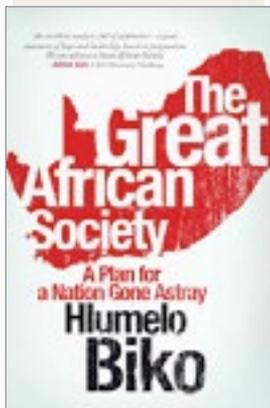


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THE GREAT AFRICAN SOCIETY: A PLAN FOR A NATION GONE ASTRAY
By Hlumelo Biko
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BOOK REVIEW

Hlumelo Biko's 'The Great African Society: A plan for a nation gone astray'

Hlumelo Biko is the son of Steve Biko and Mamphela Ramphele. He holds a Master of Science degree in International Business Government Relationships from Georgetown University, Washington. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree, with majors in History and Politics, from the University of Cape Town. Biko boasts a successful 13 year career as a venture capitalist. He is an executive Chairman of Spinnaker Growth Partners and, before this, he was Managing Director at Circle Capital Ventures. He is an investor in, and, Board Member of, entities like Mediclinic, EduLoan, Endeavor, the African School of Excellence, and Kommunity Group Projects. He has worked for the World Bank. He is a consultant. He is an analyst. He is the vice-chairman of the Baxter Theatre.

Biko's book, *The Great African Society: A plan for a nation gone astray*, is an ambitious attempt to sketch solutions to South Africa's most pressing structural problems. Biko lists these (familiar) problems, along with the mistaken conceptions and misguided approaches that have perpetuated them, point-wise. Illuminating and setting these straight, he proposes plausible sounding solutions. Solutions that will make you think: "Why aren't we doing this?"

The real story of South Africa, as it is today, is that of a nation forged by a rational and deliberate "inter-racial battle for scarce economic resources"¹. Post-apartheid, South Africa has acknowledged its terrible past and taken a hard look at the racism that has characterised it but, in Biko's view, has failed to address the effects of economic discrimination, and consequent inequality, that still divides South Africa. Biko calls on us to acknowledge economic inequality as the primary injustice in South Africa, and to move away from framing South Africa's challenges solely in terms of race.

In South Africa, despite continued economic growth, the majority of South Africans are obstructed from participating in the economy. This is a state of affairs that is not only profoundly unjust, but also manifestly unsustainable. Biko highlights the psychological effects of inequality², and the consequences of an environment where hard-work does not pay, and only a privileged minority is able to progress in the economy. He brings attention to the barriers that ordinary South African face in an unfair system that operates in bad faith.

Biko argues that economic redistribution is priority. This can only be achieved by a feat of social and economic re-engineering. He places particular emphasis on the 'school infrastructure' (i.e. the school system), and its role, in its current state, as an

economic barrier. One of the many intriguing ideas that Biko proposes, is a system whereby the private sector can directly invest and run under-performing schools, in exchange for BEE credits.³

While Biko does acknowledge the achievements of the ANC, and the challenges that the ANC have inherited, he is critical of the on-going economic inequality that still hampers our way towards an equal society. For Biko, the ANC have chosen power over the people. What is needed, and should be embraced, is a “people-centric approach”⁴. This entails a number of further interventions, from policies encouraging investment directly in human-capital (‘better schools, better schooling’⁵), job creation and public sector skills development⁶, to a more representative electoral system⁷. But this book is not about the ANC- it is about what those in a position of power ought to do, given the state of the nation.

Biko proposes a targeted policy-driven approach relying on a social investment fund, the ‘Re-engineering South Africa Fund’. This involves billions of Rands.

Biko calls for ‘restorative justice’. First, all those in a position of power must acknowledge that South Africa’s current socio-economic state is unacceptable. Secondly, assumedly, all must buy into the idea that the great African society is a “functional, equitable meritocracy”⁸. Then, with this realization, these players must make a commitment to economic redistribution. Biko proposes a targeted policy-driven approach relying on a social investment fund, the ‘Re-engineering South Africa Fund’⁹. This involves billions of Rands. The private and public sector ought to work together, and the public sector needs to create the necessary incentives to investment in such a fund (along with the requisite checks and balances).

Biko’s book is very critical. The ANC and their vision, approaches past and present: policies of Growth, Employment and Redistribution, Outcomes Based Education, Black Economic Empowerment, etc. are all examined and critiqued. But the book is also exceptionally *can-do*. All that is needed for the great African society is for the private and public sector to work together.

These ideas seem attractive, at first glance. However, the question of how ideas are translated into initiatives and then into programmes, looms large. What would have been helpful, is some guide to help the reader understand the journey from idea, to initiative, to programme. Perhaps it would have been appropriate to look at the history and development of the *Business Trust*¹⁰ as guide.

NOTES

- 1 Biko, 2013: viii
- 2 p. 89 et seq.
- 3 p. 194
- 4 p. 25
- 5 p. 195
- 6 p. 82
- 7 p. 100 et seq.
- 8 p. 2
- 9 Chapter 12
- 10 <http://www.btrust.org.za/>

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- Biko, H. (2013). *The Great African Society: A Plan for a Nation Gone Astray*. Cape Town, South Africa: Jonathan Ball Publishers.