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The Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa

by DAVID HIRSCHMANN*

BLACK politics in South Africa changed dramatically after 1976. It spread far and fast, with black organisations multiplying at all kinds of levels. The African National Congress (A.N.C.) returned and the United Democratic Front (U.D.F.) emerged. The trade unions strengthened considerably and black youths demonstrated their power. Ideologies changed and evolved. Yet at the same time as the movement broadened and deepened its hold on black people, internal divisions grew more intense. Organisational, ideological, and strategic differences became more bitter, and leaders continued to accuse each other of betraying the struggle.

In other words, the most readily and immediately mobilising element in the struggle, black racial solidarity, was losing some of its currency. It remains true that the predominant percentage of people who are beneficiaries and oppressors are white, yet the small but growing number of black officials, policemen, informers, and Bantustan leaders who co-operate in the oppression, as well as the black bourgeoisie who benefit from the system, have also continued to challenge 'race' as the prime analytical and strategic category. Furthermore, much of the current terminology of black politics, with its stress on economic exploitation and class conflict, is theoretically colour-blind. So too are the principles of the A.N.C., which has re-asserted its predominance in black politics. In all of this, what has happened to the Black Consciousness Movement (B.C.M.), so influential in the 1970s, and so important in motivating the uprisings of 1976 and initiating the turbulence that continues to challenge the Government?

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This article is concerned with the nature of the B.C.M. and its impact on black South African politics from the late 1960s onwards. It may be important to stress that Black Consciousness as discussed here relates to a specific Movement, and not to some generalised black awareness and mobilisation.

While relying to a considerable extent on the well-established scholarly and participant literature on the topic, the particular contribution of this article is intended to be its inclusion, in some detail, of extracts of interviews conducted with black South Africans. In other words, they themselves, some supportive of and others hostile towards Black Consciousness, were given the opportunity to analyse the Movement, particularly in its latter stage.

THE PERIOD BEFORE 1976

1. *Background*

Early in the 1960s the South African Government had managed to quell black resistance through the use of force, arrests, legislative restrictions, and an effective police-information network. Black leaders were imprisoned or banned or fled the country, and the long-established A.N.C. and the more recently formed breakaway Pan-Africanist Congress (P.A.C.) were proscribed. That section of the leadership which escaped detention went into exile and took the remnants of their organisations with them. Based on this restoration of law and order, business confidence returned and by the mid-1960s the economy was booming. For whites there was tranquility and their privileges appeared secure. For black South Africans, political activity and hope reached a nadir.

Ten years later – commencing with the Soweto uprising in 1976 – black resistance exploded once again, and this time it was to prove a sustained and broad-based movement. A large measure of credit (exactly how much is a contentious issue to be discussed below) for the resuscitation of black opposition must go to the Black Consciousness Movement. This political tendency found its origins at the blacks-only universities established after 1959 by the ruling National Party (N.P.) in fulfilment of its ideal of racially separate systems of education at all levels. Students like those at the University of the North (at Turfloop in the Northern Transvaal) and the University of Zululand (at Ngoye in Natal), for example, were stuck out in isolated ‘bush campuses’ where they were taught and

administered mainly by Afrikaners. In a very real sense the B.C. Movement was, therefore, a stepchild of *apartheid*.

The completeness of their isolation, resentment at an inferior education, frustration at lack of academic choices, the oppressiveness of their controlled circumstances, and time to ponder these matters together, all combined with long-standing political anger to provide young black intellectuals with a fertile environment for envisioning and initiating a new political movement. The ideas came from a variety of sources. The exclusive Africanist emphasis of the P.A.C. was one. This was certainly the case at Turfloop, where predecessors of B.C. organisations were operative in the mid-1960s.¹ The American Black Power movement and the ideas of Stokely Carmichael, Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm X, of Liberation and Black Theology, were all influential. From Africa, the thoughts and analyses of the *négritude* writers, notably Léopold Sédar Senghor, and of Frantz Fanon, Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, and Kwame Nkrumah found their way into this evolving new framework of student thinking.

More important though was the local context, more specifically the intensifying oppression of the ruling N.P. and the declining strength of multiracialism and liberalism amongst opposition forces. In particular, the white-dominated National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) was increasingly seen by black students as not being able to advance their particular interests. More broadly, they were coming to the conclusion that white sympathisers were more a hindrance than a help to their cause as they now saw it.

In 1969 at a meeting held at the Turfloop campus some black students therefore broke away from NUSAS to form their own South African Students Organisation (SASO). Indicative of their broadening perspectives, the students initiated the formation three years later of the Black People's Convention (B.P.C.) in order to spread their views to a wider community. According to Steve Biko, possibly the best known of the B.C. leaders, later to be murdered while in detention, and the subject of Richard Attenborough's film, 'Cry Freedom':

Black Consciousness is in essence the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their operation – the blackness of their skin – and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It seeks to demonstrate the lie that black is an aberration from the 'normal' which is white. It is a manifestation of a new realisation that by seeking to run away from themselves

¹ At a meeting at Turfloop in 1964 many of the later concerns of Black Consciousness were explained to this author.

and to emulate the white man, blacks are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them black. Black Consciousness therefore takes cognizance of the deliberateness of God's plan in creating black people black. It seeks to infuse the black community with a new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their value systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook to life.²

2. *Main Precepts*

As with most political movements, the B.C.M. was not unified on all themes and emphases, nor was it ideologically static. Nevertheless it is possible to draw out some of its main precepts for this period.

The centrality of race was held to be the source of the continuing struggle in South Africa: 'The greatest conflict is that between the races. The race which is in power is the white race; that which seeks the power it does not have is the black race.'³ To challenge this structure of racial discrimination first required a re-interpretation by black people themselves of the meaning of blackness. 'So many things are said so often to us, about us and for us but very seldom by us.'⁴ Now black South Africans would define their identity according to their own values, and this involved a strong positive assertion of pride in being a black person.

