

# History of Black Consciousness and the student movement

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First of all I wish to pay tribute to all our people who have paid enormous sacrifices for the liberation struggle in S.A. - since the arrival of colonial forces in 1652 - more especially those who have paid the highest sacrifice to our struggle which is life itself.

Discussion of any political history is a very difficult one because of the various factors which influence people's thinking at any particular time in history. This becomes more so when one attempts to discuss a history of political struggle because the people confronted by the task of dismantling the status quo at anytime are at a disadvantage to those of us who have the opportunity of analysing their activities in retrospect. Again, as much as one may attempt to be objective, it is very difficult for one not to be subjective because analysis itself is a subjective phenomenon. However I am going to try and do my best although I should concede on the onset that I'll also be subjective in one way or another.

In order to start a discussion on any process of political struggle it is important that one sets out a broad framework of analysis within which one can then try to place the topic under discussion into perspective. I want to say at the outset that whatever criticism I will make of any tendencies or actions by certain organisation is not meant to ridicule them but rather is an attempt at positive constructive criticism - the same goes to individuals.

## 1. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Capitalist exploitation is an international phenomenon which manifests itself in different political and social systems in various parts of the world - the common feature amongst these nations being exploitation of man by man. The political system in some countries is that of liberal democracies as is the case in Western Europe and North America. In parts of Asia, Latin America and Africa, the political system is that of monarchial dictatorship as in Morocco and Saudi Arabia or military dictatorship as in Argentina, El Salvador, Liberia - just to name a few. The rest of Africa, Asia and Latin America is today under the grip of post-colonial neo-colonialism which is characterised by an alliance between international monopoly capital and the indigenous petty bourgeoisie class in the exploitation of the majority. A few of the post-colonial African, Latin American and Asian together with East-European countries are involved in struggle to build a socialist democracy in their countries. These type of

countries are under continuing harrassment by the imperialist countries who wish to reverse the course of history.

South Africa remains the only country in Africa or even the whole world where the political and social system highly resembles that of colonialism except for the fact that there is no specific metropolitan state to which the dominant white group owes allegiance. Our analysis of the South African liberation struggle should therefore closely resemble the analysis of the struggle in colonial situations.

Colonialism as a form of capitalist exploitation and expansionism can be said to have four basic tenents:

- 1) Exploitation of the labour of the indigenous masses.
- 2) Expropriation of raw materials and profits of exchange.
- 3) Physical suppression of the masses through the army and police.
- 4) Ideological control through mainly religion, education and the mass media.

For effective control of the indigenous mass a petty bourgeois group must be allowed to grow to a certain extent. This can be drawn from the local traditional authorities in the form of chiefs and headmen and the emerging intellectual group, eg. priests, lawyers and doctors. However because of the need to maintain racism as a form of ideological control, the indigenous petty bourgeoisie cannot be completely assimilated in the ranks of the foreign petty bourgeoisie who form the foundation of security of the interests of the small capitalist class. As a result, although the indigenous petty bourgeoisie is allowed to develop, this can only be accommodated to a certain extent. They also still experience a great amount of suppression by way of political legislation.

The indigenous petty bourgeoisie therefore has two alternatives in their struggle for survival -

- a) They can put themselves completely at the mercy of the colonial master and assist whole heartedly in the subjugation of the indigenous masses.
- b) They can align themselves with the mass of the exploited and oppressed indigenous majority and join hands in the struggle to bring to an end colonial rule. The nature of the alliance with the masses is also very important, for it determines the type of society which will emerge after the colonisers have been removed from power. This can take two alternatives.
- c) An alliance of convenience as a result of the realisation of the petit bourgeoisie that without the involvement of the masses the colonial powers cannot be removed. This is an opportunistic alliance where the petit bourgeoisie uses the masses as a ladder of climbing to the top. This is reflected very clearly during the course of struggle itself. The petit bourgeoisie agitates the masses into action through the use of vague political slogans which appeal emotionally. They build themselves into symbols of resistance who are followed fanatically by a confused mass. This can take the form of a pseudo religious or actually

religious or cultural movement rallied around slogans. Economic contradictions and the primary economic motive of colonialism and racist oppression are not spoken about and the economic contradictions within the indigenous people are buried forever. Within this we find slogans such as 'Africa for the Africans' from Marcus Garvey, 'drive the white man into the sea' from the PAC, 'Black man you are on your own' and 'Black is Beautiful' from BC organisations.

