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Ian Macqueen
University of Sussex

(I.Macqueen@sussex.ac.uk)

“Black Consciousness in Dialogue: Steve Biko, Richard Turner and the ‘Durban Moment’ in South Africa, 1970 – 1974”

Abstract

Between 1970 and 1974, the city of Durban was the scene of intense intellectual exchange and debate between a wide array of progressive political movements, originating from sections of the Churches, the city’s counter-culture scene and New Left-inspired campus protest at the University of Natal, and the University of Durban-Westville. This moment of intellectual ferment, whilst spanning the critical Durban Strikes of 1973, saw as well the development and refining of Black Consciousness (BC)

philosophy by black student activists congregated at the University of Natal Medical School and Alan Taylor residence. The so-called ‘Durban Moment,’ involved city-level debates and dialogue that challenged the premises of South African liberalism, and encouraged activists to move away from party politics and engage in the politicisation of black workers. Looming large over the debates in Durban were intellectuals Steve Biko and Richard Turner, whose dialogue and intellectual labour, the paper argues, were key in framing and setting the terms of debate. The paper seeks to draw attention to their close and productive relationship and show how it problematises the historical perception of an acrimonious relationship between BC leaders and white leftist and liberal students, highlighting instead a complex synergy.

Introduction

Recent historical assessment of the politics of opposition to apartheid in 1970s South Africa increasingly highlights the importance of a shift of *perceptions*. Karis and Gerhart conclude their documentary history of the period 1964 to 1979 arguing: “Perhaps most important in transforming South Africa in the 1970s... were changes not visible to the eye. These were the dramatic shifts in perception that altered the subjective reality of South Africans on both sides of the colour line”.¹

My paper will look to support Karis and Gerhart’s reading of the period and to point to the importance of what has come to be known as the ‘Durban Moment’ in effecting these shifts in perception. In reality for many white South Africans, such a shift meant the

¹ T. G. Karis and G. M. Gerhart (eds), *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa 1882-1990. Volume 5 Nadir and Resurgence, 1964-1979* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997) p. 336.

death of liberal belief in paternalist custodianship of African grievances and the possibility of 'gradual' change. It further required reassessment of core premises, intense self-questioning and a commitment to an ideal of a democratic society which demanded personal sacrifice. For black South Africans the 1970s gave birth to a new self-confidence and self-assertiveness, encapsulated in the emergence of the Black Consciousness ideology, a commitment for which many were to pay with their lives. The 1970s indeed were to end with the deaths of the period's two key intellectuals: Richard or 'Rick' Turner and Stephen Bantu Biko. Turner was the central figure of South Africa's New Left student movement and Biko the leader of the nascent Black Consciousness movement.

In 1970 Biko and Turner met and formed a friendship in the city of Durban. The paper argues that their dialogue and interaction were to prove central in setting the terms of the ferment of discussion and radical action that were the key dynamics of what were later described as the 'Durban Moment'².

There is a danger literary scholar, Tony Morphet, points to in his short biographical essay on Turner, that "to mention only these [high profile individuals] inevitably misses the atmosphere of intellectual ferment and the countless details signalling a structural shift in the received intellectual patterns of the social world"³. Central as well for instance to such 'a structural shift' was the cumulative intellectual labour from the mid-1960s, both within the Christian Churches, student politics and leading up to the emergence of Black

² T. Morphet, 'Brushing History Against the Grain: Oppositional Discourse in South Africa', *Theoria*, 76 (October 1990), pp. 89-99.

³ Morphet, 'Oppositional Discourse', p. 93.

Consciousness. However it is also necessary to see the importance of Biko and Turner for setting the terms of intellectual discussion, and helping to effect such a ‘structural shift’.

The 1960s and the Emergence of Black Consciousness

The 1960s is seen as the nadir of African resistance to Apartheid with the banning of the African National Congress and Pan African Congress in 1960, and imprisonment of the top echelon of leadership in 1964. It was also the moment of so-called ‘Grand Apartheid’, seeing the government, under Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, enacting enormous social engineering in step with the apartheid vision of ‘separate development’. A climate of “fear-induced peace”⁴ pervaded, providing a fertile ground for white South African liberals to take on the supposed burden of conscience of South Africa, and to ‘represent’ African grievances. The efforts of the state to depoliticise South African society further effectively thrust the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) into the political forefront, as its liberal ethos and youthful idealism brought it into conflict with the State.

