

Steve Biko
"Black Souls in White Skins?"
in
Steve Biko,
I Write What I Like
A Selection of His Writings
Edited with a Personal Memoir
by Aelred Stubbs
(San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1972),
pp. 19-26

5

Black Souls in White Skins?

At the 1st General Students Council of SASO in July 1970 Steve was succeeded as President by Barney Pitso. Steve was elected Chairman of SASO Publications. The following month the monthly SASO Newsletter began to appear carrying articles by himself called "I write what I like" and signed Frank Talk. At the BPC/SASO Trial the Judge at one point interjected: "Isn't (accused) number 9 [Strini Moodley] Frank Talk?" to which Steve replied, "No, no, he was never Frank Talk, I was Frank Talk" (see p. 108). This article and the one that follows, from the August and September 1970 issues of the Newsletter respectively, give an authentic exposition of the philosophy of Black Consciousness.

I WRITE WHAT I LIKE

The following is the first of a series of articles under the above topic, that will appear regularly in our Newsletter.

BLACK SOULS IN WHITE SKINS?

Basically the South African white community is a homogeneous community. It is a community of people who sit to enjoy a privileged position that they do not deserve, are aware of this, and therefore spend their time trying to justify why they are doing so. Where differences in political opinion exist, they are in the process of trying to justify their position of privilege and their usurpation of power.

With their theory of "separate freedoms for the various nations in the multinational state of South Africa" the Nationalists have gone a long way towards giving most of white South Africa some sort of moral explanation for what is happening. Everyone is quite content to point out that these people – meaning the blacks – will be free when they are ready to run their own affairs in their own areas. What more could they possibly hope for?

But these are not the people we are concerned with. We are concerned with that curious bunch of nonconformists who explain their participation in negative terms: that bunch of do-gooders that goes under all sorts of names – liberals, leftists etc. These are the people who argue that they are not responsible for white racism and the country's "inhumanity to the black man". These are the people who claim that they too feel the oppression just as acutely as the blacks and therefore should be jointly involved in the black man's struggle for a place under the sun. In short, these are the people who say that they have black souls wrapped up in white skins.

The role of the white liberal in the black man's history in South Africa is a curious one. Very few black organisations were not under white direction. True to their image, the white liberals always knew what was good for the blacks and told them so. The wonder of it all is that the black people have believed in them for so long. It was only at the end of the 50s that the blacks started demanding to be their own guardians.

Nowhere is the arrogance of the liberal ideology demonstrated so well as in their insistence that the problems of the country can only be solved by a bilateral approach involving both black and white. This has, by and large, come to be taken in all seriousness as the *modus operandi* in South Africa by all those who claim they would like a change in the *status quo*. Hence the multiracial political organisations and parties and the "nonracial" student organisations, all of which insist on integration not only as an end goal but also as a means.

The integration they talk about is first of all artificial in that it is a response to conscious manoeuvre rather than to the dictates of the inner soul. In other words the people forming the integrated complex have been extracted from various segregated societies with their in-built complexes of superiority and inferiority and these continue to manifest themselves even in the "nonracial" set-up of the integrated complex. As a result the integration so achieved is a one-way course, with the whites doing all the talking and the blacks the listening. Let me hasten to say that I am not claiming that segregation is necessarily the natural order; however, given the facts of the situation where a group experiences privilege at the expense of others, then it becomes obvious that a hastily arranged integration cannot be the solution to the problem. It is rather like expecting the slave to work together with the slave-master's son to remove all the conditions leading to

the former's enslavement.

Secondly, this type of integration as a means is almost always unproductive. The participants waste lots of time in an internal sort of mudslinging designed to prove that A is more of a liberal than B. In other words the lack of common ground for solid identification is all the time manifested in internal strifes inside the group.

It will not sound anachronistic to anybody genuinely interested in real integration to learn that blacks are asserting themselves in a society where they are being treated as perpetual under-16s. One does not need to plan for or actively encourage real integration. Once the various groups within a given community have asserted themselves to the point that mutual respect has to be shown then you have the ingredients for a true and meaningful integration. At the heart of true integration is the provision for each man, each group to rise and attain the envisioned self. Each group must be able to attain its style of existence without encroaching on or being thwarted by another. Out of this mutual respect for each other and complete freedom of self-determination there will obviously arise a genuine fusion of the life-styles of the various groups. This is true integration.

