



## **Critical consciousness is the answer**

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There is, increasingly, a common message that is emerging about South Africa 21 years since the formal end of apartheid: things are getting bad. As argued elsewhere, this might not be surprising particularly if we look at the development experiences during the first two decades or so for many post-independent countries on our continent. We could have paid more attention to avoid what appears to be the forthcoming ultimate outcome: a new order, if not a disorder, that is plunging the whole of South African society into a crisis if not a civil conflict. The sixteenth Steve Biko Memorial Lecture, which coincided with the fortieth Independence Anniversary of the Republic of Mozambique, confirmed that South Africa is at a cross-road again. It was therefore befitting to having former president Joaquim Chissano to deliver the lecture – he also got to juxtapose the link between the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) and the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) as well as reflect on the role and relevance of Black Consciousness in the liberation struggles in southern Africa.

In former president Chissano's words, "the Black Consciousness Movement arose from the necessity to address the injustices inflicted on the black people by colonialism, apartheid, oppression, domination, exploitation and segregation. The philosophy was essentially to raise awareness of these unacceptable injustices, mobilise, galvanise and unite the black people to fight for their right to be treated equally like people of other races." As such, as he put it, "FRELIMO used words like conscientisation because awareness was not enough." I was reminded of what the Brazilian educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire, termed *conscientização* – referring to "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality."

The firm conclusion that Chissano has reached – something worth highlighting – as his Lecture made clear is that: Black Consciousness and the Black Consciousness Movement cannot be a myth but a reality in the history of the [African] continent. He further made the point that “Black Consciousness ideals remain relevant and valid even today as besides the noble goals of rescuing the pride and resolve of the black people, it was also a political philosophy that was and continues to be instrumental in mobilizing, galvanizing and uniting people to attain a just society. A society in which there is more solidarity amongst the people regardless of race, religious belief and political orientation. A society in which all the people live in harmony, working together to address the imbalances inherited from the horrendous past.” Black Consciousness therefore has an important role to play, more so today, given the volatile and uncertain nature of the unjust world we live in.

Consciousness or *conscientização* is undoubtedly critical for many reasons. Frantz Fanon and NgugiwaThiong’o, among others, have made it very clear that without critical consciousness Africa, and or Africans in particular, would remain the skunk of the world. Part of the challenge we are facing is that our political parties or leaders broadly appear to have lost critical consciousness, if not that they have forgotten the repulsive history we have gone through. It is in this context that I was moved by the reminder that Chissano began his Lecture with: we are living in an asymmetric world where Africa and its resources continue to be plundered and the plight of the African people continues to be reality.

Our political parties and our leadership are complicit to this unfortunate reality. Part of the major challenge has to do with not only poor critical consciousness but weak thought leadership. As argued elsewhere, thought leadership connotes a leadership orientation underpinned by unconventional ideology, historically nuanced, culturally sensitive and contextually grounded. Thought leadership – far from and more critical than other forms of leadership – has to be about leadership that is based on progressive ideologies, beliefs, orientations with significant pragmatic and impact appeal. Linked to this is the decolonisation of the mind as NgugiwaThiong’o argued, and ensuring that consciousness is not rudimentary as Fanon appealed. Another related aspect is knowledge production (and its dissemination).

In the context of South Africa, the country appears to continue deteriorating unabated as the opening paragraph opines. The economy is taking a knock as some of us have been arguing. The social sphere is under siege. The political scene is becoming absurd. The protests by students are another case in point that our society is falling apart. South Africa remains far from being a nation that was hoped for. Non-racialism is still a long way to go. Socio-economic transformation has been slow. As the late Neville Alexander put it – in his last book published posthumously – “the demise of apartheid did not lead to the kind of society that many of us had imagined a post-apartheid South Africa would be. There was no revolution; at best what we got was no more than a regime change...” Students’ protests and such might be helping to ensure that we do not remain just with “regime change” but rather substantial if not radical change.

With regard to our continent as a whole, as former president Chissano reminded us, the asymmetric world we live in perpetuates the peripheralisation of the African continent. At issue, essentially, is imperialism. Imperialism is “a system of domination and subordination organised with an imperial center and a periphery”, as Edward Said put it. It is perhaps in this context that YashTandon argues that “if one has not understood imperialism, one has understood nothing about the relationship between the North and the South, or between the West and the rest.” In the 1960s, Kwame Nkrumah wrote that “neo-colonialism of today represents imperialism in its final and perhaps its most dangerous stage.” Today, arguably, imperialism has become even more dangerous as it is being challenged left and right.

It might very well be that Black Consciousness, as an attitude of the mind and a way of life that was meant to inaugurate a new humanity, is the answer to the global disorder we find ourselves in. It has, however, to start with critical consciousness. Ama Mazama, the president of Afrocentricity International, puts it aptly that we must regain pride in who we are or were and consciously work relentlessly to reclaim our lost glory as well as recover our stolen legacy.