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Black Consciousness in Dialogue: Rick Turner, Stephen Biko and the Durban Moment, 1970-1974¹

This paper looks to suggest that the Durban Moment concretised the hiatus in the gradualism and moderate political reform envisioned by South African liberalism, which had initially been sparked by the breakaway of the South African Students Organisation (SASO) from the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) in 1968. The Durban Moment confronted the need for radical change and in so doing entailed questioning the previously secure paradigm of paternalist custodianship of African grievances. The moment opened up the terrain of political thinking in South Africa and forced recourse to the demand for radical political change. It was this problem of change that formed the central theme in the contestations, debate and dialogue that were central aspects of the moment. Although the emergence of Black Consciousness in South Africa played a central causative role in challenging the white liberal world view, it was a moment that was mediated in part through interpersonal dialogue and friendship, in a few but significant instances, and through a refining of a political strategy, in the form of class theory.²

Historicising the collaboration that persisted after the formation of SASO is therefore a central concern of the paper. One of Biko's contentions with the artificial interracial meetings organised by liberals was the way in which they acted as a panacea for both white and black, soothing the guilty conscience of the white liberal and encouraging the black person that they were in fact worthwhile and equal, but producing no tangible fruit. The paper suggests that the critique of such artificial integration, stimulated the beginning of meaningful dialogue, provided the white liberal was strong and committed enough to re-evaluate their moral and political standpoint, and the black party was frank and willing to assert their point of view. The risk in viewing the 1970s through the lens of the polarised rhetoric of Black Consciousness is that it obscures moments where meaningful interaction did take place, the consequences for both parties involved, and the relevance of these moments of dialogue and communication for subsequent political thinking in South Africa in general. The paper argues that a significant function of the rhetorical radicalism of Black Consciousness was to stimulate the search for a new model of what was politically possible in South Africa in the 1970s.

It was in 1970 that Richard Turner met Stephen Biko. Turner had been newly appointed to his first permanent post of lecturer at the department of political science at the University of Natal, Durban. Biko was still studying for his medical degree at the University of Natal Medical School Non-European section (UNNE).³ It was a year after the official launching of SASO at

¹ My thanks to Gerhard Maré, Richard Pithouse, Vashna Jagarnath, Nafissa Sheik and Stephen Sparks for input into this chapter at an early stage of its writing. My thanks as well to Catherine Burns for raising important and illuminating points.

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

³ Vanessa Noble notes that "UNNE" was the medical school's first official designation after being opened in 1951. During the early 1970s the University was pressured by Black students under the influence of Black Consciousness, to drop the designation "Non-European" and replaced it with "Black". The University responded by changing the name to the University of Natal medical school or University of Natal Faculty of Medicine in official designation,

the University College of the North, Turfloop, in July 1969. Durban had become the *de facto* headquarters of the new black student organisation, with Biko's room in the Alan Taylor residence functioning for a time as SASO's office. Turner came to the University of Natal as someone with a growing reputation of close involvement in student politics, an incisive intellect, and as an individual who possessed a clarity of vision that was sorely needed. The sudden appearance of Black Consciousness in South Africa had shaken the confidence of members of the stalwarts of South African liberalism within NUSAS, the South African Institute of Race Relations, Alan Paton's Liberal Party, and smaller groupings such as the Black Sash. Parallels were readily being drawn with Black Power in the United States and the Black Panthers' use of violence. In an apartheid landscape of polarisation it increasingly appeared that avenues for meaningful exchange and debate were being obliterated, initially by the State's ideology and policies of separate development, and now by a new voice of Black protest.

Durban offered a space for interaction and dialogue. Parts of the city had proved more resistant to apartheid zoning. The medical school at the University of Natal, in particular, offered an important political space for the discussion of ideas, as the only facility for the training of Black medical doctors in South Africa at an English-speaking university. It attracted a cohort of ambitious, intelligent and articulate African students, many of whom had been through the unintentionally politicising effects of Bantu Education, at the 'Bush' universities. The University of Natal medical school, along with the University of Fort Hare, in fact proved to be most resistant to the new ideology of polarisation propounded by SASO. The tradition of liberal non-racialism was entrenched particularly strongly among some of the Black student leaders at both centres. Ben Ngubane was a notable leader at UNB who was extremely resistant to the new type of thinking.

Durban was also a haven for elements of South African hippie culture, with runaway school pupils drawn to its counterculture scene. The Furness Avenue area became a focus for alternative lifestyles and developed a countrywide notoriety for its defiance of South African norms. The city drew a group of people who were attuned to the protest-decade of the 1960s, listening to Bob Dylan and Frank Zappa, and sensitive to currents of thought emerging from Europe and America.⁴ The city was also home to South Africa's largest population of Indians, functioning in effect as the South African Black middleclass, and therefore as an intermediary between Europeans and Africans. Durban was therefore unique in its racial composition, with Europeans forming a relatively smaller part of the total population than other South African cities and Indians filling white-collar positions where possibility existed.⁵ The city space, the university and the medical school offered opportunity for exchange and dialogue and it was within this milieu that a special moment in South African political and intellectual history developed. Looking back activists involved referred to it as 'the Durban moment' and acknowledged that it was due to "a special set of circumstances".⁶ The period from 1970 to 1974 in fact saw the melding of progressive political movements into closer dialogue than before. Using public spaces within the city offered the chance for interpersonal exchange and debate.

Among activists in the Durban scene, Biko and Turner stood most prominent in their breadth and force of intellect. It was their dialogue and respective ideas, the paper suggests, that

though the Medical School Student Representative Council began to refer to the medical school as University of Natal Black section (UNB). The medical school was also referred to as "Wentworth medical school" by those students whose residences were located in the Wentworth, near to the university. V. Noble, "Doctors divided: Gender, race and class anomalies in the production of black medical doctors in apartheid South Africa, 1948 to 1994," (Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan, 2005), p. 6.

⁴ Gerry Maré interview, Durban, 13 August 2008.

⁵ L. Kuper, H. Watts and R. Davies, *Durban: A Study in Racial Ecology* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1958) p. 50-55.

⁶ Gerry Maré interview.

in effect set the terms of the ferment of discussion and radical action that were the key dynamics of this moment. The paper seeks to demonstrate how their collective force of personality shaped the thinking of activists around them, how they influenced one another, and how their creative collaboration lent itself to the refining of a political strategy and outlook that posed a substantial threat to apartheid. In Durban the gap between radical thinking and praxis was effectively shrunk. Students from the university were actively engaged in canvassing the local white population, assisting in the setting up and the use of, the poverty datum line. At the same time, from their new offices in Beatrice Street, to which they had relocated at the end of 1972, SASO directed nationwide conferences, formation schools, seminars and community-help projects, which were effective enough to make the government become increasingly uncomfortable with their activities.

