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Interpreting the Character, Role and Significance of SASO and SANSCO: A Conceptual Framework

As I have indicated, the appropriate framework for the analysis of SASO and SANSCO is not a given and by no means obvious. Hence, it is necessary to make explicit the overall framework of assumptions, concepts and specific questions that structure and guide my investigation, analysis and interpretation of SASO and SANSCO. The "framework" is much like what Abrams refers to as a "problematic":

> ... a rudimentary organisation of a field of phenomena which yields problems for investigation. The organisation occurs on the basis of some more or less explicitly theoretical presuppositions – it is an application of assumptions and principles to phenomena in order to constitute a range of enquiry... [O]ne's problematic is the sense of significance and coherence one brings to the world in general in order to make sense of it in particular (1982:xv).

I draw on diverse literature from the fields of social theory, social movement theory, student politics and comparative student activism and South African political economy. The emphasis, though, is less the development of theory in relation to student activism than the elaboration of a framework which plays a heuristic function with respect to the analysis and historical and contextual understanding and interpretation of the character, role and significance of SASO and SANSCO.

Student Politics

Given the concern of this investigation, the clarification of the concept "student politics" is a useful starting point.

Burawoy defines politics as "struggles over or within relations of structured domination, struggles that take as their objective the quantitative or qualitative change of those relations" (1985:253). He further argues that

> [w]e must choose between politics defined as struggles regulated by specific apparatuses, politics defined as struggles over certain relations, and the combination of the two. In the first, politics would have no fixed objective, and in the second it would have no fixed institutional locus. I have therefore opted for the more restricted third definition, according to which politics refers to struggles within a specific arena aimed at specific sets of relations (ibid.:253-54).

This understanding of politics "refuses to accept the reduction of politics to state politics and of state politics to the reproduction of class relations" (ibid.:254). The reason why Burawoy refuses to conceive of the state only in relation to class relations is because

> [w]hat is distinctive about the state is its global character, its function as the factor of cohesion for the entire social formation. The state not only guarantees the reproduction of certain relations but, more distinctly, it is the apparatus that guarantees all other apparatuses (ibid.).

The merit of Burawoy's approach is the space it creates for extending "politics" to diverse social arenas beyond the state – education, health, environment, etc. – and the recognition it gives to the role of the state in the reproduction of other non-class, yet important, social relations having to do with, for example, race or gender. In terms of this one, can conceive of "education politics" and "relations in education", and these being of as much interest to a state as relations of production, the social relations between classes in a social formation. One can also conceive of "curriculum politics" and "governance politics" as subfields of education politics. Finally, one can begin to think about politics also in relation to

specific social classes and categories such as workers, women, youth and students.

Burawoy's formulation steers us to conceive of "student politics" as being characterised by the struggles of students "within a specific arena aimed at specific sets of relations". It also helps us recognise that since student struggles occur within a particular institutional setting it means that they will be "regulated" and, necessarily, also structured, conditioned and shaped by the distinct institutional arrangements and organisational matrices of the setting.

Burawoy's definition of politics is immensely useful. However, as Wolpe (1988:55) has argued, it may be "too restrictive". Wolpe acknowledges that the structure of a specific sphere "will condition the form and orientate the content of the struggles, which occur" but rightly points out that the "objectives of struggle" may not be confined to social relations in a particular sphere (ibid.). That is to say, the concerns of students and student organisations may extend beyond the educational arena and social relations in education to social relations in the political sphere. This means that the form and content of student struggles may be mediated not only by educational apparatuses but also by the apparatuses of the political sphere.

Student organisation, movement and body

Despite its virtues, the literature on student politics – the involvement of students in particular structural and historical settings in activities aimed at either conserving, reforming or/and fundamentally transforming prevailing social relations, institutions and practices – tends to be conceptually sloppy. Frequently, key concepts such as "student organisation", "student movement" and "student body" are not defined and are conflated, even though they are conceptually distinct. For the purpose of this investigation, it is important to define these terms and to outline their relationship to one another so that there is clarity around what is the essential unit of analysis.

A student organisation is a collective of students whose basis of affiliation to the organisation is either political, cultural, religious, academic and/or social. Various terms such as "council", "club", "society", "association", "union" and even "organisation" itself may be

used to designate such a formation. Most student organisations are characterised by a voluntary membership, although some student organisations, for example the student representative councils (SRCs) at black higher education institutions, have automatically incorporated all registered students. A large variety of student organisations have existed at black higher education institutions. The majority has been specific to particular institutions, but some have existed as regional or national organisations. Prominent black national higher education student organisations, despite their names, have been the University Christian Movement, the Azanian Students' Movement and, of course, SASO and SANSCO. The terms and conditions under which organisations have been allowed to operate has, however, frequently been the object of conflict and contestation between students and the authorities of higher education institutions.

The term student movement is difficult to define and the following will have to suffice as a working definition:

> The sum total of action and intentions of students individually, collectively and organisationally that are directed for change in the students' own circumstances and for educational and wider social change (Jacks, 1975:13).