There was an inclusive aspect to this definition: it included Indian and Coloured people, that is everyone suffering oppression because of the colour of their skin. But there was also an exclusive aspect: black policemen, for example, and others who collaborated with the *apartheid* system, lost their right to be considered black – they were 'extensions of the enemy into our ranks',⁵ referred to derogatorily as 'non-whites'. For some, it required more than mere collaboration to be truly black; it implied a determined antagonism to *apartheid*.⁶ While it was possible, therefore, for a person of colour to be excluded on political grounds, it was not possible for a white South African to be included whatever his or her position on *apartheid*.⁷

Having clarified this, the next appeal was for black 're-groupment' and conscientisation. For a people who had long been weakened through divisions enforced upon them, re-groupment in a world where

² Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like. A Selection of his Writings*, edited with a personal memoir by Aelred Stubbs (London, 1978), p. 49.

³ Njabulo Ndebele, 'Black Development', in B. S. Biko (ed.), *Black Viewpoint* (Durban, 1972), p. 14.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 11.

⁵ Biko, *op. cit.* p. 78.

⁶ Robert Fatton, Jr, *Black Consciousness in South Africa: the dialectics of ideological resistance to white supremacy* (Albany, 1986), p. 71.

⁷ Baruch Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash. The Soweto Revolt: roots of a revolution?* (London, 1979), p. 295.

political power derived from groups was an essential step towards emancipation.⁸ Believing too that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor was control of the mind of the oppressed,⁹ the necessary accompaniment was psychological liberation of the black man from the confines of centuries of racism and paternalism. In the words of Barney Pityana, it was essential 'to pump life into his empty shell... to infuse him with pride and dignity'.¹⁰

This emphasis was essentially non-violent. The B.C. Movement stated that it was not interested in armed struggle, and appeared to rely on the unified and ethical strength of a revitalised black consciousness somehow peacefully confronting and influencing whites.¹¹ As explained by Biko:

over the years we have attained moral superiority over the white man; we shall watch as time destroys his paper castles and know that all these little pranks were but frantic attempts of frightened little people to convince each other that they can control the minds and bodies of indigenous people of Africa indefinitely.¹²

Black re-groupment required the B.C. Movement not only to declare its unequivocal opposition to *apartheid*, but also to distance itself from white liberalism. Biko referred to the white liberal presence 'amongst us... [as] irksome and of nuisance value'.¹³ Partly this related to the notion that all whites who live within the system share a 'metaphysical guilt',¹⁴ partly to the sense that even the best-intentioned of them could never really understand the suffering of blacks, and partly to the tendency of white sympathisers to dominate the ideas and the strategies of whatever groups they joined, so undermining black self-reliance and autonomy. According to Bennie Khoapa:

It is a mystification to preach universal brotherhood in a situation of oppression... it is too soon to love everybody. History has charged us with the cruel responsibility of going to the very gate of racism in order to destroy racism - to the gate, no further.¹⁵

The restoration of black dignity necessitated a re-writing of South African history from a perspective that would incorporate African victories and nation-building, and emphasise the validity and beauty of indigenous cultural concepts. These included the notion of African society as a man-centred system based on community-oriented

⁸ Bennie A. Khoapa, 'The New Black', in Biko (ed.), op. cit. p. 61.

⁹ Biko, op. cit. p. 68.

¹¹ Biko, op. cit. pp. 133-4 and 136

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 78.

¹⁰ Quoted in Hirson, op. cit. p. 110.

¹² Ibid. p. 72.

¹³ Ibid. p. 23.

¹⁵ Khoapa, loc. cit. p. 14.

activities, communal land-holdings, a closeness to the natural and the spiritual, and a resistance to the dominance of technology and materialism.¹⁶

Black Theology was closely aligned to Black Consciousness. This sought to replace the principle of a universal theology interpreted for blacks by rich oppressors/whites/colonisers/racists with a situational interpretation appropriate to the suffering of the oppressed and of their struggle against *apartheid*.¹⁷ This would retain the black man's faith in the Christian religion, and assist him to find resources in the Gospel to bolster his resistance to oppression.

The emphasis on segregation was seen as a temporary means not a permanent end: ultimately the objective was integration. In the words of Biko:

At the heart of true integration is the provision for each man, each group to rise and attain the envisioned self... Out of this mutual respect for each other and complete freedom of self-determination there will obviously arise a genuine fusion of life-styles of the various groups.¹⁸

In terms of economic analysis, the original stress was on an anti-acquisitive 'traditional' communalism, an economic system based on the principle of sharing the ownership of the land and its wealth that was hostile to the 'excessive individualism' and 'decadent values' of capitalism.¹⁹ It foresaw on a national level a system which would strike a healthy balance between a relatively small private sector and community (later state) ownership.²⁰ There was some recognition of the relationship between class and race. Njabulo Ndebele, for example, noted two social evils besetting urban blacks; they suffered because of the colour of their skin and as members of an exploited class in a capitalist economy. He warned early on that *apartheid* was 'a pseudo-ideology', which had become an economic principle; blacks must therefore be 'careful of concentrating on the racial struggle to the detriment of the economic struggle, because the latter may have become more important than the former'.²¹ And Biko said:

The is no doubt that the colour question in South African politics was originally introduced for economic reasons... so that the whites could enjoy privileges at the expense of blacks and still feel free to give a moral justification

¹⁶ Biko, op. cit. pp. 41-3 and 70.

¹⁷ Charles Villa-Vincencio and John W. De Gruchy (eds.), *Resistance and Hope. South African Essays in Honor of Beyers Naude* (Grand Rapids, 1985), pp. 93 and 99, and also 'The Church as Seen by a Young Layman', in Biko, op. cit. ch. 10.

¹⁹ Ndebele, loc. cit. p. 20.

²⁰ Fattou, op. cit. p. 103, and Biko, op. cit. p. 149.

