Address at Dispatch Dialogues/Biko Foundation Launch of Book: 'Black Man You Are on Your Own'

Today, 19 October is the day on which, in 1977, numerous Black Consciousness organisations were banned, and scores of political activists were detained. This was in the aftermath of the Soweto uprising and the killing in prison of Stephen Bantu Biko on 12 September 1977.

One of the organisations that was banned on 19 October 1977 was the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), the subject of the book being launched this evening.

For white South Africans the 1960s was 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.

But for most blacks it was, in the aftermath of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, the suppression of the ANC and PAC and the repression of all radical political activity, a period of intensified exploitation, extensive and vigorous social control, demoralisation, fear, and enforced and sullen acquiescence.

In these conditions it was difficult to see how any serious organised political challenge to white minority domination could be mounted and whence it could come. Any organisation faced the prospect not only of immediate repression but also the unenviable task of breaking through the demoralisation and fear that were major impediments to organisation building and political mobilisation.

However, the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), formed in 1968 under the leadership of Bantu Stephen Biko, Nyameko Barney Pityana and others, was able to escape immediate repression and establish itself and develop a mass following on the black university campuses. 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 came from where it did. The black racial and ethnic universities created in the early 1960s were not designed to produce dissidents. They had been charged with the responsibility of winning students intellectually and politically to the separate development programme and generating the administrative corps for the separate development bureaucracies. That, after all, was the purpose of the strict ideological control of the black institutions, 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. For one, the institutions gathered together students who had survived the rigours and hurdles of black schooling but who, upon graduating from higher education, would still be condemned to a

future of limited socioeconomic opportunities and inequality.

A comment on an earlier time was still true of 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.”

So, just over 40 years ago, in 1968, when workers and students in France took to the streets in battles against the conservative Gaullist regime; when University students in Britain occupied campuses calling for greater democracy and student rights; when the Prague spring saw Czechoslovakian patriots take on Soviet tanks in an attempt to overthrow Russian domination, and when mass opposition to the war in Vietnam and the Black civil rights and Black

power movements in the United States reached new heights, in South Africa, the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) was launched.

The title of the book being launched this evening, *Black Man You are on Your Own*, is taken from an utterance by Barney Pityana, the fist 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 analyses:

- The ideology, politics and organizational features of SASO and their intellectual, political and social determinants
- SASO's role in the educational, political and social spheres and the factors that shaped its activities, and
- 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 five reasons.

First, Black Consciousness, the doctrine that SASO developed, was a response to particular institutional conditions and experiences. In the current context of calls to ‘forget the past and embrace the future’ and the rhetoric of democratic South Africa as a rainbow nation and nonracial society it is all too easy to neglect to ask how far the past has really been transformed.

On the issues of ‘race’ and identity, I hope to show that approaches such as Black Consciousness, concerns with identity, and certain exclusivist forms of organisation need not be retrogressive. On the contrary, they can make an important contribution to nonracialism and national culture. To recognise ‘difference’ and attempt to deal with it is not necessarily 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’. In fact it may be that genuinely ‘equal recognition’ will only

be possible when, with great honesty and patience, we learn to work through the issue of ‘difference’.

The second reason is that, nowadays, there is a danger of critical historical and sociological work being doused on the altar of ‘relevance’ and ‘immediatism’. This could have grave consequences for the intellectual life of our country and for feeling our way towards humane, environmentally sustainable social development. I agree with the idea that ‘historical knowledge can have important practical implications’ but I also believe that the past is worth recreating in its own right.

The third reason 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 winning of democracy. Accounts of popular resistance in South Africa must acknowledge SASO’s contribution and the often selfless courage of students.

A further reason is that student activists in South Africa appear to be growing ever vaguer about the history of student struggles and activism and the contribution of previous student organisations. While this book may not necessarily provide answers to contemporary questions, it is always useful for the current generations to be aware of their own place in the stream of history and have a historical understanding on whatever issues they confront.

Lastly, South Africa is a country with a particularly rich history of student activism and militancy, yet this is hardly reflected in scholarly literature. We need research and analysis on student politics, and student movements and organisations, and we must share the rich South African experience with scholars and activists in other parts of the world.

I want to now briefly turn to the book.
First, I set out a conceptual framework that guides and informs the analysis of SASO. I draw on a diverse literature in social theory, social movement theory, student politics and comparative student activism,

and South African political economy. My emphasis is not so much to develop a theory for student activism as to create tools for analysing aspects of SASO and capturing some of their historical and contextual significance.

