

**BIKO, THE SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS' ORGANISATION
AND THE BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS LEGACY**

**Colloquium on the Intellectual, Political
and Social Legacy of Steve Biko**

Rhodes University

Saleem Badat

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Introduction

2007 marks the thirtieth anniversaries of the killing in political detention of Steve Biko and the banning, in the aftermath of the 1976 Soweto uprising, of the South African Students Organisation (SASO) and the other Black Consciousness (BC) organisations to which he helped give birth. This paper (a) analyses the character of SASO and its doctrine of BC to which Biko made a seminal contribution, (b) its role and significance in the struggle against apartheid, and (c) suggests the relevance of BC in contemporary South Africa.

1968 was a tumultuous year. In France, workers and students took to the streets in battles against the conservative Gaullist regime. University students in Britain occupied campuses calling for greater democracy and student rights. The Prague spring saw Czechoslovakian patriots take on Soviet tanks in an attempt to overthrow Russian domination. In the United States, mass opposition to the war in Vietnam and the Black civil rights and Black power movements reached new heights.

For white South Africans the late 1960s was a time of political calm, prosperity and sharing in the economic boom of the period. For most blacks, however, it was, in the aftermath of the suppression of the African National Congress and Pan Africanist Congress, a period of intensified oppression, social control, fear and enforced acquiescence. It was hard to imagine from where any internal political challenge to apartheid could arise. However, onto this scene in 1968 was to burst SASO, under the leadership of two university students, Steve Biko and Barney Pityana.

The essence of SASO

During the 1960s small numbers of black students participated in the predominantly white National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). However, by the late 1960s many black students became disillusioned with NUSAS, feeling that its liberal politics could not serve their aspirations. According to the late Sam Nolutshungu, Biko's 'objection to NUSAS was fourfold: it was doing nothing; it repeated the same old liberal dogma; within NUSAS itself black and white formed separate opposed camps' (1982:167) and the nature of NUSAS limited the mobilisation of black students. Further, NUSAS was dominated by white students, leading Biko to object to '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 divinely appointed pace-setters in progress' (1987:24). The response of Biko and other student leaders was to organise a conference which gave birth to SASO.

SASO's establishment drew mixed responses. White liberals charged it with reverse racism. Biko, SASO's first president, responded that not only was its formation 'defensible but it was a long overdue step. It seems sometimes that it is a crime for (black) students to think for themselves. What we want is not black visibility but real black participation' (1987:4-5). Apartheid government officials gleefully, and mistakenly, hailed it as a vindication of their separate development programme.

Nolutshungu has written of SASO that it 'was not a political party, had no well defined ideology, programme of action or code of internal discipline' (1982:149). It was essentially a student political organisation 'led by intellectual, 'middle-class' youth, (who) spoke to people very like themselves, most of the time' (ibid.:161). Gail Gerhart, author of *Black Power in*

South Africa locates SASO within the ‘school of African nationalist thought in South Africa’ which ‘emphasised racially exclusive strategies for the overthrow of white domination’ (1978:3). Its precursors were the “Africanist” factions within the ANC during the 1940s and 1950s and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). However, unlike the Africanists, SASO did not exclude Indians and Coloureds but defined them as part of the oppressed and, thus, as also ‘black’.

BC did not exist at SASO’s birth but was developed by its intellectuals. It was a seminal contribution of SASO since political struggle requires not only organisation, but also the formulation and diffusion of an alternative ideology (Fetton, 1986). It arose as part of a rejection of multi-racial liberal platforms, liberal leadership and policies of assimilation and integration. The key themes of the positive doctrine of BC that SASO proclaimed itself to uphold were, according to Hirson, ‘a liberation from psychological oppression, the building of a new awareness, the establishment of a new basic dignity, the framing of a new attitude of mind, a rediscovery of the history of the people, and a cultural revival’ (1979:296). The previous negative definition of ‘non-white’ gave way to positive identification as ‘black’. The rationale provided for the term ‘black’ was that it was an attempt to ‘define one’s enemy more clearly and broaden the base from which we are operating. It is a deliberate attempt to counteract the “divide and rule” attitude of the evil-doers’ (Gerhart, 1978:278). Blacks were to be defined as ‘those who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards realisation of their aspirations’ (SASO Policy Manifesto).

SASO stressed the need for blacks to develop their own value systems and to define themselves, rather than be defined by others. The emphasis was on self-reliance: on, as Biko put it, blacks doing ‘things for themselves and all by themselves’. Pityana, SASO’s first general secretary and second president was even more unequivocal: ‘Blacks only are qualified to determine the means for change. The way to the future is not through a directionless and arrogant multi-racialism but through a purposeful and positive unilateral approach. Black man, you are on your own’ (1972:189).

SASO’s commitment was to shape black political thinking, ‘to the realisation of the worth of the black man, the assertion of his human dignity and to promoting consciousness and self-reliance of the black community’ and to get students to ‘become involved in the political, economic and social development of the Black people’ (SASO Constitution).