²¹ Ndebele, loc. cit. p. 18.

for the obvious exploitation... the race problem started as an offshoot of the economic greed exhibited by white people, it has now become a serious problem on its own.²²

He did later acknowledge that a post-*apartheid* South Africa would probably have to be socialist in order to bring about a better distribution of benefits.²³ In conformity with its overall philosophy, however, the B.C. Movement was concerned with racial oppression and exploitation, and Biko criticised those whites who 'by dragging all sorts of red herrings across our paths... tell us that the situation is a class struggle', earlier described as 'the kind of twisted logic that the Black Consciousness approach seeks to eradicate'.²⁴

Even Robert Fatton, who detects the discovery of class by the Movement earlier than other observers, acknowledges that its socialist commitment at this stage was not grounded 'on a coherent and detailed analysis of South African capitalism'.²⁵

3. *Impact*

There are very different assessments of the impact of Black Consciousness up to the mid-1970s, and of its influence on the 1976 youth uprisings and the period of turbulence that followed. There are, however, some points of agreement. Most observers acknowledge that in this period the B.C.M. was for the most part an 'introspective and intellectual movement of educated elite', and that its 'organizational manifestations were not widespread'. SASO is estimated to have had at least 3,500 members on university campuses, and the Black People's Convention another 4,000, made up almost exclusively of professionals.²⁶ It seems generally accepted too that even when it did make the effort it did not manage to organise effectively at the grassroots level. The suggested reasons for this include: police harassment, barriers to organising in the 'reserves', a paucity of experienced leadership, and lack of money, time, and transportation.²⁷ In addition, B.C. leaders did not take sufficient trouble to simplify and popularise their message, or face up to the demanding practical challenges of mass organisation.

²² Biko, op. cit. pp. 87-8.

²³ Ibid. pp. 149-50.

²⁴ Ibid. pp. 89 and 50.

²⁵ Fatton, op. cit. p. 143.

²⁶ Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945* (London and New York, 1983), pp. 322-3, and Hirson, op. cit. p. 107.

²⁷ Gail M. Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa: the evolution of an ideology* (Berkeley, 1978), p. 291, and Hirson, op. cit. pp. 107-8.

Going beyond this, serious differences emerge. Some scholars deny the B.C.M.'s importance. Baruch Hirson, for example, concludes that it remained an organisation of students, a few clerics, and some professional people, which failed to go beyond its élite circle. He also claims that it had no direct hand in leading the townships, and that the events which commenced in 1976 took it by surprise. In his view the Movement faltered at that moment, and the schoolchildren who took up the challenge left it behind.²⁸ Similarly, Alan Brooks and Jeremy Brickhill discern no direct link between the B.C.M. and the South African Students' Movement (S.A.S.M.), the leading organisation in the youth revolt.²⁹

By contrast, Gail Gerhart argues that of all the causes leading up to the June 1976 confrontation the B.C.M. was the most important 'in accounting for the determination and resilience of the youthful militants'. The B.C.'s legacy was a 'level of political education and ideological diffusion never before achieved by any political organization', and she claims that 'its major achievement was in passing on an urban African population psychologically prepared for confrontation with white South Africa'.³⁰

Fatton gives all the credit to the B.C.M. for the threat to the Government, and speaks of 7,000 – which according to some estimates would mean every member – leaving South Africa to join exile organisations.³¹ With Soweto, he asserts, the Movement accomplished its historic task: 'it united to an unprecedented extent the exploited ethnies into a popular bloc', an accomplishment which 'symbolized the emergence of BC as a revolutionary consciousness'.³²

Gavin Lewis describes the B.C.M. as 'the decisive mobilising ideology for united black action on the university and school campus',³³ and John Kane-Berman says that it was 'the single most important factor' in the origins of the uprising.³⁴ Somewhat less enthusiastically, Alf Stadler argues that the Movement contributed in important ways to changing African perceptions of themselves and of whites: 'Undoubtedly, in the long run, this will turn out to be no less important in the rehabilitation of Africans' sense of self than the notion of

²⁸ Hirson, op. cit. pp. 107–8 and 119.

²⁹ Cf. Alan Brooks and Jeremy Brickhill, *Whirlwind Before the Storm: the origins and development of the uprising in Soweto and the rest of South Africa from June to December 1976* (London, 1980), ch. III, 'Youth Ferment'.

³⁰ Gerhart, op. cit. pp. 270, 295–6, and 315.

³¹ Fatton, op. cit. pp. 36–7.

³² Ibid. pp. 129 and 124–5.

³³ Gavin Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall: a history of South African 'Coloured' politics* (Cape Town, 1987), p. 278.

³⁴ John Kane-Berman, *Soweto: black revolt, white reaction* (Johannesburg, 1978), p. 109.

négritude did elsewhere. Politically, too, it may have provided a focus for the Soweto student rebellion of 1976.³⁵ Craig Charney suggests that although a number of B.C. groups helped touch off and guide the uprisings, they proved unable to maintain the initiative in the face of detentions and bannings.³⁶

Tom Lodge discusses a number of varying viewpoints, and concludes that by 1976, as far as young urban middle-class Africans were concerned, the Movement was the dominant intellectual influence on their political perceptions. Merely because its exponents and identifiable followers were relatively socially privileged, and hence unrepresentative of the black community as a whole, did not mean they were not popularly influential. The student advocates of B.C. were to become schoolteachers, priests, and journalists, and its basic themes were taken up in the popular press and in township cultural events.³⁷ Further, 'Distilled to a basic set of catchphrases Black Consciousness percolated down to a much broader and socially amorphous group than African intellectuals'.³⁸

THE PERIOD AFTER 1976

In the post-Soweto period two major trends have been discernible. The first is that the B.C. Movement has declined rather dramatically in terms of its relative importance in black politics. The second is that central elements of its ideology have significantly altered.

