

1968: SASO and the Revival of Black Political Opposition

Rhodes University Department of History Lecture

5 September 2011

43 years ago, in 1968, workers and students in France took to the streets in battles against the conservative Gaullist regime.

In Britain university students occupied campuses, calling for greater democracy and student rights.

Elsewhere, 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 in the United States reached new heights.

And less known, in Dagenham, also in the UK, women sewing machinists at the Ford Motor company factory went on strike. In winning their demand for equal pay for equal work they struck a blow for a better future for women workers everywhere else.

During this same tumultuous year, 1968, a less dramatic but no less important event occurred in South Africa: the South African Students'

Organisation, the progenitor of Black Consciousness, was launched at Marianhill, near Durban.

The immediate trigger of the formation of SASO features the then administration of Rhodes University.

In 1967, the annual congress of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) was held at Rhodes. NUSAS represented students from white and black universities. One of the delegates at this congress from the Natal Medical School was Stephen Bantu Biko.

A few days before this congress, the Rhodes University administration resolved not to permit black delegates to stay on campus in residence; nor would they be allowed to attend social functions on campus.

Biko walked out of the congress and went to visit Barney Pityana, who was then a student at Fort Hare. A year later SASO was formed.

For white South Africans the 1960s was generally a time of political calm, rising living standards, prosperity and sharing in the sustained economic boom of that period.

Some blacks shared in the bounty, those for whom the opportunities for the accumulation of wealth, power and privilege through the bantustan and separate development programme proved irresistible.

For most blacks, however, the aftermath of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre - with the suppression of the ANC and PAC, the repression of radical political activity, detentions, bannings and banishments - was a period of intensified exploitation, extended and tightened social controls, demoralisation, fear, and enforced and sullen acquiescence.

In these conditions it was difficult to see how any serious and organised political challenge to white minority domination could be mounted and from where it could come.

Any organisation faced the prospect not only of severe repression but also the unenviable task of dissipating and overcoming the demoralisation and fear that were major impediments to organisation building and political mobilisation in the late 1960s.

Yet, the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), formed in 1968 under the leadership of Bantu Stephen Biko, Nyameko Barney Pitsoana and others, was able to escape immediate repression, establish itself, and develop a mass following at black universities and some black colleges.

It was to play a key role in constructing the doctrine of Black Consciousness and reviving black opposition to apartheid.

In some respects, it was surprising that this challenge through the medium of SASO came from where it did. The black racial and ethnic universities that were created in the early 1960s were not designed to produce dissidents.

They had been charged with the responsibility of winning the support of students - intellectually and politically - to the separate development programme and of generating the administrative corps for Bantustan and the separate development bureaucracies.

That, after all, was the intended purpose of the strict ideological control that was exercised over the black institutions, of their domination by Afrikaner nationalists, and the repressive controls on students.

However, that the revival of mass political opposition to apartheid emerged from within and spread outwards from the black universities is also understandable.

The black universities gathered together talented students who had survived the rigours and hurdles of black schooling, including the pernicious 'bantu education'. Notwithstanding their talents, upon graduating black students were still to be condemned to a future of limited socioeconomic opportunities, disenfranchisement and inequality and injustice.

At the black universities of the 1960s 'most students had common experiences in white South Africa, and there were few who had not encountered directly the humiliation of white superiority attitudes, while all suffered in some degree the effects of legal discrimination.

The very fact of their common positions of inferiority in South African society, unameliorated by contact with white students, created a bond which formed a basis for their political mobilisation.'

My recent book on SASO is titled *Black Man You are on Your Own*. The phrase 'Black Man You are on Your Own' is often associated with Biko. It is however, an utterance by Barney Pitso, the first secretary-general of SASO; and, after Biko, the second president of SASO. It expresses well both the context and sentiment of the late 1960s.

The book, in a nutshell, analyses:

- First, the ideology, politics and organizational culture and features of SASO and their diverse intellectual, political and social determinants
- Second, SASO's role in the educational, political and social spheres and the conditions and factors that shaped its activities, and
- Finally, assesses SASO's contribution to the popular struggle against apartheid education and race, class and gender oppression.

Why a book on SASO and Black Consciousness? There are a number of reasons.

Firstly, Black Consciousness, the doctrine that SASO developed, was a response to particular structural and institutional conditions and experiences.

Since 1994 there has been a growing and pervasive amnesia about our past, abetted by calls to 'forget the past and embrace the future'. There has also been confusion between aspiration and reality, as in the representation of democratic South Africa as a rainbow nation.

It seems to me that we are only feebly confronting how far past structural and institutional conditions have been really eroded, let alone transformed.

On the issues of 'race' and identity, I argue that approaches such as Black Consciousness, concerns with identity, and certain exclusivist forms of organisation are not necessarily retrogressive. On the contrary, they can make an important contribution to non-racialism and social cohesion.