Initially SASO viewed ‘race’ as the primary line of cleavage in South Africa. Class divisions were not seen as important and there was little recognition of gender issues. All around them, SASO activists witnessed white power, domination and privilege, the essential unity of whites of all classes in the defence of white supremacy, and black subordination, impoverishment, fear and resignation. They concluded that ‘race’ was paramount and to white power they counterpoised black solidarity. If SASO attacked the white staff at higher education institutions, the white press and white liberals, these targets were defined by their lived experiences. The core themes of BC, black assertiveness and pride and non-Eurocentrism were, in the words of Neville Alexander, writing under the pseudonym of No Sizwe, an ‘inevitable and historically progressive by-product of the anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist struggles of the 20th century. It is the revenge of the slave on the master and, for the present, it wants to negate whatever is associated with the master’ (1979:122).

Racial oppression led SASO to state that 'the Whiteman must be made aware that one is either part of the solution or part of the problem, (and) that, in this context, because of the privileges accorded to them by legislation and because of their continual maintenance of an oppressive regime, Whites have defined themselves as part of the problem' (SASO Policy Manifesto). Political divisions among whites were interpreted as differences over how best to maintain white privilege and political domination. A special target of SASO leaders were white liberals - in the words of Biko, 'that curious bunch of non-conformists...that bunch of do-gooders' (1972:192) who continued to hold out the possibility of integration. For SASO, all that white liberal groups and institutions were seeking, ultimately, was merely to relax 'certain oppressive legislation and to allow Blacks into a white-type society' (SASO Policy Manifesto).

Not just the goals of white liberals were rejected. Their role in shaping political strategies and their actual strategies was also called into question. Biko bluntly observed that while one sector of whites 'kicked the black', another sector of whites (liberals) 'managed to control the responses of the blacks to the provocation' and tutored blacks 'how best to respond to the kick' (1987:66). White liberals were also accused of creating the 'political dogma that all groups opposing the *status quo* must *necessarily* be non-racial in structure. They maintained that if you stood for a principle of non-racialism you could not in any way adopt what they described as racist policies' (Biko, 1972:193; emphasis in original). For Biko and SASO, it was the black person's 'right and duty to respond to the kick *in the way he sees fit*' (Biko, 1987:6; emphasis in original) and it was crucial that the hold of white liberals over black political thinking be broken. The mechanism for breaking their influence was to be the exclusion of whites from 'all matters relating to the struggle' (SASO Policy Manifesto). Consequently, contact with whites was discouraged, and multi-racial organisation *per se* was rejected.

SASO, however, was not anti-white. It accepted that South Africa was 'a country in which both black and white live and shall continue to live together' (ibid.). Biko's goal was a 'completely non-racial society (without) 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; just the people. And those people will have the same status before the law and they will have the same political rights' (1987:149). What SASO did put at issue was liberal models of assimilation and integration and 'value systems' that sought to make a black person 'a foreigner in the country of his birth and reduce his basic dignity' (SASO Policy Manifesto). BC and exclusive black organisation was seen as a strategy.

SASO's response was not shaped by the experience of apartheid alone. Its leaders also constituted, as authors Brooks and Brickhill put it, 'a generation which had to make its own way in the world' (1980:70). Born largely in the decade after 1945, they were a generation too young to have experienced the political struggles of the 1950s, the suppression of the ANC and PAC and the harsh repression that followed. Thus, they 'grew up largely immobilised, unsupported and uneducated by ongoing, day to day struggles of the sort which had previously carried the South African liberation movement into the vanguard of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism' (Brooks and Brickhill, 1980:69). In fact, in the conditions of strong repression, black youth seeking solutions to the injustice of white supremacy would have been mostly counselled by their elders to leave politics well alone.

This is confirmed by SASO leaders. Diliza Mji, now a KwaZulu-Natal ANC leader, refers to the BC period as one in which there was a 'disconnection between the historical evolution of the struggle' (quoted in Frederikse, 1990:117). 'Terror' Lekota, states: 'I regard my days in SASO as my formative years, politically.... We were deprived of the wealth of the heritage of struggle which others who had gone before us had already amassed. We moved into this as virgins, completely' (ibid:133). Lekota is also candid about the inexperience of SASO leaders and says SASO was an elementary school of politics.

Given this, criticisms from some quarters that SASO activists 'seemed to respond with the heart rather than the mind' (Hirson, 1979:9) and that BC was characterised by 'an emphasis on the primacy of experience which seems to make concrete rationalisation and expression not only unnecessary but positively untoward' (cited by Kotze, 1975:79) are misplaced. Certainly, lived experience was important in shaping SASO leaders but to seem to conclude that SASO was almost irrational or anti-intellectual is to fail to understand its real nature and the influence of political conditions.