1. *Declining Importance*

It is virtually impossible to get an accurate assessment of black support for the major political movements because elections are not allowed. However, three surveys of urban black opinion have been carried out by social scientists of standing, albeit using different classifications and locations. Though their results are, not surprisingly, divergent, they do provide some idea of the B.C.M./AZAPO support base as of the mid-1980s. In the urban areas covered, Fatima Meer found that 10 per cent of those asked backed the B.C. groupings,³⁹ Lawrence Schlemmer found that support ranged from five per cent in

³⁵ Alf Stadler, *The Political Economy of Modern South Africa* (London and Sydney, 1987), p. 172.

³⁶ Craig Charney, 'Thinking of Revolution: the new South African intelligentsia', in *Monthly Review* (New York), December 1986, p. 14.

³⁷ Lodge, *op. cit.* pp. 322 and 324.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 325.

³⁹ Fatima Meer, *Political and Economic Choices of Disenfranchised South Africans. Results of a National Survey of 11,786 Black South Africans Conducted in Four Metropolitan Areas* (Durban, 1986).

one location to one per cent in another,⁴⁰ while Mark Orkin found only one per cent in his study.⁴¹

These figures point to very limited support for the B.C.M. – some where between one and 10 per cent in the urban areas – and coincide with many of the guesstimates I received from those interviewed: namely, ‘10 per cent at the most’.⁴² One does not have convenient figures from the early 1970s with which to compare this estimate. But even if we cannot be sure about the accuracy of Gerhart’s assertion – based on her own impressions and not a survey – that SASO at the time was ‘the most politically significant black organization in the country’,⁴³ its present narrow support base does appear to represent a dramatic decline in popularity.

The following question was put to those interviewed for the study: ‘Do you think that Black Consciousness, as propounded by the Black Consciousness Movement, is growing?’ Of those asked, 49 per cent said ‘No’, 25 per cent said ‘Yes’, and 26 per cent gave conditional replies.

As might have been anticipated, the answers appeared to contain a strong subjective element. In addition, discussion was complex, not least because the question was addressed from a variety of angles. Despite the wording, a couple of respondents saw the question as relating to a general enhanced level of consciousness and anger among blacks. Some saw it as measurable in terms of support for, and membership of, the Azanian People’s Organisation (AZAPO), the Azanian Congress of Trade Unions (AZACTU), and the Azanian Students Movement (AZASM). Others saw it yet again as a developing dynamic ideology directed by people associated with those organisations.

In the main, B.C. officials and sympathisers thought that the Movement was making advances or maturing or evolving, but they did not assert that membership of any aligned group was growing. Many non-B.C. people gave conditional answers; in general, these indicated

⁴⁰ Lawrence Schlemmer, *Black Worker Attitudes: political options, capitalism, and investment in South Africa* (Durban, 1984).

⁴¹ Mark Orkin, *Disinvestment, the Struggle and the Future. What Black South Africans Really Think* (Johannesburg, 1986).

⁴² The author carried out 110 in-depth interviews: 45 during June–August 1986, and a further 65 during June–August 1987. Of these, 17 were interviewed in both years, which means that a total of 93 participated in the study. Including a variety of occupations, ages, educational levels, and places of residence, they consisted of a politically representative sample of urban blacks since the number selected for interview was designed to accord roughly with the support found for the three main political groupings/tendencies in the combined results of the earlier Meer/Schlemmer/Orkin surveys. My sample was made up as follows: 69.8% supported the A.N.C./U.D.F., 14% the B.C.M., and 9.7% *Inkatha*, while 4.3% felt supportive of both the A.N.C. and the B.C.M.

⁴³ Gerhart, op. cit. p. 270.

uncertainty about whether the influence of the Movement was increasing or decreasing, with a general consensus that its organised support was not growing. Its opponents saw its influence as steadily diminishing. In numerical terms, the responses amount to a clear majority, among those who gave a definite answer, saying that the Movement's influence was on the wane. Typically, people suggested that it 'had performed its function', and that it had been part of 'a phase' which was now over. This corroborates the results of the three surveys. Further, many of those who argued that its influence was on the rise also observed that it was changing its nature. Taking these observations and trends together indicates rather convincingly that Black Consciousness as manifested in the 1960s and early 1970s has reduced significantly in importance. As one man said: 'AZAPO, AZACTU and AZASM are so very small now.'

2. *Transformation of Ideology*

Government response to the events of 1976 included the banning of B.C. organisations. In 1978, supporters of the B.C.M. re-formed as the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO), aiming at the establishment of a 'non-racial and socialist workers republic'. The manifesto of AZAPO included the following:

Our struggle for national liberation is directed against the historically evolved system of racism and capitalism which holds the people of Azania in bondage for the benefit of the small minority of population, i.e. the capitalists and their allies, the white workers and the reactionary sections of the middle classes. The struggle against apartheid is no more than the point of departure for our liberatory efforts.

The Black working class inspired by revolutionary consciousness is the driving force of our struggle for national self-determination in a unitary Azania. They alone can end the system as it stands today because they alone have nothing at all to lose. They have a world to gain in a democratic, anti-racist and socialist Azania, where the interests of the workers shall be paramount through worker control of the means of production, distribution and exchange.⁴⁴

Several new elements were included in the manifesto: the stress on the political involvement of the black working class; the centrality of the trade union movement; greater precision and sophistication in incorporating class analysis into its policies; the proposed socialist future for South Africa; anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism; and an

⁴⁴ Quoted in Michael Sinclair, *Community Development in South Africa: a guide for American donors* (Washington, D.C., 1986), p. 83.

acceptance that some blacks would 'collaborate' because of their class interests.⁴⁵ However, AZAPO still saw no material basis for united class action by whites and blacks: white workers having defected to the capitalists, were appendages of that class; while the black petty bourgeoisie, who were also 'subjected to the vile rigours of racism', would be largely responsible for providing the leadership of the black liberation struggle.⁴⁶

While AZAPO's strategy of liberation was embedded in the principles of the class struggle, it was a struggle which manifested itself in racial terms, given the reality of apartheid. Not surprisingly, AZAPO's identification of South Africa as a 'racial capitalism' implied a continuation of the earlier Black Consciousness policy of 'going it alone'. Indeed AZAPO rejected the incorporation of whites into the movement of liberation. This rejection has accentuated the tensions and conflicts dividing the internal black opposition in South Africa.⁴⁷

In 1983 a National Forum was arranged by AZAPO to bring together organisations sympathetic to Black Consciousness in its altered form. Like the far larger and better known United Democratic Front, this new federation was formed to fight against the tricameral Parliament which the Government was in the process of establishing. Like the U.D.F. too, the National Forum remained to struggle against *apartheid*. AZAPO was joined in this new grouping by some (though not all) leaders of the small, but long-established and intellectually influential Non-European Unity Movement, based mainly in the Western Cape.