Of course, "action and intentions" could also be directed at the preservation of the prevailing student situation and maintenance of the educational and social status quo. Notwithstanding this, the above definition does have certain implications:

1 Not all student organisations are necessarily part of the student movement.

2 The student movement is not reducible to a single organisation and is not an extension of one or even many student organisations, but is a broad entity, which includes individual students who are not formally attached to organisations.

3 A student movement is a dynamic entity whose size and boundaries are likely to vary depending on political conditions, time of academic year and the issues being confronted.

The student movement is, then, to be clearly distinguished from a student organisation. The objects of this investigation are SASO and

SANSCO and, since the unit of analysis is student organisation, it is important, to hold on to the distinction between the "student movement" and "student organisation". However, it is often the case that a specific student organisation stands in a particular relationship to the student movement, enjoys a certain status within, and plays a certain role vis-à-vis, the student movement. Thus, while the higher education student movement in South Africa is not the concern of this book, it is necessary to analyse the connections and relations between SASO and SANSCO and the student movements of their time since this has a bearing on their character, role and significance.

The term student body denotes the collective of individuals who are engaged in academic study and vocational education and training at a particular higher educational institution. While each higher education institution has its own specific student body, the totality of individuals registered at all the higher education institutions collectively constitute the general student body.

The student body has been analysed in two ways: in relation to the political participation and to the political affiliation of students. Hamilton, writing about student politics in Venezuela, has defined three categories of students: "militants" who are actively involved in student and national politics; "sympathisers", who, while not consistently active, may or may not support organisations, vote in elections, attend meetings and engage in demonstrations and other activities; and "non-participants", who for a variety of reasons stand aloof from student politics (1968:351-52). Soares comments that "political participation embodies different forms, levels and degrees of intensity". This means that "reading about politics, voting, and stoning embassies are different forms of participation", which are not only "different actions" but also "involve different degrees of intensity" (Soares, 1967:124).

Lenin, on the other hand, focused on political groupings within the student body. Writing in 1903, he identified six groups within the general Russian student body. Three groups, the "liberals", the "social revolutionaries", and the "social democrats", represented particular political positions. Another three stood in a specific relationship to the student movement: the "indifferents" were unresponsive and detached from the student movement, the "reactionaries" opposed it, and the

"academics" believed that the student movement should be concerned solely with academic issues. In Lenin's view, the existence of these groups was not accidental, but inevitable. Students as

> the most responsive section of the intelligentsia ... most resolutely and most accurately reflect and express the development of class interests and political groupings in society as a whole. The students would not be what they are if their political groupings did not correspond to the political groupings of society as a whole (Lenin, 1961d:44-45).

If the relationship between a student organisation and the student movement is of some concern, so is that between a student organisation and the student body. The student body constitutes a student organisation and is the source of potential members, supporters and sympathisers, as well as antagonists. Moreover, its size, social composition, nature and so on are bound to condition the activities of a student organisation with respect to student mobilisation, organisation and collective action and, thus, the character and role of an organisation.

History, Structure and Conjuncture

I have argued that the analysis of SASO and SANSCO must take into account the historical, structural and conjunctural conditions under which the two organisations operated. The distinction between structural and conjunctural

> refers to the division between elements of a (relatively) permanent and synchronic logic of a given social structure, and elements which emerge as temporary variations of its functioning in a diachronic perspective. The distinction allows one to separate the analysis of the pre-conditions of action from the factors activating specific forms of collective mobilisation (Melucci, 1989:49-50).

For example, until 1990 the denial of full and meaningful political rights to black South Africans was a permanent feature of the South African social order, and the fundamental basis for black social disaffection and political opposition. However, during the apartheid period (1948 to 1990) there were various government initiatives which gave the impression of conceding political rights but fell far short of extending all the rights associated with full citizenship. These initiatives

were consistently the trigger for anti-government political protests and mobilisations.

One reason for considering structural conditions is that, as Abrams so cogently puts it,

> [d]oing justice to the reality of history is not a matter of noting the way in which the past provides a background to the present; it is a matter of treating what people do in the present as a struggle to create a future out of the past, of seeing that the past is not just the womb of the present but the only raw material out of which the present can be constructed (1982:8).

Another reason is that "what we choose to do and what we have to do are shaped by the historically given possibilities among which we find ourselves" (ibid.:3).

Structure and action

Social structures, institutions and practices condition social activity and struggles. Crucial to the analysis of the outcomes, and success and failure, of organisational initiatives and collective action, and also to understanding the form and content of struggles, is to ask

> under what conditions do these struggles occur; what are the conditions which structure them and affect their outcome? Of particular importance in this regard is the question of the form or structure of the political terrain in addition to the question of the form of the state (a distinction which is rarely made in the literature) (Wolpe, 1988:23).

To state that social relations and institutional arrangements "condition" social action is not, however, to argue that they constrain solely as subfields of education politics in the sense of rendering struggles and change impossible and automatically guaranteeing the reproduction of existing social relations. As Wolpe argued, "the formation of structures and relations is always the outcome of struggles between contending groups or classes" (ibid.:8). Class and popular struggles can, and do, undermine, modify, and in certain cases even transform social structures and institutions, and the latter are ultimately the outcome of such struggles.