If SASO cadres did tend to 'respond with the heart', it was because they were isolated and had to make their 'own way in the world'. If they sensed which values, beliefs, relations and social behaviour they rejected, they were not necessarily able to 'name' and systematically comprehend these. If, as Nolutshungu puts it, their 'ideas were seldom put forward in fully developed arguments they signified a groping by young students, often with inadequate equipment, for intellectual support for what they believed they felt and knew, ultimately - independently of theories' (1982:157). As Mji points out, 'you must remember that our political development was not from a textbook: it was from participating in events that were happening at the time' (quoted in Frederikse, 1990:117-18). Ultimately, SASO cadres had to fashion their views and conduct from what was available in terms of literature and ideas, and whatever their illusions and naiveté, at least the political battle against white supremacy had been joined.

SASO reflected the identification of black students with the cause of national liberation. However, unlike previous black student organisations SASO was not the student wing of any political organisation but was independent. Any alignment with the banned liberation movements would, of course, have been the death-knell of SASO. However, more fundamentally, Biko sought that 'differences of approach should not cloud the issue' (1987:7) and worked to create an organisational culture that was inclusive and enabled different political loyalties to co-exist within SASO.

Apart from an inclusive political culture, another innovation of SASO was its organisational form and strategy. SASO's view was that the experiences of black and white students generated very different, and even contradictory, interests. White leadership and domination of organisations was seen as an obstacle to the active and meaningful participation of blacks. This then dictated the need for exclusive black organisation. In this regard SASO set an important example for the generation of student organisations that were to follow.

Hirson accuses SASO of 'obscurantist' statements, 'unreal' notions and 'unrealistic' (1980:110-12) views in relation to political goals, strategy and conduct. In this view, it was an essentially reformist organisation based on a middle-class ideology. Not only was SASO not radical, but 'in all its outpourings, the Black Consciousness Movement was apolitical' (ibid.:297).

Was this the case? Did the quest for black solidarity without an appreciation of the different class interests among blacks make SASO a reformist organisation that served middle-class interests alone? Nolutshungu offers another view. For him, BC doctrine was 'instrumental and secondary to the opposition it sought to mobilise - at the level of consciousness - against attempts to consolidate and "modernise" white racist rule' (1982:193). Of singular importance was what the doctrine of BC 'made possible' and, on this score, its goals were 'not contradictory to the interests of other classes of blacks' (ibid.:196).

In South Africa the possibility of black unity was enhanced by the myriad economic and social disabilities experienced by the black middle class and the lack of political rights and oppression that it suffered in common with black workers. A struggle led by the black middle class against solely racial and national domination could also win rights and opportunities for the working-class and create the political space and conditions for a revolutionary outcome. As 'a product of revolutionary circumstances' SASO 'was itself driven to a profoundly subversive political role' (Nolutshungu, 1982:201). It helped ignite, in the form of the Soweto uprising, a political conflagration which reshaped political relations in South Africa. In so doing, it hardly promoted purely middle-class interests. Thus, 'there cannot be much difficulty in recognising the black consciousness movement as having been revolutionary' (ibid.:200). In any event, SASO's ideological, political and strategic dispositions were not static, and throughout its existence SASO reflected a dynamism and openness to new ideas. Indeed, the history of SASO shows a disposition towards developing ideologically, politically and organisationally in an ever more radical direction.

Within SASO there were informal modes of working, much was left to individual initiative, action and spontaneity was encouraged and considerable latitude was allowed for expression. The element of spontaneity shaped SASO's relation to the apartheid state. There was a refusal to consider the state as omnipotent and all vigilant and thus also an unwillingness to accommodate to the 'system', and indeed, an attitude of defiance towards everything associated with the state.

This stamped on SASO tremendous initiative and an almost uncompromising militancy. At a time when fear and resignation to white domination reigned, Pityana says SASO leaders not only 'believed that radical political activity could still be undertaken within the constraints of the legal and political structures of apartheid', but indeed pushed 'to the limit the bounds of possibility in order to confront and undermine the system' (1991a:202). Using the limited political space provided by the black universities, the founders of SASO carved for themselves an organisational niche and formulated, elaborated, and diffused the doctrine of BC outward and upward towards black professionals and intellectuals, and downward towards black school students and youth. Brooks and Brickhill write that in a number of arenas - educational, cultural, political - 'current and former SASO members were well to the fore in the years leading up to the 1976 uprising - energetic, creative and uninhibitedly militant' (1980:74). Not surprisingly, SASO was the indisputable organisational and intellectual vanguard of the BC movement.

However, more than just spontaneity and initiative characterised SASO. It was also characterised by a strong voluntarism. This was especially evident in relation to SASO's projects and community development initiatives. State repression from early 1973 onwards seriously undermined, disrupted and impeded SASO's projects. Leaders, however, blamed internal subjective factors: 'We have as yet not arrived and to be able to attain greater heights we need to have a close look at ourselves and ask ourselves whether or not we are really

committed to change. So many of our projects do not come off because we do not apply ourselves wholeheartedly with determination and genuine resolve' (SASO, 1973:20).

