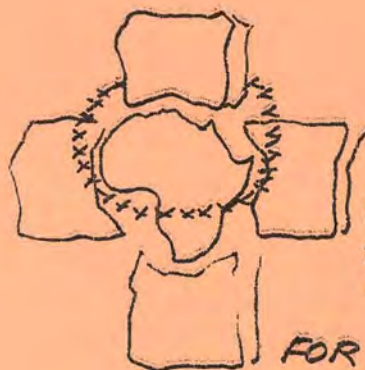


STEVEN BIKO —



Drum Magazine

- transcript of an interview with Steven Biko tape recorded in 1977 before his detention on 18 August by the security branch of the South African Police.
- Steven Biko's murder - we read inquest reports of the Black Consciousness leader's almost ritualistic killing which ended on the floor of a Pretoria jail cell on 12 September - provides answers to many of the issues posed during the course of this interview. It also underscores for any who have doubted the bestiality of South African society.
- the South African regime's crackdown on 19 October - prohibiting 19 moderate organizations and two newspapers, severely restricting White Christian leaders and imprisoning 50 Black leaders - makes clear that Pretoria is unrelenting and that the new society inevitably to be born in South Africa must come through struggle.



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FOR A FREE SOUTHERN AFRICA

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A number of our organizations are operating at different levels. The history of it starts off after 1963/64. If you remember, there were many arrests in this country which stemmed from underground activities by PAC (Pan Africanist Congress), by ANC (African National Congress), and this led to some kind of political emasculation of the Black population especially, with the result there was no participation by Blacks in the articulation of their own aspirations. The whole opposition to what the government was doing to Blacks came in fact from White organizations, mainly student groups like NUSAS (National Union of South African Students), the Liberal Party, the Progressive Party. Blacks who were articulating any sense were far fewer by comparison to the olden days, and they were dispersed amongst these particular organizations.

When I came to varsity which was some time in 1966, in my own analysis and that of my friends, there was some kind of anomaly in this situation, where Whites were in fact the main participants in our oppression and at the same time the main participants in the opposition to that oppression. It implied therefore that at no stage in this country were Blacks throwing in their lot in the shift of political opinion. The arena was totally controlled by Whites in what we called totality of White power at that time.

So we argued that any changes which are to come can only come as a result of a program worked out by Black people, and for Black people to be able to work out a program they needed to defeat the one main element in politics which was working against them, and this was a psychological feeling of inferiority which was deliberately cultivated by the system. So equally too, the Whites in order to be able to listen to Blacks needed to defeat the one problem which they had, which was one of superiority.

Now the only way to come about this of course was to look anew at the Black man in terms of what it is in him that is lending him to denigration so easily. First of all we said of Black students, we could not participate in multi-racial organizations which were by far White organizations because in this country of the overwhelming number of White students at universities.

Secondly, these organizations were concentrating mainly on problems which were affecting the White student community. Thirdly, of course, when it came to political questions they were far more articulate than the average Black student because of their superior training and because of their numbers - they could out-vote us on any one issue. Which meant that NUSAS as an organization gave political opinions which were largely affected by the whiteness of that particular organization.

So in 1968, we started forming what is now called SASO - the South African Students Organization - which was firmly based on Black Consciousness, the essence of which was for the Black man to elevate his own position by positively looking at those value systems that make him distinctively a man in society.

- Like what?

First of all, we were of the view that this particular country is almost like an island of Europe in Africa. If you go throughout the whole of Africa you do find aspects of African life which are culturally elevated

throughout the continent. But in this country somehow any visitor who comes here tends to be made to believe almost that he is in Europe. He never sees Blacks except in a subservient role. This is all because of the cultural dominance of the particular group which is now in power.

- To what extent have you been successful?

We have been successful to the extent that we have diminished the element of fear in the minds of Black people. In the period '63/'64/'65/'66 Black people were terribly scared of involvement in politics. The universities were putting out no useful leadership to the Black people because everybody found it more comfortable to lose himself in a particular profession, to make money. But since those days, Black students have seen their role as being primarily to prepare themselves for leadership roles in the various facets of the Black community. Through our political articulation of the aspirations of the Black people, many Black people have come to appreciate the need to stand up and be counted against the system. There is far more political talk now, far more political debate and far more condemnation of the system from average Black people than there has ever been since possibly 1960 and before. I'm referring here to the whole oppressive education system that the students are talking about. After complaining about it, the government wants to further entrench what the students are protesting about by bringing in police and saracens and dogs, almost soldiers so to speak.

Now the response of the students then was in terms of their pride. They were not prepared to be calmed down even at the point of a gun. And hence, what happened, happened. Some people were killed. These riots just continued and continued. Because at no stage were the young students - nor for that matter at some stage their parents - prepared to be scared. Everybody saw this as a deliberate act of oppressive measures to try and calm down the Black masses, and everybody was determined equally to say to the police, to say to the government, we shall not be scared by your police, by your dogs and by your soldiers. Now this is the kind of lack of fear one is talking about which I see is a very important determinant in political action.