The petit bourgeoisie can however forge a progressive alliance with the masses. Here the petit bourgeoisie take the initial leadership of the liberation movement while making sure that the masses learn through struggle to take their destiny into their own hands. The economic motive of political oppression is made to be understood by the masses to ensure that their needs take top priority in the aims of the movement. The contradictions between the indigenous people are made very clear so that the masses are not fooled around.

The South African liberation struggle is no exception to this broad generalisation.

At the turn of the century after the defeat of the Bambata rebellion in 1906 - the indigenous petty bourgeoisie in the form of chiefs and the educated elite realised the need to come together in order to challenge colonialism. In so doing the ANC was founded in 1912 - through the initiative of people like Pixley Seme, Rev John Dube, Dr D D T Jabavu, Sol Plaatjie and others amongst the intellectuals. The nature of their programmes indicate very clearly that these were people who although touched by the plight of the impoverished African masses, were more agitated by their frustration of being ignored by the colonial power structure. It is a result of this that we see them sending deputations to the queen persistently to protest against the lack of consultation by the local colonial powers. It was at this stage that the roots of what was to become known as B.C. in 1969 were sown.

The reasons why I say this is made clearer is if we look at how B.C. emerged. A central role was played by intellectuals in both instances who laid the basis for national unity.

For a long time the petty bourgeoisie attempted to fight the struggle alone without involving the masses. Even after trade union movements eg. ICU were established, there was very little relationship between the masses and the ANC - the political movement had political power as its target and not the equitable distribution of wealth and creation of a workers or peasant state. The ANC was very anti-communist, because the chiefs feared that an equitable distribution of the country's wealth would mean they will lose their land to the peasants. This crystallised with the expulsion of the President, Gumedé, after his visit to the USSR.

Right up to the 1940's the relationship between the ANC and the workers movement was a very weak one. The work of organising the workers was mainly in the hands of the Communist Party. The ANC would occasionally join hands with the workers mainly on political issues and on issues which would affect the

petit bourgeoisie as well, such as the anti-pass campaigns.

The leadership of the ANC realised that to be successful they needed the support of the workers but they were not prepared to build up the movement so that the workers could develop their own leadership and take over the direction of the political movement.

The formation of the ANC Youth League gave a greater momentum to the drive for political power. Here again we see the masses being concretely called upon to help the intellectuals get rid of their political frustrations. This is noted by the nature of the appeals made by the Youth League - as reflected by Anton Lembede the first president. "The African has a primary interest and an inalienable right to Africa which is his continent and motherland. The Africans have a divine destiny to make Africa free among the people of the earth. To achieve African freedom, Africans must build a national liberatory movement and adopt the creed of African nationalism led by Africans themselves." This was using rhetoric and emotional language to win over the masses.

Some of the members of the Youth League, however, moved from this position and accepted not only the central role of the masses but the need to train the masses to learn to take their future into their own hands. The masses were therefore mobilised on issues which affected them and therefore there was no need for racist slogans like "Drive the white man into the Sea." It was therefore possible to unite with other groups dedicated to the overthrow of exploitation.

Some of the African petit bourgeoisie feared that an alliance with other groups would jeopardize their leadership. Thus we see the PAC break-away in 1959. And in order to win the following of the masses they returned to emotional appeals to the masses. They feared that the masses would develop their own leadership and take the initiative of the struggle. While the PAC rejected alliances with organisations like the Congress of Democrats on the basis that they were white organisations we see a paradoxical type of situation where the PAC had a very effective alliance with the Liberal Party. Patrick Duncan played quite a crucial role in the future of the PAC. Thus white participation was not so much of an issue as was first made out. Rather with the type of petit bourgeois leadership which wants to maintain itself, such that with the success of the struggle they can be the ones who can climb the political ladder. They want the masses to remain docile and only be agitated to the extent that they can rally behind the leadership and not develop their own leadership.

The 1960's saw the crushing of both the ANC and the PAC by massive state power. The masses were demoralised and leaderless. In the long period following this, the government entrenched its politics in the form of bantustans, CRC's, SAIC's, etc. In this political vacuum, we see again young black intellectuals, not being able to tolerate the type of frustration of not being able to realise their ambitions. Thus it was again the students and not the masses who took the initiative.