This reinforced an ideological trend that was under way because, according to Gavin Lewis, the Unity Movement had a long and consistent non-collaborationist, anti-reformist record, one which submerged 'coloured' identity with the broad black united front and stressed 'the starker abstractions of class conflict and the machinations of international imperialism'.⁴⁸ Gerhart described it as an anti-Soviet Marxist group, which stressed the need for blacks to find their own feet politically before making alliances with whites.⁴⁹ The Non-European Unity Movement therefore represented a set of ideas with which B.C., as it was transforming ideologically, could comfortably ally itself; and those leaders who joined with AZAPO in the National Forum had the sort of intellectual strength to hasten the new direction of the B.C.M.

⁴⁵ Lodge, *op. cit.* p. 344.

⁴⁶ Khangale Mekhado, quoted in Lodge, *op. cit.* p. 345.

⁴⁷ Fatton, *op. cit.* p. 131.

⁴⁸ Lewis, *op. cit.* pp. 208, 243, and 253. See also Neville Alexander, *Sow the Wind: contemporary speeches* (Johannesburg, 1985).

⁴⁹ Gerhart, *op. cit.* p. 10.

Whites would still be excluded from leadership positions, but the struggle – to be led by the black working class – was now against ‘racialism and capitalism... inextricably intertwined’.⁵⁰

The following statements indicate the directions in which four interviewed leaders of B.C.-oriented organisations felt that the Movement and its ideas were going. There is a definite sense of stages, of evolution and transformation. The first comment relates to the B.C.M.’s increased attention to socialism, and to the distinction between black leadership, which it continues to support, and black exclusivity, of which it is consistently accused, but which it opposes:

The most radical socialist programme of action is the current National Forum position on these issues... Biko and others spoke about capitalism, etcetera, but because of the period they operated with no specific clarity. SASO and B.C.P. people became very clear that there were differences between capitalism and socialism. Also they understood the rightful rôle of black people in the leadership of our politics. This is a positive position, not jingoism.

The second quote also refers to socialism and worker interests, and sets out the current B.C. explanation of what it sees as its positive, realistic, and non-racist nature of looking to black leadership:

We seek an anti-racist, socialist society where workers interests are paramount... B.C. has definite ideas, and those equal scientific socialism. It does not have a black aspect. It has been misinterpreted as a racist concept. This has never been the emphasis. Biko said there is a place for all of us. We are not looking for a blacks-only Government. There is no way you can conceive of a black socialist state. What we are emphasising is that whether you like it or not the indigenous people are black: it is not racist to say so. There is nothing wrong with the analogy with Britain. The British rule Britain; in the same way Africans should rule South Africa. We want to maintain something which reflects reality. But we are not looking for a ‘blacks-only Azania’.

The third and most detailed of the comments lays out and justifies what the speaker saw as several stages in the evolution of B.C. theory and practice:

In the late 1960s Black Consciousness began to evolve as a philosophy. It used to be very loose – black is beautiful, black pride – its first stage. People were losing their identity, we were going to the dogs; the predominant wish was of appearing close to whites, people were using light skin make-up and wigs. So ‘black is beautiful’ became the response against this and it was important in changing attitudes. In the 1970s it was anti-anything that looked like white. It succeeded in stopping the white ideal completely.

⁵⁰ Lewis, *op. cit.* p. 282, and Harold Wolpe, ‘The ANC and the National Forum’, in *Southern African Review of Books* (London), 1, 1, 1987, p. 5.

The second stage: the Black People's Convention projects – health, community projects, sewing. This was to concretise the politicisation so it could be seen as real, as responsive to black people – that black people can own and administer things – this was about 73-74.

Then 1976 posed new questions. The B.C. movements were banned. There were liberal inroads into black politics. A lot of white 'democrats' increasingly involved themselves in black politics. The result – black on black confrontation escalating terribly. The first time we find people 'necklacing' each other. This time B.C. applied Marxian analysis – now it was no longer just black pride. Addressing itself to the situation and adapting a Marxian philosophy to the South African situation.

In post-76, B.C. says we have in South Africa the owners of the means of production and non-owners of means of production; it says further that race divides us into owners and non-owners. Race is a class determinant... Now B.C. lays emphasis on Marxism. Much as we appreciate Marxism, we do not apply orthodox Marxism because it would confuse our struggle. Therefore we say race is the determinant of class... We are fighting white South Africa, but also capitalism. It is capitalism which has exploited our people and will forever exploit our people... So we adopt a Marxian analysis, and we will introduce a Socialist Republic of AZANIA.

The final explanation points to the unfinished and still somewhat divided nature of this ideological evolution:

We must distinguish between political tactics and the ideology of the masses. B.C. is criticised from a non-racial point of view but Black Consciousness will remain the hegemonic ideology among the masses of the people as long as racial discrimination remains. B.C. as a political programme may wane but the ideology stays basic to black people. We want to transfer a black consciousness to a socialist consciousness... B.C. in its old form is on the wane – there is a struggle for the soul of B.C. among ethnicists and socialists. The more radical elements of B.C. and the Unity Movement have converged, have grown closer and have formalised this.

