

# Collaboration and Debate in the ‘Durban Moment’: Steve Biko, Richard Turner and the politics of Black Consciousness, 1970-1974

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## Introduction

South African<sup>1</sup> activist and academic, Tony Morphet, coined the term the ‘Durban moment’ in his Rick Turner Memorial lecture to the University of Natal in Durban on 27 September 1990 to describe four simultaneous intellectual projects that took place in the eastern seaboard city between 1970 and 1974. These projects were the philosophical and political work of the intellectual Richard (Rick) Turner; the elaboration of the philosophy and political discourse of Black Consciousness by Steve Bantu Biko and the development of its community development projects; South African sociologist Dunbar Moodie’s historical re-evaluation of Afrikaner history; and Mike Kirkwood’s challenge to the English literature canon from a South African perspective.<sup>2</sup> Together, these projects signalled a ‘structural shift in the received intellectual patterns of the social world,’ and were matched by stirrings in the black working class in the ‘unpredicted, unexpected and revelatory 1973 Durban strikes’.<sup>3</sup>

This paper looks to give historical detail to the first two projects: Turner’s and Biko’s philosophical and political contributions, whose ideas together ‘continued to shape the resistance movement [against apartheid] in different ways throughout the 1980s’.<sup>4</sup> Even

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<sup>2</sup> T. Morphet, ‘Brushing history against the grain: oppositional discourse in South Africa,’ *Theoria* (76, October 1990), pp. 92-3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> M. Burroway and K. Von Holdt, *Conversations with Bourdieu: the Johannesburg moment* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2012), p. 1.

today, Turner's ideas have been used as a prism to appraise South African democracy,<sup>5</sup> although their meaningful impact on South African politics has been recently questioned.<sup>6</sup> More widely, the influence of the ideas that informed the 'Durban moment', 'ideas of internal democracy, participation, power and methods of resistance' are discerned in the shape of trade unionism in South Africa and new labour internationalism in the Global South in the 1990s.<sup>7</sup>

## Turner and Biko

Turner met Biko in Durban in 1970.<sup>8</sup> He had been newly appointed to his first permanent post as lecturer in the department of political science at the University of Natal, Howard College campus. Biko was still studying for his medical degree at the University of Natal Medical School Non-European section (UNNE).<sup>9</sup> Durban had become the *de facto* headquarters of the black student organisation, the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), with Biko's room in the Alan Taylor residence functioning for a time as the national office. Turner came to the University of Natal as someone with a growing reputation for close involvement in student politics, an incisive intellect, and as an individual who possessed a clarity of vision that was sorely needed. Among activists in the Durban scene, Biko and Turner stood most prominent in their breadth and force of intellect.

Turner had been trained in British analytical philosophy, but was increasingly drawn into continental philosophy. He graduated from the University of Cape Town with a Bachelor of Arts Honours degree in philosophy in 1963. He wrote his doctoral thesis at the

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<sup>5</sup> T. Fluxman and P. Vale, 'Re-reading Rick Turner in the new South Africa', *International Relations* (18, 2004), pp. 173-189

<sup>6</sup> W. Keniston, 'Richard Turner's contribution to a socialist political culture in South Africa, 1968 – 1978' (MA thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> R. Lambert, 'Eddie Webster, the Durban Moment and new labour internationalism,' *Transformation*, (72/73, 2010), p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> T. Morphet, 'Richard Turner: a biographical introduction,' in R. Turner, *The Eye of the Needle: towards participatory democracy in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1980), p. xix.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the medical school, see the work of Vanessa Noble.

Sorbonne in Paris with a study of important points of political theory in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, which he completed in 1966. The English title of his thesis was ‘Some implications of existentialist phenomenology’.<sup>10</sup> This was a formative stage of his life, a crucial step in what Morphet refers to as his conceptualisation of his life as ‘a total project’. Turner had been active in student politics before his critical philosophical study at the Sorbonne. As a student at the University of Cape Town, he had shared a room with National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) leader Jonty Driver.<sup>11</sup> After his return from his studies at the Sorbonne in August 1966, Turner brought a new standard of philosophical and political incisiveness to bear on student politics in South Africa. He gave up farming and the second doctorate he had begun at the end of 1968 and took temporary positions, first at the University of Stellenbosch in the first academic term of 1969 and then at the politics department at Rhodes University in the second term. He took an active role in student politics, described as ‘a disturber of the peace’ by a colleague at Rhodes University in Grahamstown.<sup>12</sup> During the same year, there were frequent weekend seminars at his farm ‘Welcarmes’ outside Stellenbosch, which attracted a large number of students who took the opportunity to study and discuss more deeply New Left ideas and thinkers.<sup>13</sup>

From his return to South Africa and in the early 1970s Turner was busy as an advisor to NUSAS. Turner was a highly charismatic teacher and leader, functioning as a key facilitator of dialogue between students and activists in Durban. Dick Usher, a local journalist who lived in Turner’s back yard for a time, reflected that ‘he was superb with students, making them feel their ideas were important and being more concerned with

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Turner Papers, E.G. Malherbe Library, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban [hereafter Turner papers], Supreme Court of South Africa (Transvaal Provincial Division), *The State versus S. Cooper and Eight Others*, Case No. 18/75/254 (Pretoria, Lubbe Recordings), p. 3005.

<sup>11</sup> C.J. Driver, ‘Used to be great friends,’ *Granta*, (80, Winter 2002), pp. 7-26.

