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## The Character, Role and Significance of SASO

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In this chapter I now interpret the character, role and significance of SASO. To this end, I draw on the analysis of the previous two chapters, the chapters that analysed conditions in the political and higher education spheres during SASO's existence, as well as the conceptual framework elaborated in Chapter 1. Moreover, I also draw on the key literature that analyses in some detail SASO or, more generally, the Black Consciousness (BC) movement of the 1968 to 1977 period.<sup>5.1</sup>

Such literature is limited. Indeed, only four examples can be cited: a chapter of Gjerhart's *Black Power in South Africa* (1978); Hiron's *Year of Fire, Year of Ash* (1979), which is primarily concerned with the 1976 Soweto uprising; the final section of Nolutshungu's *Changing South Africa: Political Considerations* (1982), and Fatton's *Black Consciousness in South Africa: The Dialectics of Ideological Resistance to White Supremacy* (1986). Other literature advances arguments around SASO and the BC movement in the context of more general analyses of black politics (Lodge, 1983), enquiries into the post-1976 political terrain and resistance (Price, 1991; Marx, 1992), analyses of the Soweto uprising (Brooks and Brickhill, 1980), investigations of one or other aspect of BC (Pityana, et al., 1991) and studies of particular political themes such as the "national question" (No Sizwe, 1979). Since some of this literature provides certain useful insights and advances interesting views about SASO, I also draw on it.

Of the four key investigations of SASO and the BC movement, those of Nolutshungu, Gjerhart and Fatton assess SASO in generally

positive terms, and only Hirson's tends towards a strongly negative interpretation. As will be noted, I largely agree with both the framework of analysis employed by Nolutshungu and his assessment of SASO's character, role and significance. Concomitantly, I strongly disagree with Hirson's interpretation of SASO. Since evaluations are conditioned by frameworks of assumptions and/or a particular mode of analysis, as part of my disagreement with Hirson I also critique the "problematic" that he employs for interpreting SASO.

## Character of SASO

According to Nolutshungu, "SASO ... was not a political party, had no well-defined ideology, programme of action or code of internal discipline ... It was primarily a students' organisation" (1982:149, 193). It was "led by intellectual, "middle-class" youth, and spoke to people very like themselves, most of the time, and ... had only limited and intermittent organisational contact with workers" (Nolutshungu, 1982:161). However, although essentially composed of university students and not a "political party", SASO attempted to transform prevailing social relations in the education and political spheres and its goals were clearly political. Thus, using Burawoy's definition of politics, it is best understood as a student political organisation.

Gerhart locates SASO within the "school of African nationalist thought in South Africa" which "emphasised racially exclusive strategies for the overthrow of white domination" (1978:3). Its precursors are considered to be the "Africanist" factions within the ANC during the 1940s and 1950s and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). She recognises that an important difference between SASO and the Africanists, however, was that SASO did not exclude Indians and Coloureds but defined them as part of the oppressed and, thus, as also "black".

Fatton argues that SASO reflected a rupture with liberalism and white values and norms. It also signalled the emergence of a new philosophy, Black Consciousness, which embodied four key elements: an ideology capable of ending mental subordination to white values; a critique of liberalism which included an attack on its cultural, moral and other norms; the definition of all blacks as oppressed; and black solidarity as the basis of ending oppression. For Fatton, the doctrine of BC was a

seminal contribution of SASO because political struggle requires not only organisation, but also the formulation and diffusion of an ideology to displace that of the ruling class. SASO's virtue was to give considerable attention to consciousness, and it understood that "... every revolution has been preceded by an intense labour of social criticism, of cultural penetration and diffusion" (Gramsci, cited by Fatton, 1986:61).

SASO "inherited from ASA and ASUSA a sense of the essential unity of the black student movement with the cause of national liberation in general" (Brooks and Brickhill, 1980:73). However, unlike ASA and ASUSA, SASO was not the student wing of the ANC, PAC or any political organisation. It was, politically and organisationally, an independent national student political formation. Any alignment with the banned liberation movements would, of course, have been the death-knell of SASO. However, the avoidance of the political partisanship associated with ASA and ASUSA related essentially to the desire to be inclusive of the vast majority of black students. Biko had sought that "differences of approach should not cloud the issue" (1987:7) and thus an organisational culture was created that enabled different political loyalties to co-exist, but also be relatively submerged, within SASO.

If one innovative feature of SASO was the creation of an inclusive political culture, another was its organisational form and strategy. With respect to this there had been the important questions of whether a commitment to a future non-racial society necessarily entailed conducting the struggle through non-racial organisation and structured contact with white or multiracial organisations and, second, whether organisational composition and strategy should be determined entirely by principles and goals or also by structural and political conditions. The view of SASO's founders was that the different lived experiences of black and white students generated very different, and even contradictory, interests. Moreover, white leadership and organisational domination of multiracial organisations was seen as an obstacle to the active and meaningful participation of blacks in the liberation struggle. These realities then dictated the need for exclusive black organisation and, by severing the ostensibly indissoluble link between goals and strategy, SASO set an important example for the generation of student organisations that were to follow. Of course, it does not follow that exclusive black organisation

logically entails a ban on all structured contact with white or multiracial organisations. That it did in the case of SASO was the result of the conflation of multiracial and white organisation with liberal organisation, something that would be avoided by SANSCO.

One of the issues of especial concern to Nolutshungu is the political character of SASO. Did SASO essentially advance petit bourgeois interests in opposition to specifically worker interests? Put another way, did the quest for black solidarity and unity without an appreciation of the different and contradictory class interests among blacks in effect make SASO a petit bourgeois reformist organisation that served middle-class interests alone. Nolutshungu's view is that BC doctrine was "instrumental and secondary to the opposition it sought to mobilise – at the level of consciousness – against attempts to consolidate and "modernise" white racialist rule" (1982:193). What were crucial, ultimately, was not SASO's formal theses, policy statements and utterances, but what the doctrine of BC "made possible".

If the BC movement represented the interest of the "petit bourgeoisie as a whole in the reordering of the South African political system ... that in itself, and in context, was not contradictory to the interests of other classes of blacks" (Nolutshungu, 1982:196). Granted, the black population was not homogeneous and there were different social classes and class interests. However, it

does not follow that the area of common opposition to the state form may not produce a struggle that is revolutionary – undermining the existing political and ideological supports of capitalism without being able to establish alternative ones ... (ibid.:198-199).

In South Africa this possibility was enhanced by the myriad economic and social disabilities experienced by the black petit bourgeoisie and the lack of political rights and oppression that it suffered in common with black workers. A struggle led by the black petit bourgeoisie against solely racial and national domination could also win rights and opportunities for the working-class and create the political space and conditions for the erosion of capitalism.

For Nolutshungu, nationalist movements can, in certain contexts and circumstances, be revolutionary. He advances the important argument that is not necessary to

decide whether black consciousness was revolutionary or not in a Marxist sense by reference to its organisation and doctrines, or the empirical characteristics of its leaders, in the first place. Far more decisive are the necessary implications of its objective political situation and practice; in short, the form of the political terrain and how it was bound to move on that terrain (Nolutshungu, 1982:199).

SASO "was a product of revolutionary circumstances which was itself driven to a profoundly subversive political role" (ibid.:201). It helped ignite, in the form of the Soweto uprising, a political conflagration that reshaped political relations in South Africa. In so doing, it hardly promoted purely middle-class interests at the expense of worker interests. Thus, " ... there cannot be much difficulty in recognising the black consciousness movement as having been revolutionary" (ibid.:200).