- Since last June something like 400 young Blacks were killed.

499 actually.

- Do you think this will not be a deterrent?

No. I think it has been a very useful weapon in merging the young and old. Before then there was a difference in outlook of the old generation to the younger generation. The younger generation was moving too fast for the old generation. The old generation was torn between bantustan politics on the one side - old allegiances which were not progressive allegiances, to groups like ANC, PAC, without any result in action - and there were those simply too scared to move.

- Do you condemn bantustan leadership?

Yes, of course. We condemn bantustan leaders, even the best of them like Gatsha Buthelezi.

- Just say a few words on that.

Our attitude here is that you cannot in pursuing the aspirations of Black people acquire it from a platform which is meant for the oppression of Black people. We see all these so-called bantustan platforms as being deliberate creations by the Nationalist government to contain the political aspirations of the Black people and to give them pseudo-political platforms to direct their attention to. Now men like Gatsha Buthelezi, Matanzima, Mangope and so on are all participants in the White man's game of holding the aspirations of the Black people. We do not feel it is possible in any way to turn such a platform to useful work. We believe the first principal step by any Black political leader is to destroy such a platform. Destroy it without giving it any form of respectability. Once you step in it, once you participate in it, whether you are in the governing party or the opposition, you are in fact giving sanctity to it, you are giving respectability to it.

So in a sense people like Gatsha Buthelezi, like Matanzima, like Mangope, are participants in a White man's game and they are participants at the expense of the Black man. They are leading Black people to a divided struggle - to speak as Zulus, to speak as Xhosas, to speak as Pedis - which is a completely new feature in political life of Black people in this country. We speak as one combined whole, directing ourselves to a common enemy, and we reject anyone who wishes to destroy that unity.

We are of the view that we should operate as one united whole towards attainment of an egalitarian society for the whole of Azania. Therefore entrenchment of tribalistic, racialistic or any form of sectional outlook is abhorred by us. We hate it and we seek to destroy it. It is for this reason therefore that we cannot see any form of coalition with any of the bantustan leaders, even the so-called best of them like Gatsha Buthelezi, because they destroy themselves by virtue of the kind of arguments that one has put up.

- The government of course has said that all this unrest really is due to communist agitation. Are you a communist?

We are by no means communist. Neither do I believe for a moment that the unrest is due to communist agitation. I do know for a fact that there has been participation, it would appear anyway from signs, by a lot of people in the unrest. But the primary reason behind the unrest is simple lack of patience by the young folk with a government which is refusing to change, refusing the change in the educational sphere, which is where they are directing themselves, and also refusing to change in a broader political situation.

Now when these youngsters started with their protests they were talking about Afrikaans, they were talking about Bantu Education, and they meant that. But the government responded in a high-handed fashion assuming as they always have done that they were in a situation of total power. But here for once they met a student group which was not prepared to be thrown around all the time. They decided to flex their muscles, and of course, the whole country responded simply because -

There are lessons to be gleaned from this whole unrest situation of last year. In the first instance, I think Blacks have flexed their muscles a bit and they now know the degree of dedication they can find among their own members when they are called to action. And they now know the kind of response they will get from the various segments of the population - the youth, the older ones, and so on.

The second lesson of course is the response from the government and the White population at large. The government responded in one way, and the White population also in another way. One doesn't want to get into details here but reading these newspapers you get some kind of idea of the extent of fear that was prevalent in White society at a particular time, especially just after the first onslaught in Soweto, where there was a real fear throughout the community, throughout the country. Nobody knew just where something would happen next.

- So how will these lessons express themselves in future?

I am of the view that any recurrence of disturbances of that nature can only result in more careful planning and better calculation, thereby achieving the desired results to a greater extent than this spontaneous situation we had last year for instance.

- Do you believe that by these means you will bring about a real change of this society?

I see this as only one form of expression of discontent inside. I am of the view that the whole change process is going to be a protracted one in this country. It depends entirely on the degree to which the Nationalist government is prepared to hold on to power. My own analysis is that they are wanting to hold on to power and fight with their backs to the wall.

Now, conflict could only be avoidable if they were prepared to avoid it. Those who are at the seeking end, that is those who want justice, who want an egalitarian society, can only pursue their aspirations according to the resistance offered by the opposition. If the opposition is prepared to fight with their back to the wall, conflict can't be avoidable.

Now we as BPC (Black Peoples Convention) - I am a member of the Black Consciousness Movement, I was a member of BPC before I was banned, and now I've been, I'm told, appointed honorary president of BPC - now the line BPC adopts is to explore as much as possible non-violent means within the country, and that is why we exist. But there are people - and there are many people - who have despaired of the efficacy of non-violence as a method. They are of the view that the present Nationalist government can only be unseated by people operating a military wing.

