

# The Black Consciousness movement in South Africa in the late 1960s

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**We have to see the evolution of Black Consciousness side by side with the other political doctrines in the country, and other movements of resistance.<sup>1</sup>**

The purpose of this paper is to critically analyse the development of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Most of the literature that currently exists in South Africa on this aspect of the history of the democratic movements is characterised by stereotypes, deliberate distortions and outright omissions of important political events and their interconnection, sequence and periodisation.

In this sense, political events are not regarded as a process, but an illogical stream of events without structure or laws. Most of the literature does not seek explanation but description, ordering and classification of empirical facts, the appraisal of these facts from the standpoint of their moral value or on the basis of the thoughts and the ideas of the bourgeois social scientist him/herself. Thus, political history becomes the product of the mind and imagination of that social scientist.

The basic proposition in this paper is that in order to understand the historical development of the Black Consciousness as an ideology of struggle, one must understand its historical roots during its formative years, as well as its form and content as determined by the concrete historical and objective conditions of that social-economic formation.<sup>2</sup>

In this sense, it is suggested here that while later influences play an important part in shaping the form and content of the struggle perspectives of a political movement, the origins and initial organisation play the key role.

One other key element in our theorisation of Black Consciousness concerns the central concepts and ideas that influence and shape the ideology of the movement. The ideas are of two types: the core notions that express the historic goals and methods of the social movement; and the tactical-strategic ideas that express the conjunctural struggles and immediate needs of particular strategy and organisational forms.

At the same time it is important to identify the social forces that Black Consciousness represents, and in what way this helps to determine its ideological orientation. Three social forces have played an important role in South African social movements: the intellectuals, rural labour and the urban working class. The social characteristics that have enabled these forces to take an active and specific part in the movement have been under-theorised. The effort here is to redress this situation.

In South Africa, the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) came into being as a response to the relative political vacuum that existed after the ANC and the PAC had been outlawed by the State in 1960. The Black youth of the late 'sixties and early 'seventies could no longer accept White leadership and political representation in matters that affected them and the rest of their community.

So what happened was that in 1960 effectively all black resistance was killed, and the stage was left open to whites of liberal opinion to make representations for blacks, in a way that had not happened before in the past, unaccompanied by black opinion.<sup>3</sup>

The immediate concern of SASO was, therefore, to build an organisation that would represent Black students' opinion and generate solidarity amongst the various university campuses. The existence of such an organisation, it was hoped, would effectively break the isolation of these centres and bring them closer together. The SASO Communiqué at the July 1969 Conference at Turfloop stated:

That there is a need for more effective contact is unquestionable, especially in view of the ever-increasing enrolment at the non-white institutions of higher learning, particularly the university colleges. For all intent and purposes, these students have remained isolated, not only physically but also intellectually. There we find institutions which seek to breed Pseudo-intellectuals with an absolute bogey for anything which associates them with the society in

which they live, particularly if this is related to some kind of disagreement with any particular aspect of the general policy of the powers-that-be. There is no way of stopping this except by interfering with the programme of indoctrination and intimidation so effectively applied at all South African universities.<sup>4</sup>

The acute feelings of isolation, frustration and alienation repeatedly referred to in SASO literature no doubt reflected the general mood of this generation of students, and was experienced individually and collectively in various ways. At the individual campuses themselves isolation, frustration and alienation among students was deliberately fostered by the authorities at various levels.

This inevitably led to divisions which ultimately expressed themselves politically. The organisation of the faculties tended to foster balkanisation, and in some cases created feelings of superiority and inferiority. Almost without exception, students studying the natural sciences (Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Pharmacy, Mathematics and so on) tended to despise those in the social science faculty. These attitudes were invariably reinforced by the faculty staff. Law and medical students occupied a distinct position in the occupational pyramid, probably because of the lucrative nature of their professions in the world outside. Social work and theology students occupied the lowest position in the pyramid. The latter were more usually perceived as destined to play a collaborative role in the apartheid state and its Bantustans. As mentioned above, these academic divisions invariably emerged and expressed themselves politically during debates at student body meetings, and more especially at Student Representative Council elections. Students tended to elect to positions their own faculty members, probably because they could identify common interests. It was not until SASO's growth at the campuses that student representatives were elected on the basis of their political astuteness, ability and experience. It is thus not surprising that most of the SASO leadership

that emerged at this time had ANC, PAC and Natal Indian Congress(NIC) faculty backgrounds which served as valuable training ground for political leadership.

Inside the faculty itself, bitter resentment among students was generated by the organisation and content of the curriculum. In many subjects, especially in the social sciences faculty, which was numerically larger than the rest, many students were critical of the subject content which was regarded as an overdose of the dominant ideology of the oppressive ruling class. This was particularly the case in subjects like Anthropology, History, Theology, Sociology and Psychology. This resentment against the curriculum was galvanised by the fact that most of the reading lists, prescribed textbooks pamphlets and articles used as references were written by Afrikaans-speaking academics in South Africa and omitted well known racial texts.

The poor communications and generally hostile relations between the university administration and the White members of staff, on the one hand, and Black students on the other, aggravated frustration and tension at the campuses. Severe restrictions placed on students' social and political life, accompanied by frequent expulsions for related transgressions kindled a live volcano that erupted from time to time. Beyond the individual campus students suffered alienation from the local communities, particularly at Turfloop/University of the North, Ngoye and Fort Hare, which were situated in the rural areas. Unnecessary contradictions existed between student and rural populations. In the nearby towns, the police, white shopkeepers, railway officials demonstrated their own racial hostility towards university students who they regarded as 'cheeky-kaffirs-in-the-making'.

The problems faced by students went beyond their university life and immediate surroundings during term-time. During the university vacations at home, many experienced serious difficulties in their attempts to find vacation or temporary jobs. Many prospective White employers in the labour market viewed educated 'Natives' or 'kaffirs' with grave suspicion and could not countenance the idea of being confronted by a politicised and unionised labour force. This hostile attitude became more generalised as SASO hit newspaper headlines from 1972 onwards. From this time onwards Black graduates found it difficult and sometimes impossible to secure satisfactory employment in the private sector. The majority of them could only be employed as teachers, social workers or government clerks.

In their various townships, university students generally became alienated

from their own people, including their childhood friends who regarded them with awe as educated persons or felt socially inferior. It was partly for this reason that SASO was later to help form various youth organisations, composed of both secondary school pupils as well as the unemployed youths. One of these was the National Youth Organisation (NAYO) founded in 1972.

What is even more significant is the fact that many of the new generation of students, especially those in the urban areas found it relatively difficult to associate with members of their own class — the professional — who generally despised them as products of the Bantu Education system and 'tribal' bush colleges. The SASO militants were later eager to make a distinction between politically committed Black intellectuals and the educated 'middle-class' whose blackness was only 'skin deep'.<sup>3</sup>

The educated middle-class professional group referred to above had been largely educated at missionary institutions and at Fort Hare and some of them had been members of the ANC Youth League, and had been drawn from well-to-do families. Many of them were sons and daughters of chiefs, rich peasants and relatively wealthy petty traders and professional people. Unlike most of their predecessors who formed the Youth League in the mid 1940s, most of the SASO militants in the late 1960s and early 1970s were products of the locations and townships. Many of them had managed to acquire university entrance largely through the efforts of their own labour during the school vacations during which they worked in factories, and some of them even in the mines.<sup>4</sup>

Thus the Black youth of this period knew at first hand the harsh reality and the brutality of the apartheid system and its attendant appalling conditions under which their families lived and worked. This generation of students was also keenly aware that their marginal status in South Africa's racially structured social and economic system rendered them incapable of getting past the barriers thrown up by racism. In the context of Portuguese Guinean society, Amílcar Cabral characterised the dilemma of this social stratum in these words:

It is within the framework of this daily drama, against the backdrop of the usually violent confrontation between the mass of people and the ruling colonial class that a feeling of bitterness or a frustration complex is bred and develops among the indigenous petty-bourgeoisie. At the same time, they are becoming more and more conscious of a compelling need to question their marginal status, and to rediscover an identity.<sup>7</sup>

In South Africa, it was within the context of this daily drama that many black students began to question their marginal status and felt the need to seek an identity with the mass of the oppressed people. This consciousness was expressed in what became a popular slogan among SASO cadre and militants:

'We are Black students, and not Black students!' The urgent need for this process of integration and identity was vividly enunciated by the SASO president, Steve Biko, at the First National Formation School arranged at Edendale in December 1969. Biko set out the aims of SASO as inter alia:

To heighten the degree of contact not only among non-white students but also among these and the rest of the population ...