Yet the problem also lay elsewhere. Within SASO, there was no shortage of ideas and proposals for projects and new initiatives. The practice was to adopt and acclaim all proposals. No doubt there was a deeply felt need for each and every project that SASO resolved to establish. Yet, highlighting its voluntarism, there was little concern with or appreciation of the sheer scale of financial, material and person-power resources that was required by projects such as literacy education, the Home Education Scheme and the Free University Scheme.

SASO recognised that the political mobilisation of black communities required different strategies and tactics from those for students. Community development projects were to be entry points for political work in black communities and also a means of ensuring that students did not turn their backs on the needs and aspirations of their communities. However, although 6000 students were counted as SASO members, only a small number availed themselves for community projects. As a result projects were mostly unsuccessful in achieving their goals and providing a platform for mass mobilisation and organisation. According to Mji, 'in implementing projects, it was quite clear we were only reaching a few selected groups of people, and not in any systematic way. It was quite clear that we were not making any impact outside the student movement' (quoted in Frederikse, 1990:117).

SASO's voluntarism arose from a number of sources. The SASO generation was not only angered by white prosperity and black deprivation, but also frustrated and impatient with black apathy and acquiescence. There was a strong feeling that something had to be done. For Biko, there had to 'be some type of agitation. It doesn't matter if the agitation doesn't take a fully directed form immediately, or a fully supported form' (quoted in Gerhart, 1978:288-89). Action, rather than sophisticated theory and detailed social analysis, was more urgent and important.

They were especially scornful of the illusions fomented among blacks by white liberals lacking the political power to effect change. Freed from the counsel of white liberals, SASO activists were, in Nolutshungu's words, 'much freer to express, with the daring of youth and inexperience, the native anarchy of dissent, the recklessness of the oppressed' (1982:175). Not having experienced the harsh repression of the early 1960s 'they could not anticipate its brutal re-enactment, and this meant that they were not in complete awe of the state' (ibid.). Finally, this was the first student generation subjected to Bantu education which sought to secure their acceptance of the apartheid social order. Yet, in this respect, Bantu education failed, and this seemed to instill in SASO activists a strong self-belief and hope.

Yet it was also SASO's voluntarism that contributed to its survival and to the tenacity of its cadres. Bloodied by their battles with the state and campus authorities, they continued to act with courage and bravery and defiance, and to maintain a militant and uncompromising attitude towards their antagonists. As Pityana puts it: 'they refused to be defeated; instead they continued to live and work as fully as they dared, despite the legal constraints; testing, challenging. Many of those who were banned were never idle. They generally defied the banning orders or continued the principle of testing the limits of the possibility' (1991a:206).

This indomitable spirit of courage and defiance enabled SASO, damaged and depleted, to survive without being totally destroyed - a remarkable achievement considering the

repression that it suffered. It was this spirit that SASO contributed to the student and youth that confronted the police and army during the Soweto uprising. It was also this spirit that SASO activists carried into the exiled liberation organisations, and into later formations such as the United Democratic Front and National Forum.

For all its initiative and innovative character, however, one field in which SASO displayed a distinct lack of these attributes was that of gender relations. During its existence, women constituted between 12% and 25% of total university students; at the teacher-training colleges, women represented the bulk of students. Yet there was no special effort to mobilise women students and no focus on specifically 'women's issues'. Nor was there any conscious initiative to ensure that women students were represented at all levels and activities of SASO. Very few women actively participated in SASO, and only one woman was elected to national office.

Kogila Moodley writes that 'despite the designation of the black world as "communalistic" as opposed to the "individualistic" orientation of the white world, the sexual division of labour within the black Consciousness Movement closely resembled that of white society. Women were for the most part relegated to traditional women's domestic roles' (1991:147). Mampela Ramphele confirms that this and says women were only able to claim full participation as 'honorary men'. However, she makes the important point that in freeing women students from feelings of inferiority related to being black, SASO provided a platform for their liberation as women (Ramphele, 1991b:217). This was especially so for women who were SASO activists and participated in its political formation schools and leadership training seminars. Ramphele adds that one effect of the sexist world of the male-dominated universities and SASO was it made SASO women activists become 'tough, insistent, persistent' and 'assertive' (ibid.:219).

To be fair, the sexist culture of the universities and society would have been a major brake on the full and equal participation of women within SASO. Feminism was also yet to influence South African student politics and would only become influential from the late 1970s. When it came to attacking gender oppression SASO was very much a creature of its time.

The role of SASO

In the political conditions of the late 1960s, the launch of SASO was an important step. SASO re-kindled a new era of black political activism and popular resistance. It ruptured the silence and despair that characterised the early and mid-1960s. It activated 'sentiments and ideas' that responded, in thought and concretely, 'in militant ways towards certain objects - in this case the state, its functionaries and the doctrines and structures of its legitimisation' (Nolutshungu, 1982:148). By seceding from, deconstructing and challenging multi-racial and liberal politics SASO played a vital role in reconstructing and recreating black politics and political action. Once again, national and racial oppression was made the focus of struggle, the apartheid programme was challenged, and a forum created for organised opposition to apartheid.