3. *Suggested Reasons for Decline*

Black Consciousness was born into the political vacuum of the late 1960s. Modest as its 'organisational manifestations' may have been, it was in a sense the only show in town. Almost alone it was producing new leaders – young, charismatic, and articulate – and martyrs, initiating ideas and challenges to the Government, attracting the attention of the local and international press and scholars, as well as harrassment from the state. From 1973 that began to change. In that year black workers in Natal Province came out in a series of unorganised strikes that ended South Africa's labour peace, and re-inserted the black

working class into the national political scene. Steadily the workers became more organised. In 1979 the Government gave black unions official recognition and by the late 1980s, based both on the quality of their leadership and the reality of their economic power, they had become the leading political force in black politics. In 1976, as has been noted, the youths in the townships commenced their uprising, and associated demonstrations and organisations were to spread throughout the country. Then in the late 1970s and early 1980s, grassroots organisations and civic associations began to proliferate, challenging the government's failed attempts at foisting its form of local government on urban blacks.

In 1983 the Government announced its intention to establish a tricameral Parliament to include Coloureds and Indians, but not Africans; in response a national opposition federation, the United Democratic Front, was formed to fight this step. Sympathetic to the A.N.C. and the Freedom Charter, the U.D.F. included a wide array of cultural, political, educational, and sporting organisations, and rapidly gained influence. Even if the B.C.M. had not lost ground as regards numbers of supporters, it had certainly done so in relative terms.

And with organisations came ideas and fresh strategies. The precepts and principles of B.C. were now joined by new notions of opposition in the far more crowded, complex, and dynamic terrain of ideology. Attitudes to violence were changing. The vast majority of the group interviewed acknowledged that there was a far wider acceptance among blacks now that some violence was necessary to effect change in South Africa. Similarly, they thought that anti-capitalism was on the rise among blacks, and that more positive views on socialism, although at an earlier stage, were growing as well. While the B.C.M. was not isolated from these developments – as will be discussed, it was part of them – it was no longer in a position of leadership. Now one among many voices, it was partly taking the initiative, but partly responding to new realities and new ideas. The old notions of B.C. were no longer radical; and its new moves to the left were matched if not overtaken by a variety of organisations. To some extent this competition and division were 'exacerbated ... by the expectation that black government [might be] imminent'.⁵¹

More specifically the major challenge to the B.C.M. has come from the re-emergence of South Africa's oldest and most widely accepted black political movement, the African National Congress, which

⁵¹ Sinclair, *op. cit.* p. 11.

turned out to be the principal beneficiary of the post-1976 era. Despite such a long period in exile its support from black South Africans had not dissipated. Even at the A.N.C.'s least effective moments its principal message, the presence of its leaders, notably Nelson Mandela, in South African prisons, and Pretoria's continual denigration of the organisation as 'communist' and 'terrorist', kept it alive in the minds of the people. In addition it had managed to win considerable international recognition for its cause. Despite the frustrations, divisions, and setbacks of those years, the A.N.C. had by the mid-1970s regained the capacity to take advantage of the new strategic possibilities offered by the Frelimo régime in Mozambique, absorb the large numbers of new young recruits who fled the Government's attempts to smash the youth movement, and re-infiltrate its members back into South Africa for purposes of sabotage, education, and mobilisation. Although the A.N.C. remains illegal, it is widely and openly acknowledged by most politically aware blacks to be the movement in which they place their hopes for bringing about change.

During the early 1970s the pattern of sabotage in South Africa suggested that the A.N.C. was re-establishing an internal organisational network, and by the late 1970s it had come to enjoy as much prestige as it had before it was banned, if not more.⁵² It was increasingly accepted internationally and domestically by blacks and whites, including church and business leaders, and was receiving widespread acceptance as a *de facto* government in exile.⁵³ Many of the thousands of young black men and women who fled to Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland after 1976 joined up with the A.N.C., and its military wing known as *Umkhonto We Sizwe*. It was well placed to cope with the sudden expansion; it had the equipment, the financial resources, and the training facilities required to transform many of its recruits into a guerrilla force.⁵⁴

While the A.N.C. was ready to absorb young B.C. sympathisers, it was not ready to countenance an international competitor whose ideology appeared not too dissimilar from that of the P.A.C., its long-established opponent, and that of a small dissenting group within the A.N.C. itself. It therefore took steps successfully to prevent any international financing of, and recognition for, B.C. activities. By the late 1980s many of the principal figures of the B.C.M. of Azania, which had formally been established the year before in London, were joining

⁵² Stadler, *op. cit.* p. 159.

⁵³ David Lewis, 'South Africa in World Politics. At the Gates of the Laager', in *The Nation* (Johannesburg), 22 November 1986, p. 569.

⁵⁴ Lodge, *op. cit.* pp. 333 and 341.

the A.N.C.⁵⁵ A prominent U.D.F. personality in Johannesburg explained the weakening of the B.C. Movement in the following way:

Look back to 1976. The youth revolted, they were detained, they fled the country, they felt themselves the spearhead for change. The only organisation to benefit from this was the A.N.C. The only organisation able to address the problems of the country was the A.N.C. And the youth saw this. They saw that B.C. groups could not address the problem of the transfer of power... They can help politicise. But they can't *do* it. They don't have the organisational strength. So some of them asked where to attach themselves most effectively... So today we see B.C. divided. Most are in the A.N.C.

Further, in the aftermath of the 1976 uprisings the South African Government proscribed B.C. organisations and persecuted their leaders – many were banned, imprisoned, and tortured, and some died while in detention. They were by no means the only ones to suffer at the hands of the state, but their removal from the scene facilitated, at least to some extent, the return to dominance of the A.N.C.

Of far less importance, and restricted primarily to parts of the Natal Province, the KwaZulu Homeland, and sections of the Zulu people, is the movement headed by Chief Gatsha Buthelezi known as *Inkatha*. Given its leader's opposition to almost everything that the post-1976 B.C.M. organisations stand for, and the resources he has available to him, progress by the B.C.M. in these particular areas of South Africa would have been made extremely difficult. The members of *Inkatha* who were interviewed expressed strong opposition towards AZAPO, and disdain for its ideology.