The intense dialogue, reading and distillation of ideas that occurred at the Alan Taylor residence and further afield were crucial in a context of seeking to redress the floundering self-confidence in black students. Biko had noted after his tour of black campuses in 1971 that “most of the students, while very sure of what they did not like... lacked a depth of insight into what can be done. One found wherever he went the question being asked repeatedly ‘where do we go from here?’” Biko’s analysis of the cause of the phenomenon was that this was a “tragic result of “the old approach, where the blacks were made to fit into a pattern largely and often wholly, determined by white students”. As a result “our originality and imagination have been dulled to the point where it takes a supreme effort to act logically even in order to follow one’s beliefs and convictions”.⁷ Seeking to redress this situation involved an active search for intellectual resources, from thinkers from the African Diaspora, such as Cabral and Senghor, to Fanon. In response for instance to Gail Gerhart’s question as to the intellectual origins of the Black Consciousness movement, Biko asserted that “it wasn’t a question of one thing out of a book and discovering that it’s interesting. In sense it was also an active search for that type of book, for the kind of thing that will say things to you, that was bound to evoke a response”.⁸ The importance of the deeper contextualisation of the Black Consciousness movement in the political intricacies of radical politics of the early 1970s and more broadly, is given credence by Biko’s assertion of the need to see “this evolution of black consciousness side by side with other political doctrines in the country, and other movements of resistance”.⁹

The Durban Moment: Space and Philosophy

Discussion of the Durban ‘Moment’ initially evokes the temporal and historical which are most readily associated with an appeal to an historical event. Recent scholarship however on has emphasised the way in which time and space should be theorised as intimately entwined. In seeking to correct a deficiency in Western thinking that takes space as the unchanging conceptual correlative to a dynamic ‘time’, this new scholarship has sought to highlight the way in which “time and space must be thought together”; thus “it means that the imagination of one will have repercussions... for the imagination of the other and that space and time are implicated in each other”.¹⁰ Space should therefore be conceived as being constituted by interrelationships and multiplicity. Thus Doreen Massey argues that space needs to be recognised as “the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions”. From this point it follows that space is “the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist”, and that space is “always under construction... It is

⁷ Biko, *I Write*, p. 19.

⁸ G. M. Gerhart, ‘Interview with Steve Biko’ in A. Mngxitama, A. Alexander and N. C. Gibson (eds), *Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2008) p. 24.

⁹ Gerhart, ‘Interview with Steve Biko’, p. 21.

¹⁰ D. Massey, *For Space* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2005) p. 18.

never finished; never closed”.¹¹ The moment in Durban between 1970 and 1974 bore just these characteristics: multiplicity, dynamic interrelationships, and a space in which “distinct trajectories” existed.

John Rajchman has highlighted the distinct relationship that has existed between the city and the production of philosophy, in which philosophy is “the city in the process of thinking” and where “a city is not only a sociological object, but also a machine that undoes and exceeds sociological definitions posing new problems for thinking and thinkers, images and image-makers”.¹² As it emerges in the chapter, Durban was an important site, among others in South Africa, which generated a burst of creative intellectual production from black and white intellectuals.

Philosophy while often reified and conceived as an ephemeral intellectual exercise, should be seen as emanating from a distinct sociological context. Randall Collins writes in the introduction to his study *The Sociology of Philosophies* that “the history of philosophy is to a considerable extent the history of groups... nothing but groups of friends, discussion partners, close-knit circles that often have the characteristics of social movements”.¹³ Collins goes on to demonstrate the collaborative nature of philosophy, raising the importance of intergenerational networks, or “intergenerational chains” for intellectual creativity.¹⁴ Of further significance is the pervasiveness of “intellectual fields of structural rivalry”. Collins emphasises that, “Intellectual work is almost always concentrated at the same time as other work of a similar degree of innovativeness and scope. The major philosophers appear in pairs or trios, rival positions developing contemporaneously with one another”. “The pattern of contemporaneous creativity by opponents of comparable stature” he asserts boldly “is nearly universal across history.”¹⁵

Highlighting the significant patterns, or sociologies of philosophy as Collins does, raises the importance of seeing the Durban Moment, and more generally, the development of political thinking in the 1970s, in similar terms. The coincidental nature of Biko and Turner meeting one another in Durban, should not belie the importance of seeing each in terms of the other. The rhetoric and politics of polarization advocated by Biko, Pityana, Moodley and BC activists should not dissuade a close examination of the milieu from within which they argued and articulated their philosophy. Similarly, Richard Turner’s philosophical incisiveness and originality need to be read alongside the equal breadth and stature of Biko’s thought.

The notion of “intergenerational chains” is also significant, and is a neglected theme in current histories of the 1960s and 1970s setting the praxis and rationale behind the motives of individuals involved, largely within the logic of their context, while ignoring that a strong sense of history informed the actions of at least some of the individuals involved. Biko for example, had a strong sense of history and “particularly of African resistance to various forms of white oppression”.¹⁶ Biko traced Black Consciousness thinking in South Africa back to a group of young men in the 1950s who were beginning to “grasp the notion of their peculiar uniqueness’ and who were eager to define who they were and what”.¹⁷ In the case of Turner, Andrew Nash’s

¹¹ *Op cit.*, p. 9.

¹² Cited in Massey, *For Space*, p. 159.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ *Op cit.*, p. 5-6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Biko, *I Write What I Like*, p. 9.

¹⁷ G. M. Fredrickson, 'Black Power in the United States and Black Consciousness in South Africa: Connections and Comparisons' in R. Greenstein (ed). *Comparative Perspectives on South Africa* (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's, 1998) p. 195

appeal to the influence of the dialectical tradition in South African political thinking is significant.¹⁸

The Political Figure of Turner

Richard Turner had been trained in analytical English philosophy, but was increasingly drawn into continental thinking. He had graduated from the University of Cape Town with a Bachelor of Arts Honours degree in philosophy in 1963. Turner then wrote his doctoral thesis at the Sorbonne in Paris with a study of important points of political theory in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, which was completed in 1966. The English title of his thesis was “Some implications of existentialist phenomenology”.¹⁹ This was a formative stage of his life, a crucial step in what Morphet refers to as his conceptualisation of his life as “a total project”.