Moreover, in South Africa,

> the apparatuses in and through which white domination is maintained may stand not only in a functional, complementary and supportive relationship to one another, but also in relations of contradiction and conflict ... [T]he possibility is opened up that, within certain apparatuses and institutions, white domination may continue to be reproduced, albeit in changing forms, while within others it becomes, at the same time, eroded (ibid.:9).

In other words, notwithstanding its generally authoritarian and repressive character, the apartheid state and its myriad apparatuses and institutions cannot be conceived as omnipotent, absolutely monolithic and homogeneous, or as impermeable to political opposition.

The use by Wolpe of the concept of "access" is pertinent here. He argues that

> certain state apparatuses provide the possibility for mass or class struggles and others do not. The difference lies in the type of access which is available in relation to different state apparatuses (Wolpe, 1988:57).

Wolpe suggests that there are at "least two different modes of access to state apparatuses which may have vastly different effects upon the possibilities of class struggles from within these apparatuses" (ibid.). One kind of access leads to the isolation of individuals and to individualised contestation. Another kind, however, which applies to state educational institutions, "provide[s] different conditions for action" (ibid.:58). This is because institutions such as universities "are premised on, and depend on, access of individual subjects ... who are brought into direct relationship with one another" (ibid.). Here "participation" is "a sine qua non of the functioning of the institution and thus establishes an essential condition for the possibility of a politics of participation within such state apparatuses" (ibid.).

> Finally, social analysis, according to Abrams, must recognise the relation of the individual as an agent with purposes, expectations and motives to society as a constraining environment of institutions, values and norms – and that relationship is one which has its real existence ... in the immediate world of history, of sequences of action and reaction in time (1982:7-8).

The relationship between action and structure needs to be "understood as a matter of process in time" (ibid.:xv). Thus, even if the activities of student organisations in South Africa did not constitute an immediate and serious threat to the system of racial and class domination, their struggles might nonetheless weaken the pillars of such domination to the extent that the dominant classes would be impelled to restructure the institutional mechanisms that maintain domination. In this process, new conditions and a significantly altered terrain of struggle could be established which may be more favourable to the efforts of class and popular movements and organisations.

Paying attention to the particular historical conditions under which SASO and SANSCO operated means being sensitive to continuities as well as discontinuities in conditions. This facilitates an understanding of the conditions, problems and challenges that were common to both organisations, and what were distinct to each. Furthermore, it could also contribute to an understanding of the similarities and differences that may have existed between SASO and SANSCO.

Here, the concept of "periodisation" is important

> since it signals the possibility that the historical development of a society, or sectors of it such as the economy or polity, may be demarcated by periods which differ in significant respects from one another (Wolpe, 1988:19).

In this book three historical periods, 1960 to 1976/1977, 1976/1977 to mid-1986, and mid-1986 to 1990, are identified, primarily on the basis of the structure of the political terrain. The analysis of SASO and SANSCO is conducted in relation to these historical periods.

Social Movement Theory

Some of the theoretical development in the field of social movements during the past decade has resulted in considerably more interesting and rigorous analysis of collective phenomena such as the civil rights movement in the United States, the environmental movement in Europe and other forms of collective action. It may be objected that a social movement is an altogether different unit of analysis from an organisation and that the theoretical work in the field of social movements cannot legitimately be applied to the analysis of organisations. It is true that a

clear distinction has already been made between a student organisation and a student movement. It is also the case that some of the innovations within social movement theory would be especially useful for knowledge production with respect to the student movement and other mass movements in South Africa. Nonetheless, the issue of unit of analysis is not a serious barrier to harnessing some contributions within social movement theory to the analysis of organisations.

Analysing social movements

Alberto Melucci, the prominent Italian theorist, conceptualises social movements as "a form of collective action (a) based on solidarity, (b) carrying on a conflict, (c) breaking the limits of the system in which action occurs" (1985:795). The dimension of solidarity involves "actors' mutual recognition that they are part of a single unit" (Melucci, 1989:29), while that of "conflict presupposes adversaries who struggle for something which they recognise as lying between them" (ibid.). Finally, to say that a social movement "breaks the limits of compatibility of a system" means that "its actions violate the boundaries or tolerance limits of a system, thereby pushing the system beyond the range of variations that it can tolerate without altering its structure" (ibid., emphasis in original). The characteristics that Melucci attributes to social movements are, of course, also present in other "collective phenomena" such as popular organisations, which have as their objects the transformation of social relations, institutions and practices. However, the justification for critically drawing on social movement theory relates not only to this recognition. It is also motivated by fact that some of this theory is a fertile source for asking new questions about organisations like SASO and SANSCO and for approaching the issues of their character, role and significance in innovative ways.

Melucci's point of departure is unexceptionable. Collective action, he argues, cannot be viewed

> either as an effect of structural conditions or as an expression of values and beliefs. Collective action is rather the product of purposeful orientations developed within a field of opportunities and constraints (Melucci, 1989:25).