To boost the morale of the non-white students, to heighten their own confidence in themselves and to contribute largely to the direction of thought taken by the various institutions on social, political and other current topics.<sup>5</sup>

Before the Black students could set up a common political agenda and elaborate on an ideology of liberation, they first had to contend with the problem of communication among the various institutions. Two methods were envisaged through which this objective could be achieved: firstly, by initiating and regularising correspondence, and exchanging information and material about matters of mutual concern in the form of letters and publications. This was to be supplemented by inter-SRC visits.

Prior to the formation of SASO, hardly any contact existed among students at various centres. The only time students got a glimpse of the social, academic and political life of their colleagues elsewhere was during their vacations. One such place where these contacts were encountered was metropolitan Johannesburg, which was probably the only city from which students were scattered among the various colleges. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that most students from Johannesburg played a leading role in student politics, especially at Fort Hare. Johannesburg was to become the melting pot of national student politics and became the first place outside the Durban SASO headquarters to establish a SASO branch and office known as REESO (SASO REEF).

Many high school students' leaders were active at the REESO office and were to play a leading role in the June 16 uprising in 1976.

The early contacts were facilitated by the prominent SASO leaders such as Abraham Tiro, a History master at Morris Isaacson High School who taught pro-

minent student leaders such as Tsietsi Mashinini, as well as veteran SASO and BPC leaders, viz Tom Manthata, Aubrey Mokoena, Fanyana Mazibuko, and many others. It was at Morris Isaacson where the initial organisation of the June 16th uprising took place.

The second method of communication, it was believed, that could forge links among the student population, was a 'loose structural alliance' provided for by the SASO constitution.<sup>9</sup>

When the two tactics were weighed against each other, it was found that the first one was inadequate in the absence of a formal mechanism which could ensure its smooth functioning. The second tactic — that of setting up a formal organisational structure — gained more support although it also had certain shortcomings. There was an overriding fear amongst some students, especially those who had been associated with NUSAS, that any form of division in the student ranks along 'racial lines' was, in a way, tacit conformity to the policy of apartheid. This feeling was particularly strong among former NUSAS members at Fort Hare University and Wentworth medical school where the liberal tradition of 'non-racialism' had been a dominant ideological outlook.<sup>7</sup> The debate on the formation of SASO as an independent Black organisation, dubbed by some as 'second-class' apartheid, was clearly reflected in the report of the Turfloop conference.

It was summed up as follows:

Any move that tends to divide the student population into separate laagers on the basis of colour is in a way a tacit submission to having been defeated and apparently seems in agreement with apartheid ... In a racially sensitive country like ours, provisions for racially exclusive bodies tend to build up resentment and to widen the gap that exists between races, and the student community should resist all attempts to fall into this temptation ... Any formation of a purely non-white body shall be subject to a lot of scrutiny and so the chances of the organisation lasting are very little.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to note here that the debate was fuelled by law students.<sup>11</sup>

Law students, in general, in keeping with their professional pursuits, tended to be most vocal in students' meetings. Their particular training in the art of logical argument and reasoning put them in an advantageous position compared to those studying Social Work, Education, and the natural sciences. Law students also had an added advantage of professional knowledge of South Africa's legal system, and knew at first hand the provisions of the draconian

security laws, especially the Terrorism Act of 1967 which had been on the statute book for barely one year. They were, therefore, quick to point out that SASO could not survive the hazardous provisions of security laws without serious consequences for the individuals involved.

It is also possible to suggest that because of the potentially lucrative nature of their future profession, and in the circumstances of scarce and limited employment opportunities for Black graduates, law students tended to be on the cautious side politically. Additionally, quite a sizeable number of them were civil servants — prosecutors, clerks, interpreters, who belonged to the older generation and had families to support — who were either on full salary or on government scholarships. There were, of course, others who opposed the formation of SASO simply because 'they didn't want things to happen' to disturb their relative comfort.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the debate about SASO militants associated with Biko at Wentworth and Harry Nengwekhulu at Turfloop, argued in favour of organisational independence. The debate at both campuses was, however, complicated by the thorny issue of the role and position of Indians and Coloureds, not only in SASO but in the liberation movement in general. At Wentworth this issue was more prominent because there were Indian and Coloured students on the same campus as Africans. The great divide, according to Biko was between pro-NUSAS (ASA) and the pro-PAC (ASUSA) elements. The Biko group, which was not in either of these political factions, was viewed with suspicion by the PAC-oriented faction who regarded them as a 'middle-extension' of NUSAS, because of their previous associations with the latter.<sup>14</sup>

The pro-PAC group argued that minority groups like the Coloureds and Indians could not be included in SASO since they saw their interests in the maintenance of white political and economic power. Biko later complained in an interview with Dr Gerhart in 1972 of the Coloured and Indian students' failure to defend themselves and asserted that this did not help their case for SASO. Nevertheless, the Biko group argued that as far as they were concerned, all the oppressed were involved in the struggle for freedom, and each had its own grievances. It is necessary, they argued, that they should work with all groups who were committed to work for the removal of the source of those grievances, be they African, Coloured or Indian. They also argued that SASO was not a movement of Africans or any other group, but was a movement of the oppressed people, and that those who felt

the oppression in South African society and were committed to the struggle against that oppression should be free to join SASO. According to Biko, their argument weighed heavily in the minds of the majority of students. As a result, the Africanists of ASUSA were defeated, whilst Biko's group won the debate.<sup>15</sup>

The victory of Biko's group was important for two reasons, the Wentworth campus was the only one which had African, Coloured and Indian students on the same campus and any demonstration of unity here was bound to have a positive impact on other universities. Secondly, the University of Natal authorities had traditionally professed the policy of 'non-racialism' and had thus tolerated the activities of NUSAS there. It was for this reason that other campuses looked up to the UNB for leadership and direction. The 1969 SASO conference emphasised the important role Wentworth was expected to play, and this was spelt out quite clearly. Wentworth was expected by the 1969 conference not only to give firm support to SASO but also the 'strength and direction in the long struggle towards the realisation of the aspirations of these students, which in the long run are the aspirations of any "sane" South African.'<sup>16</sup>

At the 1969 conference itself, there were some students who urged for a 'fight within' the National Union of South African Students. This argument was rejected by the overwhelming majority of participants who pointed out that NUSAS's 'protest-after-the-fact' politics had only served to provoke victimisation of Black students and the result was general political apathy among them.<sup>17</sup>

When the argument for a fight within NUSAS was defeated, some students called for an undertaking from the SASO leadership that the new organisation would at least affiliate to NUSAS. Although no such undertaking was given by the leadership, the idea of affiliation was not rejected out of hand for fear of alienating those who still had some lingering loyalties to NUSAS. For some student leaders like Biko and Barney Pitjana, the idea of affiliation to NUSAS was untenable, although they could not announce this publicly. The result was a cautiously worded constitution aimed primarily at uniting people of various political outlooks, and was not a reflection of uncertainty about SASO's new role, as some historians have suggested.<sup>18</sup>

According to the first SASO constitution adopted at Turfloop, the main objective of SASO was:

To promote contact and practical co-operation among students studying at the affiliated centres.<sup>19</sup>  
In order to alleviate the fears of those

students who had argued for a fight within NUSAS and those who had sought an undertaking for affiliation of SASO to NUSAS, the constitution made room for bringing 'contact among the South Africans generally'.<sup>20</sup>

