**POL 3013: South African Political Thought**

**Lecture 42: Liberation Politics after Soweto**

**1. Soweto as turning point in South African history:** The Soweto uprising began as a student demonstration on 16 June 1976, extended across the country and continued into late 1977. It created a new generation of militants, many of whom went into exile for military training. There had been earlier signs that the long repressive silence that followed the Rivonia trials of 1964 was coming to an end. But it was not certain whether these currents of resistance could be repressed, accommodated or exhausted. Soweto made clear that the black majority would set the agenda for South African politics.

**2. The Soweto uprising as climax and crisis for Black Consciousness:** The 16 June demonstration was organized by high school students, mainly affiliated to the Black Consciousness organization SASM (South African Students Movement). The ideas of Black Consciousness played a major role in creating a sense among black students and youth that they could no longer accept the oppression of apartheid, or heed their parents’ advice to “stay out of trouble.” The Soweto uprising ensured that the resonance and popularity of BC increased suddenly and massively, taking root not only among black Africans but also among coloured students in the Western Cape (cf. Mafeje, “Soweto and Its Aftermath,” pp. 18-21). But it also showed clearly the limits of BC, which could not provide guidance or organization for the movement that erupted throughout the country.

**3. From consciousness to resources to programme:** Resistance to apartheid during the late 1960s and early 70s had focused on developing among the oppressed majority a different kind of consciousness, that gave them a clearer sense of their collective situation and their power to challenge it. That activity was designed for a situation in which people were isolated and intimidated. After Soweto, the central questions shifted from how to promote a new consciousness to that of how to organize and equip angry youth, who were ready for battle. In the eighteen months after Soweto, about 4,000 young black South Africans went into exile (mainly to Botswana, then Angola) seeking military training. The bulk of them joined the ANC; and MK’s operational force tripled in 1976 (Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki*, p. 351). They were required to subscribe to the programme of the ANC. Tsietsi Mashinini and other leaders of the Soweto SRC won Nigerian support for a South African Youth Revolutionary Council, which received training from Palestinians and fought in Lebanon in 1980 (Gevisser, pp. 376-81). After Biko’s death, his comrades formed the Azanian People’s Organization (AZAPO), with a socialist programme.

**4. Mafeje’s call for a New Left organization drawn from the old left:** The period after 1976-77 saw a ferment of debate in the liberation movement, especially as organizations in exile sought to harness this new source of militant energy or claim credit for its achievement. Mafeje, an activist in the Unity Movement of SA and a radical scholar, criticized this self-interested approach (“Soweto and Its Aftermath,” p. 17). He criticizes the student movement for its “diffuse nationalist ideology” (p. 22) and lack of a “coherent programme for the national struggle” (p. 24). He rejects their view that the exiled organizations have become irrelevant (p. 28) and calls for a convergence between a “new left from within the existing organizations” and the militants within South Africa (p. 29). Ruth First’s rejoinder is to ask whether there is, in fact, such a “new left” grouping about to emerge, and if so, “on what programme” (First, “After Soweto,” p. 94). She stresses radical elements of the ANC’s programme (pp. 97-98). But the questions that motivated BC are lost from view in both Mafeje’s and First’s analyses.

**5. The ANC as sole authentic representative of the people?** In 1972, SWAPO was recognized as the “sole authentic representative” of the Namibian people, and the General Assembly of the UN gave them this recognition in 1973. The ANC aspired after that status, either formally or in practice, in relation to South Africa, and this aspiration informed responses to Soweto. To some extent, the ANC had aspired to such a role from its formation in 1912, and took this self-conception as a “parliament of the people” into the context of exile. The quest for a “sole authentic representative” was partly a response to apartheid tactics of divide-and-rule. But it also had the effect of suppressing processes of debate and conscious self-clarification among the oppressed majority, of the kind that Biko and early BC tried to promote. Perhaps that spirit is being revived by the New BCM of Andile Mngxitama and others?