From this it becomes clear that as long as blacks are suffering from inferiority complex – a result of 300 years of deliberate oppression, denigration and derision – they will be useless as co-architects of a normal society where man is nothing else but man for his own sake. Hence what is necessary as a prelude to anything else that may come is a very strong grass-roots build-up of black consciousness such that blacks can learn to assert themselves and stake their rightful claim.

Thus in adopting the line of a nonracial approach, the liberals are playing their old game. They are claiming a "monopoly on intelligence and moral judgement" and setting the pattern and pace for the realisation of the black man's aspirations. They want to remain in good books with both the black and white worlds. They want to shy away from all forms of "extremisms", condemning "white supremacy" as being just as bad as "Black Power!". They vacillate between the two worlds, verbalising all the complaints of the blacks beautifully while skilfully extracting what suits them from the exclusive pool of white privileges. But ask them for a moment to give a concrete meaningful programme that they intend adopting, then you will see on whose side they really are. Their protests are directed at and appeal to white conscience, everything they do is directed at finally convincing the white electorate that the black man is also a

man and that at some future date he should be given a place at the white man's table.

The myth of integration as propounded under the banner of liberal ideology must be cracked and killed because it makes people believe that something is being done when in actual fact the artificial integrated circles are a soporific on the blacks and provide a vague satisfaction for the guilty-stricken whites. It works on a false premise that because it is difficult to bring people from different races together in this country, therefore achievement of this is in itself a step forward towards the total liberation of the blacks. Nothing could be more irrelevant and therefore misleading. Those who believe in it are living in a fool's paradise.

First the black-white circles are almost always a creation of white liberals. As a testimony to their claim of complete identification with the blacks, they call a few "intelligent and articulate" blacks to "come around for tea at home", where all present ask each other the same old hackneyed question "how can we bring about change in South Africa?" The more such tea-parties one calls the more of a liberal he is and the freer he shall feel from the guilt that harnesses and binds his conscience. Hence he moves around his white circles – whites-only hotels, beaches, restaurants and cinemas – with a lighter load, feeling that he is not like the rest of the others. Yet at the back of his mind is a constant reminder that he is quite comfortable as things stand and therefore should not bother about change. Although he does not vote for the Nats (now that they are in the majority anyway), he feels quite secure under the protection offered by the Nats and subconsciously shuns the idea of a change. This is what demarcates the liberal from the black world. The liberals view the oppression of blacks as a problem that has to be solved, an eye sore spoiling an otherwise beautiful view. From time to time the liberals make themselves forget about the problem or take their eyes off the eyesore. On the other hand, in oppression the blacks are experiencing a situation from which they are unable to escape at any given moment. Theirs is a struggle to get out of the situation and not merely to solve a peripheral problem as in the case of the liberals. This is why blacks speak with a greater sense of urgency than whites.

A game at which the liberals have become masters is that of deliberate evasiveness. The question often comes up "what can I do?". If you ask him to do something like stopping to use segregated facilities or dropping out of varsity to work at menial jobs like all blacks or

defying and denouncing all provisions that make him privileged, you always get the answer – "but that's unrealistic!". While this may be true, it only serves to illustrate the fact that no matter what a white man does, the colour of his skin – his passport to privilege – will always put him miles ahead of the black man. Thus in the ultimate analysis no white person can escape being part of the oppressor camp.

"There exists among men, because they are men, a solidarity through which each shares responsibility for every injustice and every wrong committed in the world, and especially for crimes that are committed in his presence or of which he cannot be ignorant".

This description of "metaphysical guilt" explains adequately that white racism "is only possible because whites are indifferent to suffering and patient with cruelty" meted out to the black man. Instead of involving themselves in an all-out attempt to stamp out racism from their white society, liberals waste lots of time trying to prove to as many blacks as they can find that they are liberal. This arises out of the false belief that we are faced with a black problem. There is nothing the matter with blacks. The problem is WHITE RACISM and it rests squarely on the laps of the white society. The sooner the liberals realise this the better for us blacks. Their presence amongst us is irksome and of nuisance value. It removes the focus of attention from essentials and shifts it to ill-defined philosophical concepts that are both irrelevant to the black man and merely a red herring across the track. White liberals must leave blacks to take care of their own business while they concern themselves with the real evil in our society – white racism.