The conference went even further to annul the impression that SASO had been formed in opposition to NUSAS or that it was its Black equivalent. The point was made that 'SASO makes no claim of being a "national union" but simply an organisation formed to promote contact' among Black students.<sup>21</sup>

The issue of affiliation was deliberately avoided by Biko and his colleagues at the conference, and it was decided that it should be shelved for the time being. In order to reach a compromise and to achieve maximum unity a resolution was passed which maintained recognition of NUSAS as a national union.<sup>22</sup>

Thus according to the SASO resolution:

SASO makes no claim of being a 'national union' but is simply an organisation formed to promote contact ... SASO is formed under protest and makes no claim of being a pure organisation ... The malicious claim (that SASO claimed to be 'national union'), therefore, cannot be reconciled with the draft Constitution, nor the Preamble thereto. Neither we nor NUSAS, or any other body should seek to thwart the attempts of students' leaders who wish to try to effect this kind of contact, for it is the lifeline to intellectual salvation of, not only the students at the university colleges, but of the non-white population as a whole since they shall draw their future leaders from these students.<sup>23</sup>

It might be important to add here that the issue of affiliation to NUSAS was limited to a few vocal individuals who had actively participated in the organisation. Whilst many students might have been cautious about the emergence of SASO as a Black-only organisation, it was less because of their faith in NUSAS rather than the fear that an independent Black organisation like SASO might be seen to be in conformity with the Bantustan programme of which the Black universities themselves were a product.<sup>24</sup>

For the new SASO leadership their most urgent task was to cultivate a broad united front of all Black students, and to identify this with the struggles of the oppressed majority. As the July conference resolution stresses, identification with the struggle of the oppressed was not in itself enough unless the students played a significant role in that process.

During the crucial formative period of the student movement, its perception of the role of Black students in the libera-

tion process, and their perception of the nature of that process itself, would in the meantime crystallise in what came to be known as the ideology of 'Black Consciousness'. The ideology of Black Consciousness was an attempt at consciously negating the dominant ideologies of 'White liberalism' and 'apartheid', as well as an instrument of unifying all oppressed people, irrespective of their class background. It is then articulation of the ideology of Black Consciousness that I propose to deal with presently.

## THE DEFINITION OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

The years 1970 and 1971 saw SASO rapidly increasing its membership and gradually extending its influence beyond the university student community. The basic method of affiliation was centre-affiliation through the Students Representative Council. Where there was no SRC, as in the case of Fort Hare, a majority decision taken at a meeting of the student body was accepted as automatic affiliation. Provision was also made for individual affiliation, especially for students studying by correspondence through the University of South Africa (UNISA) and those who had completed their studies.<sup>25</sup>

In order to achieve more unity among the membership and to establish a common political identity among students, it became necessary for the SASO leadership to address themselves to the question of ideology which had been deliberately avoided at the 1969 General Student Council (GSC) meeting at Turfloop.

The question of ideology had been consciously avoided because the most urgent task then was the consolidation of SASO and building a popular base.<sup>26</sup>

In order to achieve their political objectives, the SASO leadership felt that it was necessary to destroy any political influence that White liberalism might have had mainly at Fort Hare and Wentworth. In this process a critique of NUSAS as purely an organisation for White people 'asserting and dialoguing about White causes, and looking at the aspirations of White people', was seen as crucial to break off any links that might have existed with NUSAS. In order to effectively distinguish themselves from White liberal politics, it became necessary for the leadership to set up a common agenda geared towards the process of liberation. One prominent leader summed up this process in retrospect as follows:

We realised that the Black people in the townships, in the length and breadth of the country, were talking a different language, and we felt that what needed to be on the agenda of Black students was the

language of liberation; the language of freedom; the language of independence.<sup>27</sup>

In order to clarify among themselves the language of liberation they sought to inculcate, student leaders had to acquaint themselves with the history of the liberation movement in South Africa. This educational process was embarked upon at meetings called 'formation schools' as well as leadership training seminars, organised during 1970 and 1971. These sessions normally lasted for a four or five day period and ... involved in-depth discussions about several topics.

Participation at these leadership training seminars and formation schools was limited to the core cadres from various centres and branches. The cadres were selected clandestinely locally in consultation with the SASO National Executive. No record of participants was kept by the organisation.<sup>28</sup>

In an effort to facilitate communication amongst the Black student population, and to spread the message of Black Consciousness, a SASO newsletter was published by the headquarters in Durban. Through this medium, students were urged to engage in dialogue amongst themselves and to 'reassess their position, role and responsibility within the South African student movement and society in general.'<sup>29</sup>

The SASO Newsletter of June 1970, pointed out that too often in the past, Black students had 'thoughtlessly' aligned themselves to white student protests and tended to ape the attempts by White liberals who 'operating from their comfortable circumstances in Lower Houghton (an affluent White suburb in Johannesburg) have toiled to ameliorate the suffering caused by apartheid.' The newsletter editorial observed that although the White liberals had their own role to play in opposition to apartheid, that role for Black students was a different one. For this reason, the editorial concluded:

We'll have, we believe, to close our ranks before entering the open society, not because we are racialists, as some will charge, but because our sympathetic White countrymen, sincere and well-meaning though they may be, have been rendered by circumstances unable to view the problem from the Black man's viewpoint ...<sup>30</sup>

The significance of the SASO attack against the ideology of liberalism is that it was in the same context a categorical rejection of the Congress Alliance. SASO dubbed the Congress Alliance as an unholy alliance which had in the past led most Black leaders to rely too much on the advice of White liberals.

As a consequence of this, "it became the occupation of the leadership to "calm the masses down", while they engaged in fruitless negotiation with the status quo."

The old ANC methods of struggle were in this context regarded as a 'programmed course in the art of gentle persuasion through protests and limited boycotts' with the hope that the troubled conscience of the 'fair-minded' English folk could exert some pressure towards political change in South Africa.<sup>31</sup>

Many of the SASO cadre and militants were also hostile towards the Kliptown Freedom Charter of 1955, which as far as they were concerned was the result of the influence exerted by White liberals on the ANC. Biko's statement sums up the feeling of many leading cadres and militants at the time:

The biggest mistake the Black world has ever made was to assume that whoever opposed apartheid was an ally.<sup>32</sup>

The scepticism about old methods and perceptions of the political struggle associated with the ANC which had engaged itself in 'coalitions with organisations other than those run by Blacks' led SASO to identify with the ANC Youth League, which in their view precipitated the origins of Black Consciousness, in particular the 'go-it-alone' stance of the latter.<sup>33</sup>

The rejection of old forms of political struggle compelled the SASO leadership to grapple with new ideological and political forms of struggle. This necessity was also brought about by the massive entry of non-ANC and PAC elements into SASO who had no previous connections with or knowledge of the old political traditions. Ten years since 1960, very few students knew at first hand anything about older nationalist organisations. This was particularly the case with the PAC which had existed for only a year before it was outlawed in 1960.

It was not until the mid-1970s when there was a trickle of PAC and ANC activists from Robben Island prison that these organisations became the subject of debate within the Black Consciousness Movement. Even then, for reasons of security the discussions were largely restricted to a few individuals in leadership positions. Also, contact made with the ANC and the PAC by newly-exiled SASO/BPC cadres, from 1970 onwards triggered discussion about relationships and questions of co-operation among these various organisations.