I don't know if this is the final answer. I think in the end there is going to be a totality of effect of a number of change agencies in operating in South Africa. I personally would like to see less groups. I would like to see groups like ANC, PAC and the Black Consciousness Movement deciding to form one liberation group. It is only I think when Black people are so dedicated and so united in their cause that we can effect the greatest results. And whether this is going to be through the form of conflict or not will be dictated by the future. I don't believe for a moment that we are going to willingly drop our belief in the non-violent stance - as of now.

But I can't predict what will happen in the future inasmuch as I can't predict what the enemy is going to do in the future.

- *Can you guess at all at the number of years the change might take?*

That is a very difficult exercise. I don't want to get involved in that kind of exercise. Some people say five years, others say ten years. I think that we are not at the stage yet where it is possible to fix a precise timetable.

- *You speak of an egalitarian society. Do you mean a socialist one?*

Yes, I think there is no running away from the fact now that in South Africa there is such an ill distribution of wealth that any form of political freedom which does not touch on the proper distribution of wealth will be meaningless. The Whites have locked up within a small minority of themselves the greater proportion of the country's wealth. If we have a mere change of face of those in governing positions what is likely to happen is that Black people will continue to be poor and you will get a few Blacks filtering through into the so-called bourgeoisie. Our society will be run almost as of yesterday. So for meaningful change to appear there needs to be an attempt at reorganizing the whole economic pattern and economic policies within this particular country.

BPC believes in a judicious blending of private enterprise which is highly diminished and state participation in industry and commerce, especially in industries like mining - gold, diamonds, asbestos and so on, like forestry, and of course complete ownership of land. Now in that kind of judicious blending of the two systems we hope to arrive at a more equitable distribution of wealth.

- *Do you see a country in which Black and White can live amicably on equal terms together?*

That is correct. We see a completely non-racial society. We don't believe for instance in the so-called guarantees for minority rights because guaranteeing minority rights implies the recognition of portions of the community on a race basis. We believe that in our country there shall be no minority, there shall be no majority, just the people. And those people will have the same status before the law and they will have the same political rights before the law. So in a sense it will be a completely non-racial egalitarian society.

- *But will the vast number of Blacks after all their experiences be able to live their life without giving vent to feelings of revenge, of --*

We believe it is the duty of the vanguard political movement which brings change to educate people's outlook. In the same way that Blacks have never lived in a socialist economic system they've got to learn to live in one. And in the same way that they've always lived in a racially divided society, they've got to learn to live in a non-racial society. They've got many things to learn.

All these must be brought to them and explained to the people by the vanguard movement which is leading the revolution. So that I've got no doubt in my mind that people, and I know people in terms of my own background where I stay, are not necessarily revengeful, nor are they sadistic in outlook. The Black man has got no ill intentions for the White man. The Black man is only incensed at the White man to the extent that he wants to entrench himself in a position of power to exploit the Black man. But beyond that, nothing more.

We don't need any artificial majorities, any artificial laws to entrench ourselves in power because we believe once we come into power our sheer numbers will maintain us there. We do not have the same fear that the minority White government has been having all along, which has led to his many laws designed to keep him there.

- As you know the main argument of the government is always that the Black man just isn't on a civilization level at present to pull his full weight politically. Do you think of a one man, one vote franchise?

Yes, we do think so. Entirely. Entirely one man, one vote, no qualification whatsoever except the normal ones you find throughout the world.

- Don't you think that the Black man in fact is perfectly well able.

The Black man is well able - and the White man knows it. The irony of that kind of situation is that when the White government negotiates so-called independence for the so-called Transkei, they don't speak in terms of a qualified franchise. In the Transkei, every Transkeian votes. You get White Nationalist politicians arguing that this is a system that is going to work for the Transkei. But somehow when it comes to the broader country, the Blacks may not vote because they do not understand the sophisticated economic patterns out here. They understand nothing. They need to operate at a different level. Now this is all nonsense. It is meant to entrench the White man in the position in which he finds himself today. We will do away with it altogether. There will be a completely non-racial franchise. Black and White will vote as individuals in our society.

- This is all fascinating. As an outsider, as a visitor, I can only say that my feeling is that this is bound to be a very long and probably very bloody road.

There is that possibility. There is that possibility. But as I said earlier on it will be dictated purely by the response of the Nationalist Party. If they have been able to see that in Rhodesia Smith must negotiate with the leaders of the Black people of Rhodesia....

I think conflict is unavoidable given the predictable response from the present system. And this conflict can be pretty generalized and extensive and protracted. My worse fears are that working on the present analysis, conflict can only be on a generalized basis between Black and White.

We don't have sufficient groups who can form coalitions with Blacks - that is groups of Whites - at the present moment. The more such groups which come up the better to minimize that conflict.

- Mr. Biko, thank you.

* * * *



Mr. Biko's widow Mrs Ntsikie Biko, right, and his mother before the start of the inquest yesterday.

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