Second, I document black higher education before 1960 and then describe and analyse the particular conditions within society and higher education that confronted black students and SASO – an analysis, if you like, of the terrain on which it had to move.

Third, I briefly deal with student politics during the 1940s and 1950s and especially at Fort Hare, and the formation of the African Students Association and the African Students Union of South Africa, that were linked with the ANC and PAC respectively. Thereafter I analyse in detail the emergence of SASO in the late 1960s, and its ideological and political character, orientations and shifts.

Fourth, I describe and analyse SASO's key organisational features, the form and content of its political and educational mobilisation and collective actions, its labour and community development

projects and its position within the Black Consciousness movement.

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

If I largely agree Sam Nolutshungu's framework of analysis and his assessment of SASO's character, role and significance, I strongly disagree with Baruch Hirson's interpretation. Since evaluations are shaped by conceptual frameworks, my disagreement with Hirson extends to taking issue with the framework that he uses for interpreting SASO.

Finally, I provide my interpretation of SASO and my 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.

I wish to highlight a few salient features of the book.

First, I critique the tendency among writers to give the impression that Black Consciousness doctrine emerged with SASO's launch, and for obscuring the fact that it was actually formulated over a two-year period 1969–70.

This obscures the 'cognitive praxis' that produced Black Consciousness as a doctrine. Black Consciousness did not drop from heaven as a ready-made package. The world view, goals, oppositional targets and strategies of SASO were socially constructed by its organisation intellectuals, pre-eminently Biko but also Pityana and others. The act of construction was, moreover, not a one-off event but a process.

Second, 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'. He adds that it is not necessary to

> decide whether black consciousness was revolutionary or not in a Marxist sense by reference to its organisation and doctrines, or the empirical characteristics of its leaders, in the first place. 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.

Interpretation of SASO, then, cannot be based purely on its membership, doctrines and organisation but must include the educational and political terrain on which it operated and how it affected this terrain.

In the words of Piven and Cloward, authors of *Poor People's Movements*, 'What was won must be judged by what was possible.' So we should ask, in relation to the project national liberation, if SASO on the whole 'made gains or lost ground'; whether it 'advanced the interests' of the dominated 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.' In the form of the Soweto uprising, it helped ignite a political conflagration that 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**,** other literature tends to view SASO in purely political and instrumental terms. As a result, it misses SASO's and Black Consciousness' cultural, expressive, and symbolic elements.

Take cultural innovation, for example. With SASO and the Black Consciousness movement came a number of developments all connected in some way 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 nature. Yet another was the clenched fist salute embodying black solidarity and

opposition to white domination. There were also the various 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, too, the cultural production inspired by Black Consciousness, such as poetry and drama – what Alberto Melucci calls ‘representation’ – which 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 and in asserting that a future nonracial society would need to be the product of all national groups and to reflect the diversity of all cultures.

In repudiating the term ‘non-white’ and claiming they were ‘black’, the SASO activists rejected being identified in the negative, sought to escape the categories and language of the dominant group, and asserted their own identity and the right to name themselves.

Their attempts to expound on the concept ‘black’ or on ‘black values’ 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. Through their organisation, too, they showed that black students need not depend on whites for their thinking and organisational activities. Thus, SASO both challenged the dominant culture and attempted to innovate intellectually and culturally.

Fourth, the book makes clear that Black students were not just victims of apartheid but were also thinkers, conscious actors and historical agents. 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 formation and catalyst of collective action, and contributed significantly to the erosion of the

apartheid social order and to educational and social transformation in South Africa.

Finally, the social-structural relations that underpin unbridled wealth and privilege and the matching inequality, poverty, unemployment and unequal opportunities to high quality education, health care and social services continue to prevail. Crucial questions of ‘race’, values, identity, culture, and social and cultural transformation that SASO and Black Consciousness raised forty years ago remain highly relevant in our own time.

Any substantial social justice agenda today must discuss these conditions and issues and how to strategise imaginatively to change these conditions and address these issues. The right way is to tackle them boldly, in the energetic, uncompromising intellectual, cultural and organisational fashion of Biko and the SASO generation.

Like them, we must push ‘to the limit the bounds of possibility’ in the pursuit of social equity, justice, human rights, democracy and development.

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

As is any such publication there are many people to thank.

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- Finally, and not least, Rhodes University's commitment to the advancement of knowledge and scholarship and its vibrant intellectual culture, which provides the stimulus to continue to research, write and publish.

It is fitting that this book on SASO and Black Consciousness is being launched at 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 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. The rest you can read in *Black Man You Are on Your Own*.