1968 however saw the emergence of Black Consciousness, under the leadership of Steve Biko. Biko had been involved in NUSAS and was irked by its hypocrisy and paternalism. As Biko saw it, Blacks were continually being studied, represented and defended by white liberals, but were rarely allowed to speak their minds or act independently. Thus he took strong action, helping to form a non-white student organisation. In 1969 the South

⁴ C.C. Thomas, ‘Disaffection, Identity, Black Consciousness and a New Rector: An Exploratory Take on Student Activism at the University of the Western Cape 1966 – 1976’,

African Student Organisation (or SASO) was launched at the University of the North, Turfloop. SASO became the prime organisation advocating the new philosophy of 'Black Consciousness'. Students rejected being addressed as 'non-white', arguing that this term negated their being. Anthony Marx writes of this shift that: "The key symbolic transition to a positive group identity based on race came in 1970 with the rejection of the negative label *nonwhite* in favour of *black*".⁵ This new 'black' identity was to be infused with positive, spiritual force. As one of the main Black Consciousness poets, Mongane Wally Serote, put it "Black Consciousness transformed the word 'black' and made it synonymous with the word 'freedom'".⁶ Black Consciousness therefore placed the emphasis on liberation as originating initially from within. The oppressed needed to be freed first of spiritual and mental self-oppression. As Biko emphasised "the most important weapon of the oppressors is the mind of the oppressed". 'Black' identity was therefore made synonymous with being a member of an oppressed group in South Africa. As a member of the oppressed, it followed you could not cooperate with your oppressor. Rather than just the Afrikaner Nationalists, white liberals, who tried so hard to present a non-racial facade, now became the prime enemy. They were seen to impede Black initiative, dull Black originality, and confuse the oppressed by making them believe that there were some 'good whites'. Biko undertook a close study of South African history to emphasise his point, highlighting how ANC cooperation with white communists in the 1940s and 1950s had had a detrimental effect on the organisation. The stress placed here

⁵ A. W. Marx, *Lessons of Struggle: South African Internal Opposition, 1960 – 1990* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) p. 44.

⁶ 'Introduction' in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.), *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1991) p. 9-10

7on explaining BC is because it should be seen as a key factor in effecting the conceptual shift that occurred between 1970 and 1974.

At the same period as Biko and SASO emerged in South Africa, Europe and the United States were the scene of intense social upheaval. In the U.S. the emergence of the Black Power movement, together with New Left politics saw universities and cities becoming central sites of struggles by popular democratic movements. The student uprisings in France and Germany threatened to bring the governments of those countries to collapse. Students were infused by the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, Herbert Marcuse and R.D. Laing. The publication of Carmichael and Hamilton's *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, in 1967, called for polarisation rather than the nonviolence and multiracialism of Martin Luther King Jr. As Carmichael and Hamilton argued: "The Concept of Black Power rests on a fundamental premise: Before a group can enter the open society, it must first close ranks".⁷ George Fredrickson has shown how these international intellectual developments played a significant role in South Africa. On the one hand, Biko and the followers of BC looked to Black America for inspiration, adopting such slogans as 'Black is Beautiful' and women within the movement throwing away wigs and skin-lightening creams.

The practical application of the Black Power premise of separation, left white students in NUSAS deeply shocked, compounded by the personal attacks mounted against them by BC students, and leading to a sense of crisis of legitimacy. They similarly began to see

⁷ Cited in G. Fredrickson, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa*, (New York 1995) p. 295.

the limitations of the South African liberal tradition and began searching for alternative ways of being politically relevant in South Africa. The crisis induced by their effective rejection by the Black oppressed lent itself however to the revaluation of fundamental premises. The standard political narrative tends to neglect further the close proximity of white and black students, and friendships, in a few but significant cases, and provides scant detail on the contestation of central ideas and debates that were a significant feature. In a similar way to the case made for by Stewart Burns of social movements in the 1960s in the U.S., a “creative tension” generated a situation where a joint searching was a key component. In South Africa, Durban was the city where such a matrix of personal friendships, linked into national networks, was the site of the most intense and fruitful discussion, helping in effect to recast the tradition of oppositional activism. The discussion moves now to a consideration of this ‘Durban Moment’.

The ‘Durban Moment’: 1970 to 1974

Under apartheid, Durban’s University of Natal was the only institution in South Africa that offered the opportunity for black students to study medicine at a ‘white’ university. Biko was one of the few students accepted into the University of Natal Black Section, and Durban was where SASO set up their headquarters. Before SASO moved into a physical office, Biko’s room at the university’s Alan Taylor residence functioned as an informal meeting place for students. Here they met to read Fanon and Carmichael, and to listen to records of Malcolm X speeches. It was the scene of intense intellectual discussion, which Biko would summarise and formalise in his regular columns under the

pseudonym 'Frank Talk'. As Barney Pityana, one of the main participants in the discussions recalled:

“black consciousness evolved through many, and long hours of interaction and debate among friends... Biko was a central participant; he listened and challenged ideas as they emerged, concretised them, and brought them back for further development”.⁸

The cooperative nature of intellectual debate and discovery were thus central to a refining of BC political philosophy. In this characteristic BC fits a broader pattern of the development of philosophy. Randall Collins for instance argues in his study *The sociology of philosophies: a global theory of intellectual change* (1998) that “the history of philosophy is to a considerable extent the history of groups” he writes, “nothing but groups of friends, discussion partners, close-knit circles that often have the characteristics of social movements”.⁹ BC in South Africa certainly shared these characteristics and is best conceptualized as a social movement, with a fluid body of ideas, which Biko attempted to formalize in his regular columns.

