufficient power to ensure that they have an equal stake in the bargaining and ultimately it will be the blacks who set the terms". (10) However, it must be made clear here that to assert that multi-racial organisations are premature at this stage is not the same as saying whites have no supportive role to play. As a preliminary guideline I would suggest two requirements for community action: (1) the sine qua non of any involvement is competence and (2) that students should have something personal to gain from the activity. The first point is self-evident; the second point - reciprocity - is a necessary safeguard against the false relationship of paternalism.

A second point in the Black Consciousness position is that integration does not mean assimilation of Blacks into an already established set of norms drawn up and motivated by white society. Integration, they suggest, involves free participation by individuals in a given society and proportionate contribution to the joint culture of the society by individuals. In other words, the Black consciousness movement does not accept uncritically white culture as a model to aspire to.

#### THE WHITE RESPONSE

I have dealt at some length with the nature of Black Consciousness as it seems important for us to understand it largely on its own terms in order to develop an effective response to it. However, it seems to me that there are areas of Black consciousness which are ambiguous and undeveloped and I remain unsure of the extent to which I have captured their definition of it. Furthermore it should be clear that there is more to black politics than black consciousness. eg. the re-emergence of African trade unions.

I now want to identify three broad categories of responses on the White Left to B.C. I must emphasize that they are not mutually exclusive - in other words, it is quite possible for a person to hold more than one of these views.

#### (1) The Traditional Liberal

At first traditional liberals responded to B.C. in a defensive way seeing it as a rather unfair attack on themselves. They tended to misinterpret the emphasis on black as racist and were threatened by the break up of their platform in non-racial organisations. They responded to the call for separate organisations by re-iterating their basic principles of equality, non-racialism and the protection of civil liberties. The response of some members of NUSAS in 1969 to the breakaway of SASO may fall into this category. The traditional liberal finds it difficult to recognise the limits of his role in South Africa.

#### (2) The Despairing Liberal

The despairing liberal sees in the emergence of B.C. the collapse of the non-racial ideal. He at first reluctantly recognises the Blacks as the authentic agents of radical change, but, like the traditional liberal, he misinterprets it as a racist response. He experiences deep feelings of guilt and over-compensates for this by developing an emotional and uncritical support of all B.C. positions.



In the USA this response was manifested in the speech of one 'despairing liberal' who said "We are just a little tall on the end of a very powerful Black Panther, and I want to be on that tail - if they'll let me". Consequently he defines the situation as historically impossible for the white liberal and eventually either withdraws from the country or joins Anglo-American! The despairing liberal is unable to find an effective role for himself because he now defines the problem in over-rigid, undialectical racial categories, rather than as a particular form of racial capitalism.

### (3) The Committed Radical

The committed radical retains his commitment to a non-racial S.A. but accepts that an emphasis on black solidarity rather than non-racialism is necessary at this stage. He accepts it as entirely appropriate that Blacks should respond to their own situation in S.A. in racial terms. A shared awareness of race discrimination is their definition of the situation. Likewise, he accepts that most whites also perceive the situation in racial terms and that white workers share no potential class interest with black workers as they have been incorporated into the white power structure. This I take to be the point that is made by a SASO member when he said "They tell us that the situation is a class struggle rather than a race one. Let them to go van Tonder in the Free State and tell him this". Thus unlike the traditional liberal he recognises the limits of his role and accepts the blacks as the agents of their own liberation. However, unlike the despairing liberal his support of B.C. is not uncritical, precisely because he shares an active commitment to radical change with other blacks. The Committed radical points to the danger of B.C. becoming a mere short-term emotional release and the growth of a narcissistic mystique of blackness - the idea that merely being black is an adequate statement of political radicalism, and that being black one is contributing more to the overthrow of white supremacy than white people could possibly do. This seems to me to be an important area which we in Fanon's critique of Negritude, which he sees leading to a form of false-decolonisation where the essential institutions of colonialism are retained in the post-colonial era by a corrupt black bourgeoisie. There is a danger that the stress on blackness obscures and mystifies the problem. Putting it crudely you have not understood the problem until you recognise the fact that exploitation can just as well have a black face as a white face. At the end of a decade of independence Nyerere re-assessed the independence struggle in these terms "...many leaders of the independence struggle were not against capitalism; they simply wanted its fruits, and saw independence as the means to that end. Indeed, many of the most active fighters in the independence movement were motivated-consciously or un-consciously - by the belief that only with independence could they attain that ideal of individual wealth which their education or their experience in the modern sector had established as a worthwhile goal ... This lack of ideological content during the independence struggle often served to maintain unity among the anti-colonialist forces, or to prevent a diversion of energies into the difficult question of socialist education (It was not only selfishness which made the leaders think only in terms of Africanising the capitalist economy of the colonialists, often they had no knowledge of any alternatives). But it can present a serious problem in the post-independence period". (Nyerere: Freedom and Socialism)