In the meantime SASO had to evolve new ideological and political forms of struggle within the horizons of their own historical context and experience. In the view of Steve Biko, who was probably

the most articulate exponent of Black Consciousness, an ideology of liberation should be a product of life experience under the harsh realities of the apartheid system. Born shortly before the election of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party to power in 1948, Biko summed up his own life experience in these words:

My friendships, my love, my education, my thinking and every other facet of my life have been carved and shaped within the context of separate development. In stages during my life I have managed to outgrow some of the things the system has taught me.<sup>34</sup>

Biko made a shorthand distinction between those who opposed the apartheid system from the point of view of Black Consciousness, and those who were fighting the system from an over simplified premise, 'the apparent features of apartheid'. According to the Black Consciousness viewpoint, the fact that apartheid was tied up with White supremacy, capitalist exploitation, and deliberate oppression' made the problem much more complex.<sup>35</sup>

For the advocates of Black Consciousness, therefore, the struggle meant conscious resistance against the 'dehumanising and demoralising' effects of apartheid ideology and practice. Blacks are defined as those 'who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspirations.'<sup>36</sup>

The definition of the term Black to include Africans, Indians and Coloureds was crucial in the development of the movement. It is worth noting here that the older nationalist organisations, namely the ANC and the PAC, had not at this time arrived at such a precise and strategic definition which embraced all the oppressed and sought to unite them within a single ideological discourse.

Although the ANC had at the 1969 Morogoro conference in Tanzania opened up membership to all groups, the Congress Alliance has continued to exist and this has perpetuated the ambiguity of the organisation. The PAC on its part had always been reluctant to shift away from its narrow chauvinistic emphasis on Africanism. As a result it has failed to attract the support of other groups, except a sprinkling of individuals from the disbanded Coloured People congress.<sup>37</sup> Even among the SASO ranks, the debate about the wisdom of including Coloureds and Indians in the organisation was by no means over. As was indicated earlier, at the UNB this debate had become more ferocious and in 1970 a special meeting was called to resolve the issue.<sup>38</sup>

To Biko himself, the debate was not

new. In his own home in Kingwilliams-town, most of his blood relatives who were members of PAC had debated the same issue with him.

According to Biko, he was never convinced that it was right to exclude Coloureds and Indians from the liberation movement because like Africans they were also victims of the same system of oppression. He was then only 17. By the time Steve Biko was a university student at Wentworth medical school, this question never arose, in his own words, because 'I never had to adjust my mind to accept Indians and Coloureds ... because I never rejected them.'<sup>39</sup>

The crucial importance of Black Consciousness ideology was emphasised by Don Mattera, a leading member of the Coloured Labour Party and its Public Relations Officer who resigned later to join the BPC in 1973, who said:

Never has democracy been suppressed and crushed as in this country ... It is when all Black groups — Coloured, African, Indian can come together in a common brotherhood that there will be hope for us.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, Strinivasa Moody, an ex-member of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) spelled the basis and need for Black Solidarity in an article which was published in the SASO Newsletter in 1972:

We have come together on the basis of our common oppression and do not separate on the basis of superficial cultural differences. I say superficial ... because culture is dependent on behaviour and in the light of the realities of our oppression ... We have similar fears, the same desires, and the same experiences. We have to use the same desires, and the same experiences. We have to use the same trains, the same buses, the same restaurants.<sup>38</sup>

The SASO militants repeatedly emphasised that being 'Black' was not a matter of skin pigmentation 'but a reflection of a mental attitude'. This meant that it was only those who had committed themselves in the liberation process who could be described as 'Black' in the political sense. Those who did not identify with that process would continue to be referred to as 'non-white'. It is significant to note that the latter reference was specifically meant for the Indian capitalist group (particularly concentrated around Durban), and those individuals who served in apartheid institutions. These include the Bantustans, the South African Indian Council, the Coloured Representative Council, and the so-called mayors in Urban Bantu Councils.

In this sense, therefore, SASO's

definition of 'Black' was not all-inclusive:

The fact that we are not all White does not necessarily mean we are all Black. Non-Whites do exist and will continue to exist.<sup>39</sup>

In an editorial prior to the adoption of the SASO Policy Manifesto (hereafter referred to as the Black Students Manifesto) a lengthy explanation of the concept of 'Blackness' appeared in the September issue of the SASO Newsletter.

According to the editorial:

The term ... must be seen in the right context. No new category is being created but re-Christening is taking place. We are merely refusing to be regarded as non-persons and claim the right to be called positively ... Adopting a collectively positive outlook leads to the creation of a broader base which may be useful in time. It helps us to recognise that we have a common enemy ... One should grant that the division of races in this country is too entrenched that the Blacks will find it difficult to operate as a combined front. The Black umbrella we are creating for ourselves at least helps to make sure the various units should be working in the same direction, being complementary to each other.<sup>40</sup>

In order to foster a sense of self-respect among Blacks in South Africa, the Black Students Manifesto declared:

The basic tenet of Black Consciousness is that the Black man must reject all value systems that seek to make him a foreigner in the country of his birth and reduce his basic dignity ... The Black man must build up his value systems, see himself as self-defined and not defined by others.<sup>41</sup>

As part of this process of self-definition the term 'Black' was used to refer to Africans, Indians and Coloureds. The definition of Black Consciousness a 'an attitude of mind, a way of life' was interpreted to imply the awareness by the Blacks of the potential power they could wield as a group both politically and economically, and hence group cohesion was regarded as an important facet of Black Consciousness.

The mobilising function of the ideology of Black consciousness was conceived as decisive in the advancement of what was called 'the totality of involvement of the oppressed people.'<sup>42</sup>

The political implications of the adoption of Black Consciousness as an ideology liberation by SASO were far-reaching in practice. When the veteran leader of SASO, Barney Pityana succeeded Biko as president in July 1970, he set about rewriting the SASO con-

stitution. The executive was enlarged to accommodate action-oriented development programmes designed for political mobilisation at grassroots level, such as those concerned with illiteracy amongst the rural population.

The amended SASO constitution committed the organisation to the struggle for the 'emancipation' of the Black people of South Africa, and the 'betterment of their social, political lot'. The new constitution also unconditionally declared SASO's 'lack of faith' in the genuineness and capability of multi-racial organisations and individual Whites to effect rapid social change in South Africa. Accordingly, in view of the conception that Black students had 'unique problems pertaining to them,' it had become imperative for Blacks 'to consolidate themselves and close their ranks' if their aspirations were to be realised.<sup>43</sup>

Although no strategy was mapped out to achieve the objectives of SASO and this task was left to the National Executive and Planning Commissions, the primary aims and objects were set out as follows:

1. To promote contact, practical co-operation, mutual understanding and unity among all Black students in South Africa.
2. To represent the interests of students on all issues that affect them in their academic and community situation.
3. To heighten the sense of awareness and encourage them to become involved in political, economic and social development of the Black people.
4. To project at all times the Black Consciousness image culturally, socially and educationally.
5. To become a platform for expression of Black opinion and represent these internationally.<sup>44</sup>

The second SASO GSC held at UNB in July 1971 laid the foundations of the political direction that SASO was to follow throughout the period of its legal existence. At this GSC, SASO declared itself as a Black students organisation working for the liberation of the Blacks in South Africa, first from psychological oppression brought about by inferiority complexes, and secondly from physical oppression 'accruing out of living in a racist society.' According to Pityana, it was necessary to make a distinction between psychological oppression which was self-inflicted in the sense that Blacks had internalised feelings of inferiority and 'dared not challenge the system', and physical oppression which was an external and visible condition of existence. Pityana nevertheless acknowledged that there was no rigid demarcation between psychological and physical oppression because liberation was a unified, single

process.<sup>45</sup>

In this context therefore the central proposition of Black Consciousness is that Blacks in South Africa have a certain common historical experience arising out of colonialism which they need to be conscious of collectively.