Turner had been active in student politics before his critical philosophical study at the Sorbonne. As a student at the University of Cape Town, he had shared a room with NUSAS leader Jonty Driver. After his return from his studies at the Sorbonne in August 1966 he brought a new standard of philosophical and political incisiveness to bear on student politics. Turner initially spent two years living at his mother’s farm, Welcarmes, near Stellenbosch. He farmed and worked on a temporary contract at the University of Cape Town in 1967 and 1968. At the time, together with Raphael Kaplinksy, founder of the Radical Students’ Society, Turner provided advice and guidance during the Mafeje Affair of 1968, giving seminars and leading political discussions during the length of the nine-day occupation of the University of Cape Town administration building by students.²⁰

Turner gave up farming and the second doctorate he had started at the end of 1968 and took temporary positions, first at the University of Stellenbosch in the first academic term of 1969 and then at the politics department at Rhodes University in the second term. He took an active role in student politics, being described as “a disturber of the peace” by one of his Rhodes colleagues.²¹ During the same year there were frequent weekend seminars at Welcarmes, attracting a large number of students who took the opportunity to study and discuss more deeply New Left ideas and thinkers.²²

In 1970 Turner was given a permanent position at the University of Natal, Durban. From his return to South Africa, and in the early 1970s, he was active as an advisor to NUSAS, travelling around the country, giving seminars at the University of Witwatersrand, the University of Cape Town, and giving advice to the NUSAS executive. Turner was a highly charismatic 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 than imposing his own”.²³ In this characteristic, Turner shared a strong

¹⁸ A. Nash, ‘The Dialectical Tradition in South Africa’ (Ph.D. thesis, Political Studies, University of Cape Town, 2000).

¹⁹ Turner papers, Supreme Court of South Africa (Transvaal Provincial Division), *The State versus S. Cooper and Eight Others*, Case No. 18/75/254 (Pretoria: Lubbe Recordings) p. 3005.

²⁰ R. Erbmman, ‘Conservative Revolutionaries: Anti-Apartheid Activism at the University of Cape Town 1963-1973’ (Honours Historical Studies, Oxford University, 2005) Chapter 2. Found at: http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/libraryresources/articles_papers/1963_1973_conservative_revolutionaries.htm (Accessed 23 April 2009)

²¹ Richard Turner Papers, E.G. Malherbe Library, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban [hereafter Turner papers] Republic of South Africa, *Fourth Interim Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Certain Organisations*, p. 91

²² Erbmman, *Ibid.*

²³ D. Usher, ‘Rick Turner: A compassionate innovator committed to reason’, *Echo*, 28 January 1988.

resemblance with Biko's leadership style, which was facilitative and empowering. As Lindy Wilson writes of Biko "his presence ensured that people would be heard and their opinion considered. He engendered trust and freed people to use their potential".²⁴

The years between 1970 and 1974 were the most influential of Turner's public life.²⁵ Using his permanent position as political science lecturer at the University of Natal as a base, his sphere of activity steadily expanded. Beginning with his first meeting with Biko in 1970 he had close contacts with members of SASO, as well as members of the Natal Indian Congress, the Coloured Labour Party and Chief Buthelezi. According to his own testimony, he was consulted often by members of these political parties on the nature of South African society. Peter Randall, the director of Spro-cas (Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society), invited Turner to join the Economics and Politics commissions, on which he served between 1971 and 1972. At the University of Natal at the same time, along with Raphael De Kadt in the political science department, he "pioneered the teaching of radical political philosophy" making Durban's department one of the most innovative in the country. In his teaching Turner remained committed to the philosophical ideal of Socratic dialogue.²⁶ Turner's commitment to social values, to fundamental and continued moral and existential investigation, reinforced by his grounding in Western Marxism, allowed him a theoretically sophisticated moral vision by which political movements and praxis generally could be assessed.²⁷

Turner's influence was significant moreover through the impact his writing had by stimulating thinking in the country. Most prominent among his work was his provocative projection of a future South African society, *The Eye of the Needle*, which he published in 1972 as a contribution to the Spro-cas political commission. However his other articles, for instance 'The Relevance of Contemporary Radical Thought', also provided a stimulus for political thinking, and of a particular type – thinking which sought to reconceptualise political praxis for meaningful change. For instance Steve Biko referred to Turner's article in his paper to the student conference held at the Abe Bailey Institute for Inter-racial Studies, held in Cape Town in January 1971, noting, specifically, the observation that it was likely that a future black government would be socialist.²⁸

Turner's banning by the government in February 1973 put an ostensible end to his public role as a facilitator of debate and radical contemporary thinking. His article, 'The Relevance of Contemporary Radical Thought,' for instance, could not be included in the final Spro-cas political commission report, *South Africa's Political Alternatives*. Turner was banned after the report of the Schibusch Commission, along with students Neville Curtis, Paul Pretorius, Paula Ensor, Phillipe Le Roux, Sheila Lapinsky, Clive Keegan and Chris Wood.²⁹ In spite of his house arrest activists such as Phyllis Naidoo continued to visit him and his wife Foszia Fisher at their home in Dalton Avenue, in the poor-white suburb of Bellair where he continued to provide advice on

²⁴ L. Wilson, 'Bantu Stephen Biko: A Life', in Pityana et al., *Bounds of Possibility*, p. 27.

²⁵ Usher, *Op cit.*

²⁶ Greaves, 'Turner: moral visionary'

²⁷ Karis and Gerhart attribute Turner's significance to the particular historical circumstances of the 1968 to 1973 period, where "the rupture between NUSAS and SASO created a situation where the force of Turner's personality and opinions intersected with the need among white student activists to find a new political identity and role". As they note Turner "was frequently invited to speak on white campuses and at NUSAS seminars, where his lucid analyses contributed both to the legitimization of black consciousness ideas and to the spread of philosophical radicalism among white students". 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. 70-71.

²⁸ S. Biko, 'White Racism and Black Consciousness', in S. Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa) p. 68.

²⁹ Karis and Gerhart, *Nadir and Resurgence, 1964-1979*, Footnote 7, 86-87

trade union matters.³⁰ Turner used his banning to good effect, embarking on an extended study of the role of individual agency in dialectical materialism, as well as teaching himself Portuguese so that he could follow the process of decolonisation that was occurring in Angola and Mozambique, and learning German to study the works of Hegel, Kant and Marx in their original language.

Although banned Turner was also instrumental in setting up the Institute for Industrial Education at the University of Natal in May 1974, with its publication the *South African Labour Bulletin*.³¹ From 1972 Turner had already initiated a programme of “action research” seeing groups of students visiting factories to collect research information from the workers on pay and working conditions in the Durban and Greater-Durban area.³² The new Institute and its bulletin however was also an ambitious intellectual project that could provide shape and structure to these efforts, and were to have a lasting impact on shaping strategy in the re-emergence of African trade unions, one of the most salient features of the Durban moment.

Central figures in the new institute were Harriet Bolton, Lawrence Schlemmer, John Copelyn, Alec Erwin, Fozzia Fisher, Beksise Nxasana, Omar Badsha, Halton Cheadle and David Hemson, with Gatsha Buthelezi acting as Chancellor.³³ According to sociologist, Eddie Webster, Turner’s legacy was that “he successfully combined a radical vision of the future with an argument for the strategic use of power”.³⁴ Central to his strategy was the contextualisation of class theory, and the notion of radical reform rather than a revolutionary rupture with the old order. Turner rejected armed insurrection, as well as economic sanctions, and instead advocated using the means available to affect radical change. Central to these means were the democratic trade unions.