The committed radical sees in the uneven development of capitalism the creation of potential conflicts of interests within the black community and the danger of the emergence of black middle-classes who feel their interests are best served by individual careerism and the preservation of the status quo. They are conscious of the power of the capitalist system to cultivate artificial needs and channel political energies into consumerism. Here also, one has to recognise the potential of the policy of separate development for diverting Black energies into the limited status and rewards of the apartheid institutions. The committed radicals stress the extent to which a middle-class university trained Black has to go through a difficult process of adaption in order to work on a fruitful level of equality with the black peasant or worker

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It may be a lot easier for him than a white person, but it is still difficult, and it is important that he should not let his Blackness blind him to these difficulties. The committed radical sees the power of the black in the unorganised working class and encourages the advocates of B.C. to organise African trade unions. Committed radicals feel they have access to certain skills and a freedom of movement that enables them to play a supportive role in areas where blacks may find it difficult.

The other side of the coin of the committed radical's response to B.C. is to take seriously Carmichael's statement that 'If the white man wants to help, he can go home and free his own people'. In the South African context this can be interpreted in part to mean that whites must work towards a transformation of their own culture in the African context. This seems to me to present us with an exciting opportunity of discovering Africa and our African-ness. Clive Nettleton has suggested that the sine qua non of such an achievement is a knowledge of African languages and of African music and art. This seems to me to be a sensible approach, although we must be careful about our purpose for doing this - plenty of white racists speak an African language and feel they 'know the native' and are thus better able to control him. In the USA the fruits of the Harlem Renaissance, the first signs of the development of Black culture from its folk-slave pattern, were expropriated by the whites, and this process has continued to the present. The Black man can be an entertainer but not a producer of culture, or if a producer then not of a black national culture (ii). Again Nettleton suggests that whites should simplify their life-style. This relates to an earlier point about consistency - a commitment to radical life-style, and the time is long overdue for the white left in S.A. to think out the full implications of their political position in their personal lives. At the same time this should not be interpreted as a plea for so-called 'dropping out' - a form of escapist make-believe that bears a strong resemblance to Marie Antoinette's attempt at playing shepherdess.

If we are to attempt to transform white culture in the African context we need to engage in a debate with white society in an idiom which it understands. To begin with, we need to turn our critical gaze onto white society to show clearly how its social institutions maintain and perpetuate inequality. We must focus not on the institutions of Afrikanerdom but those of white English South Africa - our families, the private schools, the universities, the economic institutions and the churches. We must recognise that for a white to liberate himself from racism is a long and difficult intellectual and psychological process. It requires firstly, an awareness of precisely how deeply racism has permeated our concepts of reality and our identity. Emotionally and intellectually one has to go through a long period of critical self-examinations to understand the forces that have shaped us - this process of de-socialisation and de-colonisation is a total process as it involves re-discovering the history of our country and the culture of its peoples. The difficulty here lies in developing a balanced response to these 'discoveries' as it is all too easy to develop exaggerated feelings of collective guilt.

Decolonisation and de-socialisation is a process which can only take on meaning through active involvement in S.A. society accompanied by reflection - the authentic unity of theory and practice. However, in our debate with white society we must avoid moralism and we must recognise the objectively reactionary nature of that society - we must realise that we cannot change white society but we can only make it more receptive to the kind of changes that the oppressed will force upon it. Finally, we must recognise that B.C. is not so much a description of social reality as an attempt to change this reality by a group of Black intellectuals who recognise that their unity is their strongest weapon. Thus it is possible to demonstrate that very little actual unity exists among the black community.



But this is to miss the point - the first step to changing reality is to conceive of how it could be different. Black consciousness has mapped out some of the steps needed to change this reality - my task today has been to describe this attempt and the white response to it - our task now is to translate our commitment into meaningful radical action.

EDDIE WEBSTER

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