**POL 3013: South African Political Thought**

**Lecture 37: From Sharpeville to SASO**

**From Sharpeville to Rivonia:** The massacre at Sharpeville created a crisis for the apartheid regime. After a period of uncertainty, the NP under Verwoerd moved to repress black (and liberal) opposition. In this they had the backing of the United Party and English-speaking big business. The banning of black organizations was followed by widespread repression, torture of activists, and deaths in detention (beginning with Looksmart Ngudle in 1963). The leadership of Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) were captured at Rivonia, near Johannesburg, in 1963. Seven of them, including Mandela, were sentenced to life imprisonment on 12 June 1964, signalling the crushing of internal resistance to apartheid. Liberal opposition was neutralized by the Prohibition of Political Interference Act of 1968, which banned non-racial political parties.

**Challenges to Apartheid after Rivonia:** The Rivonia trial left a vacuum in South African political life, in which apartheid could grow in power and even prestige. Economic growth took off and investment flooded into the country. South Africa averaged over 6% growth per annum throughout the 1960s. International opposition to apartheid in the UN General Assembly was kept in check by the Western powers. Kissinger’s NSC memorandum of 1969 set out the dominant Western strategy of condemning apartheid in public while supporting it behind the scenes and preventing African states from seeking change in South Africa. Armed struggle had no real impact in South Africa. In this vacuum, the role of liberal organizations (SA Institute of Race Relations, Black Sash), church organizations (SA Council of Churches, Christian Institute) and especially student organizations (National Union of SA Students, University Christian Movement) took on disproportionate importance. Through them, a new generation of activists came to the fore, drawing on different traditions. This was also a decade of rapid growth in higher education: black African university students increased from 811 in 1961 to 4,601 in 1970; white student numbers also increased to about 46,000 in 1970.

**NUSAS radicalism and Rick Turner:** Until the 1960s, students had not had a significant or independent role in South African politics. In the context outlined above, universities took on a larger role after 1964. In the early 1960s, the national Union of South African Students (NUSAS) debated the option of becoming a student wing of the liberation movement, in somewhat unrealistic terms. After 1964, groups within NUSAS were influenced by new currents in Western radicalism. This was also the moment in which distinctive youth cultures emerged in the West and in South Africa, often in apolitical forms (pop music, surfing, dress codes). The central figure in forming this current of Bohemian culture into a distinct political culture was Richard Turner. Turner was a student at UCT, who switched from engineering to philosophy in 1960. Some of his friends became active in the African Resistance Movement’s sabotage campaign in 1963. Turner studied in France from 1964 to 1966. On his return to South Africa, he taught at Stellenbosch, Rhodes, and from 1970 at the University of Natal in Durban. He was an adviser to NUSAS, and spoke and wrote prolifically for the student movement. He was placed under a banning order in 1973 and assassinated in 1978.

**Three new directions in the opposition to apartheid:** By 1969, three new directions were emerging from the vacuum left by Rivonia. The ANC Conference at Morogoro adopted the theory of national-democratic revolution, which had been adopted earlier by the SACP. Steve Biko and his comrades walked out of the NUSAS conference of 1968 and formed the South African Students Organisation (SASO), which became the stronghold of the Black Consciousness movement. Turner published the first versions of the argument that was to be set out in his book *The Eye of the Needle*, published in 1972. Turner’s arguments provided a theoretical framework for the independent labour movement that emerged after the Durban strikes of 1973, in which his students were active. Biko’s idea of Black Consciousness was the driving force of the Soweto uprising of 16 June 1976, which transformed South African political life. He died in police detention in 1977.