A second major problem for the B.C.M. was its initial lack of connection with much of the working class, and with the major black trade unions, considered today as 'the best organised and most resilient expression of black anger'.⁵⁶ In 1973, with the killing of black miners and the Natal strikes, the B.C.M. failed to establish ties with workers. According to Baruch Hirson and Harold Wolpe, the sentiments of the students were not translated into any effective contact with the workers. They were 'unable to build a bridge to, let alone exercise any direction over, the one social force that could back their own demands for political change'.⁵⁷ Although in the 1980s AZAPO helped to initiate some effective new unions sympathetic to its objectives, it does not appear to have developed strong connections with the mainstream and most significant black labour organisations. Even its links to the

⁵⁵ Fatton, *op. cit.* p. 343.

⁵⁶ Martin Plaut, 'The New Unions', in *Southern African Review of Books*, 1, 1, 1987, pp. 15–16.

⁵⁷ Hirson, *op. cit.* pp. 88–9, and Wolpe, *loc. cit.* p. 5.

ideologically sympathetic National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) are somewhat tentative. As explained by Lodge:

It is true that the Confederation of Unions of South Africa (CUSA) [now part of NACTU], formed in September 1980... emphasised the importance of black leadership and control of any union federation. Its leading officials claim that CUSA's guiding philosophy is that of Black Consciousness... [but] it does not seem inclined to provide the vehicle for worker mobilisation sought by AZAPO... [In addition], AZAPO officials tend to be contemptuous of negotiated reforms involving bread-and-butter issues, whereas not even the most politically radical trade union can afford to dismiss the value of material improvements conceded within the system.⁵⁸

A few of those interviewed linked this lack of strong connection with the trade unions with a broader weakness of the B.C.M.; namely, its failure to take mass mobilisation seriously. Even at its most effective, they said, it remained élitist and restricted to middle-class intellectuals. While its ideas had a significant influence, it did not succeed – in fact, it did not make a consistent effort to do so – in involving the people in the struggle. As a result, after 1976, when emotions were high, it did not have the organisational base to translate ideas into action. In terms of popular appeal, it has also suffered from a lack of senior and revered leaders of national and international standing to compete with Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, and others in the A.N.C. and in the U.D.F.

Its influence also appears to have been undermined by white intellectuals and organisations. This point has a number of components. Progressive white scholars have had a powerful influence in integrating class analysis and socialist strategies into the domestic South African anti-*apartheid* debate. Whites are not alone in this, but they have made a definite impact, for example, at universities, research and support agencies, and in trade unions. White activists have also contributed to the development of the trade union movement which had arisen as a very strong competing political force, one which in general does not pay strong heed to the B.C.M. And thirdly, whites opposed to the Government have contributed in various ways – organisationally, financially, intellectually, and in terms of personnel and research – to strengthening the non-racial groupings opposed to the B.C.M.

Whites were struck by the potential worker power revealed by the 1973 strikes... influenced by the separatism prevalent amongst blacks at the time. They were radicalized by the black criticism of liberal hypocrisy, while being

⁵⁸ Lodge, *op. cit.* pp. 345–6.

rejected by the black elite obliged them to seek allies among the working masses.⁵⁹

A post-graduate student explained why he thought the B.C. Movement had been hijacked by whites:

1976 was spearheaded by the B.C. Movement. It was crushed by the Boers. So black youth left the country and joined the A.N.C. and P.A.C. Then the progressives came up. The Freedom Charter emphasises non-racialism. White organisations joined black organisations in the U.D.F. All of these are taking over black-initiated organisations. U.D.F. has whites and gets money from whites. The white-controlled media downplays P.A.C. because it is scared of it. P.A.C. is closely connected to AZAPO.

A first-year university student who was an AZAPO supporter felt that the Movement was 'stuck':

It is not going anywhere. It has been messed up by the so-called donors – churches, corporations, institutions – who don't give money to B.C., only to non-racial organisations so that... [they] can organise better. Also B.C. leadership lost credibility – and a leader was involved in crime. It is weakening not because it is meaningless but because of financial problems.

A person closely associated with the B.C. Movement argued that whites had returned to the realm of opposition politics with a sense of revenge and vengeance towards the B.C.M. which supporters of the Movement had not anticipated. Through their access to financial resources and their influence over the media, academia, and publishing houses, both internally and internationally, they had succeeded in stifling the Movement, which was finding it very difficult to effectively represent itself to the public.

Finally, the main tenets of its ideology have been faulted on various grounds. One was its espousal of 'psychologism' involving an assumption that conscientisation towards psychological liberation was the key to freedom, and that no strategy of covert or overt action needed to be confronted.⁶⁰ Along these lines, Hirson points to its inward-lookingness, over-emphasis on black pride, and romanticism about the ease of change. 'Much of it sounded like a course in group psychotherapy, and not like a political program... did not offer any serious new thoughts on questions of racism and colour and class.'⁶¹ Those interviewed argued that segregation – and many implied that this was still an important component of the B.C.M. – would not provide an answer to South Africa's problems:

⁵⁹ Charney, *loc. cit.* p. 12.

⁶⁰ Stadler, *op. cit.* p. 172.

⁶¹ Hirson, *op. cit.* pp. 110–11 and 297–8.

we are all interdependent; in the economy particularly, completely interdependent. Separation on the basis of colour is not acceptable. B.C. is not increasing. U.D.F. and its affiliates have proved black separateness is not feasible.

An ex-trade union officer in the Eastern Cape said that a racial response to white racism was not an answer: 'It is racism and I don't agree with it. The thing is dead in the Eastern Cape. In Johannesburg maybe 10 per cent support it. It has nothing going for it.' A graduate student agreed:

B.C. is a reactionary type of radicalism, if it is radical at all. It is similar to the white A.W.B. [Afrikaner Resistance Movement] and Terreblanche, that is, extreme racism. It came and went – it's gone. We must fight the system, not the people.