SASO's organisation of the pro-FRELIMO rallies and its support of the school-student demonstration that sparked the Soweto uprising illustrated the impact of changing circumstances. SASO generally did not favour "demonstrations after the fact" which changed nothing" (ibid.:185). A speech in 1973 by the SASO president, Henry Isaacs, exemplified this position very well, if it also revealed the sheer idealism and illusions of some SASO leaders. Isaacs argued that the oppressive system in South Africa would "only be changed by a demonstration of solidarity and faith in ourselves as Blacks" (SASO 1973g:3-4). While justifiably sceptical of appeals to morality and deputations and petitions, he also asserted that "protests in such a society are meaningless" (ibid.). All that he was then able to offer was that "Our only hope lies in our solidarity and Black Consciousness is a strong foundation for this" (ibid.). SASO, however, organised the pro-FRELIMO rallies and supported the 1976 school student demonstration because "passions had been aroused among members, and the desire for action was widely and acutely felt" (Nolutshungu, 1982:185). Moreover, the banning of SASO leaders and pressure "from the state was a taunt and a goad to action" (ibid.). Thus, despite the idealism of leaders like Isaacs, SASO " ... showed in its own

development a tendency towards social radicalism that reflected both the political and economic circumstances in which it arose" (ibid.:147).

Nolutshungu's characterisation of SASO as a revolutionary nationalist student political organisation would not find favour with Hirson (1979). He contends that, although SASO activists and black students were deeply angry and frustrated with the social system, "nonetheless their petit bourgeois aspirations coloured their entire outlook" (Hirson, 1979:284). He criticises the student activists because "they looked inwards to their own problems. They sought "awareness", "self-identity", "liberation from psychological oppression", and some mythical "black value-system" (ibid.). He is also critical of their failure to establish contact with workers and become involved in worker struggles, and alleges that "they were curiously insensitive to the broader struggles around them" (ibid.:283).

Hirson accuses SASO activists of "obscurantist" statements, "unreal" notions and "unrealistic" views in relation to political goals, strategy and conduct. He lambastes them for making people "dream dreams" without a realistic assessment of the strength of the state and of popular forces, without adequate preparation for struggle and defence in the face of repressive actions and for failing to comprehend the "logistics of the political struggle in South Africa" (ibid.:110-12). Finally, he criticises them for failing to give leadership to the school students during the Soweto uprising, for the "absence of organisation, ideology or strategy", for there being "no plans, no ideas on what should be done" (ibid.: 9). Hirson does acknowledge that SASO contributed to the political awakening of students and sections of the youth and to the mood that resulted in the Soweto uprising. He also recognises that "the young leaders of SASO ... were inexperienced" (ibid.). Nonetheless, his overall characterisation of SASO is that it was an essentially reformist organisation, and a purveyor of petit bourgeois politics based on a petit bourgeois ideology.<sup>5.2</sup> Moreover, not only was SASO not radical, but "... in all its outpourings, the Black Consciousness Movement was apolitical" (ibid.:297).<sup>5.3</sup>

Hirson confesses that his book "is by no means impartial", that he writes as one committed to the "South African revolution", and says his

intention is to "help the forces of socialism and liberation" to realise a free South Africa (ibid.:2). Much as I identify with his commitments, I strongly disagree with his interpretation of SASO. His appraisal is, ultimately, the result of certain assumptions and a particular mode of analysis and thus it is important to engage with them.

First, although Hirson seemingly is aware that "race" is an important dimension of social relations in South Africa, his preoccupation with social class means that "race" is essentially subsumed under class, and racialism is treated simply as an epiphenomenon of class relations. The effect is that racialism is accorded little significance as an independent material reality and there is little appreciation of the way it may shape and structure the responses of dominated classes and groups.

SASO activists witnessed all around them white power, domination, and privilege, and the essential unity of whites of all classes in the defence of white supremacy, and concomitant black subordination and impoverishment, and fear, apathy, and resignation. Confronted by these experiences, it is understandable that they concluded that "race" was the primary line of cleavage and that they counterpoised black solidarity and unity in opposition to white power. If SASO activists attacked the white staff at higher education institutions, the white press and white liberals, these targets were defined by their lived experiences. Moreover, the ideological postulates of BC, black assertiveness and pride, and non-Eurocentrism were

an inevitable and historically progressive by-product of the anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist struggles of the 20th century. It is the revenge of the slave on the master and, for the present, it wants to negate whatever is associated with the master (No Sizwe, 1979:122).

The lived experience of apartheid was, however, not the only factor that structured the response of the SASO activists and, here, Hirson does not fully appreciate the historical conditions under which SASO arose and operated. The SASO activists were a generation, born largely in the decade after 1945, that was too young to have been involved in, or to have paid close attention to, the mass political struggles of the 1950s, the suppression of the liberation organisations and the harsh repression of the early 1960s. As Brooks and Brickhill put it, the activists of SASO

grew up largely immobilised, unsupported and uneducated by ongoing, day to day struggles of the sort which had previously carried the South African liberation movement into the vanguard of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism (1980:69).

In conditions of strong repression of dissent and an extensive apartheid security apparatus, black youth seeking solutions to the obvious injustice of white supremacy would have been mostly counselled by their elders to leave politics well alone. Hence, the SASO activists also constituted "a generation which ... had to make its own way in the world" (Brooks and Brickhill, 1980:70).

This insight is confirmed by two SASO leaders. Mji refers to the BC period as one "in which there was a disconnection between the historical evolution of the struggle" (quoted in Frederikse, 1990:117). Lekota states:

I regard my days in SASO as my formative years, politically ... We were deprived of the wealth of the heritage of struggle which others who had gone before us had already amassed. We moved into this as virgins, completely (quoted in Frederikse, 1990:133).

Lekota is also candid about the inexperience and limitations of SASO activists and about SASO being an elementary school of politics. In the light of the above, Hirson is much too harsh in his scathing criticism of SASO, and especially in regard to its "failure to work out a strategy by means of which the apartheid system could be undermined and then destroyed" (Hirson, 1979:119). Implicit in Hirson's analysis is the belief that things could have been different. His expectations of SASO are, however, highly unrealistic and, especially in relation to the Soweto uprising, he demands of it, decimated as it was by repression, the kind of leadership that could only have been provided by mature, experienced and practised revolutionaries.

Hirson also claims that SASO activists "seemed to respond with the heart rather than the mind" (1979:9), while Frankel asserts that BC was characterised by "an emphasis on the primacy of experience which seems to make concrete rationalisation and expression not only unnecessary but positively untoward" (quoted in Kotze, 1975:79). Certainly, "lived experience" was important in shaping SASO activists – but to conclude, as Frankel seems to, that SASO was irrational or anti-intellectual is to fail



to understand its real nature and the influence of historical conditions. If SASO cadres did tend to "respond with the heart", it was because they were isolated and had to make their "own way in the world". If they sensed which values, beliefs, relations and social behaviour they rejected, they were not necessarily able to "name", systematically comprehend, and draw connections between, these. If their

ideas were seldom put forward in fully developed arguments they signified a groping by young students, often with inadequate equipment, for intellectual support for what they believed they felt and knew, ultimately – independently of theories (Nolutshungu, 1982:157).