<sup>12</sup> Turner papers, Republic of South Africa, *Fourth Interim Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Certain Organisations*, p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> R. Erbmman, ‘Conservative revolutionaries: anti-apartheid activism at the University of Cape Town, 1963-1973,’ (B.A. Thesis, Oxford University, 2005), chapter 2. Found at: [http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/libraryresources/articles\\_papers/1963\\_1973\\_conservative\\_revolutionaries.htm](http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/libraryresources/articles_papers/1963_1973_conservative_revolutionaries.htm) (accessed 23 April 2009).

helping them refine their thoughts than imposing his own'.<sup>14</sup> The years between 1970 and 1973 were the most influential for Turner's public life.<sup>15</sup> Using his permanent position as political science lecturer at the University of Natal as a base, his sphere of activity steadily expanded. Beginning with his first meeting with Biko in 1970, he had close contacts with members of SASO, as well as members of the Natal Indian Congress, the Coloured Labour Party and Chief Buthelezi. According to his own testimony, Turner was consulted often by members of these political parties on the nature of South African society. Peter Randall, the director for the Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society (Spro-cas), a joint initiative of the ecumenical bodies the Christian Institute and South African Council of Churches, invited Turner to join the Economics and Politics commissions, on which he served between 1971 and 1972.

Together with Raphael De Kadt and Michael Nupen in the political science department, Turner 'pioneered the teaching of radical political philosophy,' making Durban's politics department one of the most innovative in the country.<sup>16</sup> In his teaching Turner remained committed to the philosophical ideal of Socratic dialogue, teaching by posing apparently simple questions.<sup>17</sup> Turner's commitment to social values, to fundamental and continued moral and existential investigation, reinforced by his grounding in Western Marxism, allowed him a theoretically sophisticated moral vision by which political movements and praxis could be assessed. Historians Karis and Gerhart attribute Turner's significance to the particular historical circumstances of the 1968 to 1973 period, where 'the rupture between NUSAS and SASO created a situation where the force of Turner's personality and opinions intersected with the need among white student activists to find a new political identity and role'. As they note, Turner 'was frequently invited to speak on white campuses and at NUSAS seminars, where his lucid analyses contributed both to the legitimation of black consciousness ideas and to the spread of philosophical radicalism

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<sup>14</sup> D. Usher, 'Rick Turner: prophet of the moral society,' *Weekly Mail*, 22-28 January 1988, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Usher, 'Prophet of the moral society'.

<sup>17</sup> Greaves, 'Turner: moral visionary,' *Natal Witness*, 18 May 1993.

among white students'.<sup>18</sup> Turner's influence was also felt through the impact of his writing as it stimulated new thinking in the country. Most prominent among his work was his provocative projection of a utopian future South African society in *The Eye of the Needle* (1972).

Biko's life was marked by the exigencies of apartheid. He had been expelled from the prestigious mission school, Lovedale College, on account of the political activities of his brother, Khaya. Biko had been given a scholarship to attend the Catholic school of St. Francis at Marianhill. From there he was able to gain entrance to the University of Natal Non-European section (UNNE), later University of Natal Black section (UNB). Biko entered the medical school at the University of Natal at the beginning of 1966.<sup>19</sup> Due to his extensive political commitments, Biko failed his fourth year of study and was forced to abandon his medical studies in 1970. He took up a law degree by correspondence from the University of South Africa that year, as well as working for the Black Community Programmes (BCP) in Durban, and helping to found the Black People's Convention (BPC) in 1971.<sup>20</sup> Although Biko propagated the need for Black self-reliance, he was able to form and maintain close personal friendships with white student leaders. His friendship with Turner is a prime example. As his spiritual mentor and Community of the Resurrection priest, Aelred Stubbs, and friend, Hugh Lewin, wrote of Biko, his 'founding of SASO... never led to a breach of the good personal relationships he continued to enjoy with the white NUSAS leaders'.<sup>21</sup> In spite of his friendly personal acquaintances, Biko remained clear on the need to relegate the white liberal to a secondary position; Black Consciousness demanded the self-emancipation of the Black oppressed. Biko described the role of the liberal, as he saw it, with a compelling analogy. They needed to serve as 'a lubricating material so that as we change gears in trying to find a better direction for

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<sup>18</sup> T.G. Karis and G.M. Gerhart (eds.), *From Protest to Challenge: a documentary history of African politics in South Africa 1882-1990. Volume 5 Nadir and Resurgence, 1964-1979* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 70-1.

<sup>19</sup> 'Biographical Summary' in S. Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Johannesburg, Picador Africa, 2004), p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

South Africa, there should be no grinding noises of metal against metal but a free and easy flowing movement which will be characteristic of a well-looked-after vehicle.’<sup>22</sup>

Compatriot and friend, Barney Pityana, recalled of ‘long hours of interaction and debate among friends’ at the Alan Taylor residence, that Biko was the central participant. ‘[H]e listened and challenged ideas as they emerged, concretised them, and brought them back for further development’. Although the refining of ideas was still a collaborative effort and was the product of consensus, ‘it was Steve who translated that common idea into essays that went into his columns as Frank Talk: *I Write What I Like*, and as memoranda to the SRCs and SASO Local Branches. It was Steve ultimately who concretised and articulated the ideas. He captured the common mind’.<sup>23</sup> It was this ability to formalise and systematise a mood and general consensus that was central to Biko’s role. Mamphela Ramphele, who became a leading academic, medical doctor, the first black female Vice Chancellor of the University of Cape Town and a Managing Director of the World Bank, was a fellow medical student at the time who became intimate with Biko, fathering two of his children. Ramphele remembers how Biko would dictate to her as she would write, a scenario that spoke powerfully to the complexities in gender power relations in the Black Consciousness movement.<sup>24</sup>

Biko’s facility for communication was put to full use when at the July 1970 SASO student council meeting in Wentworth, Pityana replaced him as president, and he was elected chair of SASO publications.<sup>25</sup> As Mzamane and Howarth note, this was ‘a crucial post because the early to mid-1970s witnessed an outpouring of scholarship (on subjects like poetry, aesthetics, culture, politics, economics, and theology) within the

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<sup>22</sup> Biko, *I Write*, p. 28.