To put into perspective why it was the students again and not

the masses who took the initiative, I want to quote one of the people who is still today quite closely involved in the Black Consciousness Movement, Quarish Patel. He wrote in 1979: "The reason for the students taking the lead in the black struggle can be traced to the fact that they were outside the process of the means of production and distribution. Their resulting militant consciousness which filled the political vacuum after the Sharpeville watershed could not be conditioned or influenced by the stifling influence of the productive/consumptive relationship."

On this strength BC as an ideology set the pace of a new political era. But precisely because of the black students' position outside the means of production and distribution, there was an inbuilt limit to BC as it was then conceived.

A group of black students found themselves in a situation where their only outlet for political action was NUSAS, which they perceived as an organisation which was too liberal and which was not addressing itself to the problems confronting the majority of the oppressed people. And therefore realising the common political oppression of Africans, Coloureds and Indians, the students decided to come together and form an organisation called SASO.

Students are outside the process of production and therefore do not experience the contradictions which manifest themselves especially in the process of production. On the factory floor you see racial discrimination in operation, where Indians will, for example, automatically get a higher position of employment than an African person. This is a strategy adopted not only the Government but also by the capitalist bosses.

So due to the fact that students are removed from the process of production, we can come together simply on the basis that we are excluded from the political process. There is no material contradictions present among students and therefore it becomes very easy to form a common alliance.

There are similarities between the formation of BC and the ANC Youth League. A characteristic of both is the intellectual nature of the organisations.

When the ANC was formed in 1912, it was soon after the last armed rebellion (the Bambata Rebellion) had been crushed, where the mass resistance to colonialism had just been defeated. It was not possible for the masses at this stage to effectively take over the struggle because there had been demoralisation and reorganisation was needed. In 1960, the mass political movements had been crushed and the masses were demoralised. And again we see the intellectuals taking the initiative.

Another similarity between BC and the Youth League was the emphasis on psychological emancipation. Little attention was paid to the production process. In the years 1973 - 1974 SASO was at its peak with intensive activity such as the pro-Frelimo rallies and the expulsion of Tiro from Turfloop. 1973 was also the year when the workers movement started to take initiative especially in the form of the Durban strikes. Significantly the headquarters of SASO was in Durban and

many leaders were based in Durban. Yet while there was intensive activity by the workers and students, there was no relationship or correlation between the activities of the two sectors.

This was true too for the BC organisation which developed such as Black Community Programmes. This was an attempt to form a more broad political movement. But due to the fact that it was mainly based on psychological liberation and was not addressing itself to the day-to-day issues which affect the majority of the people, there was not much which was achieved in the form of attracting workers. The masses of the oppressed people were not drawn into the political organisation.

They were not expecting the masses to take the leadership of the organisation. This was reflected in the SASO Constitution and Black Students Manifesto. Slogans like "Students are the vanguard of the struggle and the conscious of the community" were common.

There were attempts to form a workers section in the form of the Black Allied Workers Union. This was perceived as being the workers wing of the BC movement and people felt that they needed to organise workers through the philosophy of BC and not based on the day-to-day problems of the workers. Few workers were drawn into this type of trade union.

The economic plan of the Black Peoples Convention gives us a clear conception of the type of society which they foresaw. This economic plan was broadly called "Black Communalism".

If we look at this plan its outcome would be - if you remove the existing white government and replace it with a black, BPC government - almost the same type of relationship existing except that what at the present moment is beneficial only to whites, would then be beneficial to blacks only. The workers themselves are not able to determine how they are going to do their work and what they are going to produce, but rather the state will determine what is going to happen to the workers. Here we see an elite trying to ascend to the top by using the mass of the oppressed people as a ladder to get to the top.

It is useful to look at the concept of nationalism in this discussion of BC, for BC is one form of nationalism. It is necessary to look at the colonial situation in S.A. where capitalist exploitation has taken a racist form. Nationalism can take two directions. Anti-white slogans in themselves are primitive manifestations of political awareness. It is the duty of the advanced political activists to make sure that the primitive type of political awareness which develops should be translated into positive political action whereby the masses can ultimately identify the actual enemy, which is exploitation of man by man. But this depends on the type of leadership that develops, especially from the intellectual group. The type of political organisation which develops must be able to accommodate both the development of primitive political consciousness and create the necessary structure which will make it possible for the political understanding of the masses to develop.