Ultimately, SASO cadres had to fashion their views and conduct from what was available in terms of literature and ideas, and whatever their illusions and naiveté, at least the ideological and political battle against white supremacy had been joined.

Mji has made the point that "you must remember that our political development was not from a textbook: it was from participating in events that were happening at the time ..." (quoted in Frederikse, 1990:117-18). This leads to my third criticism of Hirson: that his approach to SASO's doctrine and strategy is rather static and pays little attention to unfolding processes and the overall path of their development. Hirson is aware that by the mid-1970s there began to be some questioning of a solely "race" based analysis of the South African social order. Early SASO leaders had refused to attach any importance to "class" and had rejected class analysis. This was not surprising since the "class analysis" that they had been exposed to treated race as an epiphenomenon of class. Now, however, under the influence of the revolutions in Mozambique and Angola and contact with the ANC, the saliency of class began to be posed, a Marxist-inspired critique of capitalism and imperialism began to emerge and political and organisational strategies also began to be called into question. These developments were nipped by the Soweto uprising and subsequent repression but not completely erased, and debates around these issues continued after the banning of SASO in October 1977.

At the same time, following contact with the exiled liberation movements, there was greater discussion around the issue of a transition

from efforts around “psychological liberation” towards those of “physical liberation” and around the question of armed struggle. The point is that, contra Hirson, the character and identity of SASO and its role was not permanently settled or fixed by its doctrinal statements. It is also not at all evident that student struggles under SASO were about black students securing “positions of (comparative) affluence after graduation” (Hirson, 1979:69). SASO’s ideological, political and strategic dispositions were not static, and throughout its existence SASO reflected a dynamism and openness to new ideas. Indeed, whatever its limitations, and there were many, the history of SASO shows a disposition towards developing ideologically, politically and organisationally in a more radical direction.<sup>5.4</sup>

Finally, Hirson appears to reserve the term “revolutionary” exclusively for formations adhering to Marxism, and committed to class analysis and the struggle for socialism. However, in a context where racial and national oppression nourished capitalism, it is incorrect to designate as “revolutionary” only organisations committed to socialism and to characterise nationalist formations like SASO as petit bourgeois and reformist. Nolutshungu correctly argues that while nationalist movements which challenge national and racial domination 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 (1982:147).

He adds that

[i]t is in this sense 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 ... (ibid.:199).

Thus, even if “there was little that was specifically radical” (Hirson, 1979:109) in the ideas or projects of SASO, its character is not a question of just doctrine and organisation but also of its effects on the political terrain. What is important, following Poulantzas (1978), is the political position of SASO in the conjuncture rather than a reading off of its character from simply its class composition or policy statements (see

Chapter 1). In these terms, as will be underlined by the consideration of its role and significance, there can be no doubt that SASO was, if nationalist, also a revolutionary formation.

Turning to the internal organisational character of SASO, within SASO there were informal modes of working, much was left to individual initiative, action and spontaneity was encouraged and considerable latitude was allowed for "individual expression and spontaneity" (Nolutshungu, 1982:151). Concomitantly, the leadership displayed a willingness to canvass ideas and views around important political, organisational and strategic issues with one another, and with other members and political figures. The boundaries of thought and action were "defined as much by a spontaneous community of outlook as by the written principles of SASO" (ibid.:173). The element of spontaneity shaped SASO's relation to the state in two differing ways. On the one hand, there was a refusal to consider the state as omnipotent and all vigilant and thus a unwillingness to accommodate to the "system", and indeed, an attitude of defiance towards everything associated with the state. On the other hand, spontaneity also meant being "less conscious of tactical and strategic subtleties and, therefore, also less conscious of security risks" (ibid.).

The features of spontaneity and defiance that characterised SASO deserve greater emphasis and comment. SASO was characterised by tremendous initiative and an almost uncompromising militancy. At a time when fear, apathy and resignation to white domination reigned, the SASO activists not only "believed that radical political activity could still be undertaken within the constraints of the legal and political structures of apartheid", but indeed pushed "to the limit the bounds of possibility ... in order to confront and undermine the system" (Pityana, 1991a:202). Using the limited political space provided by the black universities, the founders of SASO carved for themselves an organisational niche and formulated, elaborated, and diffused the doctrine of BC outward and upward towards black professionals and intellectuals, and downward towards black school students and youth. In a number of arenas – educational, cultural, political – "current and former SASO members were well to the fore in the years leading up to the 1976 uprising – energetic, creative and uninhibitedly militant" (Brooks and

Brickhill, 1980:74). Not surprisingly, SASO was the indisputable organisational and intellectual vanguard of the BC movement.

However, considerably more than just spontaneity and initiative characterised SASO. Overall, it was also characterised by a distinct and strong voluntarism. This was manifested in SASO's tendency to "underestimate the power of the state and its willingness to use force ruthlessly to suppress opposition" (Nolutshungu, 1982:174). In the previous chapter I also noted the tendency of SASO leaders to underplay the impact of the repression and to blame membership and infrastructural weaknesses on purely subjective and internal factors. The strong voluntarism was, however, especially evident in relation to SASO's projects and community development initiatives, the vast majority of which arose during a one-year period between mid-1971 and mid-1972. A SASO publication triumphantly proclaimed that "for SASO the year 1972 must be regarded as the most productive and historic of her existence. It was in this year that many of her plans were put into effect" (SASO, 1973a:5). Community development initiatives are described as being "methodically brought into operation". Indeed, "so much progress was made" by community projects that "it became necessary for SASO to increase her staff". Moreover,

Publications, Literacy and Community Development Programmes ensured that SASO was reaching out to the millennium of Black people. High school students, varsity students, social clubs, organisations, sport groups – all of them began to join the mainstream of Black endeavour and self-assertion (ibid.).

State repression from early 1973 onwards seriously undermined disrupted and impeded SASO's projects. The national executive, however, blamed internal subjective factors:

We have as yet not "arrived" and to be able to attain greater heights we need to have a close look at ourselves and ask ourselves whether or not we are really committed to change ... So many of our projects do not come off because we do not apply ourselves wholeheartedly with determination and genuine resolve (SASO, 1973f:20).

Since this view was expressed after just the first state action against SASO, greater culpability could possibly be placed on subjective

problems such as the lack of membership commitment and participation. Still, the central question is whether the alleged lack of "determination" "whole heartedness", and "resolve" on the part of SASO members is sufficient to explain why many of SASO's projects failed to take off or achieve much success. That is to say, apart from the real and "objective" problem of repression, were there other "subjective" problems that also accounted for the poor performance of many SASO initiatives?

A study of the minutes of the various SASO CJSs and other meetings, but especially the 1971 and 1972 CJSs, reveals that there was no shortage of ideas and, going by the language of the proposals, passion for projects and new initiatives. The practice was to adopt and acclaim all proposals. No doubt there was a deeply felt need for each and every project that SASO resolved to establish. Yet, and as indicator of its voluntarism, there appears to have been no concern with or appreciation of the sheer scale of financial, material and person-power resources that was required by some of the projects, such as literacy, the Home Education Scheme and the Free University Scheme, if they were to meet all the objectives defined for them.

This mode of operation is perfectly illustrated by a report from the Natal region tabled in mid-1974. The report first laments that conditions "left a dark cloud that was constantly threatening the existence of the organisation", but draws inspiration that "ours is the truth and the truth will always triumph"! It then mentions a decision taken by a recent Free University Seminar for the

[e]stablishment of a Legal Aid Scheme to assist people who are victims of the nefarious influx control laws, pass laws and a host of other dehumanising laws. One Free university member has been assigned the task of seeing this Scheme off. With dedication and co-operation with the local attorneys, a scheme of this nature is bound to be a success (SASO, 1974b).