<sup>23</sup> B. Pityana, ‘Reflections on 30 years since the death of Steve Biko: a legacy revisited,’ in C.W. du Toit (ed.), *The Legacy of Stephen Bantu Biko: theological challenges* (Pretoria, Unisa Press, 2008), p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> L. Wilson, ‘Biko: A Life,’ in B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.), *Bounds of Possibility: the legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1991. London, Zed Books, 1992), p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> M.V. Mzamane and D.R. Howarth, ‘Representing blackness: Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement,’ in L. Switzer and M. Adhikari (eds.), *South Africa's Resistance Press: alternative voices in the last generation under apartheid* (Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2000), p. 182.

movement'.<sup>26</sup> Notable publications were *SASO Newsletter*, *Creativity and Black Development*, *Black Review* and *Black Viewpoint*. Ramphele remembers how Biko spent well over a year working on the first *Black Review* 1972. 'Single-handedly Steve designed the first edition... The data was derived from newspaper cuttings, visits to newspaper libraries, and Hansard reports on parliamentary proceedings'.<sup>27</sup> Together with editorial assistants Malusi Mpumlwana, Tomeka Mafole and Welile Nhlapo, Biko worked from 'the second half of 1971 and the whole of 1972'.<sup>28</sup> Due to Biko's banning, on completion and before the printing of the first *Black Review* in 1973, Biko's name had to be omitted, and Bennie Khoapa was instead named as editor. In the beginning of 1973 as a result of the findings of the Schelbusch Commission, eight NUSAS leaders and eight SASO leaders had been issued with banning orders.<sup>29</sup> Whereas Turner was banned by the state in 1973 to his home in Bellair, Durban, Biko was sent to his 'homeland', confined to the magisterial district of King William's Town. Biko's banning marked the end of his direct involvement in Durban and ostensibly the last direct encounter between him and Turner.

What was the nature of the relationship and interaction between Biko and Turner? Commentators have recognised that there were complex political relations between New Left student leaders and SASO,<sup>30</sup> and these political relations are well represented in the lives of both men. It can be argued that it was Turner's close relationship with black activists that helped him to continue to develop a critical political awareness. Tony Morphet makes the point that Turner's shift away from the 'confusions of the liberal position' was evinced by his contacts with the nascent Black Consciousness movement, most notably Biko. According to Morphet, Turner and Biko were introduced through Fozzia Fisher, a philosophy honours student at the university who would later marry

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> M. Ramphele, *Across Boundaries: the journey of a South African woman leader* (New York, The Feminist Press, 1996), pp. 67-8.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>30</sup> C.R.D. Halisi, *Black Political Thought in the Making of South African Democracy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 9.

Turner, after the failure of his first marriage.<sup>31</sup> According to Morphet, Turner initially showed an ‘over-reactive sympathy typical of the guilt felt by white liberals,’ but through his personal contacts he was able to go beyond the initial reaction and become a sympathetic critic of the movement.<sup>32</sup>

It was this step, beyond initial fear, that distinguished Turner and ‘radicals’ of the period. It was a step facilitated by their willingness to re-examine their own worldviews and values, drawn from the challenges posed by friends across the racial divide. As such, it was friendship, which helped steer liberals towards a more radical outlook. One common point was that both Turner and Biko had a strong affinity for the philosophy of Sartre. Pityana observed that Biko ‘laid his hands on some philosophical writings like Jean-Paul Sartre and made ready use of them’.<sup>33</sup> Biko found Sartre’s work particularly stimulating in thinking through the concepts of freedom and responsibility.<sup>34</sup> Sartre had been a formative influence on Turner and there is no evidence that he shifted from the Sartrean standpoint. It was from Sartre’s philosophical work that Turner had extrapolated a political philosophy, and he had returned to South Africa ‘armed’ with his doctorate, convinced in a sense by its own argument.<sup>35</sup>

Mamphela Ramphela remembers that Turner used to visit the Alan Taylor residence and became friendly with all of the students there. She remembers how he ‘spent long periods of time arguing with Steve about the analytical limitations of Black Consciousness, which a socialist perspective could remedy by adding a class analysis to address some of the complexities of power relations in South Africa’. According to Ramphela, ‘Steve in turn pointed out to Rick that an economic class analysis which ignored the racist nature of capitalist exploitation in South Africa, and in many other parts of the globe, was itself

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<sup>31</sup> Morphet, ‘A Biographical Introduction,’ xix-xx. According to Turner’s daughter, Jann, it was Biko who introduced Turner and Foszia. J. Turner, ‘Rick Turner: 30 Years On,’ *Mail and Guardian*, 21 December 2007 to 3 January 2008, p. 47.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Cited in M. More, ‘Biko: Africana existentialist philosopher,’ in A. Mngxitama, A. Alexander and N.C. Gibson (eds.), *Biko Lives!: contesting the legacies of Steve Biko* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 48.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>35</sup> Morphet, ‘A Biographical Introduction,’ p. xvi.

inadequate. White workers identified more with white owners of capital than with black workers, Steve would conclude'. Ramphele notes how the debate would 'drift into a discussion of the false consciousness of white workers, ending with Steve challenging Rick to go out and conscientise white workers to prove that his approach would work in apartheid South Africa'.<sup>36</sup>