Bantu Stephen Biko

Biko’s personal trajectory was marked by the exigencies of apartheid. He had been expelled from the mission school, Lovedale, on account of the political activities of his brother, who was suspected of involvement with the PAC armed wing *Pogo*. Biko had been given a scholarship to attend the Catholic school of St. Francis at Marianhill. From there he was able to gain entrance to the University of Natal Non-European section (UNNE), later University of Natal Black section (UNB). Biko had entered the medical school at the University of Natal at the beginning of 1966.³⁵ Due to his extensive political commitments, he failed his fourth year of study and was forced to abandon his medical studies in 1970. He took up a law degree by correspondence from the University of South Africa that year, as well as working for the Black Community Programmes (BCP) in Durban, and helping to found the Black People’s Convention (BPC) the following year in 1971.³⁶

Although on one hand Biko propagated the need for Black self-reliance, he was able to form and maintain close personal friendships with white student leaders. His friendship with Turner is a prime example. As Aelred Stubbs and Hugh Lewin wrote of Biko, his “founding of

³⁰ As Phyllis Naidoo writes, Bellair had previously been an Indian suburb, but was reclassified under the Group Area Act and its inhabitants forced to leave, and the houses given to white railway workers and civil servants. Turner Papers, P. Naidoo, ‘Who Killed Rick?’ manuscript, p. 2.

³¹ Webster, ‘Moral Decay and Social Reconstruction’, p. 5-7.

³² E. Webster, ‘Moral Decay and Social Reconstruction: Richard Turner and Radical Reform’, *Theoria*, (October 1993) p. 1.

³³ *Op cit.*, p. 6.

³⁴ *Op cit.*, p. 4.

³⁵ ‘Biographical Summary’ in S. Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2004) p. 1

³⁶ *Op cit.*, p. 2.

SASO... never led to a breach of the good personal relationships he continued to enjoy with the white NUSAS leaders”.³⁷ In spite of his friendly personal acquaintances Biko remained clear on the need to relegate the white liberal to a secondary position relative to the active self-emancipation of the Black oppressed. In an evocative analogy Biko argued that the liberal should serve as “a lubricating material” facilitating political change, so that “in trying to find a better direction for South Africa, there should be no grinding noises of metal against metal but a free and easy flowing movement which will be characteristic of a well-looked-after vehicle.”³⁸

It is fair to say that Biko created an impression on whoever he met. Donald Woods described him as the greatest man he had the privilege of knowing.³⁹ He had a profound shaping impact on the form that Black Consciousness in South Africa took. In Themba Sono’s assessment the “pivotal” factor in the development of Black Consciousness was the “overpowering mind of Biko”, and “the charismatic personality of Steve Biko, without whom any discussion of the early phase if not the entire spectrum of Black Consciousness becomes sterile and ineffectual”.⁴⁰ As Barney Pityana recalled of the “long hours of interaction and debate among friends” at the Alan Taylor residence, it was Steve Biko who was the central participant, “he listened and challenged ideas as they emerged, concretised them, and brought them back for further development”. Although the refining of ideas was still a collaborative effort and was the product of consensus, “it was Steve who translated that common idea into essays that went into his columns as Frank Talk: *I Write What I Like*, and as memoranda to the SRCs and SASO Local Branches. It was Steve ultimately who concretised and articulated the ideas. He captured the common mind”.⁴¹ It was this ability to formalise and systematise a mood and general consensus that was central to Biko’s role. Mamphela Ramphele reflected for instance how Biko would dictate to her and she would write. As she remembers the notes would hardly have to be edited, “he had a way with words”.⁴²

Biko’s facility for communication was put to full use when at the July 1970 SASO student council meeting in Wentworth, Barney Pityana replaced Biko as president, and Biko was elected chair of SASO Publications.⁴³ As Mzamane and Howarth note, this was “a crucial post because the early to mid-1970s witnessed an outpouring of scholarship (on subjects like poetry, aesthetics, culture, politics, economics, and theology) within the movement”.⁴⁴ Notable publications were *SASO Newsletter*, *Creativity and Black Development*, *Black Review* and *Black Viewpoint*. Ramphele remembers how Biko spent well over a year working on the first *Black Review* 1972. Together with editorial assistants Malusi Mpumlwana, Tomeka Mafole and Welile Nhlapo, Biko worked from “the second half of 1971 and the whole of 1972”.⁴⁵ On completion and before the printing of the first *Black Review* in 1973, Biko’s name had to be omitted and Bennie Khoapa was named as editor. In the beginning of 1973 as a result of the findings of the Schibusch Commission, eight NUSAS leaders and eight SASO leaders had been issued with

³⁷ *Op cit.*, p. 11.

³⁸ Biko, *I Write*, p. 28.

³⁹ D. Woods, *Biko*

⁴⁰ T. Sono, *Reflections on the Origins of Black Consciousness in South Africa* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1993) p. 2 & 11.

⁴¹ B. Pityana, ‘Reflections on 30 Years since the Death of Steve Biko: A Legacy Revisited’, National Arts Festival Winter School lecture, 3 July 2007. Found at : http://www.unisa.ac.za/contents/about/principle/docs/Steve%20Biko%20Lecture%202007%20doc%20final%202_.pdf (accessed on 29 January 2009). p. 3.

⁴² Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*. This scenario evokes much about gender dynamics within SASO, with the male intellectual and the female secretary, or ‘helper’, a point which I owe to Catherine Burns.

⁴³ M. V. Mzamane and D. R. Howarth, ‘Representing Blackness: Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement’, in L. Switzer and M. Adhikari (eds.), *South Africa's resistance press: alternative voices in the last generation under apartheid* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000), p. 182.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, pp. 67 – 68.

banning orders.⁴⁶ Whereas Turner was banned in 1973 to his home in Bellair, Durban, Biko was sent to his 'Homeland', being confined to the magisterial district of King Williams Town. Biko's banning marked the end of his direct involvement in Durban and ostensibly the last direct encounter between him and Turner.