Not just ideas for projects, but projects themselves, emanated from all kinds of forums; and the triumph of truth and the success of a considerable undertaking was simply a matter of "dedication and co-operation"!

SASO recognised that the political mobilisation of black communities required different strategies and tactics from those who had

enabled it to mobilise students so successfully. Community development projects were defined as the entry points for political work in black communities and were also a means of attempting to ensure that black students did not turn their backs on the oppressed communities from which they originated. However, the success of projects necessitated strong student participation. It is probable that SASO took confidence from the ease with which it mobilised black student support and considered that this would guarantee the success of its various projects. However, as Gerhart has commented, "... recognising the problem of student detachment and prescribing the solution of grassroots involvement were not the same as actually achieving that solution in practice" (Gerhart, 1978:291).

Although 6 000 students were counted as SASO members in early 1973, only a small number made themselves available for community projects. Thus, SASO was obliged to conclude :

Very few field projects do attract the amount of man-power that is urgently needed ... Black students usually shun these projects and even those who do go there sometimes display an abject lack of urgency and proper motivation (SASO, 1973f:15).

It is certain that the vast majority of the 6 000 members were "supporters" and "sympathisers" who – while they identified with SASO, read its literature, and participated in campus meetings and actions – were unlikely to participate in SASO activities on any continuous and sustained basis. The community development projects were of the kind that required ongoing and sustained commitment and would, thus, have had to be serviced by SASO's core and deeply committed activists.

Such activists, however, were only numbered in the hundreds. They were responsible for maintaining the SASO infrastructure on campuses, its central organisation, and were increasingly the targets of state repression and counteraction on the part of campus authorities. The removal from circulation of key activists deprived SASO of a wealth of day to day, immediately on hand, political and organisational expertise and skills, which were not easily replaced. With all the commitment and will in the world, the solid core of SASO cadres would have found it impossible to service the myriad initiatives that were launched. There

is also some evidence that certain members, while proclaiming that "We are tired of talking, we want action, baby, action!", had in mind militant political action rather than the kind provided by community development initiatives (SASO, 1974b).

Given that SASO's community development initiatives aroused little interest among the mass of students, it was unrealistic to expect the committed core of activists to shoulder every project and futile to accuse them, as the national executive committee does, of lack of "determination and genuine resolve" (SASO, 1973f:20). The fundamental problem was threefold. First, project after project was adopted willy-nilly without any attempt at prioritisation in relation to political objectives and strategy and resources. Second, SASO was completely unrealistic about its ability to successfully implement and realise the aims of some of its projects. Third, it also seriously underestimated what the projects would in practice entail. Thus, both in terms of actual practice and overall conception and strategy, the claim that "community development projects were methodically brought into operation" generally has to be regarded as far-fetched. Moreover, the suggestion that "progress" dictated the employment of staff, cannot be accepted as accurate for all projects. It is inconceivable that any progress could have been achieved around the aims set for literacy or some of the other community development activities without the employment of full-time staff. In any event the full-time staff were, on their own, to also prove inadequate.

The voluntarism that was an indelible feature of SASO arose from a number of sources. The SASO generation was not only angered by white prosperity and black deprivation, but also frustrated and impatient with black apathy and acquiescence. There was a strong feeling that something had to be done. They were especially scornful of the illusions fomented among blacks by white liberals lacking the political power to effect change. Freed from the counsel of white liberals, SASO activists were "much freer to express, with the daring of youth and inexperience, the native anarchy of dissent, the recklessness of the oppressed" (Nolutshungu, 1982:175). The SASO generation had also not witnessed the harsh repression of the early 1960s and the suppression of the ANC and PAC. "Not having seen it, they could not anticipate its brutal re-enactment" (ibid.), and this meant that they were not in

complete awe of the state. Moreover, "by defining state power as white power they subordinated its reality to ideology, making it too, subjective, and subjectively everything seemed possible" (ibid.:178). Finally, this was the first student generation that was subjected to Bantu education whose aim was to secure their acceptance of the status quo and their subordinate place in the apartheid social order. Yet, in this respect, Bantu education failed, and this seemed to instil in this generation a strong belief in them and hope.

For Biko, there had to "be some type of agitation. It doesn't matter if the agitation doesn't take a fully directed form immediately, or a fully supported form" (quoted in Gerhart, 1978:288-89). Action, rather than sophisticated theory and detailed social analysis of the kind sought by Hiron, was more urgent and important. In the political vacuum created by the banning of the ANC and PAC and the general quiet in the country, it was, understandably, difficult for the SASO activists to see from where else, apart from themselves, the lead for action could come. Without waiting for any exiled liberation movement to play its professed leadership role, or for the working class to take its position as the supposed vanguard of the South African struggle, SASO and students took it upon themselves to use the space provided by the black campuses to reactivate black political opposition as best they could.

The actions of SASO were also born more out of hope than despair. Hobsbawm has argued that in addition to an oppressive, exploitative and unjust society it is also the belief that "the relatively modest expectations of everyday life ... cannot be achieved without revolution" that turns individuals into revolutionaries (Hobsbawm, 1973:247). Certainly, the limited position within South African society to which black students could aspire was a revolutionising factor. However, Hobsbawm also adds that when all doors to social change are closed the tendency is not to batter in the doors, but first to explore other options. Only when these other options are seen as not viable, and there is the belief that the doors can indeed be battered open, will this more drastic approach be used. In other words, "becoming a revolutionary implies not only a measure of despair, but also some hope" (ibid.:248).

The argument that spontaneity and voluntarism characterised SASO is implicitly challenged by Gerhart who writes that, in SASO, the



PAC's "exaggerated faith in the spontaneous revolutionary disposition of the masses was largely abandoned in favour of a more hard-headed emphasis on patient organisation" (1978:301). The lesson from the PAC's history "was clear: patience was more important than heroics" (ibid.:285). Gerhart's focus is largely on the early years of SASO (1968 to 1972) and on its ideology and political perspectives, and little attention is given to issues of organisation and to SASO's various projects and initiatives. Had she broadened her focus she might have changed or qualified the view that SASO was characterised by a "hard-headed emphasis on patient organisation".

Certainly, there was a strand within SASO and the BC movement, associated with Biko, that stressed careful, patient, and sustained work around the psychological liberation of people and the need to avoid unnecessary confrontations with the state. Indeed, a SASO editorial had asserted that it

is very important to rid ourselves of impatience which yields disillusionment in the face of lack of success. The road will be long and hard, the rewards few and sporadic (SASO Newsletter, June 1970).

Yet, after the 1972 student protests the stress on "patient organisation" was challenged by cadres who sought more militant, and potentially confrontational, action. The initial demand, at SASO's 1972 GSC, for more militant forms of actions was rejected by the majority of delegates. However, in the years to come, and especially as the state's response to SASO grew more repressive, the impatience with activities centred around "patient organisation" grew. One manifestation was the poor participation by members in community development projects; another was the organisation of the pro-FRELIMO rallies and support given to the 1976 demonstration that triggered the Soweto uprising.