To recognise 'difference' and seek to deal with it effectively is not necessarily a desire to elevate and ossify difference. Nor is it to succumb to a 'politics of difference' and to turn one's back on a 'politics of equal recognition'.

'Equal recognition' will only be possible when we begin to tackle the issue of 'difference' with sensitivity, honesty and courage and begin to respect and embrace diversity in all its rich and myriad forms.

The second reason for this book is that despite a repressive political order and an array of coercive and ideological instruments to maintain national oppression and class domination, the apartheid government ultimately failed to crush political opposition in South Africa.

SASO and its student militants played a vital role in the eventual winning of democracy. Accounts of popular resistance in South Africa must acknowledge SASO's contribution and the often selfless courage of its militants and students.

A third reason is that South Africa is a country with a particularly rich history of student activism and militancy, yet this is hardly reflected in scholarly literature. The vitality of student politics cries out for research and analysis, and our rich South African experience must be a part of our contribution to knowledge production globally.

A further reason is that contemporary student activists are frighteningly ill-informed and vague about the history of student struggles and activism, and the role and contribution of previous student organisations. While this book will not necessarily provide answers to contemporary questions, it is important for new generations to be aware of their own place in the stream of student political history and to have a historical understanding of issues they continue to confront.

Lastly, nowadays, there is a danger of critical historical and sociological work, and the humanities and social sciences more generally, being decimated by narrow instrumental and utilitarian logics, and being sacrificed on the altar of 'relevance', defined in the most parochial way and reduced, ultimately, to market or economic relevance.

However, as Thandeka Mkandawire argues, "attempts to improve Africa's prospects by focusing on (natural) scientific advances and the benefits accruing from them have all too often overlooked the important perspectives which the humanities and social sciences afford." It "is vital that the social sciences and humanities are granted their rightful place...if Africa's development challenges are to be fully and properly addressed."

The unadulterated privileging of knowledge and research generated by the natural, medical and business sciences and engineering to the detriment of the arts, humanities and social sciences has grave consequences for the intellectual and cultural life of our country and for us feeling our way towards an equitable, just and environmentally sustainable democracy.

I want to now turn briefly to the book itself.

Firstly, to guide and inform the analysis of SASO I set out a conceptual framework that draws on radical social theory, social movement theory, comparative student politics and South African political economy. My purpose is not to develop a grand theory for student activism but to forge creative tools for analysing key aspects of SASO and capturing their historical significance.

Secondly, I describe black higher education before 1960 and then analyse the particular conditions within society and higher education in the 1960s and 1970s that confronted black students and SASO. I do this so that we can appreciate the terrain on which SASO had to move and operate.

Thirdly, I briefly deal with student politics during the 1940s and 1950s, especially at Fort Hare, and the formation of the African Students Association and the African Students Union of South Africa, which were linked with the ANC and PAC respectively.

Thereafter, I analyse in detail the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the emergence of SASO in the late 1960s, its ideological and political character and orientations and the shifts that began to occur within it.

I also describe and analyse SASO’s key organisational features, the form and content of its political and educational mobilisation, its labour and community development projects and its position within the overall Black Consciousness movement.

Finally, I critically engage the key literature on SASO and Black Consciousness, including Gail Gerhart’s *Black Power in South Africa* (1978); Baruch Hirson’s *Year of Fire, Year of Ash: The Soweto Revolt* (1979); Sam Nolutshungu’s *Changing South Africa: Political Considerations* (1982), and Robert Fatton’s *Black Consciousness in South Africa* (1986).

On the one hand I largely concur with the late Sam Nolutshungu’s conceptual framework for analysing SASO, as well as his assessment of SASO’s character, role and significance.

On the other hand, I strongly disagree with the late Baruch Hirson’s interpretation. As interpretations are shaped by conceptual frameworks, my disagreement with Hirson, not surprisingly, extends to his framework for analysing SASO.

Finally, I advance my own interpretation of SASO and arguments on its character, role and significance in relation to its internal characteristics, the South African social order, and the particular historical conditions under which it operated.

There are five salient features of the book that I wish to highlight.

One is my critique of the tendency of writers to give the impression that the doctrine of Black Consciousness was already developed by the time of SASO's launch in 1968 and emerged with its launch. This is not true – BC doctrine was actually formulated over the two-year period, 1969 – 70, that followed SASO's formation.

When you imagine that Black Consciousness doctrine was already formed when SASO was launched, you completely ignore and obscure the profound and creative 'cognitive praxis' that produced the doctrine.

Black Consciousness did not drop from heaven as a ready-made package or anything else. The world view, goals, oppositional targets and strategies of SASO were socially constructed by its organisation intellectuals, pre-eminently Biko but also Pityana and other activists. The act of construction was, moreover, not a one-off event but a process.