Collaboration

Commentators on the period have recognised that there were "complex political relations" between New Left student leaders and SASO,⁴⁷ and these relations are well represented in the life of Biko and Turner. It was Turner's close relationship with black activists that helped him to continue to develop a critical political awareness. Tony Morphet for instance makes the point that Turner's shift away from the "confusions of the liberal position" was evinced by his contacts with the nascent Black Consciousness movement, most notably Biko. According to Morphet, Turner and Biko were introduced through Foszia Fisher, who would later marry Turner. Fisher was then a philosophy honours student at the university, who was interested in the movement, but also critical of some aspects.⁴⁸ According to Morphet, Turner initially showed an "over-reactive sympathy typical of the guilt felt by white liberals" but through his personal contacts, he was able to go beyond the initial reaction and become a sympathetic critic of the movement.⁴⁹ It was this step, beyond initial fear, that seemed to mark out Turner and many of the radicals of the period.⁵⁰ It was a step facilitated by their willingness to re-examine their own worldviews and values, drawn from the challenges posed by friends across the racial divide. As such it was friendship, rooted in reciprocity and dialectical reason, which helped steer individual liberals towards a more radical outlook on South Africa.

Common interests facilitated the friendship. Both Turner and Biko had a strong affinity for the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. Pityana observed that Biko "laid his hands on some philosophical writings like Jean-Paul Sartre and made ready use of them".⁵¹ Biko found Sartre's work particularly stimulating in thinking through the concepts of freedom and responsibility.⁵² Sartre had been a formative influence on Turner and there is no evidence that he shifted from, or lost faith, in the Sartrean standpoint, which emphasised the power, and historical salience, of individual choice. It was from Sartre's philosophical work that Turner had extrapolated a political philosophy, and he had returned to South Africa armed with his doctorate, convinced in a sense by its own argument.⁵³

Ramphela recalls the friendship between Turner and Biko, remembering that Turner used to visit the Alan Taylor residence and became friendly with all of the students there. She remembers how he "spent long periods of time arguing with Steve about the analytical limitations of Black Consciousness, which a socialist perspective could remedy by adding a class

⁴⁶ Ramphela, *Across Boundaries*, p. 82.

⁴⁷ C.R.D. Halisi, *Black Political Thought in the Making of South African Democracy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 9.

⁴⁸ Morphet, 'Richard Turner', p. xix-xx. According to Turner's daughter, Jann, it was Biko rather who introduced Turner and Foszia. J. Turner, 'Rick Turner: 30 Years On', *Mail and Guardian*, 21 December 2007 to 3 January 2008, p. 47.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Colleen Ryan relates how Beyers Naude came to adopt his radical position in a similar way, through his contact with black people, rather than through personal theological or bible study.

⁵¹ Quoted in M. More 'Biko; Africana Existentialist Philosopher', in A. Mngxitama, A. Alexander and N. C. Gibson (eds.), *Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 48.

⁵² More, 'Biko: Africana Existentialist Philosopher', p. 49.

⁵³ Morphet reflects for instance that Turner was *unable* to give up the insights he had won through philosophical study, noting "his refusal, or perhaps inability is a better description, to compromise the insights won in the philosophic study when faced by the South African reality". Morphet, 'Biographical Introduction', p. xvi.

analysis to address some of the complexities of power relations in South Africa”. According to Ramphele, “Steve in turn pointed out to Rick that an economic class analysis which ignored the racist nature of capitalist exploitation in South Africa, and in many other parts of the globe, was itself inadequate. White workers identified more with white owners of capital than with black workers, Steve would conclude”. Ramphele notes how the debate would “drift into a discussion of the false consciousness of white workers, ending with Steve challenging Rick to go out and conscientise white workers to prove that his approach would work in apartheid South Africa”.⁵⁴

Eddie Webster portrays the relationship in similar terms, as Turner emphasising to Biko that “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”.⁵⁵ As Webster points out, their interaction followed perhaps predictable lines, with Turner advocating the need for a class analysis, or the salience of class as a factor. Biko’s response to this position was best characterised in his Frank Talk article, when he suggested “Let them go to van Tonder in the Free State and tell him [that the situation is a class struggle rather than a racial one]”.⁵⁶ More importantly, in Biko’s assessment, class analysis was adopted as a defence mechanism by whites.⁵⁷

Biko’s critique of the white left went so far as to argue for a white “liberal-left axis”, which, while recognising that the rights of black people were being violated and that blacks needed to be “brought up”, failed to see that this necessarily entailed some of them “coming down”. “This was the problem” Biko reflected, “We talk about that, and we get a whole lot of reaction and self-preservation mechanisms from them”.⁵⁸ Turner, though, did not fit Biko’s picture of a puritanical and arrogant Marxist. Indeed his humanism allowed him a breadth of thought, such that while remaining “a true Marxist,” he could be open to opposing ideas. As Gerry Maré emphasised to me “Rick Turner’s type of socialism was not a strict structural Marxism, it was a humanist Marxism”.⁵⁹

Webster’s characterisation of the relationship between Biko and Turner neglects, therefore, the plausibility of the importance each played in clarifying the terms of their counterparts’ philosophy. Both men called for the need for exactness in the meaning of key terms. As a professional philosopher, this was an abiding concern of Turner’s, as he contended that misunderstandings were almost always associated with confusions over the definitions of key terms, especially where parties had different understandings of the terms of the debate.⁶⁰ Biko was similarly astute to the need to be clear about key definitions, as he concluded his paper to a leadership school at the end of 1971, “I wish to stress again the need for us to know very clearly what we mean by certain terms and what our understanding is when we talk of Black Consciousness”.⁶¹

In giving evidence at the SASO Nine trial for example, Turner recalled that he had actively studied Black student politics and had been actively engaged with SASO, speaking on Black Campuses and at Alan Taylor residence.⁶² In terms of more personal relations, Turner

⁵⁴ M. Ramphele, *Across Boundaries: The Journey of a South African Woman Leader* (New York: Feminist Press, 1995) p. 62.

⁵⁵ Webster, ‘Moral Decay and Social Reconstruction’, p. 2.

⁵⁶ S. Biko, ‘Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity’, in *I Write What I Like* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2004 [1978]) p.99

⁵⁷ Gerhart, ‘Interview with Steve Biko’, p. 34.

⁵⁸ Gerhart, ‘Interview with Steve Biko’, p. 34.

⁵⁹ Maré, interview

⁶⁰ Turner papers, R. Turner, “Memorandum to Commission of Inquiry into Certain Organisations”, p. 6.

⁶¹ S. Biko, ‘The Definition of Black Consciousness’, in *I Write What I Like*, p. 57.