Spontaneous initiatives can, of course, be followed by patient organisation. In SASO's case the reflex and almost frenzied approach to education and community development projects and the lack of sober, meticulous, diligent and patient planning and organisation meant that spontaneity was in intractable tension with "patient organisation". As a result projects were mostly unsuccessful in achieving their immediate

objectives and providing a platform for mass mobilisation and organisation. According to Mji,

in implementing ... projects, it was quite clear we were only reaching a few selected groups of people, and not in any systematic way. It was quite clear that we were not making any impact outside the student movement (quoted in Frederikse, 1990:117).

The priest, Smangaliso Mkhathshwa, echoed this: "SASO only reached the educated and sophisticated segment of the population. Through its projects it is now gradually moving towards the grassroots" (quoted in Hirson, 1979:107). Mkhathshwa was writing in 1975. By then, far from any accelerated thrust towards the grassroots, SASO projects were already in a weakened state. Thus, at the organisational level there was no significant and extensive move "towards the grassroots" or "reaching out to the millennium [sic] of Black people" as was claimed (SASO, 1973a:5).

The voluntarism of SASO, and the notion that commitment and will alone were sufficient to overcome all obstacles, straight-jacketed it into a "more of the same" approach. More importantly, it potentially also retarded the search for new organisational strategies and tactics for survival and optimum effectiveness under the post-1972 conditions of state repression. However, SASO's voluntarism also contributed to its survival and to the tenacity to its cadres. Although SASO activists were bloodied by their battles with the state and campus authorities, they continued to act with courage and bravery and defiance, and to maintain a militant and uncompromising attitude towards their antagonists. As Pityana puts it,

they refused to be defeated; instead they continued to live and work as fully as they dared, despite the legal constraints; testing, challenging ... Many of those who were banned were never idle. They generally defied the banning orders or continued the principle of testing the limits of possibility (1991a:206).

This indomitable spirit of courage and defiance enabled SASO, damaged and depleted, to survive without being totally destroyed – a remarkable achievement considering the repression that it suffered. It was this spirit that SASO contributed to the student and youth that confronted the police and army during the Soweto uprising. Finally, it was also this

spirit that SASO activists carried into the exiled liberation organisations that they joined, and into the internal post-Soweto formations such as the United Democratic Front and the National Forum.

For all its initiative and innovative character, however, one field in which SASO displayed a distinct lack of these attributes was that of gender relations. During its existence, women university students constituted between 12% and 25% of total university students; at the teacher-training colleges, where SASO's organisational presence was insignificant, women represented the bulk of students. There is no evidence that SASO made any special efforts to mobilise women students, that there was any focus specifically on "women's issues" or that there was any conscious initiative to ensure that women students were represented at all levels of the organisation and in all activities. Only a very small number of women actively participated in SASO, and only one woman appears to have been elected to national office.

Moodley writes that

despite the designation of the black world as "communalistic" as opposed to the "individualistic" orientation of the white world, the sexual division of labour within the black Consciousness Movement closely resembled that of white society. Women were for the most part relegated to traditional women's domestic roles ... (Moodley, 1991:147).

Ramphele, as noted in the previous chapter, has confirmed that this was so and that women were only able to claim full participation as "honorary men". However, she also makes the important point that freeing women students from feelings of inferiority related to being black did provide a platform for their liberation as women (Ramphele, 1991b:217). This would have especially been the case for the small number of women who were active SASO members and participated in the formation schools and leadership-training seminars. Moreover, one effect of the sexist world of the male-dominated universities and SASO was that it made women who sought meaningful involvement in SASO become "tough, insistent, persistent" and "assertive" (ibid.:219).

No doubt, even had the inclinations of male SASO leaders and SASO as an organisation been otherwise, the sexist culture of the universities and society would have put a major brake on the full and

equal participation of women within SASO. Structural factors would also have kept some women from joining and actively participating in SASO. Feminism was yet to influence South African student politics and would only become influential after the late 1970s. For all its voluntarism, when it came to attacking gender oppression SASO was very much a creature of its time. Thus, whatever else SASO may have been, it was also a predominantly male organisation with a discourse and language that was unabashedly male-centred.

## **Role of SASO**

In the context of the political conditions of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the launch of SASO was an important and progressive step and the organisation performed a number of historically specific and valuable functions.

SASO was instrumental in re-kindling a new era of black political activism and mass popular resistance. Its formation ruptured the silence and despair that characterised the early and mid-1960s. It activated "sentiments and ideas" that responded "cognitively and operationally, in militant ways towards certain objects – in this case the state, its functionaries and the doctrines and structures of its legitimisation" (Nolutshungu, 1982:148). By seceding from, deconstructing, and challenging multiracial and liberal politics SASO played a vital role in reconstructing and recreating black politics and political action. Once again, national and racial oppression was made the focus of struggle, the apartheid programme was challenged, and a forum was created for organised opposition to apartheid.

Through the doctrine of Black Consciousness, SASO attempted "to rebuild and recondition the mind of the oppressed in such a way that eventually they would be ready forcefully to demand what was rightfully theirs" (Gerhart, 1978: 286-87). Its essential focus was "consciousness", and through its activities it sought to develop the self-esteem, pride, confidence and solidarity of black students and the black oppressed and contribute to their "psychological liberation". This approach was shaped by the conjunctural conditions of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period during which the apartheid regime seemed to be so firmly entrenched as to be immovable and black responses were a

mixture of fear, apathy, resignation, defeat, sullen acquiescence and accommodation to separate development. In concentrating on "psychological liberation", SASO saw its role as complementing that of the ANC and PAC, whom it regarded as the authentic spokespersons of the people, and had no notion of competing with the exiled liberation movements. Other aspects of liberation, for example the "physical liberation" that was spoken about and which implied armed struggle, it sought to leave to the liberation movements even though most SASO leaders were not opposed to the armed struggle; and there was some contact with the liberation movements around this (Nolutshungu, 1982:160, 171-72, 179-85).

SASO also had no notion of incorporating non-students, or of itself becoming a political organisation with an orientation towards one or other liberation movement. It attempted to avoid being paralysed by ideological divisions of the kind that had weakened the black student body during the time of ASA and ASUSA and aimed to forge a broad unity of all the oppressed. To this end, outside of the education sphere, it played a key role in the launching of other anti-apartheid formations, such as the Black People's Convention, encouraged the formation of youth and cultural organisations, and lent support to the Black Community Programmes. Here too, it promoted black unity and solidarity as the basis for effective struggle against white power. SASO's role within the overall BC movement that it helped to create is well captured by Nolutshungu: "At the centre of the movement, giving leadership, was SASO" (Nolutshungu, 1982:149). However, there were limits to the extent to which SASO was prepared to submerge political differences in the quest for black unity. After initial relations with some of the ostensibly more progressive bantustan leaders, black organisations and individuals participating in separate development structures were condemned and attacked since there was a concern that fear and passivity could lead to black accommodation with separate development.

SASO provided black higher education students a political home and avenue for political activity outside the black political parties involved in separate development institutions. Many, like Masterpiece Gumede, were inducted into progressive politics through SASO. As Gumede says, "When we came to Ngoye we were immediately grabbed by

SASO ... I only got into politics through the student movement at university" (quoted in Frederikse, 1990:110). By being an exclusively black organisation, SASO made it possible for black students to no longer stand "at the touchlines", and to "do things for themselves and all by themselves" (Biko, 1987:15). It helped to engender a culture of black pride and assertiveness. It provided political education and organisational training and the "experience of leadership, planning, strategising and mobilising ..." (Pityana, 1991b:255). With respect to its community development initiatives, Ramphela adds that there was

success in empowering activists in its ranks at all levels. Most of these individuals attained total psychological liberation and realised the meaning of being active agents in history. The impact of this success had a multiplier effect on the wider black community (1991a:173).