They, therefore, need to mobilise themselves as a group in order to translate this awareness into political action in order to overcome racist oppression. As a consequence of this observation, the Black Consciousness ideology places great emphasis on freedom from the constraints of psychological oppression, which was a 'result of 300 years of deliberate oppression, denigration, and derision.'<sup>46</sup>

The conclusion arrived at from this premise was that in the South African historical setting where both Blacks and Whites live, and 'shall continue to live together' each of the group was either part of the solution or part of the problem. In view of the historical circumstances that accorded Whites a privileged position, and because of their 'maintenance of an oppressive regime' Whites had defined themselves as part of the problem. What this meant in essence was that SASO envisaged a common multi-racial society in an undivided and unified South Africa. The organisation contended that this could not be achieved through the introduction of selected reformist measures as advocated by White liberals.<sup>47</sup>

SASO also believed that a non-racial society could only come about with the overhaul of the socio-economic system which apartheid had built and sustained over many decades. It was argued, therefore, that the only people who had a genuine interest and commitment to this objective were the victims of the system. This observation led SASO to declare that they 'believe that in all matters relating to the struggle towards realising our aspirations, Whites must be excluded.'<sup>47</sup>

The practical implications of the SASO statement were far-reaching and when translated into practice had a traumatic impact on student relationships in South Africa as a whole. The immediate impact of it directly concerned SASO's relationship to NUSAS. Initially, SASO had expressed the need to establish contact with other student and professional organisations, including NUSAS.<sup>48</sup>

As was pointed out previously, SASO upheld the recognition of NUSAS as the 'national union' of South African students and even rejected the idea that SASO sought to compete with NUSAS in the recruitment of membership. At the 1970 SASO conference, however, this position was completely reversed. SASO effectively withdrew its formal recogni-

tion of NUSAS as a body purporting to represent all students in South Africa and declared:

The emancipation of the Black people depends on the role the Black people themselves are prepared to play ... (and that SASO aware) that in the principles and make-up of NUSAS Black students can never find expression for the aspirations foremost in their minds.<sup>49</sup>

The decision to derecognise NUSAS shocked the entire liberal establishment in South Africa, and the challenge was met with equal vigour, although without any positive success. The liberal response only served to polarise the already existing political cleavages amongst the student population.

## RESPONSES TO SASO AND BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

The launching of a Blacks-only organisation, the South African Students Organisation, had a predictably traumatic effect on the traditional White liberal organisations, particularly NUSAS.

At the congress of the latter which met at the same time as the SASO inaugural conference, there was a call from the NUSAS leadership for a re-examination and re-assessment of the structures of the organisations and the traditional attitudes of liberal ideology. The need for this pervaded the whole congress and it was decided that this should be dealt with accordingly.<sup>50</sup>

According to a NUSAS leader, *Oliver Nettleton*, the major problem that faced NUSAS as a 'non-racial' organisation existing in a society based on discrimination and racism was that, while preaching the ideal of non-racialism, the members of the organisation were unable to live out their ideals: these were remained ideals and for the vast majority of students they were unreal:

The fact is that, while it is still possible for White and Black students to hold joint congresses and seminars, and to meet occasionally at social events, they live in different worlds.<sup>51</sup>

Even more fundamentally important was the observation that the historical development of NUSAS policy was rooted in a noble liberal ideology based on a commitment of the full equality and the full humanity of all people, their right to freedom and their right to full participation in the political process, total opposition to apartheid and White domination. As history unfolded this policy became rigid and doctrinaire liberal ideology and whilst advocating specific prescriptions, it rejected anything that did not conform to these 'while at the same time not

realising that its (White) proponents were themselves inextricably part of what they rejected, and for all their morality and ultimate rightness, were part of the White racist establishment.'<sup>52</sup>

Those typically rigid ideological positions were doggedly defended and promoted by Donald Woods, the then honorary president of NUSAS. A bitter and vocal opponent of SASO, Woods wrote a lengthy slanderous editorial, one of many, in his *Daily Despatch* newspaper, in 1971, in which he said:

The promoters of Black Consciousness are wrong in what they are doing. They are promoting apartheid. They are entrenching the idea of racial exclusivity and therefore are doing the Government's work. (sic)

Fortunately they represent only a small minority of Black students, most of whom are far too intelligent to fall for this line in secondhand apartheid, but it is nevertheless said there should be even some students prepared to throw in the towel on the issue of racism ... They also let down the members of NUSAS, who have battled so long and so admirably for the cause of non-racial values ... We (White liberals) say SASO, if it flourishes, will divide students at a time when they need to be united as ever. In short, we believe SASO is a disastrously narrow organisation as is the Afrikaanse Studentebond. So much for the principle concerned. As to the practical considerations, if SASO believes it will achieve more through exclusivity it betrays a sense of unreality quite equal to those who believe apartheid has a future.<sup>53</sup>

This slanderous attack on SASO carried with it all the traits of White liberal paternalism towards Blacks in general and had all the racist manifestations of ruling class ideology of *Herrgenvolkism*. The accusation that SASO was 'promoting apartheid' by organising resistance to it, is as illogical and contradictory as anything can be. Woods was, however, not alone in this hate campaign against the Black Consciousness movement. The tremors unleashed by the emergence of SASO had their impact felt even on the older generation of celebrated and revered ideologues of South African brand of White liberalism such as Edgar Brookes and Alan Paton. Dr Brookes had in his time seen many notable African nationalist fighters from the whole of Southern Africa pass through Adams College where he was once principal. Brookes noted that the Black Consciousness movement arose out of long-

term disappointment with 'our own (liberal) weakness and insensitiveness'. He was nevertheless vigorously opposed to what he termed the practical dangers of the 'Black Power' movement. Echoing the White liberal establishment, he wrote:

At times (Black Power) plays right into the hands of those who uphold apartheid ...

Racism always has its dangers and can never be unequivocally accepted by liberals, whether it be White racism or Black Racism, racism inspired by offensive superiority or by defensive revolt.<sup>54</sup>

The Johannesburg evening paper, *The Star*, also joined the *Daily Dispatch* editorial in the vigorous campaign against the Black Consciousness movement:

... all such movements have a negative side as well, particularly when they cross over into the swampy fields of politics and economics. There is a narrow line between proper national pride and the nationalism that can turn into a bitter, chauvinistic kind of separatism and exclusivity ... So much mindless division of people is already going on officially that it seems a pity to have to help the process along.<sup>55</sup>

Yet Donald Woods and those of the liberal establishment quoted above totally misconceived the situation. In the first place it was fundamentally incorrect to assume that SASO or the Black Consciousness movement was promoting apartheid. On the contrary, SASO leaders had come to realise that the only effective way to combat racism was to unite all those who were victims of that practice. In fact, the primary objective of SASO was to popularise the struggle against the apartheid regime and to unite all the oppressed in this process. At the same time there was a need to combat liberal reformist ideas amongst the Black intelligentsia who were more susceptible to these than the mass of the urban and rural workers. The ideology of Black Consciousness was therefore perceived as a double-edged sword which could be utilised simultaneously against the apartheid policies of the Nationalist Party on the one hand, and White liberalism on the other.

At another level, Black Consciousness was a means of resolving the crisis of identity of the Black intelligentsia and the various sections of the working class. To this extent, Black Consciousness is a revolutionary ideology of the Black oppressed.

The harsh reality of the racial divisions in the social-economic system and the ineffectiveness of liberal ideology to resolve the contradictions emanating

from it were however gradually being appreciated by the more progressive sections of the NUSAS leadership in the early 1970s. This is evident and explicit in Clive Nettleton's statement who explained the ambivalence of orthodox White liberalism in these terms:

The problem is that believing in non-racialism seems to be contradicted by an acceptance of a Blacks-only organisation. But the essence of the matter is that NUSAS was founded on White initiative, is financed by White money and reflects the opinions of the majority of its members who are White ... The student left-wing has been shattered and the non-racial concept on which its ideal rested has been realistically rejected by SASO: they have realised that in South Africa today it is impossible to live on the non-racial ideal and it is therefore better to withdraw in order to achieve congruence between programme and reality.<sup>56</sup>

The quote above is particularly significant because it exposes the vulnerability of the White liberal middle-of-the-road political position which opposes both the radicalism and militancy of the Black oppressed as well as the reactionary conservatism of Afrikaner nationalism. To the rigid White liberal, the militancy of the oppressed is the other side of the conservatism of the oppressors — the opposite sides of the same coin, and mutually feeding on each other. The quotation from another editorial by SASO opponent, the Editor of Daily Dispatch, confirms this observation:

The implementation of White racism has spawned Black racism ... all racial programmes without fail, get out of hand, and the temporary expedient becomes the lasting madness. It has happened with the Nazis, the Communist and the Nationalists, and there is no evidence that Blacks are immune from the process.<sup>57</sup>

The response of the so-called moderate Blacks to SASO was articulated by Obed Kunene in a White liberal newspaper, the Daily News, and clearly reflected the same contradiction inherent in liberal ideology in the South African context. Kunene, now editor of *Ilanga lase Natal*, a paper that vigorously supports Gatsha Buthelezi's Inkatha organisation, wrote in 1971:

I haven't the least admiration for isolationist tendencies of some of the more militant protagonists of the Black craze. The Lord knows, we have enough racist bigots as it is without seeking to add our own peculiar brand.<sup>58</sup>

Predictably, the emergence of SASO received some warm, although mis-

conceived sympathy from the ethnically exclusive Afrikaanse Studentebond leadership.