Secondly, the black-white mixed circles are static circles with neither direction nor programme. The same questions are asked and the same naiveté exhibited in answering them. The real concern of the group is to keep the group going rather than being useful. In this sort of set-up one sees a perfect example of what oppression has done to the blacks. They have been made to feel inferior for so long that for them it is comforting to drink tea, wine or beer with whites who seem to treat them as equals. This serves to boost up their own ego to the extent of making them feel slightly superior to those blacks who do not get similar treatment from whites. These are the sort of blacks who are a danger to the community.

Instead of directing themselves at their black brothers and looking at their common problems from a common platform they choose to

sing out their lamentations to an apparently sympathetic audience that has become proficient in saying the chorus of "shame!". These dull-witted, self-centred blacks are in the ultimate analysis as guilty of the arrest of progress as their white friends for it is from such groups that the theory of gradualism emanates and this is what keeps the blacks confused and always hoping that one day God will step down from heaven to solve their problems. It is people from such groups who keep on scanning the papers daily to detect any sign of the change they patiently await without working for. When Helen Suzman's* majority is increased by a couple of thousands, this is regarded as a major milestone in the "inevitable change". Nobody looks at the other side of the coin – the large-scale removals of Africans from the urban areas or the impending zoning of places like Grey Street in Durban and a myriad of other manifestations of change for the worse.

Does this mean that I am against integration? If by integration you understand a breakthrough into white society by blacks, an assimilation and acceptance of blacks into an already established set of norms and code of behaviour set up by and maintained by whites, then YES I am against it. I am against the superior-inferior white-black stratification that makes the white a perpetual teacher and the black a perpetual pupil (and a poor one at that). I am against the intellectual arrogance of white people that makes them believe that white leadership is a *sine qua non* in this country and that whites are the divinely appointed pace-setters in progress. I am against the fact that a settler minority should impose an entire system of values on an indigenous people.

If on the other hand by integration you mean there shall be free participation by all members of a society, catering for the full expression of the self in a freely changing society as determined by the will of the people, then I am with you. For one cannot escape the fact that the culture shared by the majority group in any given society must ultimately determine the broad direction taken by the joint culture of that society. This need not cramp the style of those who feel differently but on the whole, a country in Africa, in which the majority of the people are African must inevitably exhibit African values and be truly African in style.

What of the claim that the blacks are becoming racists? This is a favourite pastime of frustrated liberals who feel their trusteeship

* At that time, and for many years, the only Progressive Party MP. Editor's note.

ground being washed off from under their feet. These self-appointed trustees of black interests boast of years of experience in their fight for the 'rights of the blacks'. They have been doing things for blacks, on behalf of blacks, and because of blacks. When the blacks announce that the time has come for them to do things for themselves and all by themselves all white liberals shout blue murder!

"Hey, you can't do that. You're being a racist. You're falling into their trap."

Apparently it's alright with the liberals as long as you remain caught by *their* trap.

Those who know, define racism as discrimination by a group against another for the purposes of subjugation or maintaining subjugation. In other words one cannot be a racist unless he has the power to subjugate. What blacks are doing is merely to respond to a situation in which they find themselves the objects of white racism. We are in the position in which we are because of our skin. We are collectively segregated against – what can be more logical than for us to respond as a group? When workers come together under the auspices of a trade union to strive for the betterment of their conditions, nobody expresses surprise in the Western world. It is the done thing. Nobody accuses them of separatist tendencies. Teachers fight their battles, garbage men do the same, nobody acts as a trustee for another. Somehow, however, when blacks want to do their thing the liberal establishment seems to detect an anomaly. This is in fact a counter-anomaly. The anomaly was there in the first instance when the liberals were presumptuous enough to think that it behoved them to fight the battle *for* the blacks.

The liberal must understand that the days of the Noble Savage are gone; that the blacks do not need a go-between in this struggle for their own emancipation. No true liberal should feel any resentment at the growth of black consciousness. Rather, all true liberals should realise that the place for their fight for justice is within their white society. The liberals must realise that they themselves are oppressed if they are true liberals and therefore they must fight for their own freedom and not that of the nebulous "they" with whom they can hardly claim identification. The liberal must apply himself with absolute dedication to the idea of educating his white brothers that the history of the country may have to be rewritten at some stage and that we may live in "a country where colour will not serve to put a man in a box". The blacks have heard enough of this. In other words, the

liberal must serve as a lubricating material so that as we change the gears in trying to find a better direction for South Africa, there should be no grinding noises of metal against metal but a free and easy flowing movement which will be characteristic of a well-looked-after vehicle.

FRANK TALK