Thus, SASO members would take into post-Soweto popular organisations considerable political and organisations skills and expertise.

In a context where politics was generally regarded as the preserve of adults, SASO also constituted students as an independent political and organisational force. Beginning with SASO and whether palatable to adults and political organisations or not, organised students become a permanent and irrevocable feature of South African politics, and a vital sector of the national liberation struggle. Through its various projects and initiatives, meetings, statements and publications, SASO diffused ideas and a mood that aroused both anger and hope and a spirit of resistance among students. The diffusion of ideas and mood was given impetus by the student boycotts of 1972, which also contributed to school-student and youth political awakening and organisation. Even the court trial of 1975-76 was used

to restate the nationalist viewpoint, and [the accused] took every opportunity to symbolise 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 held up to the youth once again a model of "rebel" courage (Gerhart, 1978:298-99).

Through its contribution to the Soweto uprising, and the subsequent flow of students and youth into exile, SASO also gave to the ANC oxygen and new life, which the movement desperately needed – youth of the South African people, tempered in defiance in action (Mongane Wally Serote, cited by Pityana et al., 1991:10).

Thus, in various ways, SASO mobilised opposition to white minority rule and contributed to interrupting the previously untrammelled reproduction of apartheid power and domination.

## **Significance of SASO**

Within higher education, SASO began the tradition of the racial and ethnic campuses being sites of activism and struggle. The formation of SASO gave a more political character and hue to the overall black higher education student movement. Prior to SASO, students tended to be elected to the SRC on a parochial or faculty loyalty basis. With the emergence of SASO the political affiliations, positions, abilities and experience of candidates became considerations for the electorate (Buthelezi, 1991:112). These considerations also influenced elections to positions within the student religious, cultural and sport organisations. SASO members were often also members of such student formations, contested elections to leadership positions within them, and/or sought to develop close relations with their officials. Of course, not all student organisations necessarily supported SASO or even sought political involvement. SASO, however, strongly impacted on the overall black higher education student movement, stood at its head, and generally provided its political direction.

SASO's mobilisation of students around campus conditions, the racial composition of staff and governance structures, and the powers of SRCs forced the state to establish various "commissions of enquiry" to investigate student grievances and demands. The recommendations of commissions tended to be double-edged. On the one hand, the "Africanisation" calls by SASO – for black rectors and black members of governance structures – tended to be easily incorporated without any

significant change in power relations between students and the campus authorities. On the other hand, the recommendations sometimes contributed to the restructuring of the education terrain on campuses in a way that opened up new spaces for mobilisation and organisation.

SASO's call for black rectors was controversial, with Alexander, a leading black South African Marxist intellectual and activist, for one denouncing it as an "attempt to dignify sectarian institutions of education". He claims that this was to accept

the idea of working the administrative apparatus of apartheid.

There is no difference between administering a "Coloured University" and administering a "Coloured Representative Council" (Alexander, 1991:250-51).

Certainly, SASO activists seem to have harboured some illusions about the difference that a black rector would make to an institution and about the willingness of the state to install as rectors the kind of black intellectuals that SASO probably had in mind. Nonetheless, the organisation did draw an important distinction between apartheid political and education institutions, and was unlikely to accept the suggestion that "there is no difference between administering a "coloured university" and administering a "coloured Representative Council". To the extent that black universities were viewed not only as arenas of struggle but also seen as the stakes of such struggles, SASO could have argued that it was both legitimate and strategic for it to advance demands around all aspects of an education institution.

Although SASO failed to organise concerted campaigns and struggles around relations in education to do with the curriculum, texts, and the learning-teaching process, its media did attempt to expose the academic inadequacies of black institutions and seek to encourage a critical attitude towards the form and content of education. It is likely that at an intellectual level apartheid ideas were largely rejected. What must remain uncertain, however, was the extent to which students were able to penetrate, challenge and transcend the conservative and/or liberal social theories that would have been hegemonic among the academic staff of the black institutions.

For activists, participation in SASO and involvement in knowledge production, debates, formation schools and leadership-training seminars,



media production, and other organisational activities, would have constituted a rich and powerful education experience. The "non-formal" and "informal" education and "on the job" training provided by organisations like SASO should not be underestimated. Indeed, for many activists, and especially those who were "organisation intellectuals", the knowledge and skills that they learned within SASO and through political involvement were likely to have been more stimulating, enriching, enlightening and rewarding than anything that their higher education provided.

Finally, through the black universities the apartheid state had sought to win black higher education students to the programme of separate development and to generate the intellectual, professional and administrative corps for the separate development bureaucracies. SASO, however, within and outside the black campuses, renewed and reinvigorated the historical opposition to bantustans that had begun in the 1950s. It denounced separate development, attacked bantustan leaders, and mobilised students around an ideology of a united and common South Africa. In doing this, SASO was generally successful in preventing the state from winning over black students and graduates, intellectually and politically, even though black graduates would have in some cases been obliged to seek employment in the separate development bureaucracies.

The political significance of SASO is a matter of some debate. Fatton's thesis is that ideology and the changing of consciousness is crucial in bringing about revolutionary change. Consequently, his consideration of SASO is shaped by its performance in

effecting what Antonio Gramsci described as an intellectual and moral reform. This reform is a profound cultural transformation which changes the masses' conception of life, politics and economics. Accordingly, it ushers in a new social and moral vision and it restructures the role and place of the hitherto subordinate and dominant classes (Fatton, 1986:57).

Fatton argues that because of repressive conditions it was difficult for SASO to openly state its views and goals. He is, however, in no doubt that it was "animated by a revolutionary will and vision" (ibid.:126) and was tremendously successful in effecting an "intellectual and moral

reform". BC helped blacks to develop their own sense of being and humanity, to move out of a state of apathy and passivity, and it eroded the ideological hegemony of the apartheid state. It also united Africans, Indians and coloureds and developed black solidarity. Its overall achievements were to liberate people from mental enslavement, to clarify the targets of ideological and political struggle and to prepare people for their historical role (ibid.). Moreover, through ideology, SASO contributed to the Soweto uprising and post-Soweto politics and was thus of considerable historical significance.

There is no denying some of the achievements that Fatton attributes to SASO. Yet, using his own yardstick, I am not convinced that such an enthusiastic and glowing appraisal of SASO is merited. A major problem is that Fatton attaches great weight to the doctrinal utterances of the BC movement and gives scant attention to its concrete initiatives and practices. As a consequence, he grossly overstates the extent to which the BC movement did produce a "cultural transformation" and generate a revolutionary consciousness at a mass level. He also tends to give BC an ideological and political coherence which is not borne out by the empirical data, and which did not really exist. Finally, he especially overplays the extent to which there existed a class analysis and socialist commitment within the key BC organisations of the 1968 to 1977 period.

As Ramphela notes, the BC tendency to view blacks as a homogeneous group meant that there was a concomitant blindness to the stratification within black "communities" (1991a:171). "Such naiveté", she argues, "was in a sense an inevitable consequence of the very analysis underpinning the BC philosophy". As a result, SASO failed to comprehend, analyse and tackle the contradictions resulting from internal differences amongst blacks that occurred along the lines of class, gender, age and geographic location. Instead, Black Consciousness exponents opted for the simplistic excommunication of those blacks who failed to act for the common good in solidarity with others – they were banished to the realm of "non-whites". A deeper examination of the limitation of their philosophical stand-point was not undertaken (ibid.:171-72).