Leon Wessels, the national president of the ASB expressed sympathy for the cause of SASO who had the right 'to cultivate their own ideals and to be represented by only their people'.<sup>59</sup>

The ultimate ironic response produced by the emergence of the Black Consciousness movement came from the Nationalist party press and radio, in particular *Die Burger* ('The Citizen'), an Afrikaner mouthpiece in the Cape Province.

This newspaper rejected the idea advanced by the White liberals that the 'Black Power' movement existed in South Africa. In its view the country where such a movement existed was the United States, 'where integration is the watchword'. *Die Burger* pointed out that Steve Biko in a speech he had given in Cape Town had dissociated himself 'in strong language' from the White champions of integration. The paper arrived at two conclusions: the first was that a 'Black Power' movement would have emerged in South Africa even if the Nationalist Party had not been in power. *Die Burger* argued that the movement would even have emerged sooner and assumed a more militant posture if the NP had not been in power, because the United Party (the opposition) approach to the race relations problem offered no possibility of satisfaction of the aspirations which must of necessity arise among Blacks.

The second inference, the paper continued, was that an integrationist policy in the circumstances of South Africa would not have satisfied the Black Power advocates. The paper concluded:

It is because the Nationalist Party realised this that it formulated its policy of separate development and separate freedoms. It foresaw that 'a variety of nationalisms' would emerge within the boundaries of South Africa — which would be hard to accommodate in one geographical area without destructive conflict ... In the direction indicated by the Nationalist Party we see the only solution to the problems created by the new development. (sic)<sup>60</sup>

The response of the radical 'Coloured' intellectuals was even more interesting because it arrives at essentially the same conclusion about Black Consciousness as traditional White liberalism.

The Teachers League of South Africa, for example, which has always been dominated by Trotskyites, and has been consistently hostile to radical Black nationalism, was predictably hostile to the emergence of SASO and Black Con-

sciousness. The League declared:

The diversion of any section of the unfranchised people into the racist morass of 'Black' or 'Brown' so-called power (which is in fact neither power nor even potential in any liberatory sense) is something which can only serve the forces of reaction and continuing helotry. As may be tragically demonstrated in regard to almost every allegedly independent country on the African continent today, the path takes the elite upper crust of the oppressed to the market and stock exchange while the people are plunged still deeper into bondage. The shop windows change somewhat but the old firm remains in control.<sup>60</sup>

The liberal characterisation of Black Consciousness as a 'racist' phenomenon was also echoed by the exiled Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), despite its avowedly Africanistic ideological posture. As far as the PAC was concerned it is possible to suggest that their conception of the new movement reflected the Party's inability to grasp the dynamics of the liberation process inside South Africa, a condition created by the PAC's long exile existence. This observation can be supported by the fact that within SASO itself, especially at Wentworth and Turfloop there were many PAC members who belonged to the organisation. In 1972 there were even bigger numbers who flocked to the newly-formed Black People's Convention. The most prominent leader of the PAC, Zeph Mothopeng, was an active rearguard activist in the BPC until the organisation was banned in 1977. Even more significant is the fact that the first chairperson of the BPC Johannesburg Central Branch, Paul Tsotetsi, was himself a hard-core cadre of the PAC before it was outlawed in 1960. In its official organ, the *Azania News*, the PAC expressed hostility to the Black Consciousness movement:

We specifically want to warn against the promotion of Black Consciousness which seems to be gaining foot in our country today. Black Consciousness is racial reaction to White racism and White liberal paternalism. It is not a solution to either.<sup>61</sup>

The PAC position and its hostile reaction is even more contradictory if one considers its posture vis-a-vis the role of Indian and 'Coloured' political organisations in the liberation struggle in South Africa. Whereas previously the Africanists had advocated the exclusion of Indians and 'Coloureds' from the liberation movement because they seem to be intent on safeguarding their relatively privileged position in the social-economic formation, the Africanist posi-



tion was reversed in 1966, two years before SASO was formed. The ground for this was prepared by Potlako Leballo and Gora Ebrahim, leaders of the Pan Africanist Congress and the Coloured People's Congress respectively, who issued a 'communiqué on the amalgamation of the PAC and CPC in 1966. Although the communiqué was essentially an attack on the multi-racial structure of the Congress Alliance led by the ANC, it embodied the principle of a single political and ideological discourse later expressed and popularised by SASO. The PAC and CPC then declared:

The leaders of the Congresses (PAC and CPC) are firmly convinced that the retention of a political organisation based on race conspires to entrench racialism and perpetuate political divisions which help the ruling class in continuing the subjugation of the people.

Furthermore, the urgency of our political tasks ... demands a unified movement comprising all the oppressed as one people aspiring to a common nationhood. Consequently, coloured Africans take their place in the PAC simply as Africans. The retention of Coloured and Indian organisations as junior partners of the Black Africans in the struggle aggravates racialism and strengthens the race barriers, showing suspicion and discord among those who are organised along such lines.<sup>62</sup>

This blatantly contradictory position of the PAC towards Black Consciousness has been explained as a reflection of the internal contradictions within the PAC. The Leballo faction which posed as the official PAC in Dar-es-Salaam and was therefore solely responsible for the hostile propaganda against SASO and BPC, was at the beginning of the 'seventies fighting for its political legitimacy amongst the PAC fighters.

This group was diametrically opposed to the London faction, which involved among others the so-called 'Sobukwe Executive', led by Nana Mahomo and Matthew Nkoana.

The Leballo faction seems to have had its own reasons for its attack on the Black Consciousness movement, since the 'Nkoana faction' falsely and maliciously claimed to have direct influences on the development of SASO and BPC inside South Africa. Incredibly enough this seems to have been believed in Dar-es-Salaam. As recently as the beginning of 1983, Matthew Nkoana claimed to have written the basic SASO documents, including Biko's article entitled 'I Write What I Like'. Nkoana was resident in Cairo.<sup>63</sup>

It has also been suggested that the

internal political and organisational crisis within the PAC rendered it incapable of issuing collective and unified response to political developments inside South Africa. Thus, for example, the Leballo 'official' PAC faced with a severely diminished authority among the rank and file cadres, and serious factional struggles at leadership level, could not countenance any challenge that emanated from inside the country where they had virtually no influence to direct the course of events. As one of the veterans of the revolution put it, this PAC faction did not even recognise Black Consciousness 'as a movement in its own right'.<sup>64</sup> The African National Congress for its part welcomed the emergence of the Black Consciousness movement. The ANC observed that Black Consciousness organisations were a revolutionary phenomenon since 'at no time have these movements adopted policies promoting Black capitalism or retaliatory Black racism as some Black movements advocate in some countries'.<sup>65</sup>

The most enthusiastic support for Black Consciousness came from the Africanists in the ANC. Ontisitse Sethapelo argued that the Black people of South Africa had a legitimate right to define themselves as they deemed necessary, and to chart the course of their own struggle. In his firm and forceful argument, Sethapelo declared that:

Black Consciousness is the single most important development within our country, among our people, that has occurred following the banning (of) our people's organisations (ANC and PAC) and the Rivonia and other trials of the early- and mid-sixties.