According to Gerhart, through BC SASO attempted 'to rebuild and recondition the mind of the oppressed in such a way that eventually they would be ready forcefully to demand what was rightfully theirs' (1978:286-87). Its essential focus was 'consciousness', and its activities sought to develop the self-esteem, pride, confidence and solidarity of black students and the

black oppressed and contribute to their “psychological liberation”. This approach was shaped by political conditions – an apartheid regime seemingly so firmly entrenched as to be immovable and black responses of fear, apathy and resignation. In concentrating on “psychological liberation”, SASO saw its role as complementing that of the ANC and PAC, whom it regarded as the authentic spokespersons of the people. There was no notion of competing with the exiled liberation movements. Other aspects of liberation, for example the “physical liberation” that was spoken about and which implied armed struggle, it sought to leave to the liberation movements even though most SASO leaders were not opposed to armed struggle and there was some contact with the liberation movements around this.

SASO attempted to forge a broad unity of all the black oppressed. To this end, outside of the student and educational sphere, it played a key role in the launching of other anti-apartheid formations such as the Black People’s Convention, encouraged youth and cultural organisations, promoted Black Theology and black cultural production and lent support to the Black Community Programmes. SASO’s role within the overall BC movement is well captured by Nolutshungu: ‘At the centre of the movement, giving leadership, was SASO’ (1982:149).

Black Theology was defined as a theology ‘of action and development’; as ‘an authentic and positive articulation of the Black Christian’s reflection on God in the light of their Black experience’ (SASO, 1971:21). Christ’s liberation was understood as freedom not only from ‘internal bondage’ but also ‘from circumstances of external enslavement’, and therefore Black Theology meant ‘taking resolute and decisive steps to free Black people not only from estrangement to God but also from slave mentality, inferiority complex, distrust of themselves and continued dependence on others culminating in self-hate’ (ibid.). BC ideas and Black Theology enjoyed strong support among theological students and via them reached sections of the broader black population.

SASO and BC forums provided platforms for art exhibitions, poetry reading, and drama and music festivals and exposure for emerging black artists, while SASO publications carried numerous articles on culture and also featured black poetry. SASO members were instrumental in establishing a number of cultural formations, played an active role in various theatre, art and music bodies, and a number of them were to go on to establish national and international reputations as novelists, poets and playwrights. Mbulelo Mzamane writes that BC ‘realised the essentially political importance of the cultural struggle. It was active in all the arts, but in none more effectively than theatre, which included poetry performances. Black Consciousness emphasised the educational function of cultural and artistic activity and exploited the political resources of art, theatre, music, dance and culture in general’ (1991:185). The poetry, drama, art and music influenced by BC was strongly shaped by the audience that it sought to communicate with - primarily the black oppressed, rather than white cultural consumers or any other social group.

SASO provided black students a political home and avenue for activity outside of the political parties involved in separate development institutions. Many, like Masterpiece Gumede, were inducted into radical politics through SASO. As Gumede says: ‘When we came to Ngoye we were immediately grabbed by SASO. I only got into politics through the student movement at university’ (quoted in Frederikse, 1990:110). By being an exclusively black organisation, SASO made it possible for black students to no longer stand, as Biko put it, ‘at the touchlines’, and to ‘do things for themselves and all by themselves’ (1987:15). It helped to engender a culture of black pride and assertiveness. It provided political education

and organisational training and 'experience of leadership, planning, strategising and mobilising' (Pityana, 1991b:255). Ramphela adds that there was 'success in empowering activists in its ranks at all levels. Most of these individuals attained total psychological liberation and realised the meaning of being active agents in history. The impact of this success had a multiplier effect on the wider black community' (1991:173). Thus, SASO members would take into the popular organisations of the 1980s considerable political and organisational skills and expertise.

In a context where politics was generally regarded as the preserve of adults, SASO also constituted students as an independent political and organisational force. Whether palatable to adults and political organisations or not, organised students became a permanent feature of South African politics and a vital sector of the national liberation struggle. Through its various projects and initiatives, meetings, statements and publications, SASO diffused ideas and a mood that aroused both anger and hope and a spirit of resistance among students. This was given impetus by the university and college student boycotts of 1972, which also contributed to school-student and youth political awakening and organisation.