Secondly, Sam Nolutshungu makes the very important point that 'a nationalist movement can be revolutionary in a Marxist sense, despite its lack of a revolutionary organisation or, even, ideology'.

As he argues, 'in the first place' the important issue is not 'organisation and doctrines, or the empirical characteristics of...leaders'. 'Far more decisive' are the necessary implications of its objective political situation and practice; in short, the form of the political terrain and how it was bound to move on that terrain.'

This means that interpretation of SASO's character cannot be read-off from an analysis of its membership, doctrines and organisation. It must also include an analysis of the educational and political terrain on which it operated and how it affected this terrain.

In *Poor People's Movements* Piven and Cloward, write 'What was won must be judged by what was possible.' So we must ask, in so far as national liberation is concerned, if SASO on the whole 'made gains or lost ground'; whether it 'advanced the interests' of the oppressed classes and social groups or set them back.

My argument is that SASO 'was a product of revolutionary circumstances which was itself driven to a profoundly subversive political role.' It helped to ignite, in the form of the Soweto uprising, a political conflagration that fundamentally reshaped political relations in South Africa.

In so doing, it hardly promoted purely middle-class interests at the expense of worker interests. Thus, 'there cannot be much difficulty in recognising the black consciousness movement as having been revolutionary.'

Third, much of the literature on SASO and Black Consciousness views them in purely political and instrumental terms. This, then, misses SASOs' and Black Consciousness' important cultural, expressive, and symbolic roles and features.

Take, for example, *cultural innovation*. With SASO and the Black Consciousness movement came a number of developments all connected with enhancing black pride, assertiveness and solidarity.

One was the slogan 'Black is beautiful' and along with this an attack on hair-straightening and skin-lightening creams. Another was the Afro hairstyle and dress of a more African character.

Yet another was the clenched fist salute embodying black solidarity and opposition to white domination. There were also the slogans and songs that emphasised black self-reliance, expressed defiance of the existing social order, and voiced the hope of a better future.

There was also the cultural production that was inspired by Black Consciousness, such as poetry and drama – what Alberto Melucci calls 'representation'. This was important in critiquing the social order and stirring black audiences to action.

Symbolically, SASO played a vital 'prophetic' function in repudiating white liberal notions of black assimilation into the existing white and Eurocentric culture. Instead, it held out the vision of a non-racial society that would be

the product of all social groups and reflect the full richness of our cultural diversity.

Hugely important was SASO's repudiation of the term 'non-white', a term that, disconcertingly, you still hear from time on radio and in social interactions, and still see in newspapers.

By 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' or the concept of a 'black university' may have been somewhat inchoate; but, to their credit, they refused to accommodate to white conservative and liberal conceptions of the world, and of behaviour and conduct.

Instead they pointed, as best as they could, to the possibility of radically different ideas and practices. Through their organisation, they showed that black students did not to depend on whites for their thinking and organisational activities. Thus, SASO both challenged the dominant culture and attempted to innovate intellectually and culturally.

The book also makes clear that black students were not just victims of apartheid but were also thinkers, conscious actors and historical agents. *Ironically*, it was a generation that bantu education was meant to intellectually stultify whose intellectual creativity gave rise to the revolutionary doctrine of Black Consciousness.

Further, in the face of an authoritarian and repressive political order, SASO constituted black students as an organised social force, functioned as a school of political education and formation and as a catalyst of collective action. In this way, it contributed to the erosion of the apartheid social order and to educational and social transformation in South Africa.

On 'Black Wednesday' – the 19th of October 1977, numerous Black Consciousness organisations, including SASO were banned, and scores of political activists were detained.

This was, of course, following the Soweto uprising of 1976, and in the aftermath of the killing in prison of Stephen Bantu Biko on 12 September 1977.

Fast forward, through 1994 to 2011. 17 years into our democracy, the social-structural relations that under apartheid underpinned unbridled wealth and privilege, and the accompanying inequality, poverty, unemployment and unequal opportunities to high quality education, health care and social services, continue to prevail.

In this context, the crucial questions of 'race', values, identity, culture, new intellectual frames, and social and cultural transformation that SASO and Black Consciousness raised remain highly relevant in our own time.

Any substantive social justice agenda cannot ignore these conditions and issues, and must imaginatively and creatively develop strategies to address these issues and erode and transform these conditions.

Here Biko and SASO provide pointers: their way was to tackle their conditions boldly and fearlessly, and with aplomb and energy and uncompromising intellectual, cultural and organisational endeavour.

They pushed 'to the limit the bounds of possibility' in the pursuit of social equity, justice, human rights, democracy and development.

That is the historical story of Biko, Black Consciousness and the South African Students' Organisation.