1976: When the Black Child Declared War on Fear

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The mistake we so often make in post-apartheid South Africa is to remember June 16 as a symbolic moment when children stood up against the oppression of the apartheid system. The truth is this 'commemoration' obscures more than it reveals. The Soweto Youth Uprising was in no way an exclusive reaction to the 1974 Afrikaans Medium Decree, but the culmination of a continuous political and ideological initiative that had been launched sixteen years earlier. Subsequently revealing itself more prominently through the reconfiguration of the political landscape post the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, and later it's intensification through the unstoppable rise of Black Consciousness in the late 1960s through to the 70s. For one to understand 1976, they must understand the historical trajectory stretching from the total collapse of legal African nationalist politics in SA in 1960 to the imminent rise of a new politically conscious and ideologically radicalised student generation in the early to mid-1970s.

The structural foundation on which apartheid education is born cannot be separated from the broader political economy of racial capitalism in South Africa. Following the so called 'discovery' of diamonds in Kimberly, 1867, and gold in Witwatersrand in 1886, South Africa quickly developed into an industrial capitalist economy that fundamentally depended on the labour of Africans, all the while simultaneously denying the same Africans political and economic rights. By 1948, this contradiction was codified through apartheid legislation. Education would soon become the mechanism through which this contradiction would be managed. Under Dr Hendrik Verwoerd – specifically during his time as Native Affairs Minister (1950-1958) & Prime Minister (1958-1966), Bantu education would be institutionalised via the Bantu Education Act of 1953. In 1953 Verwoerd would go on to argue that African education ought to be designed for roles within their own communities. This was in no way an incidental policy position but a clear articulation of the ideology that informed the labour strategy of apartheid.

Around 1965, it was clear we had entered a new political age. The historical rupture of 'internal resistance', as it was known, occurred at The Sharpeville Massacre in March 1960, swiftly followed

by the banning of the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania, and the African National Congress in April of the same year. Furthermore, the regime decided to behead the liberation movements with the arrests of Mangaliso Sobukwe in 1960 – and the introduction of the subsequent Sobukwe Clause in 1963, and the Rivonia trialists from 1963 to 64, leaving the liberation movements with no other alternative but to move the struggle to exile camps and underground structures. The apartheid state had, to some extent, successfully disrupted the internal political infrastructure of African nationalism. However, one must not confuse this repression with the elimination of political consciousness. Indeed, this displacement then resulted in a more dangerous reconfiguration.

The period between June 1960 to 1968 can be understood to a certain extent as a phase of political silence, but not the disappearance of political thought. On a global stage, this period runs in parallel with the rapid spread of decolonisation across Africa. Ghana had ushered in her independence in 1957, led by the Osagyefo Kwame Nkrumah, the war of independence in Algeria had been concluded in 1962, and armed struggle had greatly intensified in Angola (1961), Guinea-Bissau (1963) and Mozambique (1964). All of these happenings form part of this global ideological environment that places the anti-colonial struggle at its centre.

By the time we arrive at 1968, a new generation of Black intellectuals had begun to organise itself independently of the banned movements. The birth of the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) in July of 1969 at the then University of the North marked a decisive turning point. Under the leadership of Bantubonke Stephen Biko, Black Consciousness emerged as the only appropriate response to the psychological vacuum created by the aforementioned repression. Between 1969 to 1972, it morphed into an ideological framework that emphasised psychological liberation as a prerequisite for political struggle.

From 1970 to 1973, the Black Consciousness Movement deliberately expanded through student networks, in particular through the newly established South African Students' Movement of 1972, which served as a bridge between university ideology and township schools in Soweto and elsewhere. As a result, in 1974, with the introduction of the Afrikaans Medium Decree, tensions intensified dramatically. Under the leadership of the revolutionary Tsietsi Mashinini in 1976, students relentlessly mobilised against the policy, subsequently triggering the Soweto Uprising of June 16 as we know it. Obviously, the police brutality escalated the uprising into a national revolt that would continue for months across the country.

The results of this growing resistance can be seen in the mass exile and militarisation of youth between 1976 and 1980. Furthermore, the internationalisation of the liberation struggle found its true expression in this period through the ANC and PAC.

When one contrasts that twenty-year period (1960-80) with 2010 to 2030, the difference lies in political formation. The earlier period is carved by the anti-colonial struggle and its ideological mobilisation, while this contemporary period is shaped by neoliberal capitalism, mass youth unemployment, and structurally entrenched inequality under formal democracy.

However, the question of liberation, be it economical, psychological and/or social remains intact. So, I ask, what type of political consciousness or ideology does this historical moment demand of the daring Youth at this challenging time?