Eyerman and Jamison, who are especially interested in the knowledge production moments of social movements, make essentially the same point. Movements are "at once conditioned by the historical contexts in which they emerge, their particular time and place, and, in turn, affect that context through their cognitive and political praxis" (1991:62). A more important contribution of Melucci is to point to the pitfall of the tendency to treat social movements as a "personage" with a "unitary character", and to reify collective action "into an incontrovertible fact, a given that does not merit further investigation" (1989:18; emphasis in original). However, rather than assume that social movement has a unitary character and treat collective action as a given, Melucci argues that they should be seen as

> action systems operating in a systemic field of possibilities and limits ... Social movements are action systems in that they have structures: the unity and continuity of the action would not be possible without integration and interdependence of individuals and groups ... But movements are action systems in that their structures are built by aims, beliefs, decisions and exchanges operating in a systemic field (1985:793, emphasis in original).

Keane and Mier elaborate on this theme. They argue that social movements should be conceptualised as

> fragile and heterogeneous social constructions. Collective action is always "built" by social actors, and thus what needs to be explained in concrete terms is how movements form, that is, how they manage to mobilise individuals and groups within the framework of possibilities and constraints presented them by the institutions of our complex societies. Collective action must be understood in terms of the processes through which individuals communicate, negotiate, produce meanings, and make decisions within a particular social field or environment. They establish relations with other actors within an already structured context, and through these interactions they produce meanings, express their needs and constantly transform their relationships (Keane and Mier, 1989:4; emphasis in original).

The advantage of taking such an approach to student organisations is it enables fruitful lines of enquiry related to questions such as

1 the recruitment networks and processes through which students were drawn into SASO and SANSCO;

2 the basis of appeals for involvement;

3 the processes through which collective actions were constructed by these formations; and

4 the modes by which organisational continuity was maintained in the face of repressive conditions and the transitory status of students.

The perspective of "social construction" also renders problematic the formation of collective identity within an organisation. Now, identity is not something that an organisation begins with but is the outcome of ongoing processes and activities. This means that objectives, strategies and tactics, sites of struggle and organisational processes and forms are not to be regarded as ready at hand or static but as being socially and collectively formed.

The question of the "cognitive identity" as well as the "cognitive praxis" of social movements has been of special interest to Eyerman and Jamison (1991). One criticism they have of writing on social movements is that

> [t]he particular historical interests that a movement aims to further are not analyzed in the process of being formed, as a central component of movement praxis. The knowledge interests of a social movement are frozen into static, ready-formed packages, providing the issues or ideologies around which movements mobilise resources or socialise individuals (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991:46).

Their response is to stress the historical and social construction of ideas and the active role social movements play in knowledge production. Cognitive praxis they argue

> does not come ready-made to a social movement. It is precisely in the creation, articulation, formulation of new thoughts and ideas – new knowledge – that a social movement defines itself in society (ibid.:55).

Knowledge is the result of social interactions and "a series of social encounters, within movements, between movements, and ... between movements and their established opponents" (ibid.:57). Moreover,

knowledge is produced through debates over meeting agendas, the planning of meetings, campaigns and demonstrations and also exchanges over strategies and tactics. It is also generated in interaction with old movements, old traditions, concepts and values and in the recombination and reinterpretation of intellectual roles and practices.

> "Cognitive praxis", however, is not just aspects of thought but is also forms of social activity to which there are three dimensions. The first, as noted, has to do with the production of the basic assumptions, world-view and goals of a social movement or organisation. Relevant here is Eyerman and Jamison's notion of "movement intellectuals" – "actors who articulate the collective identity that is fundamental to the making of a social movement", who are central to the production and dissemination of ideology, to the theoretical and empirical definition of the opposition, and to the education of new members (ibid.:114-18). Of course, the historical context is bound to condition the particular types of intellectual produced and their forms and roles. The second dimension of cognitive praxis relates to the issues that are identified for criticism and protest and are the targets of opposition. The final dimension concerns the organisational moment – how knowledge is disseminated, how calls to action are made, modes of planning, vehicles and instruments that are employed and internal practice.

Another important insight of Melucci is the need to avoid conceiving social movements in purely political and instrumental terms, for this misses the cultural, expressive and symbolic moments of these movements. Thus, Melucci argues that although the collective actions of social movements may have visible effects – helping bring about institutional change, serving as recruitment grounds for new elites, and cultural innovation relating to new forms of behaviour, social relationships, customs and dress – much of their activities may be interpreted as taking place on a symbolic plane (Melucci, 1989).

The symbolic challenge of social movements takes three main forms. The first is "prophecy", the proposition that alternative frameworks of meaning, in contrast to those that are dominant, are possible. "Paradox" consists of exemplifying, in exaggerated form, that what is termed

"irrational" by dominant groups is actually very true. The final form is "representation", which makes use of the theatre and other visual forms to show contradictions of the social system. All of this helps render "power visible" (Melucci, 1989:76). In this sense, beyond being a challenge to cultural codes, social movements are also laboratories of cultural innovation. Also important, social movements are said to operate as a "sign" or "message" for the rest of society in that they are not just a means to an end. As Melucci puts it,

> the organizational forms of movements are not just "instrumental" for their goals, they are a goal in themselves. Since collective action focuses on cultural codes, the form of the movement is itself a message, a symbolic challenge to the dominant codes (1989:60, emphasis in original).