Even the court trial of BC leaders in 1975-76 was used 'to restate the nationalist viewpoint, and [the accused] took every opportunity to symbolise their defiance of the state by singing freedom songs and raising clenched fists in the courtroom. Instead of suppressing BC, the trial provided a public platform and helped disseminate BC even more widely and held up to the youth once again a model of "rebel" courage' (Gerhart, 1978:298-99). Through its contribution to the Soweto uprising, and the subsequent flow of students and youth into exile, SASO also gave 'to the ANC oxygen and new life, which the movement desperately needed - youth of the South African people, tempered in defiance in action' (Mongane Wally Serote, cited by Pityana et al, 1991:10)

SASO stood at the head of the overall black student movement and provided its political direction. The ethnic black universities and colleges were turned into sites of activism and struggle and the mobilisation of students around campus conditions, the racial composition of staff and governance structures forced the state to establish various 'Commissions of Enquiry'. However, the 'Africanisation' calls by SASO - for black rectors and black members of governance structures - tended to be easily incorporated without any significant change in power relations between students and the campus authorities. Indeed, SASO's call for black rectors was controversial, with Neville Alexander, for one, denouncing it as an 'attempt to dignify sectarian institutions of education' (No Sizwe, 1991:250-51). Certainly, SASO activists seem to have harboured some illusions about the difference that a black rector would make to an institution, and about the willingness of the state to install as rectors the kind of black intellectuals that SASO probably had in mind.

For activists, participation in SASO and involvement in writing, debates, political formation schools and leadership training seminars, media production, and other organisational activities constituted a rich and powerful educational experience. The 'non-formal' and 'informal' education and 'on the job' training provided by SASO should not be underestimated. Indeed, the knowledge and skills learnt within SASO and through political involvement were probably more stimulating, enriching, enlightening and rewarding than anything that higher education then provided.

Finally, while the apartheid state sought to win students to the programme of separate development and to generate the intellectual, professional and administrative corps for the

separate development bureaucracies, SASO renewed and reinvigorated the historical opposition to bantustans that had begun in the 1950s. It denounced separate development, attacked bantustan leaders, and mobilised students around an ideology of a united and common South Africa. In doing this it prevented the state from winning over black students and graduates even though black graduates would have in some cases been obliged to seek employment in the separate development bureaucracies.

The significance of SASO

The political significance of SASO is a matter of some debate. Robert Fatton Jr. argues that changing of consciousness is crucial in bringing about revolutionary change. His consideration of SASO is shaped by its performance in 'effecting an intellectual and moral reform. This reform is a profound cultural transformation which changes the masses' conception of life, politics and economics. Accordingly, it ushers in a new social and moral vision' (Fatton, 1986:57). Fatton has no doubts that SASO was animated by a 'revolutionary will and vision' and was successful in effecting an 'intellectual and moral reform' (ibid.:126). BC helped blacks to develop their own sense of being and humanity; to move out of a state of apathy and passivity, and it eroded the ideological dominance of the apartheid state. It also united Africans, Indians and Coloureds and developed black solidarity. Its overall achievements were to liberate people from mental enslavement, to clarify the targets of ideological and political struggle and to prepare people for their historical role. Moreover, SASO contributed to the Soweto uprising and post-Soweto politics and was thus of considerable political significance.

Some of the achievements that Fatton attributes to SASO are warranted. However, he grossly overstates the extent to which the BC movement did produce a 'cultural transformation' and generate a revolutionary consciousness at a mass level. He also tends to give BC an ideological and political coherence which did not really exist. Moreover, he especially overplays the extent to which there existed a class analysis and socialist commitment within the key BC organisations of the 1968 to 1977 period.

As Ramphela notes, the BC tendency to view blacks as homogeneous group meant that there was blindness to the stratification within black 'communities'. 'Such naiveté', she argues, 'was in a sense an inevitable consequence of the very analysis underpinning the BC philosophy'. As a result, SASO 'failed to comprehend, analyse and tackle the contradictions resulting from internal differences amongst blacks that occurred along the lines of class, gender, age and geographic location. Instead, Black Consciousness exponents opted for the simplistic excommunication of those blacks who failed to act for the common good in solidarity with others - they were banished to the realm of 'non-whites'. A deeper examination of the limitation of their philosophical stand-point was not undertaken' (1991:171-72).

For Gerhart, SASO's significance was its work among 'black university students - a significant percentage of the African intelligentsia and middle-class-to be of the 1970s and beyond', which resulted in 'a level of political education and ideological diffusion never before achieved by any black political organisation' (1978:270). Also of significance was SASO's impact on school students and youth. However, she notes that 'the BC movement was clearly more successful in communicating the subtler nuances of its message inside the

walls of academic and religious institutions than beyond them in black society at large' (ibid.:295).

Still, this should however not detract from its creation of a mood and stirring in black townships. The accomplishment of SASO and the BC movement was to bring about a 'mental revolution among black youth', to hand over a new generation of young people that were 'proud, self-reliant, determined'; and a major achievement was 'an urban African population psychologically prepared for confrontation with white South Africa' (Gerhart, 1978:2, 315). Like Fatton, Gerhart regards SASO as positively contributing to black liberation in South Africa. Unlike Fatton, she correctly finds in SASO and the BC movement no socialist ideological orientation and is more realistic about the extent of its penetration beyond student, youth and certain middle-class circles.

