**Black radical thought and neoliberalism**

Call for Workshop Proposals

While an elusive concept, neoliberalism has come to denote a set of economic policies and principles grounded on individualism, market deregulation, and extensive privatisation. Neoliberalism has also, however, come to be understood as extending far beyond its ‘proper’ economic domain, a mode of reason that governs every realm of our lives, where “all conduct is economic conduct,” as Wendy Brown puts it: “In neoliberal reason and in domains governed by it, we are only and everywhere *homo oeconomicus*” (Brown, 2015: 10). The proliferation of neoliberal reason, as Brown and others have underscored, not only reproduces existing racial inequalities, the neoliberal condition cannot but be apprehended as intertwined with processes of racialisation. Racialisation hinges, as some recent work has shown, on what we might name the calculability of the subject, its reduction to definable fixed quantities. It is in this frame that we hear Mbembe’s argument in *Critique of Black Reason* that neoliberalism is inextricably linked to the digital, the reduction of life to ones and zeros, to abstract calculability. To this end, we propose to rethink black radical thought in relation to neoliberalism, racial capitalism and speculative capital and/or considered forms of capitalism by foregrounding but not limiting ourselves to Steve Biko’s elaboration of black consciousness.

Apartheid divided up oppressed groups, thereby creating the categories “African,” “coloured,” and “Indian/Asiatic.” Biko’s idea of black consciousness involves a self-emancipation from any internalised sense of inferiority produced in the racialised subject of apartheid. This follows from Biko’s argument that “the most powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed” (Biko, 2017: 101–102). Rather than identifying with the apartheid signifier, “non-white,” Biko implores apartheid’s subjects to refer to themselves as “black,” as a form of resistance. This is a strategic response to the apartheid separation of people into races and the apartheid practice of affording some races better conditions than others. For Biko, it is important to recognize that it is in the name of apartheid that “African,” “coloured,” and “Indian/Asiatic” people are all oppressed. These are all groups that, Biko argues, ought to unite as “black.” Black consciousness is thus a principle of solidaritythrough which to counter the central problem, “white racism,” which he apprehends not only in apartheid’s policies and practices but in the limits of a liberal critique of apartheid.

This is not without relevance for today or for an effective critique of a thoroughly neoliberalised world. If Immanuel Kant is the philosopher “at the very beginning of the liberal era,” he is also the philosopher whose thought “reverberates down to the everyday life of our minds today” (Adorno, 1995, 6, 77), and it is a version of liberal Kantian critique—“disinterested bourgeois reflection” (Gilroy, 2004, 17)—that is routinely marshalled against neoliberalism. Read with Biko, this reinscribes a “white-black stratification that makes the white a perpetual teacher and the black a perpetual pupil” (Biko, 2017: 24). Put plainly, if black consciousness suspects the liberal critique of apartheid, this should matter for liberalism’s limits in addressing neoliberal “global apartheid.” In denouncing “white racism,” Biko renders “the white man’s quest” a more or less homogeneous undertaking. By invoking exploitation in the terms of “the mind and the body,” Biko includes both *political* exploitation, including a division between physical and mental labour, and those *philosophies* from which the practice of liberal government emerged, especially Kantian philosophy, which entails the same division in its concept of the subject, a subject in which the mind must rule over the body as its “servant”—for Kant, the sensory apparatus is a “servant of the understanding” (Kant [1798] 2007), 256). Even if the best that can be hoped for is “a constructive rather than disabling complicity” with, an “ab-use” of, the Enlightenment (Spivak, 1999: 4), even if “our sense of critique is too thoroughly determined” by Kantian critical philosophy for us to be able to reject him as one among other “motivated imperialists” (6-7), it is our contention that something like “black radical thought” affords a stronger critique of neoliberalism, which we aim to explore.

A number of lines of enquiry arise: How, if at all, is black consciousness, or black radical thought, relevant to us in the neoliberal context we now inhabit? What does Biko offer by way of a response to the individualism, privatisation, and economisation of neoliberal reason? How can black radical thought allow us to think and describe neoliberal subjection? Can this understanding of black radical thought which we are implying here offer us useful modes of resistance? Are these limited for contemporary use? The question of theology, of religion and black consciousness, has long been a concern of traditions of black radical thought—we invite attention to this question. The engagement should not be seen as a one-way street, where black consciousness stands to learn nothing from existing critiques of neoliberalism. Biko invokes “true African style,” “African culture,” “African institutions,” “African traditions,” but also, more jarringly to our ears today, but also attempting to reach to an “unmediated” pre-1652 moment, “the true native culture,” “indigenous culture,” and the “evolution of a genuine culture” that can be—*should* *be*—“fully rediscovered” (Biko, 2017: 74, 77). How might these very “styles,” “cultures,” “traditions,” and “institutions,” which may offer a resource for anti-racist critiques of neoliberalism, not only already be commoditised objects of what Adorno and others called the “culture industry,” but so enmeshed in the neoliberal means of representation—already converted into what Brown calls forms of “creditworthiness”—that they remain available only as specular objects?

We plan to hold a small workshop in the first week of November 2023, where papers will be presented and discussed together, with the aim of putting together an edited volume in 2024. We invite submissions of an abstract for a paper on the topic of “black radical thought and neoliberalism.” Submissions can relate to any of the specific topics described above or address a different but relevant question.

The deadline for the submission of abstracts is 1 August 2023. Please email an abstract, not longer than 300 words, to: blackradicalthought@gmail.com

**Works cited**

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