The importance of this development is manifested, among other things in its bringing together the youth and people of the three Black communities in an uncompromising manner.<sup>66</sup>

The Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in its initial response to Black Consciousness was at first cautious. Later the Party consistently depicted the Black Consciousness ideology as a reactionary chauvinistic form of nationalism. The CPSA's response reflected its historically contradictory position on the National Question in South Africa: whilst the Communist Party advanced the ideology of Marxism-Leninism for the South African revolution, because of its traditional support and alliance with the ANC it has to abandon the class struggle to accommodate the ANC nationalistic ideology. In this context, any other form of nationalism which it cannot influence is labelled chauvinistic and reactionary. The final product of this is the

CPSA's two-stages theory of revolution: fight for democracy first, and later fight for socialism. The comment of the CPSA on Black Consciousness reflects its own inability to distinguish between reactionary and revolutionary nationalism. The result is a repetition of fossilised clichés and rhetoric, typical of the Communist Party:

In order to become a more positive and dynamic force in uniting the various strata of the oppressed people, the concept of Black Consciousness needs the reinforcement of the scientific and enlightening ideology of the working class, Marxism-Leninism, and to be integrated within the hard-won programme of the liberation alliance: the Freedom Charter.<sup>67</sup>

The sum-total of the White liberal critique of Black Consciousness was that it was racism in reverse. The origins of the White liberal perspective are not hard to find. For the traditional liberal ideology, the main contradiction in South African society is the apartheid system which promotes and practices racial segregation and discrimination. The solution to this problem is non-racialism which can be achieved through legalised equality for all: socially, politically, and economically, regardless of the individual's colour, race or sex. The main emphasis of liberal ideology is individual liberty, and the worth of a person is judged by his membership of the human fraternity.

If this presentation of liberal ideology is correct, it is thus hardly surprising that it is rejected by those Black intellectuals who had personally witnessed its failure and inconsistency, particularly the generation that grew up in a brutally racist South Africa where the worth of an individual, prescribed by the ruling class ideology, is judged in terms of one's race. A notable SASO leader, for example, commented on the 'colour-less' integrationist policy of White liberalism in these words:

It is true that the question of race (in liberal circles) is one which we often find embarrassing, it should rather not be discussed (just like the problem of sex during the Victorian era).

'Oh you see, I love you as a person and it never occurs to me that you are Black!'

This sort of gesture we receive from our sympathetic friends. Many would prefer to be colour-blind, to them skin pigmentation is merely an accident of creation. To us it is something much more fundamental. It is a synonym for subjection, an identification for the disinherited, the discarded people and the wretched of the earth.<sup>68</sup>

This fundamental reality of a racially structured social-economic system became a determining factor in the process of the formulation of the central concepts of Black Consciousness. These central concepts were essentially directed towards a specific problem area — the problem of power relationships in the South African social-economic formation. As Pityana emphasised, power is 'an essential element' of politics.<sup>69</sup> The conclusion therefore was that those who are committed to the politics of change should direct their attack to the group which wields power in society.<sup>70</sup>

### THE SOCIAL ECONOMIC BASIS OF THE IDEOLOGY OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

The central thesis that is advanced here is that Black Consciousness is basically an ideological function of the petty bourgeoisie. If we agree that there is a close relationship between the ideology of a class and its political position, this means that the only real class ideologies in a capitalist social formation are those of the two major classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

These two major classes because of their dominant positions in the sphere of production relations, produce a coherent and systematic ideological discourse of their own. The petty bourgeoisie on the contrary, does not have an ideological discourse of its own. Its ideology rather tends to incorporate certain 'elements' of the dominant social forces in that society. This stems from the fact that the petty bourgeoisie, despite the variety of their insertion in the sphere of economic relations, they do have a basic feature in common: their separation from the dominant relations of production in a given society. This means that their contradictions with the dominant bloc are posed, 'not at the level of the dominant relations of production, but at the level of political and ideological relations which make up the system of domination in that social formation.'<sup>71</sup>

The contradiction they experience is therefore not a class contradiction. This means that the identity as the people plays a much more important role than the identity as class. Since the democratic struggle is always dominated by the class struggle, the popular democratic ideology such as Black Consciousness is insufficient to organise its discourse and can only exist within the ideological discourse of the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. Ernesto Laclau, has emphasised that the struggle for the articulation of popular-democratic ideology in class ideological discourse is the basic ideological struggle in capitalist formations.

In the racially-structured capitalist system of South Africa, the Black petty bourgeoisie's contradiction thrown up by the barriers of apartheid, in contrast to that of his counterpart, is thus perceived not just abstractly but in his very existence.<sup>72</sup>

Thus for example, Aime Cesaire, a Black intellectual from Martinique who lived in metropolitan France for ten years, summed up his own experiences in diaspora by affirming that,

Negritude is ... a concrete rather than abstract coming into consciousness ... We lived in atmosphere of rejection, and we developed an inferiority complex. I have always thought that the Black man was searching for his identity.

The coming to collective consciousness by the Black intellectuals is described by Sartre as follows:

The 'coloured' man on the other hand, by virtue of his colour, an instinct of oppression, unaffected by his class, though muted by it. So that the 'coloured' intellectual in resolving his contradiction, resolves also his existential contradiction. In coming to consciousness of the oppressed, he takes conscious of himself, in taking conscious of himself, he comes to the consciousness of the oppressed.<sup>73</sup>

The imperative of the unity of the oppressed in South Africa became one of the central concepts of the Black Consciousness movement in the 1970s. The single most important contribution of the movement was that it was the first to articulate this unity in a single ideological discourse. Thus according to the SASO document:

1. We are all oppressed by the same system.
2. That we are oppressed to varying degrees is a deliberate design to stratify us not only socially, but also in terms of aspirations.
3. Therefore, it is to be expected that in terms of the enemy's plan, there must be this suspicion and that if we are committed to the problem of emancipation to the same degree, it is part of our duty to bring to the attention of the Black people the deliberateness of the enemy's subjugationist scheme.<sup>74</sup>

In an effort to promote unity SASO realised that as a student organisation it had obvious limitations, and that this task could be best achieved by a political party or organisation. Faced with this SASO initiated the early discussions among the various Black organisations with the object of setting up a political organisation. The end result was the formation of the Black People's Convention in December, 1971.

To sum up, Black Consciousness

arose out of the concrete historical and objective conditions of the Black intelligentsia in the South African social-economic formation. The racially-structured capitalism system generated contradictions which impelled this stratum to formulate and articulate an ideological discourse that sought an identity with the mass of the oppressed. As stated above, the identity as a 'people' was much more important than identity as 'class'. Because of their separation from the dominant production relations, the Black petty bourgeoisie expressed their individual and collective experience of oppression at the political and ideological consciousness thus became a function of this political and ideological consciousness through which the Black oppressed could be organised for political action.

### FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Steve Biko, *Interview with Gail M Gerhart*, Durban, October 1972 (mimeo).
- <sup>2</sup> By 'social formation' it is meant here the concrete complex whole comprising economic, political and ideological practice at a certain place and stage of development of society.
- <sup>3</sup> Steve Biko, op cit.
- <sup>4</sup> SASO COMMUNIQUE as drawn up by the July 1969 conference held at Turfloop, University of the North and issued by the South African Students' Organisation, Durban Head Office, 1969.
- <sup>5</sup> See 'Understanding SASO', an introductory paper presented to a 'Formation School' organised by SASO at Edendale, near Pietermaritzburg, in 1971 by S Biko (mimeo). See also Biko's interview cited above.
- <sup>6</sup> Abraham Onkgopets Tiro who was killed by a bomb whilst living in exile in Botswana in 1974, and Harry Negwekwe are typical examples of SASO cadre who had working class experience. Incidentally they succeeded each other as SASO national organisers.
- <sup>7</sup> Amilcar Cabral, *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches*, New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1973, p 82 (emphasis original).
- <sup>8</sup> Report of the First National Formation School, address by SASO President S Biko entitled 'SASO — its role, its significance and its future' (mimeo) 1969.
- <sup>9</sup> See SASO Communique, op cit.
- <sup>10</sup> Quoted from the 'letter addressed to SRC Presidents, National Students Organisations, Other Organisations, Overseas Organisations' issued by the South African Students' Organisations, Umbilo Road, Durban and signed by the President, S Biko, February 1970.
- <sup>11</sup> Law students in all campuses were notorious for their conservatism and in many instances, outright sabotage of student-body meetings. They caused problems by constantly raising questions of procedure and other constitutional issues. The result was a sharp drop in morale and participation among the rank and file.
- <sup>12</sup> See Biko interview with Gerhart, op cit.
- <sup>13</sup> Interview with leading SASO official, Milton Keynes, England, December 1962.
- <sup>14</sup> See Biko in the interview with G Gerhart on the debate at Wentworth in 1969 before the July conference.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>16</sup> SASO Communique, op cit.