After the 1977 bannings of BC organisations, there was a feeling among some that this was a time of reassessment of the direction and gains that had been made. In August 1978, an organisation was launched in Johannesburg called AZAPO, the Azanian Peoples Organisation. It was clear right from the start that the direction of the organisation was going to change, there was going to be more emphasis on the involvement of workers. They felt that previous organisations had been led by students who were outside of the production process which made it impossible for them to attract the mass of the people.

They said that the workers were the vanguard of the struggle and went on to define all blacks as workers. This sounds very contradictory. They said that black workers were the vanguard of the struggle and since all blacks are workers, blacks must be a vanguard within a black movement, which in a way sounds a bit rhetorical. By confusing the situation in this way, the leadership is denying the fact that the leadership is petit bourgeois leadership and that for the organisation to take a correct direction it has to promote forums through which the workers can take the leadership of the organisation. But then by saying that all blacks are workers, in other words that there is no reason to promote any separate group such that it can ultimately take leadership of the struggle because we are all the same - we are all blacks and all workers.

Later on, we see a further development in AZAPO itself. A quote from the National Organiser of AZAPO in 1980, Leonard Mosala, illustrates this:

"AZAPO's significance is for the black working class based on grassroots leadership and with a programme for society as a whole. This is completely different from the change envisaged by the integrationist which creates a middle-class black who feels protected by maintenance of capitalism. Integrationists of this type, means blacks accepting white institutions, norms and values with the implication of black inferiority . . . whites who appear sympathetic to the black cause more often than not want to form alliances on a leadership level, rather than joining at grassroots level. They thus want to fight our struggle for us, by giving us the lead...we in the black consciousness movement advocate an open, egalitarian society where skin pigmentation will not play a part. But we also believe the tactics to achieve liberation won't necessarily be the same with those required to reconstruct a new society."

Here we see the organisation denying a very important principle of any organisation involved in struggle - that the nature of the struggle is going to reflect the type of society that is going to come.

I think that the arguments he puts forward, although very contradictory, but especially for NUSAS, as a white student movement, it is very important that people understand clearly the type of involvement which they can get into.

We have to realise that because of the racist nature of exploitation in South Africa, it is inevitable that the people who are becoming politically conscious and wanting to bring

to an end their political oppression, in the initial stages before the people can develop a higher political consciousness, it is inevitable that they will start by developing a nationalist hatred of the colonial situation. It is wrong for certain political leaders then to take advantage of this type of development and not want to make the masses develop a further political understanding, further than the basic nationalist contradictions.

The fact that people do have at some stage those type of conceptions does not necessarily mean that they are reactionary. It is just a stage in their political development. In a way, BC was just a form of political consciousness which reflected this situation and therefore in itself was not a reactionary move. Just as with the beginnings of the ANC and ANC Youth League in the 40's, people developed from a situation where they were rallied together on slogans such as 'Africa for Africans' but due to further political involvement, people came to understand the political contradictions beyond this type of situation.

The student movement since 1977, has developed differently from AZAPO. In 1979, after a two year period of reassessment, black high school students came together to form the Congress of South African Students. Students were able to reflect back on the mistakes of the past and realised that during the uprisings not enough groundwork had been laid. So when students realised that students alone could not challenge the system and that there was a need to rally the workers as well, there was not any groundwork laid for this. Therefore the situation which developed was one of the most nasty confrontations in our history - the clashes between students and workers, especially between students and the workers of Mzimhlope Hostel. Students had to coerce workers not to go to work.

Later in 1979, AZASO was formed. Initially it was formed as a supposed university student wing of AZAPO. But the university students also took a new direction. There was the possibility then of going to the other extreme - of students emphasising more of a student-worker relationship and actually ignoring the important fact that as students we are still primarily needed to challenge the education system.

Therefore we see, especially after the 1980 boycotts, a steady emphasis of student movements, both COSAS and AZASO, and to a certain extent within NUSAS also, there was this type of emphasis on worker issues.

This type of emphasis can also be misleading. As much as all fronts of the struggle should work together, it is also important each front of struggle should know where its priorities lie and we being primarily a student movement, have got a responsibility therefore to challenge the education system. It is out of this realisation that at the recent congress of AZASO, it was decided that students should embark on a programme to launch an Education Charter, which COSAS has also endorsed.

By learning from past mistakes we as students will ultimately discover the correct role which we as students have to play in the struggle.