And a union official sympathetic to the U.D.F. explained:

It has weakened since the establishment of the U.D.F. and the reason is that people have been mobilised in a way that they don't see the enemy on the basis of colour; and the more people develop these [non-racial] strategies the more they see the mistakes of B.C.

BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS: A TRANSITIONAL MOVEMENT

While Black Consciousness may continue to have mass appeal as a slogan – the racism of *apartheid* makes this inevitable – the coherent ideology formulated and developed in the 1960s seems to have little support at the intellectual and leadership level, or at that of their followers. Even AZAPO and the National Forum, the declared successors to the B.C.M., have altered their own ideology: class has become more significant as a category of analysis than race, and capitalism has become as much the enemy as *apartheid*.

Race remains relevant in the notion of racial capitalism, a term which makes sense in the South African context: were it not so closely associated with the B.C.M. it would probably have a wide acceptance among opponents of the Government. Race also remains significant in the stress on black leadership of the liberation movements, opposition organisations, and trade unions. But for the rest there is a substantially reduced intellectual connection – although the emotional ties remain strong – with the Black Consciousness of Biko and his colleagues.

In present-day black-opposition politics, the established ideas of the B.C.M. are under attack, partly because of strong disagreements over their merits, but also as a result of the fact that the importance granted to the Movement's legacy is now part of current political conflict. To give credit to those ideas and personalities amounts to strengthening

the cause of the National Forum and AZAPO, and so adding to their legitimacy. This is a reality that no observer can alter. Yet the B.C.M.'s contribution deserves assessment, rather than nullification by its opponents or aggrandisement by its sympathisers.

Two sympathetic American academics foresaw that the Movement had some built-in weaknesses which would lead to its demise or transformation. Fatton pointed out its failure to establish either strong ties with the working class or direct linkages with the leading forces of the Soweto rebellion, and its 'programmatic escapism' – the absence of clear theorisation about the transfer of the existing political and economic system.⁶²

As the antithetical stage of the revolutionary dialectic the Black Consciousness Movement was bound to work for its own abolition. Indeed, it must be construed as an ethico-political philosophy of praxis whose ultimate end was its own annulment through the achievement of the task it had set out to accomplish. Once black people have engaged in revolutionary activity and erected the foundations of the new society, the Black Consciousness Movement will be superseded, since the clash between the polar opposites will have resulted in a new synthesis.⁶³

Gerhart saw B.C. 'in the end as primarily a transitional philosophy, aimed at overcoming the psychological handicaps which [had] crippled African politics for so long'. According to her 1978 analysis:

Its constructive potential and that of the African nationalist ideology generally will almost certainly prove too limited once a more searching analysis of political and economic problems becomes an urgent requirement of the struggle. As the ideology of Black Consciousness outlives its usefulness, the onus will be on black leadership to keep black ideology closely attuned to popular needs and to the exigencies of a changing situation.⁶⁴

Lewis makes a similar point about it serving as a transitional philosophy restoring unity and a sense of self-confidence.⁶⁵

Critics have pointed out the Movement's weaknesses as a comprehensive strategy of revolutionary change. It either did not deal with or was unconvincing on key issues that would arise pursuant to psychological liberation. How, in practice, were whites going to be convinced of the need to abandon *apartheid*? What would have to be done about those who refused to change? What types of pressure might be applied in what kinds of situations... covert, overt, boycotts, strikes, or violence? What strategies were going to be used to mobilise the masses in the rural and urban areas? What was the rôle of the working

⁶² Fatton, *op. cit.* pp. 123 and 146.

⁶⁴ Gerhart, *op. cit.* pp. 310–11.

⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 77.

⁶⁵ Lewis, *op. cit.* p. 279.

class? What sort of society and economy should be created in a post-*apartheid* South Africa? and how?

The gaps in the ideas and strategies of the early Movement would probably be acknowledged by most B.C. leaders today, and it seems reasonable to suggest that at least some of these omissions made strategic sense at the time. Given the predicaments that faced black political leaders in the 1960s, and the cruel responses that their opposition consistently drew from Pretoria, to have confronted some of these issues head-on and in public would have been self-destructive. In other words, the early stress on the psychological, the cultural, and the historical, and on mobilisation and conscientisation, made tactical sense and, more importantly, worked. Ironically the B.C.M. was ultimately a victim of its own success. It did make a significant contribution to restoring to mainly young, mainly educated blacks a strong sense of self-assurance and self-reliance. It did conscientise and it did mobilise. It gave back to some black people the very confidence that now enables them to work with white progressives on an equal basis. It went, in Khoapo's words, to the gates of racism, and in the process helped to facilitate the return of A.N.C. non-racialism.

Thereafter the Movement no longer had answers to the changing realities of South Africa. The history of black resistance will one day have to put the B.C.M.'s ideology and its contribution into perspective. It may have been appropriate for its time and situation, and it certainly played a constructive rôle during an important but fairly short era. It made a direct impact on a rather small but significant group of relatively privileged blacks, and indirectly influenced a far wider group. Inside the country it helped to bridge two phases in the black struggle: sullen acquiescence followed by broad confrontation. Eventually its ideas, structures, and influence became intertwined – unevenly and uncomfortably – with the fast evolving and changing black movement of the mid-1970s and 1980s. Some of its members remained isolated from, while others were re-absorbed into, the mainstream. Its organisational capacity was not up to the new demands. It lacked answers to some key analytical and strategic questions. Its own leaders recognised that.

Black organisations and political thinking have moved on. One cannot prophesy the form that future black responses will take to the changing machinations of white supremacy. However, since Black Consciousness originally conceived in the 1960s seems to have served, and therefore lost, its purpose, the notion that it was a transitional movement seems apt.