⁶² Supreme Court of South Africa, *The State versus S Cooper and Eight Others*, p. 3011.

highlighted his “discussions with a number of SASO leaders on general questions of South African society, specifically in connection with SASO”. He noted that he had attended the opening of the third general student conference of SASO in Durban in 1971, as well as a seminar on the topic “Black Consciousness and its relevance for Black Life”, held in Durban in 1971.⁶³

Turner was 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 use of the categories of ‘blackness’ and ‘whiteness’ by Black Consciousness advocates was one area of concern. Turner was critical of the tendency to absolutise these concepts.⁶⁴ Turner further appealed for the need to see different categories of white South African, namely “racist, liberal and radical”.⁶⁵ He suggested that the Black Consciousness 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. Black Consciousness 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.⁶⁶

Both Biko and Turner were able to approach and articulate what Biko described as the “quest for a true humanity”,⁶⁷ what Turner had seen as barred to the experience of white South Africans, amidst the trappings of material comfort. Biko and Turner’s politics shared a glimpse of this liberated, moral vision, to which their respective doctrines and theoretical groundings provided the means. In their joint discussion, debate and friendship, this shared sense of liberation, as originating from within, no doubt gave them common ground for hope. Biko’s vision from his first ‘Frank Talk’ article asserted “At the heart of true integration is the provision for each man, each group to rise and attain the envisioned self. Each group must be able to attain its style of existence without encroaching on or being thwarted by another. Out of this mutual respect for each other and complete freedom of self-determination there will obviously arise a genuine fusion of the life-styles of the various groups. This is true integration”.⁶⁸

Confrontational Politics and Community Development in Durban

In March 1969 UND students Halton Cheadle, Dave Hemson, Jennifer Brown and Veronica Vorster were forced out of a meeting at the Alan Taylor residence called to discuss the formation of SASO. They were greeted at the door with the ironical “Hello Baas, Hello Missus!” and referred to in the meeting as “intruders” and “foreigners”. They left the meeting after being accused of being Security Branch spies.⁶⁹ Hemson was in no doubt as to the cause of their treatment arguing that it “reflected the new spirit of black consciousness”. The new spirit the white student leaders sensed was given wider airing by SASO leaders. As Pityana remembered “when you hear Ranwedzi Nengwekhulu, addressing a crowd wild with excitement squatting on a rugby field at the Alan Taylor Residence, you’d imagine you were listening to Malcolm X himself”.⁷⁰ Many of the young SASO activists battled to maintain the nuances of distinguishing

⁶³ *Op cit.*, p. 3012

⁶⁴ Morphet, ‘Richard Turner’, xix-xx

⁶⁵ R. Turner, ‘Black Consciousness and White Liberals’

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ S. Biko, ‘Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity’ printed initially in B. Moore (ed.), *Black Theology: the South African Voice* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1973), pp. ????. See also S. Biko, ‘Towards a True Humanity in South Africa’, *The Ecumenical Review*, 30, 4 (1978).

⁶⁸ S. Biko, ‘Black Souls in White Skins?’ in *I Write What I Like* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2004 [1978]) p.22

⁶⁹ ‘Black Power – Students Forced to Leave Meeting’, *Dome* (University of Natal) 27 March 1969, in Karis and Gerhart, *Nadir and Resurgence*, p. 458-9.

⁷⁰ N. Pityana, ‘Afro-American influences on the Black Consciousness Movement’. Address to conference on Afro-American inter-relationships with Southern Africa, African Studies and Research Program, Howard University,

between “white racism as a system to be fought and white people who may be innocent bystanders in a racist society”.⁷¹ However even those whites who saw themselves as “anti-apartheid” were a potential danger. Recalling one bitter experience, Ramphele blamed Turner for wrecking the work of BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS-activists at the New Farm Settlement Project.

Malusi Mpumlwana, the chairperson of the University of Natal SASO committee had been in charge of the project, working with the squatters at New Farm near the Phoenix settlement to improve their housing and providing them with running water. The emphasis had been on encouraging dialogue and initiative with the squatters of New Farm. As Ramphele reflects, the black students felt they had achieved a breakthrough when they were able to get each household to agree to contribute R2 to the provision of clean tap water in the area. SASO agreed to cover the deficit. But “matters went awry when a group of mainly young white activists, under the leadership of Richard Turner... entered the same community at about the same time”.⁷² The white activists were prepared to pay for the costs of installing the tap water in total, thus negating the spirit of self-help that had been the focus of the SASO development policy. In Ramphele’s estimation it was “as though the poverty of the New Farm residents offered a scarce resource, accessible to Natal University activists, for which they competed to test their ideals of community development”.⁷³ The damage done by the insensitive course of action thus confirmed “Black Consciousness fears of white domination”. It was more distressing for the reason that “Turner had up to that point been regarded by Black Consciousness activists as one of the few white radicals who understood their views about white racism and economic domination”.⁷⁴

In her autobiography Ramphele was more scathing, calling Turner’s interference at New Farm “the height of insensitivity” and commenting that “If ever there was a case of Black Consciousness needing to stand up to white people, one couldn’t have written a better script than this one”.⁷⁵ Part of the refining of Black Consciousness strategy indeed, according to recent commentators, was learning to work with and make use of the resources offered by white activists, but not to be used by them in turn.⁷⁶ Biko needed to mediate between Turner and angry black students who saw it as an overt sign of white arrogance.

The Development of SASO in Durban

Turner’s call for the need to create a new culture reflected the mood of “the counter-culture” scene of the 1960s. Gerry Maré recalled 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 [or] whatever. “So just in terms of student politics,” he reflected, “there was an incredible movement of different

Washington D.C., Howard University, 27 May 1979. p. 10.

⁷¹ Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, p. 65.

⁷² M. Ramphele, ‘Empowerment and Symbols of Hope: Black Consciousness and Community Development’, in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.), *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1991) p. 158.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 63.

⁷⁶ As Mzamane, Maaba and Biko put it “BC was striving, in fact, to develop a unique organisational philosophy and set of strategies not only on how to stand on one’s own feet but also how to work with other people without being used by them.” in M. V. Mzamane, B. Maaba and N. Biko, ‘The Black Consciousness Movement’ in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Volume 2, 1970-1980* (South African Democracy Education Trust, Pretoria: Unisa Press) p. 100.

things”.⁷⁷ 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 in Durban, an initiative that was soon replicated around the country.

Biko and 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 aligned with the second phase of Spro-cas, aimed at micro-level development among black communities. In 1973 the Black Workers Project was set up and an independent trade union, the Black Allied Workers Union, under Drake Koka was launched.