For Nolutshungu, SASO, and the BC movement was important 'because of the questions it posed about the nature of oppositional politics in South Africa' (1982:147-48). Beyond this, it was also significant 'because of the forces of protest and rebellion it was to prove itself capable of unleashing' and 'the real contribution of black consciousness to the revolt was in the demon it had roused: the defiant attitude among the youth in the face of police violence' (ibid.:185). SASO and the BC movement also helped undermine the reproduction and restructuring of apartheid and produced cadres to augment the ranks of those 'committed to the revolutionary overthrow of the entire order of exploitation and domination' (Nolutshungu, 1982:201).

Baruch Hirson, however, is sceptical of SASO's political significance. He recognises that 'the establishment of a group with a political orientation was no mean feat in the 1970s in South Africa' (1980:292), and acknowledges that 'SASO, provided the leading cadres for the BPC, and helped create the atmosphere which led to the 1976 confrontation in Soweto' (ibid.:8). He also grants that 'through their language, songs, meetings and writings' SASO and the BC movement 'generated a corporate spirit' (Hirson, 1980:292-93). However, Hirson says that although 'intellectually the black university students took the cause of national liberation to be their goal in practice they tended to concentrate on their own problems on the campus'. Also, despite SASO's aspirations, 'in the final analysis there was no campaigning and no direction. In place of real political activity, there were just words' (ibid.: 283, 113).

This appraisal of SASO is not convincing. Nolutshungu usefully cautions that BC may have been important less for what it literally said than for what it made possible' (1982:162). Pityana makes a similar point: BC, 'as such, was not a political philosophy or ideology but a strategy for action', though he also acknowledges that SASO and the BC movement 'displayed a naiveté and innocence born out of an inadequate theoretical basis for its political activities' (1991a:212).

Certainly, there were many failings and BC did not make any real inroads, politically and organisationally, among urban, rural and bantustan workers and the unemployed. Still, there is a world of difference between pointing to the limitations of SASO and Hirson's claims that SASO was of little significance and was even 'apolitical'.

Tom Lodge makes the important point that SASO members, supporters and sympathisers 'were to become school teachers, priests and journalists', and that BC's 'basic themes were taken up in the popular press, in township cultural events' and elsewhere (1983:324). Notwithstanding that these themes were unlikely to find a strong resonance among workers,

he argues that even 'if its influence was limited to the urban intelligentsia this would have guaranteed its imprint on almost any African political assertion of the time. Distilled to a basic set of catchphrases Black Consciousness percolated down to a much broader and socially amorphous group than African intellectuals' (ibid.:325). He also takes issue with those who contend that SASO and BC ideas had little impact on school students. The problem is that 'they tend to estimate the influence of ideas in terms of formal organisational structures and affiliations' (ibid.).

In reality, the Johannesburg office of SASO was a meeting point for not just SASO activists but also school students and youth, and SASO members like Tiro, later assassinated in Botswana, taught for a period in Soweto. Moreover, among school students SASO and BC publications were often the texts for political discussion and debate. As Lodge notes, given that black higher education students, teachers and priests 'were an important reference group' for school students it also 'would surely have been a little surprising if sentiments inspired from [BC] were not found in school children' (1983:332-33). If not the central medium of the Soweto uprising, SASO was one of the vital catalysts. The uprising, in turn, profoundly altered political relations in South Africa by exposing the vulnerability of white rule and stimulating the generalisation of resistance organisations and political struggle in later years. Given this, it is 'difficult to see how its achievement could have been more significant' (Lodge, 1983:336).

One issue which has been much ignored is the 'cognitive praxis' (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991) and knowledge production of SASO intellectuals. Apartheid ensured that knowledge production was principally the activity of whites, and especially white males. There were very few black academics, and they published little. On the other hand, the liberation movements and organisations had long been arenas of knowledge production by blacks. SASO was no exception and the knowledge production of its intellectuals was of great significance given that it helped spawn an entire social movement in the form of BC. In the South African context it was, however, doubly significant: it was also knowledge production by blacks, and at that by young blacks whom Bantu education had sought to render intellectually sterile.

Finally, it is important to not overlook the cultural, expressive, and symbolic dimensions of SASO and BC (Melucci, 1989). With the BC movement came a number of developments all connected with enhancing black pride, assertiveness and solidarity. One was the slogan "Black is beautiful" and an attack on hair-straightening and skin lightening cosmetics. Another was the "Afro" hairstyle and new forms of dress. Yet another was the clenched fist salute embodying opposition to white domination and black solidarity. There were also the various slogans and songs that emphasised black self-reliance, expressed defiance to the existing social order and voiced the hope of a better future. Finally, mention has been already made of the cultural production inspired by BC.