In 1970 Richard Turner was appointed to a lectureship in political philosophy at the University of Natal. Turner had been exposed to the student ferment in France. He was steeped in the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, writing his doctoral thesis at the Sorbonne, on important points of political theory in Sartre's philosophy. In 1970 Turner and Biko met each other in Durban. Turner had actively sought out and met other

⁸ B. Pityana, 'Reflections on 30 Years since the Death of Steve Biko: A Legacy Revisited', National Arts Festival Winter School lecture, 3 July 2007. p. 3.

⁹ R. Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: a global theory of intellectual change* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press 1998) p. 3. My thanks to Richard Pithouse for pointing me to this book.

leaders of the BC movement. It was to prove a fruitful collaboration, the extent of which was a key element in the Durban Moment. That they could meet and discuss South Africa's political future through commensurable concepts implied a common humanism in which both their personal and political philosophies were grounded. Tony Morphet identifies their common point to be "the traditional conceptual bastion of liberalism – the *individual consciousness*: the view that the inner intentionality of people counted... "In this sense" he argues "both men were still liberals".¹⁰ This is an aspect of their dialogue which has often been ignored in South African scholarship. Shireen Ally has recently drawn attention to the importance of Black Consciousness for facilitating the shift to a radical sociology at the University of Witwatersrand in the 1970s.¹¹ Eddie Webster for instance characterised the predominant concern in Biko and Turner's engagement to be a debate over the salience of class, with Turner reminding Biko that it "It was not race... that explains the exploitation of the black worker, but the capitalist system. Do not let your Blackness blind yourself to the fact that your power lies in the unorganized working class".¹² Biko's response was well captured when he suggested that Turner and his radical students try to tell a 'redneck' farmer in the Free State "that the situation is a class struggle rather than a racial one" and see what his response would be.¹³ Central to Biko's political analysis therefore was the premise that blacks were oppressed on account of their 'blackness'. Biko and Turner's debate however further revolved around their common understanding of the relationship between consciousness and praxis. As

¹⁰ Morphet, 'Oppositional Discourse', p. 95. Emphasis added.

¹¹ S. Ally, 'Oppositional intellectualism as reflection, not rejection, of power: Wits Sociology, 1975-1989', *Transformation*, 59 (2005), pp. 66-97.

¹² Webster, 'Moral Decay and Social Reconstruction', p. 2.

¹³ S. Biko, 'Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity', in *I Write What I Like* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2004 [1978]) p.99

Morphet put it, they believed that if one were to: “Develop a critical and radical consciousness... of the conditions of exploitation and repression. Social change would follow”.¹⁴ In this assumption Turner and Biko shared a belief in the role of ‘conscientisation’, a catchword of the time, closely associated with work of Paulo Freire. Both BC and New Left students were involved in attempts to conscientise society, which saw them running weekend retreats, or ‘formation schools’ in the case of BC, and weekends at Turner’s farm, conferences and community development in the case of white students. Behind these efforts however was the force of Biko and Turner.

Both men were highly charismatic individuals. Turner was a gifted teacher and leader, functioning as a key facilitator of dialogue between students and activists in the Durban scene. Dick Usher, a former student, reflected that “he was superb with students, making them feel their ideas were important and being more concerned with helping them refine their thoughts rather than imposing his own”.¹⁵ In this characteristic, Turner shared a strong resemblance with Biko’s leadership style, which was facilitative and empowering. As Lindy Wilson writes “[Biko’s] presence ensured that people would be heard and their opinion considered. He engendered trust and freed people to use their potential”.¹⁶ Turner was further uniquely well placed, with his deep grounding in philosophy and his exposure to New Left radical thought, to be open to any ideas, and subject them to sustained critique. The BC use of the categories of ‘blackness’ and ‘whiteness’ are good examples. Turner advanced “important criticisms of the movement, especially its

¹⁴ Morphet, ‘Oppositional Discourse’, p. 95.

¹⁵ D. Usher, ‘Rick Turner: A compassionate innovator committed to reason’, *Echo*, 28 January 1988.