Eddie Webster, now a distinguished sociologist and professor emeritus at the University of Witwatersrand, had returned to Durban after completing his doctorate in the United Kingdom and was also personally influenced by Turner.<sup>37</sup> Webster portrays the relationship between Biko and Turner in similar terms. Turner emphasised that it 'was not race' that 'explains the exploitation of the black worker, but the capitalist system'. 'Do not let your Blackness blind yourself to the fact that your power lies in the unorganized working class,' he would chide Biko.<sup>38</sup> As Webster points out, their interaction followed somewhat predictable lines, with Turner advocating the need for a class analysis. But in Biko's assessment, class analysis was adopted as a 'defence mechanism' by whites 'primarily because they want to detach us from anything relating to race. In case it has a rebound effect on them because they are white'.<sup>39</sup> Biko's critique of the 'white left' went so far as to argue for a white 'liberal-left axis', which, while recognising that the rights of black people were being violated and that blacks needed to be 'brought up', failed to see that this necessarily entailed some of them 'coming down'. 'This was the problem' Biko reflected, 'We talk about that, and we get a whole lot of reaction and self-preservation mechanisms from them'.<sup>40</sup> Turner, though, did not fit Biko's picture of a puritanical and arrogant Marxist. Indeed, his humanism allowed him a breadth of thought such that he could be open to opposing ideas. As Maré reflected to me, 'Rick Turner's *type* of socialism was not a strict structural Marxism, it was a humanist Marxism'.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, p. 62.

<sup>37</sup> Lambert, 'Eddie Webster, the Durban Moment and new labour internationalism,' p. 27.

<sup>38</sup> E. Webster, 'Moral decay and social reconstruction: Richard Turner and radical reform', *Theoria* (October 1993), p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Gerhart, 'Interview with Steve Biko,' in Mngxitama et al., *Biko Lives!*, p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Maré interview.

Both men called for the need for exactness in the meaning of key terms. As a professional philosopher, this was an abiding concern of Turner's, and he contended that misunderstandings were almost always associated with confusions over the definitions of key terms, especially where parties had different understandings of the terms of the debate.<sup>42</sup> Biko was similarly careful about the need to be clear about key definitions, concluding his paper to a leadership school at the end of 1971, by stressing 'again the need for us to know very clearly what we mean by certain terms and what our understanding is when we talk of Black Consciousness'.<sup>43</sup> Turner was uniquely well placed with his deep grounding in philosophy and his exposure to New Left radical thought to be open to any ideas and to subject them to sustained critique; the use of the categories of 'blackness' and 'whiteness' by SASO activists was particularly problematic for him. Turner advanced 'important criticisms of the movement, especially its tendency to over-simplify and to absolutise' concepts.<sup>44</sup> He further appealed for the need of Black Consciousness activists to see different 'categories' of white South African, namely 'racist, liberal and radical'.<sup>45</sup> He suggested that the analysis of SASO was 'confused by a very loose grasp of the concept "liberal"' and argued that there were black as well as white racists, and that there were black and white radicals. Black Consciousness was 'a form of radicalism' and Turner emphasised that, rather than demonising white liberals, the aim should be the creation of a new culture.<sup>46</sup>

Both Biko and Turner were committed to the 'quest for a true humanity'.<sup>47</sup> It was what Turner had seen to be barred from the experience of white South Africans, amidst the trappings of material comfort; it was the 'the excitement of self-discovery, the excitement

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<sup>42</sup> Turner papers, R. Turner, 'Memorandum to Commission of Inquiry into Certain Organisations,' 6.

<sup>43</sup> Biko, *I Write*, p. 57.

<sup>44</sup> Morphet, 'A Biographical Introduction', pp. xix-xx.

<sup>45</sup> Turner, 'Black Consciousness and white liberals,' in Karis and Gerhart, *Nadir and Resurgence*, 429.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Biko, *I Write*, pp. 96-108.

of shattered certainties, the thrill of freedom'.<sup>48</sup> Biko's and Turner's politics shared a glimpse of this liberated, moral vision, to which their respective doctrines and theoretical groundings provided the means. In their joint discussion, debate and friendship this shared sense of the liberation of the mind, gave them common ground for hope for a wider political liberation. Biko's vision from his first article, under the pseudonym 'Frank Talk', asserted that at 'the heart of true integration is the provision for each man, each group to rise and attain the envisioned self'. This demanded that 'each group must be able to attain its style of existence without encroaching on or being thwarted by another'. It would be out of 'mutual respect for each other and complete freedom of self-determination' that a 'genuine fusion of the life-styles of the various groups' could be achieved; this would be 'true integration'.<sup>49</sup>

Biko and Turner approached their humanism from different standpoints. Turner was an atheist for whom 'God-talk' was 'meaningless.' In contrast, Biko admitted no difficulty in believing in an omnipotent being, noting 'I am sufficiently convinced of the inadequacy of man and the rest of creation to believe that a greater force than mortals is responsible for creation, maintenance and continuation of life'.<sup>50</sup> A sense of a religious calling was central to the way Biko understood and communicated his mission to others. 'Obedience to God in the sense that I have accepted it is in fact at the heart of the conviction of most selfless revolutionaries,' he observed. 'It is a call to men of conscience to offer themselves and sometimes their lives for the eradication of evil'.<sup>51</sup>

Turner was banned in February 1973 on the recommendation of the state-initiated Schibusch commission into 'affected organisations', a move intended to put an end to his public role as a facilitator of debate and radical thinking. Turner was banned together with NUSAS leaders Neville Curtis, Paul Pretorius, Paula Ensor, Phillippe Le Roux,

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<sup>48</sup> Turner, *The Eye of the Needle*, p. 92. Cited in A. Nash, 'The moment of Western Marxism in South Africa,' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* (29, 1, 1999), p. 69.