Durban provided the nascent organisation with some advantages. Although Biko denied that there was any intentional reason for locating the SASO headquarters in the city, referring to it as “just a historical aberration”, he acknowledged that Durban was not the typical South African city, zoned with a white central business district and the outskirts for ‘non-whites’. In Durban, however, as Biko noted “there is this whole meeting ground of this half of town. It is supposed to be an Indian area, and it is accessible therefore to all groups. There are no restrictions attached to Africans regarding Indian areas”.⁷⁸ Thus SASO was able to sub-let offices in Beatrice Street without the need for official permission. Apart from Durban, Johannesburg was the only other city where a branch and office of SASO was established, REEF SO or SASO Reef.⁷⁹

The Eye of the Needle and Black Consciousness

The publication of Turner's *The Eye of the Needle*, by Peter Randall and Spro-cas was another important element in establishing a dialogue between activists in South Africa. In a context of increasing political repression, Turner advocated a form of democratic socialism, inspired by a Sartrean emphasis on the significance of individual choice. As recently as 2004 the book has been used as “an optic with which to view the kind of society that has been established in the country since [the democratic elections of] 1994”.⁸⁰

The book was mentioned in *Black Review 1973*, with the editor Mafika Pascal Gwala noting that the book had stimulated “much thinking in the Black youth [and] reaction to it was varied and controversial”.⁸¹ In the new Black Consciousness induced climate the editor emphasised the point that Blacks were now a far more critical audience. Pointing to the publication of the book *Being-Black-in-the World* by clinical psychologist Chabani Manganyi, the editor argued that “Significant about Manganyi's effort is that he showed further impetus in the Black's wanting more to argue their case dialectically and therefore from an objective and more

⁷⁷ Interview with author, Durban, 13 August 2008.

⁷⁸ G. M. Gerhart, 'Interview with Steve Biko' in A. Mngxitama, A. Alexander and N. C. Gibson (eds.), *Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) p. 36.

⁷⁹ According to Siphobuthlezi, metropolitan Johannesburg played an important role in bringing Black students together, becoming “the melting pot of national student politics” with students from Johannesburg dominating the national student scene. S. Buthlezi, “Black consciousness in the late 1960s”, p. 24.

⁸⁰ T. Fluxman and P. Vale, 'Re-reading Rick Turner in the New South Africa', *International Relations*, 18, 2 (2004), pp. 173-189

⁸¹ M. P. Gwala (ed.), *Black Review 1973* (Durban, Black Community Programmes 1973) p. 178.

basic stand-point. The system of reference was no more based on white terms of reference but on Black terms".⁸²

Gwala's reservations about *The Eye* reflected a shifting epistemological base associated with the search for 'Black terms' and an aversion to relying too heavily on the indigenous South African left. As shown, Biko had been particularly scathing in his assessment of the role of the white left. Although Black Consciousness similarly saw the need for the fundamental socio-economic change envisaged in *The Eye*, its leaders qualified the book's remit by arguing that "the only people who had a genuine interest and commitment to this objective were the victims of the system".⁸³

The stance of Gwala was to assert that, although *The Eye* pointed in the right direction, its utopian solution occluded "the true perspective of the developments in the country which could be misleading to the average Black in the face of historic, social, economic and political reality in South Africa". The danger was therefore to fall back on the utopian analysis presented by Turner, without adequately grasping the structurally constrained position from which he was arguing. Thus the "criticism from Black Consciousness circles was that Blacks were by now quite aware that [a] radical stance was one thing and radical action quite another thing. Only Blacks could move into solidified action, not the whites – by virtue of their privileged position".⁸⁴ In short Turner's contribution was stimulating but also to be treated with caution, because it could detract from the close relationship between active self-definition and self-liberation for the black oppressed.

The SASO Nine Trial and Turner's Defence

In 1974 SASO planned to stage a celebration rally at Curries Fountain, Durban, to celebrate the independence of Mozambique from Portuguese rule. The day before the rally was due to commence, the Minister of Police, Jimmy Kruger told parliament that the rally had been banned. SASO refused to back down and printed thousands of leaflets advertising the march. An estimated 5 000 people converged on Curries Fountain, only to be met with police and dogs. The rally was brutally broken up when the dogs were set on the assembled people. An estimated 37 Black Consciousness-related activists were detained under South Africa's anti-terrorist legislation.⁸⁵ Nine SASO activists were formally prosecuted for their role in organising the march, namely: Saths Cooper, Zithulele Cindi, Mosioua Lekota, Aubrey Mokoape, Strini Moodley, Muntu Myeza, Pandelani Nefolovhodwe, Nkwenkwe Nkomo, and Kaborane Sedibe.⁸⁶ Their lengthy prosecution was to become widely known as the 'SASO Nine trial'. Gail Gerhart writes of the trial:

Aware that the eyes of the country were on them, the accused used the trial to restate the nationalist viewpoint, and took every opportunity to symbolize their defiance of the state by singing freedom songs and raising clenched fists in the courtroom. Thus, instead of contributing to the suppression of Black Consciousness ideology, the trial, by giving the accused a continuous public platform through the press, merely disseminated that ideology even more widely, and help up to youth once again a model of 'rebel' courage".⁸⁷

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ S. Buthelezi, 'The Black consciousness movement in South Africa in the late 1960s', p. 28.

⁸⁴ Gwala, *Black review 1973*, 182

⁸⁵ Institute of Commonwealth Studies [hereafter ICS] 6/2/12.Mary Benson Papers, Institute of Commonwealth Studies Library, London. 2nd Report on Arrests, Detentions and Trials of Members and Supporters of South African Students Organisation, Black People's Convention, Black Allied Workers Union, Theatre Council of Natal, Black Community Programmes. Issued by the Program for Social Change, 23 December 1974.

⁸⁶ Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa*, p. 299.

⁸⁷ Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa*, p. 298

Prominent among the witnesses for the defence were Steve Biko and Richard Turner. Biko's defence was turned into a book, *The Testimony of Steve Biko* (1978), edited by Millard Arnold. Arnold highlighted the importance of Biko's brilliant exposition and defence of Black Consciousness, similarly showing how the trial became a crucial public platform for the dissemination of Black Consciousness ideology. Turner's defence at the trial in 1976, three years after his banning has not received similar attention, although as this section will argue, it was also important, providing insight and reflection on his preceding six years of activism. Although outside the ambit of what activists remember the Durban moment to be, Turner's defence highlights his close knowledge of SASO and, as a postscript to this paper, sheds light on the space that existed for collaboration between activists.⁸⁸

Part of Turner's strategy in defence was to challenge the prosecution's expert witness, Stoffel Van der Merwe, a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the Rand Afrikaans Universiteit, on his use of SASO and BPC documents out of their original context. According to Turner, the prosecution had not distinguished between 'policy documents' and 'reactive' documents, it had failed to make the distinction between organisational discussion and concrete policy decisions, and had not taken into account the relative importance of documents in relation to each other. Van Der Merwe had used the documents to try and establish "a framework of theory which would identify features of black consciousness ideology likely to lead to revolution, which could be used to measure the revolutionary nature of BPC and SASO".⁸⁹ Thus he presented a theory which he argued "had diagnostic value to predict and identify a revolutionary group". As Michal Lobban points out, this was the "necessary crux of his evidence," because black consciousness organizations had throughout their existence assiduously avoided overtly revolutionary activity.⁹⁰