Thus, he suggests that the continuous rotation of persons in leadership positions and strong emphasis on genuinely participatory forms of democracy in some organisations can be seen as having a deeper significance than was initially thought.

Finally, it is important to comprehend the relationship between the "visible" and "latent" dimensions of collective action. During the latency phase

> the potential for resistance or opposition is sewn into the very fabric of daily life. It is located in the molecular experience of the individuals or groups who practice the alternative meanings of everyday life. Within this context, resistance is not expressed in collective forms of conflictual mobilizations. Specific circumstances are necessary for opposition and therefore of mobilizing and making visible this latent potential (ibid.:70-71).

Thus, phases of latency, far from being periods of inaction, are crucial to the formation and development of abilities and capacities for mobilisation and struggle. Consequently, they deserve attention and analysis in much the same way as do phases of visible mobilisation.

Comparative Literature

With regard to the comparative and international literature on student politics, what pointers do they provide for the analysis of SASO and SANSCO? Here, I have been guided by the assumption that since

SASO and SANSCO formed part of the radical opposition to apartheid, literature on radical student organisations – particularly in social contexts of political authoritarianism – would be most pertinent. This is not to attribute in advance, a radical character to SASO and/or SANSCO. Rather, such a characterisation may be treated as a hypothesis and point of departure for the analysis of the two organisations.

The question of character

Six points can be made about the character of radical student organisations, or with respect to issues that have a bearing on the analysis of their character.

First, regarding the origins of a radical organisation, the comments of Maravall are useful. Writing about student radicalism in Spain under Franco, Maravall states that,

> [b]ecause of the constraints that non-democratic political conditions present, student radicalism often has a minoritarian, elitist origin. In these circumstances, access to available ideological alternatives is restricted and becomes the privilege of a few ... The militant has, then, very distinctive features which make him non-representative of the student population as a whole (1978:119).

The militant politicised student is likely to be the product of a "deviant political socialisation", and/or of contact with surviving "political groups ... not ... totally eradicated by repression" (ibid.:166-167).

Second, a radical student organisation is likely to draw attention to the links between education and politics, and emphasise the continuum between student life and life as a member of an (often oppressed) community and between student politics and national politics. Third, if one is to distinguish between student organisations in terms of whether they are norm-oriented (taking up immediate and limited issues, and focusing on specific goals) or value-oriented (taking up longer-term issues, linking educational and political issues, and focusing on general social goals), a radical organisation is more often of the latter type. Thus, for black university students in colonial Zimbabwe, student issues "appear[ed] inconsequential" and the target was the state, because at stake was the destiny of Zimbabwe (Cefkin, 1975:146). However,

many radical organisations also take up immediate issues and organise around specific goals, but attempt to transcend immediate issues and link specific goals with broader political and organisational goals. Moreover, a relationship of some sort may exist between a radical organisation and norm-orientated organisations, and members of the former may also be members of organisations of the latter kind.

Fourth, a radical student organisation is often a collective of students "inspired by aims set forth in a specific ideological doctrine, usually ... political in nature" (Altbach, 1967:82). Fifth, although a radical organisation may have a small membership, its members often display a high level of commitment. In addition, members frequently work in other campus and off-campus organisations. Finally, a radical organisation is often influenced by and/or affiliated to off-campus political organisations and parties. National political issues and struggles are brought onto the campuses and the potential of the organisation in certain areas may be harnessed by political organisations. Conversely, political guidance and assistance may be sought by the radical organisation from off-campus political activists and groups.

The issue of role

The comparative literature on the role of student organisations is not only descriptive but, occasionally, also prescriptive. That is, there is both analysis of the role that student organisations and students generally have played in political struggles in both advanced and underdeveloped capitalist countries, and arguments around the role that they ought to play. There is no point in detailing the myriad activities students in various countries have engaged in. Many of these activities are highly specific to conditions in particular social formations and, as Emmerson has argued, it is important to recognise "the vital influence of diverse national conditions on the political roles ... of university students' (1968:391-92). Instead, I will briefly outline the interesting perspectives of Cockburn (1969) and Lenin (1961a-e) on the role radical student organisations ought to play in relation to political and educational struggles, and sketch some of the general roles that have been played by student organisations.

Cockburn argues that the aim of the student movement should be to forge a revolutionary alliance with the working class (1969:15). The role of students is, however, not conceived as external to revolutionary politics – that is, defined only in terms of expressions of solidarity with the working class. Instead, "once the student movement is committed to an alliance with the working class it can begin to explore the specific contribution it can itself make to the general revolutionary cause" (ibid.). An important rider to the above is that if the student movement is to make an effective contribution to revolutionary struggle it has to "first be itself" (ibid.:16). The implication is that the contribution of the student movement to revolutionary politics will be enhanced if it concentrates on student mobilisation, establishes a strong organisation and defines a distinct role for itself. In this regard, it is asserted that the real power of students resides in the universities and colleges, and means have to be found to challenge the authoritarian structures and undemocratic practices of higher education institutions and to extend and consolidate student power. Thus, educational institutions are defined as important arenas and sites of struggle in the overall battle against bourgeois power. Cockburn wrote in the immediate aftermath of student militancy in France, Britain and elsewhere in 1968, and his conception of the role and tasks of students and their organisations was thus informed by the concrete experiences and lessons of the 1968 student struggles.