<sup>49</sup> Biko, *I Write*, p. 22.

<sup>50</sup> Wilson, 'Biko: A Life,' p. 43.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

Sheila Lapinsky, Clive Keegan and Chris Wood.<sup>52</sup> In spite of his house arrest, activists such as Communist Party member and defence lawyer, Phyllis Naidoo, continued to visit Turner and his wife, Foszia, at their home in Dalton Avenue, in the Durban suburb of Bellair.<sup>53</sup> Turner used his banning to good effect; he embarked on an extended study of the role of individual agency in dialectical materialism, taught himself Portuguese so that he could follow the process of decolonisation in Angola and Mozambique, and learnt German to study the works of Hegel, Kant and Marx in the original.

Although banned, Turner remained engaged with local and national developments. In May 1974 academics founded the Institute for Industrial Education at the University of Natal with its publication the *South African Labour Bulletin*.<sup>54</sup> From 1972 Turner had already initiated a programme of ‘action research,’ where groups of students would visit factories to collect research information from the workers on pay and working conditions in the Durban and Greater-Durban area.<sup>55</sup> The new Institute and its bulletin was an ‘ambitious intellectual project’ intended to provide shape and structure to these efforts, and were to have a lasting impact on shaping strategy in the re-emergence of African trade unions, one of the most salient features of the ‘Durban moment’. Central figures in the new institute were Harriet Bolton, Lawrence Schlemmer, John Copelyn, Alec Erwin, Foszia Fisher, Beksise Nxasana, Omar Badsha, Halton Cheadle and David Hemson, with Zululand homeland leader Gatsha Buthelezi acting as Chancellor.<sup>56</sup> According to Eddie Webster, Turner’s legacy was that ‘he successfully combined a radical vision of the future with an argument for the strategic use of power’.<sup>57</sup> Central to his strategy was the innovation of class theory and the notion of radical reform rather than a revolutionary rupture with the old order. Turner rejected armed insurrection, as well as economic sanctions, and instead advocated using the means available to effect radical change. Central to these means were the democratic trade unions.

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<sup>52</sup> Karis and Gerhart, *Nadir and Resurgence*, pp. 86-7

<sup>53</sup> Phyllis Naidoo, interview with author, 29 April 2010, Durban, South Africa.

<sup>54</sup> Webster, ‘Moral decay and social reconstruction’, pp. 5-7.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

## **Black Consciousness activists and trade unionists in Durban**

Turner's challenge to Black Consciousness, for the need to 'create a new culture,' drew on the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s. In an interview, Afrikaans-speaking student activist and now professor of sociology, Gerhard (Gerry) Maré, recalled how in his student days the university became the scene of an 'odd alliance' between hippies, radical sports people and the 'politicos' who 'would come together around particular protests against the vice-chancellor [or] whatever'. 'So just in terms of student politics,' he reflected, 'there was an incredible movement of different things'.<sup>58</sup> The ferment around the university was further translated into concrete political action; with a group of student activists, Turner helped to set up the Student Wages Commission in Durban, which used the latest sociological research to formulate the 'poverty datum line'. Grace Davie shows that the use of this statistical measurement, enabled students to challenge white South African society as to the exploitative labour policies of Durban companies, as well as gathering evidence to help politicise Durban's black workers, specifically the dockworkers at Durban harbour. In her analysis of the Wages Commission, Davie is not able to come to a certain conclusion as to the students' role, noting the 'considerable extent to which students' voices intermingled with workers' voices'. She does recognise, though, the 'dramatic ways in which intellectuals, students and workers confronted race and class oppression'.<sup>59</sup>

Biko and SASO activists were also busy. They set up an office in Beatrice Street, in downtown Durban. From their office, SASO published a regular newsletter with the aim of introducing ideas and generating debate on black campuses. The newsletter was a central medium of communication. Although Biko denied there was any reason for locating the SASO headquarters in Durban, brushing the fact aside as 'just a historical aberration,' he acknowledged that Durban was not the typical South African city, zoned

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<sup>58</sup> Maré interview.

<sup>59</sup> G. Davie, 'Strength in numbers: the Durban student wages commission, dockworkers and the poverty datum line, 1971-1973,' *Journal of Southern African Studies* (33, 2, June 2007), pp. 419-20.

with a white central business district and the outskirts for 'non-whites'. In Durban, Biko acknowledged, 'there is this whole meeting ground of this half of town. It is supposed to be an Indian area, and it is accessible therefore to all groups. There are no restrictions attached to Africans regarding Indian areas'.<sup>60</sup> SASO was able to sub-let offices in Beatrice Street from Howard Trumbull, a treasurer of the Congregationalist American Board Mission, who as treasurer was able to grant access without official permission.<sup>61</sup>

SASO's attention to its national image and its investment in circulating reading material, allowed critical observers to actively monitor the development of its discourse. Turner studied 'the SASO newsletter, and... SASO associated publications like Creativity and Black Development, and Black Theology'.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, much attention was devoted to communication models in SASO seminars and conferences. Although 'communication' was ostensibly limited to the Black community, there was ready access given for those who wished to explore the movement. The aims of SASO Newsletter were given as: establishing 'proper contact amongst the various black campuses' and the black community; stimulating debate on 'current matters of topical interest'; to foreground 'black opinion on matters affecting blacks in South Africa'; to 'make known the stand taken by students in matters affecting their lives on and off campus'; to 'examine relevant philosophical approaches to South Africa's problems; and centrally, to 'contribute in the formulation of a viable and strong feeling of self-reliance and consciousness amongst the black people of South Africa'.<sup>63</sup> Although these aims were limited to generating black solidarity, the *SASO Newsletter* also created a national profile that was accessible to both white and black observers. The newsletter provided a medium for the crystallisation and translation of an otherwise nebulous and emotional appeal to a 'black consciousness'. Recent commentators have observed that 'Black Consciousness intellectuals made use of the *SASO Newsletter*, which was the major means of communicating the Black

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<sup>60</sup> Gerhart, 'Interview with Steve Biko,' in Mngxitama et al, *Biko Lives!*, p. 36.