17. *Ibid.*
18. Denis Herbstein, *White Man We Want to Talk to You*, 1978, p 65 has suggested that SASO was unsure of its new role, but the evidence I have is that this is a false assumption. There was no question of a dividing line between the conservatives and the radicals as Berstein has claimed.
19. See *SASO Constitution* (mimeo), 1969.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *SASO Communiqué*, op cit.
22. Interview with Biko by Dr Gerhart.
23. *SASO Communiqué*, op cit.
24. Interview with B Pityana, op cit.
25. See Biko's 'letter to SRC Presidents ...', February 1970.
26. Interview with Pityana by S Buthelezi, 1982. See also Biko's interview with Gerhart, 1972.
27. *Ibid.*
28. The detailed information about the operation of the seminars is given by Biko in the interview referred to in note 26.
29. See 'Editorial' by S Biko, *SASO Newsletter*, Durban, South African Students' Organisations, 1970.
30. *Ibid.*
31. S Biko, 'White Racism and Black Consciousness', paper presented by Biko at the symposium sponsored by the Abe-Baily Institute for Inter-racial Studies, Cape Town, January, 1971 (mimeo).
32. *Ibid.*
33. There will be more discussion about this later in this chapter. See also S Biko op cit.
34. S Biko, 'We Blacks' (Biko used 'Frank Talk' as a pseudonym) in *SASO Newsletter*, September, 1970.
35. See 'Definition of Black Consciousness' a paper presented by S Biko in a SASO leadership training seminar held at Edendale Lay Ecumenical Centre, Pietermaritzburg, in December, 1977 (mimeo).
36. S Biko, interview with Gerhart, 1972.
37. Don Mattered, quoted in the Johannesburg morning newspaper, *The Rand Daily Mail*, 11 July 1972.
38. Strini Moodley, 'Black Consciousness, the Black Artist and the Emerging Culture', in *SASO Newsletter*, May/June 1972.
39. S Biko, 'The Definition of Black Consciousness', op cit (emphasis original). See also the *SASO Policy Manifesto* adopted by 2nd GSC, held at Alan Taylor Residence, Wentworth, on 4-10 July 1971. This document was tabled by S Biko (Wentworth) and Alex Mhlongo (Ngoye) at the conference (mimeo). The *Policy Manifesto* was later called the *Black Students Manifesto*.
41. *Black Students Manifesto*, 1971.
42. *Ibid.*
43. See the *Amended Constitution* approved and adopted by the 2nd GSC, 9 July, 1971.
44. *Ibid.* NOTE: The Planning Commission's task was to deal with the administrative task of the organisation, such as for example the nomination of a second layer of leadership in case of banning orders, arrests or imprisonment of the current leadership. The Commission also dealt with political and ideological questions in conjunction with the Secretary-General of SASO. All its deliberations and decisions were secret. On the work and function of the Planning Commission, see Biko's interview with Gerhart, 1972.
45. Interview with Pityana, op cit.
46. See S Biko (pseudonym 'Frank Talk'), 'Black Souls in White Skins' in *SASO Newsletter*, August 1970.
47. See *Black Students Manifesto*, 1971.
48. See 'Minutes of 1969 Conference' (mimeo). At this conference the Secretary General of SASO had been instructed to establish contacts (and to report his finding) with NUSAS, UCM, ASB, SAIRR, SACHED, SCM, SCA, TUATA, OFSATA, NATU and SAG.
49. 'Report on the 1970 SASO Conference', (mimeo) Durban, SASO, 1970.
50. See Clive Nettleton, 'Racial Cleavage on the Student Left', in Hendrik W van der Merwe and David Walsh (eds) *Student Perspectives on South Africa*, David Philip, 1972, p 127.
51. C Nettleton, op cit, p 125.
52. See Neville Curtis and Clive Keegan, 'The aspiration to a Just Society,' in H W van der Merwe and D Walsh, op 119.
53. Donald Woods, 'Editorial Opinion', in the *Daily Dispatch*, East London, August 10, 1971.
54. Article by Edgar Brookes in *The Star*, Johannesburg, March 16, 1972.
55. Editorial entitled 'When Black isn't Beautiful', in *The Star*, January 13, 1971.
56. C Nettleton, op cit, pp 134-137 (emphasis added).
57. Donald Woods, 'Black Exclusives', editorial published in the *Daily Dispatch*, 17 July 1972.
58. Obed Kunene, 'Isolation is for the Impetuous', article in the *Daily News*, Durban, July 17, 1971.
59. Leon Wessels quoted in the *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 April 1972.
60. See the *Educational Journal*, September 1971, published by the Teachers League of South Africa.
61. Statement of the Pan Africanist Congress in *Azania News*, Dar-es-Salaam, August 1972.
62. Quoted from the 'full text of the CPC—PAC Communiqué', in the *CPC International Bulletin*, March 1966.
63. In my conversation Siphog Mgwaza in May 1983 in London, one of the first Chinese-trained guerrillas in the mid-sixties, he emphasised that by 1972 the PAC was fast disintegrating. He argued that the *Azania News* statement in August 1972 did not reflect the official line or policy.
64. Conversation with Dan Mokonyane, London, May 1983.
65. See ANC statement in *Sechaba*, March 1973, the official organ of ANC.
66. Letter from O Sethapel, in *Sechaba*, October/December 1973. This letter was a reply to another written by Arnold Selby in *Sechaba*, no 2, February 1973, which had attacked the Black Consciousness Movement. The gap of 8 months between the dates of publication was said by Sethapel to be a concerted attempt by White communists in the ANC to block the publication of the reply to Selby. (Conversation with O Sethapel, London, January 1983).
67. Quoted from the *African Communist* by *Azania News*, June 1973.
68. Barney Pityana, 'Power and Social Change in South Africa', in H van der Merwe and D Walsh, op cit, p 174.
69. *Ibid.*
70. See Steve Biko, 'White Racism and Black Consciousness', op cit. NOTE: Power in this context refers mainly to political power in the usual sense, to the characterised condensation of social-power relationships invested in the State. For a profound discussion of the concept, see Goran Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*, London, Verso, 1980.
71. Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, London: Verso, 1979, p 114.
72. Baruch Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash, The Soweto Revolt: Roots of a Revolution?* London: Zed Press, 1979, has suggested that this contradiction was 'felt rather than understood', and this paternalistic view is contradicted by all available evidence and the speeches, articles and utterances of the individuals involved. NOTE: by 'Contradiction' I embrace the definition by Laclau, which means the articulation of a practice into the complex whole of the social formation. Contradictions may be antagonistic or non-antagonistic according to whether their state of overdetermination is one of fusion or condensation or one of displacement.
73. Aime Cesaire, 'Interview with Rene Depretre' (a Haitian poet) at the Cultural Congress in Havana in 1967, published in *Discourse on Colonialism*, New York and London, 1972, p 76.
74. A Sivanandan, 'The Liberation of the Black Intellectual' in *Race and Class*, vol XV, Spring 1977, no 4, London p 331.
75. See S Biko, 'The Definition of Black Consciousness', op cit.
76. Jean Paul Sartre, *Black Orpheus*, Paris (n.d.) quoted by A Sivanandan op cit p 332.
77. See S Biko, 'The Definition of Black Consciousness', op cit.