Lenin, scornful of "the over-clever contention that bourgeois students cannot become imbued with socialism" (1961d:42), was also of the view that student organisations and students had an important role to play in revolutionary struggles. Writing in mid-1903, Lenin welcomed the "growing revolutionary initiative among the student youth" and called on the Bolshevik party organisation to help the students organise themselves (1961b:471; 1961c:509). However, Lenin argued for a particular approach to the organisation of students. He was in full agreement with an editorial in the September 1903 edition of the Student, a revolutionary student newspaper, which argued that "revolutionary sentiments alone cannot bring about ideological unity among the students', but that this "requires a socialist ideal based upon one or another Socialist world outlook" (Lenin, 1961d:43). For Lenin, the editorial represented a break "in principle with ideological

indifference ... and ... put the question of the way to revolutionise students on a proper footing" (ibid.), since talk about "ideological unity" among students in the context of a heterogeneous student body was absurd. According to Lenin, the phrase "ideological unity" could have only two implications: winning over the mass of students to a particular ideology and politics, and attracting them to off-campus groups with the same ideology.

The task of social-democrat students was not to "gloss over" the differences in the student body "but on the contrary, to explain it as widely as possible and to embody it in a political organisation" (Lenin, 1961d:53). Social-democrat students had to have their own autonomous organisation since

> only on the basis of a perfectly definite programme can and should one work among the widest student circles to broaden their academic outlook and to propagate scientific socialism, i.e. Marxism (ibid.:50).

This insistence on an autonomous social-democratic student organisation and stress on political work on the basis of a "definite programme" does not mean that Lenin rejected general student councils or unions or that he considered academic issues to be unimportant. On the contrary, student unions were seen as important and it was stressed that

> when the Social-Democratic student breaks with the revolutionary and politically-minded people of all the other trends, this by no means implies the break-up of the general student and educational organisations (ibid.).

Although on certain occasions an emphasis on purely academic issues could detract from political issues, and it was then correct to oppose academicism, in general, and especially during periods of political calm, it was imperative to support an academic movement, to work within it, and attempt to transform it into a political movement. During this process, through agitation and active participation, new students could be won over to social-democratic thinking and organisation could be expanded and strengthened.

The above represents the perspectives of a veteran of the 1968 struggles, and those of one of the leading theoreticians and strategists of

the 1917 Russian revolution on the role that student organisations ought to play in social struggles. What, however, are some of the roles that student organisations and students have played in political struggles in colonial social formations and in contexts of political authoritarianism?

> First, in relation to broader political resistance, students have acted as catalysts for the mass movement; more, they acted as initiators of mass action, following up their own demonstrations and activities with a call for a general strike (Woddis, 1972:318).

Thus, they have the potential to ignite a "more general conflagration" (Cockburn, 1969:16), and play a powerful role as "detonator" (Mandel, 1969:52). Second, students have actively assisted in the formation and development of local-level popular organisations (Hamilton, 1968:373-78). Third, they have helped with the propaganda and organisational activities of pamphlet and poster distribution, announcements of meetings, and so on (ibid.). Fourth, student organisations have inducted students into a political culture and have provided a training ground for the development of political activists (Myr, 1968:280).

Fifth, they have also served a recruitment function in relation to political and popular organisations (Hobsbawm, 1973:260). Thus, Altbach writing about the Bombay Students' Union has commented: "the students were a valuable source of active cadres in the trade union movement. Students are an active element in the Congress" (quoted in Woddis, 1972:318). Finally, under repressive conditions, student organisations have been outlets for the views of banned organisations, on occasion even speaking for and promoting such organisations (Hamilton, 1968:373-78). It is suggested that such a role was made possible by the greater freedom enjoyed by students relative to other dominated social groupings.

Student organisation: constraints, challenges and possibilities

The extent to which a student organisation is able to play all, some, or any, of the various roles outlined above is, of course, conditioned by what Emmerson has called "the vital influence of diverse national conditions" (1968:391) as well as the internal characteristics of an organisation. However, beyond "national conditions" there are also

others factors related to the student situation and the educational arena which both challenge and constrain – and also facilitate – student action.

A student organisation's role and character is also conditioned by the manner in which it copes with particular problems related to the student situation, deals with certain practical organisational issues and, by the nature of its relationships, with other class and popular organisations. A major problem facing any student organisation is the transitory status of students, long breaks in the academic year and the demands placed on students by examinations. There is often a near-100 per cent turnover of the student body within a short space of time; breaks in the academic year can have the effects of disrupting ongoing activities; and examination periods may mean a general diminishing of the level of student activity. This means student organisations may often be "impermanent and discontinuous" (Hobsbawm, 1973:261), finding it difficult to maintain a continuity of activity, organisation and perhaps even of programme and ideology.