<sup>61</sup> Howard Trumbull, Skype interview with author, 04 June 2010. David Trumbull, Skype interview with author, 02 June 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Turner papers, Supreme Court of South Africa, *The State versus S Cooper and Eight Others*, p. 3011.

<sup>63</sup> *SASO Newsletter* (1, 1, May 1971), p. 21.

Consciousness message from 1970 until mid-1973'. At its peak they note that the *SASO Newsletter* appeared four or five times a year and that its circulation reached 4,000 copies, not counting its hand-to-hand circulation.<sup>64</sup>

Biko's biographer, Lindy Wilson, also notes that 'SASO became a sub-culture of the university'. Malusi Mpumlwana emphasised how when he arrived at UNNE it was the warmth and camaraderie of the SASO group that attracted him. They read widely outside of their curriculum and this intellectual searching 'provided the essence of the debates, and the discussions that made the future have some kind of meaningful possibility'.<sup>65</sup> The intense dialogue, reading and distillation of ideas that occurred at the Alan Taylor residence and further afield were crucial in redressing the floundering intellectual self-confidence in black students.

Biko had noted after his tour of black campuses in 1971 that 'most of the students, while very sure of what they did not like... lacked a depth of insight into what can be done. One found wherever he went the question being asked repeatedly "where do we go from here?"' Biko considered the situation to be a 'tragic result' of 'the old approach, where the blacks were made to fit into a pattern largely and often wholly, determined by white students'. As a result 'our originality and imagination have been dulled to the point where it takes a supreme effort to act logically even in order to follow one's beliefs and convictions'.<sup>66</sup> Seeking to redress this situation involved an active search for intellectual resources, from thinkers from the African Diaspora, such as Cabral, Senghor, and especially Frantz Fanon. In response, for instance, to the American political scientist, Gail Gerhart's, question as to the intellectual origins of the Black Consciousness movement, Biko asserted that 'it wasn't a question of one thing out of a book and discovering that it's interesting'. Rather it was 'also an active search for that type of

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<sup>64</sup> Mzamane and Howarth, 'Representing Blackness,' p. 187.

<sup>65</sup> Wilson, 'Biko: a life,' in Pityana et al., *Bounds of Possibility*, p. 28.

<sup>66</sup> Biko, *I Write*, p. 19.

book, for the kind of thing that will say things to you, that was bound to evoke a response'.<sup>67</sup>

There were also conflicts among activists. Looking back at her time in Durban, Ramphele blamed Turner for wrecking the work of SASO at the New Farm Settlement Project. Malusi Mpumlwana, who had become the chairperson of the University of Natal SASO committee, was in charge of the project, working with people squatting at New Farm near the Phoenix settlement, to improve their housing and provide them with running water. The emphasis had been on encouraging dialogue and initiative. As Ramphele reflects, the black students felt they had achieved a breakthrough when they were able to get each household to agree to contribute an amount to the provision of clean tap water. SASO agreed to cover the deficit. But, 'matters went awry when a group of mainly young white activists, under the leadership of Richard Turner' arrived.<sup>68</sup> The white activists were prepared to pay for the costs of installing the tap water in total, thus negating the spirit of self-help that the SASO activists had worked hard to create. In Ramphele's judgement, it was 'as though the poverty of the New Farm residents offered a scarce resource, accessible to Natal University activists, for which they competed to test their ideals of community development'.<sup>69</sup> The damage done by the insensitive course of action confirmed 'BC fears of white domination'. It was more distressing because 'Turner had up to that point been regarded by Black Consciousness activists as one of the few white radicals who understood their views about white racism and economic domination'.<sup>70</sup> Ramphele was more scathing in her autobiography, calling Turner's interference at New Farm 'the height of insensitivity,' commenting '[i]f ever there was a case of Black Consciousness needing to stand up to white people, one couldn't have written a better script than this one'.<sup>71</sup> As Mzamane, Maaba and Biko argue, part of the refining of Black Consciousness was learning to work with and make use of the resources offered by white

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<sup>67</sup> Gerhart, 'Interview with Steve Biko,' in Mngxitama et al., *Biko Lives!*, p. 24.

<sup>68</sup> M. Ramphele, 'Empowerment and symbols of hope: Black Consciousness and community development', in Pityana et al., *Bounds of Possibility*, p. 158.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, p. 63.

activists, but not to be used by them in turn.<sup>72</sup> Biko needed to mediate between Turner and the angry SASO activists, who saw their interference at New Farm as an overt sign of white arrogance.