Symbolically, SASO played a vital 'prophetic' function in repudiating white liberal notions of black assimilation into the existing white and Eurocentric culture and in asserting that a future non-racial society would need to be the product of all national groups and to reflect the diversity of all cultures. In repudiating the term 'non-white' and claiming they were 'black', the SASO activists rejected being identified in the negative, sought to escape the categories and language of the dominant group and asserted their own identity and the right to 'name' themselves. Their attempts to expound on the concept 'black', or on 'black values' may have been somewhat inchoate, even incoherent. But, to their credit, they refused to accommodate

to white conservative and liberal conceptions of the world, and of behaviour and conduct. And they pointed, as best as they could, to the possibility of radically different conceptions. Most crucially, through their organisation they illustrated that black students need not depend on whites for their thinking and organisational activities.

SASO's organisational culture and internal working was fundamentally democratic and, to a large degree, characterised by freedom of expression, the right to dissent, a consultative style of leadership, regular elections, continuous turnover and rotation of leading officials and avoidance of a leadership cult. This in a context of an authoritarian political culture and order! On the one hand this way of working was shaped by the need to ensure that there was a rapid production of leadership for expanding the BC movement and withstanding state repression. On the other hand, it was also 'prophetic' in that it was a conscious challenge to the dominant culture and a 'sign' or 'message' for other organisations and institutions of more democratic forms of working.

On balance, there can be no question about the essence of SASO as a revolutionary nationalist and highly innovative organisation. Thrust by historical circumstances to play the leading political role in pre-Soweto South Africa, SASO took on the responsibility and rekindled black intellectual and political opposition to white domination. Its activities helped sew the potential for resistance into 'the very fabric of daily life' (Melucci, 1989:70) and there is no disputing the bravery and courage, defiant and indomitable spirit of its cadres, and the example this set for school students and youth. A catalyst of the conflagration that was the Soweto uprising, it also created the conditions for the generalisation of political resistance and organisation in the 1980s. In all these ways it was of tremendous significance in the struggle for national liberation in South Africa.

BC and contemporary South Africa

The above analysis underlines the significance of the historical contribution of Biko, SASO, and the BC movement to the South African national liberation struggle.

Of course, Biko, SASO and BC were specific intellectual and political responses to a particular configuration of social-structural relations and conjunctural conditions: racial domination and the economic and political subordination of black South Africans; class and gender exploitation and oppression, and legislatively and coercively reproduced white economic and social privilege and political domination.

During the past thirteen years of democracy there have been some important economic and social gains. Yet the reality is that thirty years on from Biko's killing, South Africa continues to be one of the most unequal societies on earth in terms of disparities in wealth, income, opportunities, and living conditions. The Presidency's *Development Indicators Mid-Term Review* released in June 2007 reveals that the Gini coefficient, which is a measure of income inequality, increased from 0.665 in 1994 to 0.685 in 2006 (2007:22). This indicates that the social grants that are provided to 12 million people and new jobs that have been created have been insufficient 'to overcome widening income inequality' (ibid.).

The Theil index, which 'is another measure of inequality', has risen from 0.880 in 1994 to 1.030 in 2006, and 'while inequality between races has declined' (from 0.532 in 1994 to 0.416 in 2006), it has increased within 'race' (from 0.348 in 1994 to 0.613 in 2006) (Presidency,

2007:22). The percentage of income of the poorest 20% of our society has fallen since 1994 from 2.0% to 1.7%; conversely, the percentage of income of the richest 20% of our society has risen since 1994 from 72.0% to 72.5%. At the same time, the per capita income of the richest 20% has risen much faster than that of the poorest 20% (Presidency, 2007:21). 43% of our fellow citizens continue to live on an annual income of less than R 3 000 per year (down from 50.5% in 1994) (Presidency, 2007:23).

The cleavages of 'race', class, gender and geography are still all too evident. Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Millions of citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while, alongside, unbridled individualism and crass materialism, and a vulgar mentality of "greed is cool" runs rampant in our society. Patriarchy and sexism continue to stifle the realization of the talents of girls and women and the contribution they can make to development. The rape and abuse of women is a pervasive, morbid ill that destroys innumerable lives and wreaks havoc in our country. HIV/AIDS exacerbates the fault-lines of our society, intensifies our social challenges and has over the past decade reduced life-expectancy from almost 60 years to about 47 years.

In short, thirty years after Biko's killing the social-structural relations that underpin unbridled wealth and privilege and concomitant inequality, poverty, unemployment and unequal opportunities to high quality education, health-care and social services continue to prevail. Crucial questions of 'race', values, identity, culture, and social and cultural transformation that BC raised also remain highly relevant issues.

Any substantive social justice agenda today cannot avoid discussion of these conditions and issues and the elaboration of imaginative strategies for their dissolution and resolution respectively. Drawing on our history, the appropriate engagement with these conditions and issues is to tackle them in the energetic, determined and uncompromising fashion of Biko and the SASO and BC generation. Contemporary politics must boldly and creatively innovate intellectually, culturally and organisationally as they did. And like them, it must push 'to the limit the bounds of possibility' in the pursuit of social equity, justice, human rights and democracy and development. That is the most fitting tribute to the memory and life of Stephen Bantu Biko.

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