If there were criticisms of the black bourgeoisie and merchants and traders and attacks on class privileges, this had its basis more in the

aloofness of these groups from BC and their political acquiescence than in any rigorous class analysis (Nolutshungu, 1982:155).

Gerhart argues that SASO's significance was its work among "black university students – a significant percentage of the African intelligentsia and middle-class-to-be of the 1970s and beyond", which resulted in "a level of political education and ideological diffusion never before achieved by any black political organisation" (1978:270). Also of significance was SASO's impact on school students and youth. Gerhart acknowledges that

the BC movement was clearly more successful in communicating the subtler nuances of its message inside the walls of academic and religious institutions than beyond them in black society at large (ibid.: 295).

She argues that this should, however, not detract from its creation of a mood and stirring in black townships. The accomplishment of SASO and the BC movement was to bring about a "mental revolution among black youth", to hand over a new generation of young people that were "proud, self-reliant, determined"; and a major achievement was "an urban African population psychologically prepared for confrontation with white South Africa" (ibid.:2, 315). Like Fatton, Gerhart then regards SASO as making a positive contribution to the cause of black liberation in South Africa. Unlike Fatton, she correctly finds in SASO and the BC movement no Marxist or socialist ideological orientation, and is more realistic about the extent of its penetration beyond student, youth and certain middle-class circles.

For Nolutshungu, SASO, together with the BC movement, was important "because of the questions it posed about the nature of oppositional politics in South Africa and its relation to the nature of South African society" (1982:147-48). Beyond this, it was also significant "because of the forces of protest and rebellion it was to prove itself capable of unleashing", and "the real contribution of black consciousness to the revolt was in the demon it had roused: the defiant attitude among the youth in the face of police violence" (ibid.:185). Finally, SASO and the BC movement undermined the reproduction and restructuring of capitalism and apartheid and produced cadres to augment the ranks of those "committed to the revolutionary overthrow of the entire order of exploitation and domination" (ibid.:201).

Hirson, however, is sceptical about SASO's political significance. He recognises that "the establishment of a group with a political orientation was no mean feat in the 1970s in South Africa" (Hirson, 1979:292), and acknowledges that SASO "provided the leading cadres for the BPC, and helped create the atmosphere which led to the 1976 confrontation in Soweto" (ibid.:8). He also grants that "through their language, songs, meetings and writings" SASO and the BC movement "generated a corporate spirit", and that "in the words of Fanon ... they made "the people dream dreams" (ibid.:292-93). However, seemingly reluctant to overstate SASO's achievement, Hirson immediately qualifies this statement. Instead, they were able to reach "groups of people who were seeking a political message and were already dreaming dreams" (ibid.). Moreover, although "intellectually the black university students took the cause of national liberation to be their goal ... in practice they tended to concentrate on their own problems on the campus" (ibid.:283) and, despite SASO's aspirations, "in the final analysis ... there was no campaigning and no direction. In place of real political activity, there were just words (ibid.:113). In Hirson's view, SASO lacked a theoretically coherent ideology, effective political strategy and extensive organisation, its influence was limited to "the elite circles the students frequented" and its significance was essentially to create the atmosphere for the Soweto uprising.

I reject this appraisal of SASO's significance. Nolutshungu usefully cautions against attaching too much importance to SASO's statements since they were "primarily instrumental than theoretical", and because BC "may have been important less for what it literally said than for what it made possible" (1982:162). Pityana, one of SASO's founders, makes a similar point: BC, "as such, was not a political philosophy or ideology but a strategy for action" (1991a:212). Still, he acknowledges that SASO and the BC movement "displayed a naïveté and innocence born out of an inadequate theoretical basis for [their] political activities" (ibid.:212). Similarly, Brooks and Brickhill have noted the following:

If one turns to the literature of the movement itself, one enters a world of eloquent and deeply felt rhetoric, full of spirit and boldness, unmistakably committed to black liberation. Yet one searches in vain for a definitive programme, for a clear strategy, or for discussion about methods of struggle (1980:76-77).

Certainly, there were many failings and BC did not make any real inroads, politically and organisationally, among urban, rural and bantustan workers and the unemployed. Still, there is a world of difference between pointing to the very real limitations of SASO and Hirson's claims that SASO defined itself out of the realm of struggle and was even "apolitical".

Here, it is useful to draw on Melucci's distinction between the "visible" and "latent" dimensions of collective action and their relationship. The danger of focusing only on the "visible" dimension of collective action – campaigns, mass action and physical engagements between organisations and the state – is that latent dimensions of collective action tend to be ignored. However, activities related to the latency phase of an organisation – recruitment and induction of members into the organisation or movement, political formation and training, building of inter-personal bonds of solidarity, diffusion of ideology and the influencing of new individuals and groups – are crucial. They are vital to the formation and development of the propensity, abilities and capacities for opposition and struggle, for sewing "the potential for resistance or opposition ... into the very fabric of daily life" (Melucci, 1989:70-71).

Lodge makes the important point that SASO members, supporters and sympathisers "were to become school teachers, priests and journalists", and that BC's "basic themes were taken up in the popular press, in township cultural events" and elsewhere (1983:324). Notwithstanding that these themes were unlikely to find a strong resonance among workers, he argues that even

if its influence was limited to the urban intelligentsia this would have guaranteed its imprint on almost any African political assertion of the time. Distilled to a basic set of catchphrases Black Consciousness percolated down to a much broader and socially amorphous group than African intellectuals (ibid.:325).

He also takes issue with the contentions of Hirson and Brooks and Brickhill that SASO and BC ideas had little impact on school students. The problem with their position is that "they tend to estimate the influence of ideas in terms of formal organisational structures and affiliations" (ibid.). In reality, the Johannesburg office of SASO was a

meeting point for not only SASO activists but also school students and youth, and SASO members like Tiro taught for a period in Soweto (Buthelezi, 1991:115). Johnson, on the basis of interviews with secondary school student activists who were active in the Soweto uprising, has noted that

[i]n the absence of adult-led black resistance, Montsisi's generation seized upon the message of black student leaders at the universities. Impromptu political discussions took place in and out of the schools, the text for debate often being the SASO Bulletin, the Black Consciousness journal (1988:101).

Lewis, in his history of coloured politics, claims that BC spread rapidly among coloured youth and that during "the 1976 unrest, it proved to be the decisive mobilising ideology for united black action on the university and school campuses" (1987:278). Thus, given that black higher education students, teachers and priests "were an important reference group" for school students it also "would surely have been a little surprising if sentiments inspired from [BC] were not found in school children" (Lodge, 1983:332-33.).

An analysis of the "latent" dimension of SASO's collective action reveals, then, more clearly the real spread of SASO's influence and the connections it, and its individual members, had with township student and youth. If not the central medium of the Soweto uprising, SASO was one of the vital catalysts. The uprising, in turn, profoundly altered political relations in South Africa by exposing the vulnerability of white rule and stimulating the generalisation of resistance organisations and political struggle in later years. Given this, and contra Hirson, it is, as Lodge notes, "difficult to see how its achievement could have been more significant" (1983:336).