## **The SASO Nine trial, Biko's and Turner's defence**

In 1974, with Biko banned to King William's Town, younger SASO leaders planned to stage a celebration rally at Currie's Fountain in Durban, to celebrate the independence of Mozambique from Portuguese rule. According to Biko's biographer, Xolela Mangcu, this action took place against his direct counsel.<sup>73</sup> The day before the rally was due to commence, Minister of Police, Jimmy Kruger, told parliament it had been banned. SASO refused to back down and printed thousands of leaflets advertising the march. An estimated 5 000 people converged on Currie's Fountain to be met with police dogs. The rally was brutally broken up when the dogs were set on the assembled people. Matching the demonstrations in Durban, students held a rally at Turfloop, University of the North, an "ethnic" university set up by the government in the northern Transvaal, on 25 September 1974, following its annual SASO week.<sup>74</sup> Militant slogans and posters were placed on the road to the entrance of the university, such as 'Frelimo fought and regained our soil, our dignity. It is a story. Change the name and the story applies to YOU'; 'Revolution!! Machel will Help! Away with Vorster Ban! We are not Afro Black Power!!!'<sup>75</sup> Following the discretion of the university Rector, the university authorities waited until the arrival of a large contingent of police before removing the placards.

An estimated 37 activists were detained under South Africa's anti-terrorist legislation after the pro-Frelimo Rallies,<sup>76</sup> a moment that Julian Brown shows 'pushed against the

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<sup>72</sup> M. V. Mzamane, B. Maaba and N. Biko, 'The Black Consciousness Movement,' in South African Democracy Education Trust, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Volume 2, 1970-1980* (Pretoria, Unisa Press, 2006), p. 100.

<sup>73</sup> X. Mangcu, *Biko: a biography* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2012), pp. 191-4.

<sup>74</sup> J.G.E. Wolfson, *Turfloop: A Summary of the Reports of the Snyman and Jackson Commissions of Inquiry into the University of the North* (Johannesburg, South African Institute of Race Relations, 1976), p. 26.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>76</sup> Institute of Commonwealth Studies Library, London, 6/2/12, Mary Benson Papers, 2nd Report on Arrests, Detentions and Trials of Members and Supporters of South African Students Organisation, Black People's Convention, Black

limits' of what was 'publicly possible' and 'the stated approach to politics' of Black Consciousness, which eschewed open confrontation.<sup>77</sup> Nine SASO activists were formally prosecuted for their role in organising the march, namely: Saths Cooper, Zithulele Cindi, Mosioua Lekota, Aubrey Mokoape, Strini Moodley, Muntu Myeza, Pandelani Nefolovhodwe, Nkwenkwe Nkomo, and Kaborane Sedibe.<sup>78</sup> Their lengthy prosecution became known as the 'SASO Nine trial'. The political scientist Gail Gerhart noted that trial allowed the accused to 'to restate the nationalist viewpoint' who 'took every opportunity to symbolize their defiance of the state by singing freedom songs and raising clenched fists in the courtroom'. Rather than quashing Black Consciousness, the trial provided the accused activists with 'a continuous public platform through the press, [and] merely disseminated that ideology even more widely, and held up to youth once again a model of "rebel" courage'.<sup>79</sup>

Prominent among the witnesses for the defence were Biko and Turner. Biko's defence formed the basis of the book, *The Testimony of Steve Biko* (1978), edited by Millard Arnold. Arnold drew attention to the importance of Biko's brilliant exposition and defence, similarly showing how the trial became a crucial public platform for the dissemination of Black Consciousness. Turner's defence at the trial in 1976, three years after his banning, has not received much attention, although as this section will argue, it provides insight and reflection on his preceding six years of activism.

Turner was called as the first witness for the defence. Part of his strategy was to challenge the prosecution's expert witness, Stoffel Van der Merwe, a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the Rand Afrikaans University, on his use of documents out of their original context. According to Turner, the prosecution had not distinguished between 'policy documents' and 'reactive' documents. They had also failed to make the distinction

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Allied Workers Union, Theatre Council of Natal, Black Community Programmes. Issued by the Program for Social Change, 23 December 1974.

<sup>77</sup> J. Brown, 'An experiment in confrontation: the pro-Frelimo rallies of 1974', *Journal of Southern African Studies* (38, 1, 2012), p. 71.

<sup>78</sup> G. Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa: the evolution of an ideology* (Los Angeles, California University Press, 1978), p. 299.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

between organisational discussion and concrete policy decisions, and had not taken into account the relative importance of documents in relation to each other. Van Der Merwe had used SASO documents, seized by the Security Branch, to try and establish 'a framework of theory which would identify features of black consciousness ideology likely to lead to revolution, which could be used to measure the revolutionary nature of BPC and SASO'.<sup>80</sup> He presented a theory, which he argued 'had diagnostic value to predict and identify a revolutionary group'. As Michal Lobban points out, this was the 'necessary crux of his evidence' because Black Consciousness organisations had assiduously avoided overtly revolutionary activity.<sup>81</sup>

In response to Van der Merwe's diagnostic model, Turner presented his own collection of Black Consciousness material. He distinguished, however, between the policy documents of the General Student Council, its branch reports and occasional publications, and the speeches by individual members. Evidently these could not be accorded the same importance: 'One cannot treat these all on exactly the same level of analysis,' he argued, 'one has to categorise one's documents... and then weigh each document in the light of its position in the overall organisation'.<sup>82</sup> SASO/BPC documents needed to be weighed-up and read alongside a proper analysis of the organisation. This required close knowledge and sensitivity in judgement, which the court's legal, document-based, approach did not fulfil. Moreover, there was a danger that language itself could be misleading. Drawing on the latest linguistic, anthropological and social psychology material available, Turner argued that political language needed to be understood in terms of its specific context. Quoting from Edelman, he reminded the court that 'The realistic study of political language and its meaning is necessarily a probing not only of dictionaries nor of word counts, but of diverse responses to particular modes of expression of audiences in disparate social settings'.<sup>83</sup> Thus, he concluded, that qualification and further research was required for a proper understanding of 'Black use

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<sup>80</sup> M. Lobban, *White Man's Justice: South African political trials in the Black Consciousness era* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 55.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56

<sup>82</sup> Turner Papers, Supreme Court of South Africa, *The State versus S Cooper and Eight Others*, p. 3015.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3020.

of language, Black perceptions, Black use of ideas in South Africa'.<sup>84</sup> He cited the example of Nkwenkwe Nkomo, one of the accused, whose background was in the Evangelical Churches, and whose speeches tended towards a robust, bellicose form of expression associated with the fiery preaching of his church background. It was thus evident that the qualifications of the prosecution to render a fair and nuanced assessment of the reality of SASO, and therefore the culpability of the accused, were inadequate.