¹⁶ L. Wilson, ‘Bantu Stephen Biko: A Life’, in Pityana et al., *Bounds of Possibility*, p. 27.

tendency to over-simplify and to absolutise” concepts.¹⁷ Turner further appealed for the need of BC to see different categories of white South African, namely “racist, liberal and radical”.¹⁸ He suggested that the BC analysis was “confused by a very loose grasp of the concept ‘liberal’”. He argued that there were black as well as white racists, and that there were black and white radicals. BC was according to Turner “a form of radicalism” and he emphasised that rather than demonising white liberals, the aim should be the creation of a new culture.¹⁹

Turner’s appeal to the need to create a new culture rang true of “the counter-culture” scene of the 1960s. In an interview Gerry Mare reflected for instance how in his student days the university became the scene of an “odd alliance” between hippies, radical sports people and the politicians who “would come together around particular protests against the vice-chancellor, whatever. “So just in terms of student politics” he reflected “there was an incredible...movement of different things”.²⁰ The ferment around the university was further translated into concrete political action. In 1972 Turner set up the Worker's Benefit Fund and Institute for Industrial Education. Together with a group of hardcore student activists, Turner also helped to set up the Student Wages Commission, using the latest sociological research to set up a ‘poverty datum line’. Grace Davie argues that the use of this statistical measurement enabled students to challenge white South African society on the one hand to the exploitative labour policies of Durban companies, as well as gathering evidence to help politicise Durban’s black workers, specifically the

¹⁷ Morphet, ‘Richard Turner’, xix-xx

¹⁸ R. Turner, ‘Black Consciousness and White Liberals’

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Interview with author, Durban, 13 August 2008.

dockworkers at Durban harbour. There is still debate as to what extent the students were responsible for the subsequent watershed Durban Strikes of 1973. The strikes came as a considerable shock to the apartheid government and precipitated the eventual legalisation of trade unions, which became a key movement in the struggles of the 1980s. In her analysis of the Wages Commission, Grace Davie is not really able to come to a certain conclusion as to the students' role, noting the "considerable extent to which students' voices intermingled with workers' voices". However she recognises the "dramatic ways in which intellectuals, students and workers confronted race and class oppression".²¹

Biko and the SASO were also highly active at the time. They had set up an office in Beatrice Street in downtown Durban. From their office SASO published a regular newsletter with the aim of introducing ideas and generating debate on black campuses, functioning therefore as a central medium of communication in an otherwise fractured political space. 1972 saw the initiation of the Black Community Projects (BCP) an organisation aimed at micro-level development. In 1973 the Black Workers Project was set up and an independent trade union, the Black Allied Workers Union, under Drake Koka was launched.

The strikes of 1973 evoked immediate and harsh response from the South African government. A secret government commission was set up to investigate the activities of "affected organisations" such as NUSAS. Decolonisation as it was gaining force encouraged the black majority and made the Nationalist position seem increasingly

²¹ G. Davie, 'Strength in Numbers: The Durban Student Wages Commission, Dockworkers and the Poverty Datum Line, 1971-1973', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 33, 2 (June 2007), p. 419-420.

insecure. A rally planned in celebration of the independence of Mozambique in 1974 led to the breaking up of the gathering, widespread arrests, and the trial of SASO leaders. The end of the Durban Moment therefore came with the banning of Biko and Turner, consigning them to house arrest. They were not allowed to be quoted or to speak in public. Both were placed under house arrest with Biko consigned to the rural Transkei. In a sense events in South Africa overtook the intellectual milieu in Durban, first with the strikes in 1973 and then later with the Soweto riots of 16 June 1976. As Biko later reflected, “the seeds had already been sown” [check quote]. The full implications of perceptual shift of the 1970s were only to come in the widespread civil revolt of the 1980s. Biko and Turner did not live to see this, dying within four months of each other: Biko murdered under police interrogation in September 1977, and Turner shot through the window of his home in January 1978.

Conclusion

A dominant reading of the politics of the 1970s has stressed the polarised nature of the political scene, in which insecure white activists turned to focus on ‘class’ due to the challenge of the Black Consciousness stress on ‘race’. As the explanation goes, they felt excluded and saw in ‘class analysis’ a viable alternative to the politics of race advocated by BC. What has been less recognised was the common values around which Black and white activists could organise, specifically a common humanism, and an agreement over the relationship between consciousness and praxis. Whereas emphasis should not be detracted from the considerable shock that BC achieved in its introduction to South

Africa through Biko and SASO, some recognition should be given to the intellectuals, Turner being a prime example, who from as early as 1970 were sympathetic to the movement and tried to retain their position as sympathetic critics. In turn the opposition of the 1970s should further be conceptualised, not just in terms of immediate concerns, but the way in which they appropriated democratic trajectories of thinking in South Africa, often linked to the universalist appeals of philosophy and the search for universal values. South Africa's notoriety as one of the most openly racist regimes of the 20th century has obscured its contribution to the radical impulse for social justice and humanism, and project in which Biko and Turner should be seen to stand prominent.