SASO was also of political significance in other ways. An important contribution was the definition of "black" to encompass not just Africans but also coloureds and Indians. Admittedly, "black" unity did not extend beyond professional, intellectual, and urban student and youth circles. SASO, however, both renewed and gave new form to the tradition of joint action initiated in the 1950s by organisations representing these national groups, and also set an example for post-Soweto resistance. This was no small achievement in a society in which Africans, coloureds and

Indians lived in geographically segregated areas and where differences, real or otherwise, and prejudice hindered contact and unity. Moreover, there was also an important indirect consequence of the emergence of SASO as an exclusively black organisation. In time, NUSAS was to shift its policy to accept that the primary responsibility of students was to work for change in South Africa. Beyond this, more radical white students turned towards involvement in the fields of worker support and eventual worker organisation. These efforts were to be important in the emergence of the non-racial trade union movement during the late 1970s.

There has been an unfortunate silence around the important feature of the “cognitive praxis” and knowledge production of SASO intellectuals. Social relations in South Africa ensured that knowledge production was principally an activity engaged in by whites, and especially white males. There were very few black academics, and they published little. On the other hand, the liberation movements and organisations had long been key arenas of knowledge production by blacks. SASO was no exception and the knowledge production of its “organisation intellectuals”, to paraphrase Eyerman and Jamison, the social movement theorists discussed in Chapter 1, was of great significance given that it helped spawn an entire social movement network in the form of BC. In the South African context it was, however, doubly significant for it was also knowledge production by blacks, and at that by young blacks whom Bantu education failed to render intellectually sterile.

In Chapter 3 I criticised the tendency to write on BC doctrine to give the impression that the doctrine emerged with SASO’s launch, and to obscure the fact that it was actually formulated over a two-year period. I now want to argue, following Eyerman and Jamison, that this also obfuscates the “cognitive praxis” that produced BC as a doctrine. BC did not drop from heaven as a ready-made package. The world-view, goals, oppositional targets and strategies of SASO were socially constructed by its “organisation intellectuals” – pre-eminently Biko – but also Pityana and many others. The act of construction was, moreover, contra Hirson, not a one-off event but a process.

The views, beliefs, ideas, and objects of opposition of BC were produced by “organisation intellectuals” in historical time and space.

They were generated through the mutual interaction of "organisation intellectuals", their personal and collective confrontation with NUSAS and other organisations, their encounter with the available "relevant" literature, their contacts with white liberals and radicals, and through acquaintance with blacks who supported different liberation movements. The ideas of the "organisation intellectuals" were embodied in speeches, in articles penned for conferences and workshops, and for the SASO Newsletter and other SASO publications, and in manifestos, declarations and resolutions. The knowledge production of the "organisation intellectuals" – the BC doctrine – gave SASO its distinct "cognitive identity", while organisational activities and SASO media ensured that the ideas constituting this identity were disseminated outwards onto the campuses and beyond.

Finally, the literature on SASO generally tends to view it in purely political and instrumental terms. As a result, the cultural, expressive, and symbolic moments of the organisation are ignored (Melucci, 1989). At the level of cultural innovation, with SASO and the BC movement came a number of developments all connected in some way to enhancing black pride, assertiveness and solidarity. One was the slogan "black is beautiful" and an attack on hair-straightening and skin-lightening cosmetics. Another was the "Afro" hairstyle and dress of a more African nature. Yet another was the clenched fist salute embodying opposition to white domination and black solidarity. There were also the various slogans and songs that emphasised black self-reliance, expressed defiance to the existing social order and voiced the hope of a better future. Finally, there was the cultural production inspired by BC such as poetry and drama – what Melucci calls "representation" – which was important in critiquing the social order and stirring black audiences to action.

Symbolically, SASO played a vital "prophetic" function in repudiating white liberal notions of black assimilation into the existing white and Eurocentric culture and in asserting that a future non-racial society would need to be the product of all national groups and to reflect the diversity of all cultures. In repudiating the term "non-white" and claiming they were "black", the SASO activists rejected being identified in the negative, sought to escape the categories and language of the



dominant group and asserted their own identity and the right to "name" themselves. Their attempts to expound on the concept "black", or on "black values" or the concept of a "black university" may have been somewhat inchoate, and even incoherent. But, to their credit, they refused to accommodate to white conservative and liberal conceptions of the world, and of behaviour and conduct. And they pointed, as best as they could, to the possibility of radically different conceptions. Moreover, through their organisation they illustrated that black students need not depend on whites for their thinking and organisational activities. In summary, SASO both challenged the dominant culture and attempted to innovate intellectually and culturally.

Curiously, in the context of the authoritarian political order under which they existed, it is difficult to discover any references by SASO or its intellectuals to "democracy" and to the human and civil rights associated with democracy. It is possible that some intellectuals were scornful of these notions, and counterpoised them to freedom and liberation. Still, even if SASO did not talk in terms of democracy, its organisational culture and internal working was fundamentally democratic and, to a large degree, characterised by freedom of expression, the right to dissent, a consultative style of leadership, an adherence to rules and norms established by its constitution, regular elections, continuous turnover and rotation of leading officials and the avoidance of a leadership cult. On the one hand this mode of operation was shaped by the need to ensure that there was a rapid production of leadership for expanding the BC movement and withstanding state repression. On the other hand, and complementing its "prophetic" role, the organisational form was a conscious challenge to the dominant cultural codes and a "sign" or "message" for other organisations and institutions of an alternative and considerably more democratic form of organisational practice. However, the organisational form and the practices associated with it were not simply a means to an end; to paraphrase Melucci, they were not just "instrumental" for SASO's goals, but a goal in themselves.

Without doubt, a number of criticisms can be levelled against SASO and various weaknesses can be pointed to in its doctrine of BC, its analysis of the South African social formation, its political strategies, and

in its organisation. There were also silences and omissions on its part. None of this is to be denied. However, there are good grounds for some of the criticisms of SASO to be tempered, and for a greater indulgence and understanding of the organisation's weaknesses and limitations. The evaluation of SASO on the basis of essentially its ideas and doctrines, and a mode of analysis that lacks sensitivity to historical conditions in South Africa, as carried out by Hirson, is simply inadequate for any balanced assessment of the organisation. Any rigorous appraisal of SASO must also take into account unfolding processes, and the latent dimensions of collective action. It must extend beyond the political to also incorporate the cultural and symbolic aspects, and not conceive all thought and practice in purely instrumental terms. Most crucially, and ultimately, any assessment of SASO must be not only in relation to its own internal characteristics, but also with reference to the South African social order, the particular historical conditions under which it operated, and its effects on those conditions.

In these terms, there can be no question about the revolutionary nationalist and highly innovative character of SASO. Despite being primarily a student organisation, forced by historical circumstances to play the leading political role in pre-Soweto South Africa, SASO took on the responsibility and rekindled black intellectual and political opposition to white domination. Through the "cognitive praxis" of its organisation intellectuals", it provided a framework for opposition to racial and national oppression. Through its "latent" activities it helped sew the "the potential for resistance or opposition ... into the very fabric of daily life" and there is no disputing the bravery and courage, and defiant and indomitable spirit, of its cadres, and the example this set for school students and youth. Finally, as a catalyst of the conflagration that was the Soweto uprising, and in also creating the conditions for the generalisation of political resistance and organisation post-Soweto, SASO ensured that it was of tremendous historical significance in the struggle for national liberation in South Africa.