In response, Turner presented his own collection of Black Consciousness material, which he ordered according to their context. On the most basic level he distinguished between policy documents of the General Student Council, branch reports, occasional publications and speeches by individual members. Evidently these could not be accorded the same importance, as Turner remarked "One cannot treat these all on exactly the same level of analysis, one has to categorise one's documents in these categories and then weigh each documents in the light of its position in the overall organisation".⁹¹ Thus SASO/BPC documents needed to be weighed up and read alongside a proper analysis of the organisations. This required close knowledge and sensitivity in judgement which the court's legal document-based approach was not fulfilling. Moreover there was a danger that language itself could be misleading. Drawing on the latest linguistic, anthropological and social psychology material available he argued that political language needed to be understood in terms of its specific context. Quoting from Edelman he reminded the court that "The realistic study of political language and its meaning is necessarily a probing not only of dictionaries nor of word counts, but of diverse responses to particular modes of expression of audiences in disparate social settings".⁹² Thus he concluded that qualification and further

⁸⁸ At the same time as Turner was witness, Breyten Breytenbach was being tried for treason on account of his involvement with Ohkela in the adjoining courtroom. Breytenbach notes "Once, on my way in... I caught a glimpse of Rick Turner's red beard, sitting alone in the SASO court" quoted in A. Nash, "The Dialectical Tradition in South Africa" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cape Town, 2000), p. 208. More importantly, Nash draws out important parallels between Breytenbach and Turner's personal journeys and their thinking in which dialectics was a central and significant theme.

⁸⁹ M. Lobban, *White Man's Justice: South African Political Trials in the Black Consciousness Era* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) p. 55.

⁹⁰ *Op cit.*, p. 56

⁹¹ Supreme Court of South Africa, *The State versus S Cooper and Eight Others*, p. 3015.

⁹² *Op cit.*, p. 3020.

research was required for a proper understanding of “Black use of language, Black perceptions, Black use of ideas in South Africa”.⁹³ He cited the example of Nkwenkwe Nkomo, one of the accused, whose background was in the Evangelical Churches, and whose speech tended towards a robust, bellicose form of expression associated with the fiery preaching of his church background. It was thus evident that the qualifications of the prosecution to render a fair and nuanced assessment of the reality of SASO and therefore the culpability of the accused were inadequate.

Turner also highlighted how SASO always focused its activities within prescribed ‘legal’ parameters, and called for qualification on the charge levelled by the prosecution that SASO was seeking a regime change. Rather, Turner pointed out that SASO accepted “certain regime norms and values” such as freedom of speech and freedom of association, but were “operating and using these aspects of regime norms and values in criticising other aspects of the way in which the regime functions”.⁹⁴ “A point which strikes me over and over again in attempting to interpret this” he reflected “is that their political activity has seemed to me to be always aimed at finding within the existing regime methods of activity, and in that sense they are saying: look, this regime gives us scope for doing certain things, but we don’t want all aspects of the regime we clearly want some change but we have scope within the regime for working for changes in other aspects of the regime”. It was incorrect therefore to assert, as the prosecution did, that SASO was rejecting the entire regime; if that were the case the most rational course of action would be to go underground and “attempt to use violence”.⁹⁵ Turner asserted the crucial point from the analysis of the documentation was that where violent imagery may occur it “did not reach the level of policy and become the policy of the organisation”.⁹⁶

Turner and the other expert members of the defence, such as Professor Ted Robert Gurr, were highly successful in destroying the credibility of the diagnostic model proposed by Stoffel Van Der Merwe. In his interim ruling the judge, Boshoff J., was forced to concede that a distinction needed to be drawn between a revolutionary and a protest group, “which might overlap in terms of objectives, organization, and tactics, but which differed in strategies and demands: revolutionary groups demand the destruction of the existing political, economic and social system” and worked in secret, therefore not making recourse to demonstrations and strikes.⁹⁷ However, despite the success of the expert defence, the court was able to prosecute the accused on the charge of promoting racial hostility.⁹⁸ While the central contention of the defence was that “the language and content of SASO and BPC documents cannot be understood without an appreciation of the reality experienced from day to day by the black community”, Lobban notes the way in which the prosecution discounted the ‘black world’ as represented by the defence and trivialized the disempowerment of Blacks in South Africa. The expert witness of Turner and Gurr were eventually beaten by a prosecution that argued that Van der Merwe’s model could not be viewed “bit by bit” but needed to be taken as “a whole”.⁹⁹ The unique nature of the trial, as Lobban highlights, was a prosecution of ideas rather than actions, and the SASO Nine were eventually convicted on the basis of the revolutionary potential of their ideas, rather than their organisational intentions.

⁹³ *Op cit.*, p. 3022.

⁹⁴ *Op cit.*, p. 3037.

⁹⁵ *Op cit.*, p. 3038. Turner’s analysis closely matches Barney Pityana’s assessment of the strategy of BC in his essay “Revolution Within the Law?” in Pityana et al. (eds.) *Bounds of Possibility* where he regrets the political naiveté of attempting to work within the law to achieve political change, viewing the strategy as inherently constrained.

⁹⁶ *Op cit.*, p. 3174.

⁹⁷ Lobban, *White Man’s Justice*, p. 60.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Lobban, *White Man’s Justice*, p. 76.

Conclusion

The Durban Moment occurred in a unique context, where due to historical circumstance activists drew on traditions of democratic thought, often making recourse to notions of transcendent values to which a political vision and political praxis could be examined.¹⁰⁰ In the case of Biko and the Black Consciousness activists, this entailed, on the one hand, a reinterpretation of African nationalist traditions, Black American thought and the postcolonial critique of the Third World. In the instance of white students, congregating around Turner, it took the shape of an appeal to the values of Western civilization, the New Left critique of capitalist society and to a lesser extent tapping into the spaces of South Africa's dialectical tradition. This moment of revaluation and exploration extended beyond Durban to influence thinking in Spro-cas, as well as providing impetus for greater contextual theological revaluation, in the form of Black Theology centres. The Black Consciousness othering of white liberals played an important role in refining their political ideology, but it also created a space for meaningful engagement with those who were willing to go beyond the liberal paradigm. Turner as a young white South African had left South Africa to study abroad, departing as a 'liberal' but returned changed, with a broader political consciousness, a move that was concretised and formalised by his contacts with Biko and the SASO students in Durban.

Black Consciousness was the fruit of the intellectual labour of blacks alone, but it was a political body of ideas that arose out of a political context that was shaped by many forces, emanating from both white and black sources. Although the rhetorical force of the ideology was levelled at rejection of white liberal interference, this did not summarily end all contact or prevent fruitful dialogue. The paper calls for the need for thinking in terms of the intellectual history of South Africa, not seeing Black Consciousness solely in terms of a political organisation (as significant as that is) but as a body of ideas developed in the South African context, with comparative appeal to other political ideologies.

¹⁰⁰ Eddie Webster regretted that this clear, radical vision was subsequently lost in the nineties.