Turner also emphasised how SASO always focused its activities within prescribed 'legal' parameters and called for qualification on the charge, levelled by the prosecution, that SASO was seeking a regime change. Rather, Turner pointed out that SASO accepted 'certain regime norms and values' such as freedom of speech and freedom of association, but were 'operating and using these aspects of regime norms and values in criticising other aspects of the way in which the regime functions'.<sup>85</sup> 'A point which strikes me over and over again in attempting to interpret this,' he emphasised, 'is that their political activity has... always aimed at finding within the existing regime methods of activity, and in that sense they are saying: look, this regime gives us scope for doing certain things, but we don't want all aspect of the regime we clearly want some change but we have scope within the regime for working for changes in other aspects of the regime'. It was incorrect to assert, as the prosecution did, that SASO was rejecting the entire regime; if that were the case the most rational course of action would be to go underground and 'attempt to use violence'.<sup>86</sup> Turner asserted the crucial point from his analysis of the documentation, that where violent imagery may occur it 'did not reach the level of policy and become the policy of the organisation'.<sup>87</sup>

Turner and the other expert members of the defence, such as Professor Robert Gurr, were highly successful in undermining the credibility of the diagnostic model proposed by Van Der Merwe. In his interim ruling judge, Boshoff J., was forced to concede that a

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 3022.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 3037.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 3038.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 3174.

distinction needed to be drawn between a revolutionary and a protest group, 'which might overlap in terms of objectives, organization, and tactics, but which differed in strategies and demands'. He recognised that 'revolutionary groups demand the destruction of the existing political, economic and social system' and worked in secret, and thus did not use demonstrations and strikes, as SASO and BPC had done.<sup>88</sup> Despite the success of the expert defence, the court was able to prosecute the accused on the charge of promoting racial hostility.<sup>89</sup> While the central contention of the defence was that 'the language and content of SASO and BPC documents cannot be understood without an appreciation of the reality experienced from day to day by the black community', Lobban shows that the prosecution was able to discount the 'black world,' as represented by the defence, and trivialise the disempowerment of Blacks in South Africa. The expert witness of Turner and Gurr was sidestepped by the prosecution, as they argued that Van der Merwe's model could not be viewed 'bit by bit' but needed to be taken as 'a whole'.<sup>90</sup> The unique nature of the trial, as Lobban notes, was that it prosecuted ideas rather than actions, and the SASO Nine were eventually convicted due to the revolutionary *potential* of their ideas.

## Conclusions

Turner's response to Black Consciousness sensed the political possibilities in its radicalism; but in his view, the correct focus was a positive affirmation of persons and the creation of a new culture that affirmed their dignity, rather than a negative rejection of white liberalism. He saw the significance of radical thought in its embodiment of a rejection of capitalism and apartheid, which was congruent with the demands of full citizenship and equality of black South Africans.<sup>91</sup> A new political model was called for, one that rejected avarice and consumerism and embraced instead a 'Christian model' based on genuine community and love.

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<sup>88</sup> Lobban, *White Man's Justice*, p. 60.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>91</sup> R. Turner, 'In search of a new South Africa,' *Pro Veritate* (9, 5, 15 September 1970), pp. 3-8.

But events overtook Biko's and Turner's debates; within less than six months, both had been murdered. Biko died on 12 September 1977 after being brutally assaulted in police detention in Port Elizabeth's Sanlam Building. Almost four months later to the day, Turner was murdered at his home on Dalton Avenue, Bellair, in Durban, shot through the window by an unknown assassin. The state banned seventeen Black Consciousness organisations on 17 October 1977, two weeks after the funeral of Biko, crushing the movement and confiscating its assets.<sup>92</sup> The wave of bannings and the murders occurred in the aftermath of an upwelling of popular revolt, sparked when the Soweto schoolchildren marched on 16 June 1976, and signalled that apartheid was firmly on the defensive. The state aimed to destroy the broad base of interlinked progressive activism that had coalesced from the late 1960s and through the course of the 1970s.

In its historical moment, Black Consciousness could be tempered by open engagement; reasoning, searching and dialogue were paradoxically maintained together with the necessity of polarisation. No doubt, Black Consciousness bore the personal imprint of its key intellectual and political leader and there were those less disposed to such open engagement, but the strength of Biko and the Black Consciousness message during its historical moment was as much due to its ability to convert opponents, as its message resonated with the utopian hopes of the young, radical Christians and socialists alike. A call to maturity, personal growth and a qualified openness was inherent to the political vision of the leaders of Black Consciousness, for whom the focus was more of 'a way of being' than political orthodoxy, and in which personal liberation necessarily preceded political freedom. These were key aspects to the 'Durban moment' and indeed were the elements of Morphet's four projects, which transcended the university to influence the nature of the debates in Durban and contributed to the inflection of national debates as well.

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<sup>92</sup> L. Hadfield, 'Biko, Black Consciousness, and 'the System' Ezinyoka: oral history and Black Consciousness in practice in a rural Ciskei village,' *South African Historical Journal* (62, 1, 2010), p. 95.