A second challenge is that of the recruitment and training of the membership. Where organisations are treated with hostility by educational authorities, recruitment becomes an especially difficult matter. Beyond this, general political conditions within a social formation may inhibit recruitment. Apart from recruitment, the education and training of its membership is especially crucial for an organisation inspired by a radical ideology and a definite political programme.

Finance is a third problem confronting a student organisation. The availability of finances may either facilitate the expansion and activities of an organisation or may constitute a severe impediment to its progress and development. Especially when an organisation operates at a national level, finances may also affect the process of decision making and democratic participation within the organisation. How an organisation addresses these organisational challenges has a bearing on whether it is "impermanent" or more lasting.

Finally, the relationships that a student organisation develops with other non-student class and popular organisations are bound also to condition its activities and role, as well as its character and significance. With reference to the relations between student and worker movements,

Hobsbawm has pointed to the need to achieve a confluence, suggesting that if such a confluence is not realised the student movement could well become characterised by "brief brush fires and relapses into passivity by the majority", coupled with student activists engaging in "frenzied ultra-left gestures" (Hobsbawm, 1973:265). Whether, in what ways, and to what extent a confluence was achieved between SASO and SANSCO and popular formations requires analysis.

However, it needs to be kept in mind that various social groupings and organisations are not all capable of orientating themselves equally swiftly, or of organising either with the same rhythm or in parallel. Or, as Hobsbawm puts it with reference to students and workers: "The two groups are evidently not moved in the same way, in the same direction, by the same forces and motives" (ibid.:258). This means that united political action by student, worker and other organisations may not always be possible under all conditions and that tensions could develop between student organisations and others around issues of political strategy, tactics, campaigns, and so on.

With respect to facilitating conditions, the fact that students generally do not have families to support means that they are less tied down and more mobile. Moreover, their congregation, often in large numbers, on campuses makes communication, mobilisation and organisation somewhat easier. Furthermore, higher educational institutions, by virtue of their role in knowledge production and dissemination, may often provide greater political space for militant activities and resistance. Thus, despite the real constraints that student organisations face, there also exist conditions which facilitate mobilisation and organisation and which ensure that students are strategically well placed for political action.

What all of the above point to, then, is the extent to which the role and character of a student organisation are "over-determined" by a large number of elements which are both internal and external to the organisation. Membership, ideology, programme – but equally the student situation, social structure, and the nature of the educational and political terrain – all need to be considered in the analysis of the character and role of a student organisation.

Interpreting Character, Role and Significance

The foregoing discussion on social structure, the contributions of social movement theory and the comparative literature on student politics, has illuminated the themes, issues and questions that are pertinent to the analysis of SASO and SANSCO. What remains to be addressed is the important issue of the specific approach and criteria to be employed in the assessment of SASO and SANSCO.

Beyond class location

One tendency in the literature on student politics is to read off the political character and significance of students and, thus implicitly, of student organisations, from the location of students in the class structure. The outbreak of militant student resistance in advanced capitalist social formations during the late 1960s led to considerable debate among radical intellectuals around the class location of students and their political significance. On the one hand students, because of their social origins and social destination upon completion of their higher education, were seen as part of the traditional middle class. Theorists of this position argued that students were not an important political force. Essentially middle class, only a few students would be won over to the working class, which was designated as the only politically revolutionary class (Jones, 1969:26-30). On the other hand, a theorist like Mandel, pointing to changes within the capitalist production process, conceptualised students as future "white collar employees of the state or industry, and thus part of the great mass of salaried workers" (1969:49). This led him to argue that "an urgent task is the integration of the students into the workers" movement. Yes, the workers" movement must win back the student movement, particularly in as much as the students are workers" (ibid.:51). Thus, students were seen as part of a vanguard movement for socialist change and accorded considerable political significance.

The fundamental problem of the approaches that conceptualise students as traditional middle class or working class is that they all read off the political character and significance of students from their defined

location in the class structure. As a result the political potential of students is either under-emphasised or overstated.

The student situation

More cogent and useful for this investigation is the conceptualisation of students implicit in the work of Poulantzas (1978) on social classes. For Poulantzas, the mental-manual labour division is one of three important distinctions in defining social classes. Professionals, scientists and skilled technicians are seen as constituting the "new petit bourgeoisie", the chief characteristic of this class being the involvement of its members, by and large, on the mental side of the division of labour. Higher education institutions, particular universities, it is suggested, must be located in relation to the mental-manual labour division. The role of these institutions is to socialise, train and distribute agents within the class structure, but is especially crucial in the training of mental labour and the reproduction of the new petit bourgeoisie (Poulantzas, 1978:259). The training of higher education students as mental labour, means that the class trajectory of their education is one that leads them to largely a new petit bourgeois class location. However, since students stand outside production relations (though not outside ideological relations) and experience a social situation different from other members of the new petit bourgeoisie, they can be best treated as a distinct fraction of the new petit bourgeoisie.

If in terms of a structural determination of classes, students constitute a distinct fraction of the new petit bourgeoisie, what of their long-term class-political position? Poulantzas affirms a thesis of most Marxist theorists that the petit bourgeoisie "has no long-run autonomous class political position" (ibid.:297). The class position of the new petit bourgeoisie will be polarised between the class positions of the bourgeoisie and the working class, the balance of class forces between the two fundamental classes playing an important role in determining the political orientation of the new petit bourgeoisie.

In the case of students, their social situation is also likely to be a crucial factor. In this regard, Jones has argued that

> any characterisation of students as a social group must simultaneously encompass student origins, the student situation itself and

> the social destination of students ... These three "moments" are not, however, of interchangeable weight or significance. They form a complex whole, dominated by one structure – the student situation (1969:34-35, emphasis in original).

The importance of Jones's argument is the recognition that "from a political perspective, it is ... the student situation itself which has overriding priority" (ibid.:35). The synthesis of the arguments of Poulantzas (1978) and Jones (1969) provides an approach which, although it locates students firmly within the class structure, leaves open-ended the class position and political potential of students. The political position and significance of students in any conjuncture cannot be simply read off from their location in the class structure. Instead, it is a question that can only be settled by the empirical examination of their specific situation within a particular social formation.

The question of political terrain

An important implication of the above argument is that the class location of the membership of an organisation is, on its own, an insufficient indicator of the character of an organisation and its potential significance. This accords well with the important theses advanced by Nolutshungu following his brilliant analysis of the Black Consciousness movement of the 1970s. Nolutshungu argues as follows:

1 The class-relatedness of a political movement (i.e. its role in the class struggle) is not decided by its organisational affiliations, blueprints, or, even, the objective class membership of its empirical representatives.

2 The revolutionary significance of a political movement, whatever its class character, is not determined solely by its own internal characteristics (programmes, ideologies and organisations) but also by the nature of the political terrain and the effects of that terrain on its political practice (1983:200).

Nolutshungu's argument, of course, extends well beyond that of membership. Its strength lies in

1 the emphasis it places on the conditioning of political practice by "terrain"; and

2 the need for the character and significance of an organisation to be interpreted in relation to prevailing structural and conjunctural conditions.

Rootes, in analysing the consequences of student actions, emphasises that the "political significance of student movements varies according to their social and political circumstances" (1980:473). In the context of South Africa, given the historically specific relationship between racism and capitalism, national oppression and class domination, essentially nationalist movements and nationalist struggles can undermine and weaken capitalism. As Nolutshungu notes,

> [w]hile nationalist movements are to be distinguished from class movements, they may and often do provide the medium in which class struggles can develop, and can, in their own right, severely weaken the ideological and political supports of the order of class exploitation (1983:147).

The implication of this is that

> a nationalist movement can be revolutionary in a Marxist sense, despite its lack of a revolutionary organisation or, even, ideology. It is revolutionary to the degree that the structures against which it struggles are essential to the survival of the order of class relations ... and to the degree that it is inherently disposed to develop, as the struggle proceeds, in a revolutionary direction (organisationally, ideologically and in point of social composition) (ibid.:199).

Interpretation, then, cannot revolve purely around questions of membership, doctrines and organisation but must also incorporate the educational and political terrain on which SASO and SANSCO operated and their actual effects on this terrain. As Piven and Cloward put it, "what was won must be judged by what was possible" (1979:xiii). Moreover. to paraphrase them, the "relevant question to ask is whether, on balance", SASO and SANSCO "made gains or lost ground; whether they" advanced the interests" of the dominated classes and social groups or "set back those interests" (ibid.).

In summary, it is clear that there is no quick and easy path to interpreting the character, role and significance of SASO and SANSCO. This is, of course, a consequence of the nature of the

"problematic" that I have just sketched. Alternative problematics for approaching the principal object of this book are no doubt available. However, although they might offer considerably simpler, faster and straightforward routes to interpretation, they would be likely to result in analysis which is superficial and lacking in rigour and ultimately would produce incorrect assessments.

Answers to the questions on the character, role and significance of SANSCO and SASO entail answers to numerous prior questions. With respect to character, questions are included that relate to the ideological and political orientations of SASO and SANSCO; their conceptions of the South African social order; the programmes, objectives, principles, and policies of these two organisations and the social and political determinants of these; the organisational structure and internal operations of SASO and SANSCO and their relations with other organisations; and their repertoires of collective action.

The issue of the roles of the two student organisations requires analysis of how they conceived their roles and the reasons for their conceptions; the principal themes and issues around which they mobilised and organised and why these themes were accorded priority; how members, supporters and sympathisers were mobilised or/and educated; what was done to ensure organisational continuity, and similar issues. The question of significance involves an examination of the importance of their specific and general activities, and of their effects and consequences; it also involves an analysis of what they achieved, made possible and contributed distinctively. Moreover, key issues are how, in what ways and to what extent did the objectives, principles and policies and practices of SASO and SANSCO contribute to reproducing, undermining or transforming social relations, institutions and practices?

Finally, it has been argued that, ultimately, the character, role and significance of SASO and SANSCO cannot be read off purely from their internal characteristics. That is to say, the meanings to be attached to their character, role and significance must also take into account the real social conditions, the "given and inherited circumstances", under which they were obliged to make history and indeed made history.