

D.R. Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968–1977*

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With the current malaise of the ANC, interest has piqued in the history of Black Consciousness, with its moral compass and the powerful memory of its martyrs less sullied by the politics of expediency associated with post-1994 democracy. Daniel Magaziner's *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968–1977* has come as a timely contribution to the scholarship on Black Consciousness in South Africa and his study casts many of the young black student leaders of the 1960s and 1970s in clear and dramatic relief. The scholarship on Black Consciousness in South Africa lacks monographs, as Magaziner notes early on, and his book is a particularly welcome addition.

The Law and the Prophets is unashamedly an intellectual history of “anti-apartheid politics” that aims to push beyond “great” men and women to “broaden the category of African intellectual history” (p 5). Previous studies have looked to place Black Consciousness in the wider narrative of resistance to apartheid, stressing similarities and differences in approach from Charterism and Pan Africanism. This approach fails to sufficiently engage the originality and depth of the discourse; looking to understand the Black Consciousness movement, social scientists did not sufficiently engage with the originality of Black Consciousness’ ideas. *The Law and the Prophets* demonstrates the strength of the historical perspective to gauge and assert the broader impact of Black Consciousness on South Africa and to give closer attention to its ideas. A key success of Black Consciousness, Magaziner shows, was to overcome the climate of fear that pervaded South Africa in the 1960s in the wake of the banning of African political parties and the imprisonment of black leaders on Robben Island. It was this psychological victory, he implies, that made an event like the 1976 Soweto uprising possible.

The compact format of *The Law and the Prophets* is a distillation and refinement of the insights of Magaziner’s substantial University of Wisconsin doctoral study. A most helpful contribution is to ask different questions of Black Consciousness than standard treatments have done thus far. The real research thrust is an engagement with the process of translation of international theological currents, particularly Black Theology, into a political set of ideas to counter apartheid’s religion of separation. Magaziner is

particularly interested in the intricacies of faith: how a minority of Christians embraced a radical Christianity in the 1960s and 1970s, influencing black activist culture to live faith politically. Activists claimed the right to speak the true Gospel of political freedom and cast apartheid as the prime evil. Magaziner emphasises “contingency” (p 9) in the development and unfolding of the account of Black Consciousness and introduces an intricate unfolding of state repression and activist response. His focus is acute from the start and his eye is quick to draw on nuance, eschewing broad brush strokes, a feature that makes his study demanding of the reader.

The book is divided into three parts: the first gives close attention to the development of Black Consciousness ideas in student seminars and explores the periodical, *SASO Newsletter*, between 1968 and 1972. The second focuses closely on theological debate. The third examines the confrontation between the “law” of the apartheid state and the “prophets” of the Black Consciousness movement, emphasising a shift from debate and flexibility to a later stance of confrontation and a greater rigidity in ideas.

The sixth chapter crucially delineates the development of a locally expressed theology of liberation and the creation of “the Black Messiah”. Increasing state repression of the movement demanded Black Consciousness to discursively confront death, which activists did by a close rhetorical association with the death of Christ. The religious logic, Magaziner argues, came to be the overriding impetus, because as a “sense of mission” overrode the earlier “dialogic tension” (p 132) that was at ease with intellectual independence. In so doing, he argues, by the mid-1970s Black Consciousness asserted orthodoxy and in some sense challenged its own basic premise: of Black Consciousness being a way of life, of continual searching. It was through a mixture of contingent events and political intent that Black Consciousness assumed its shape, Magaziner argues. Chapter 8, “The Age of Politics: Confronting the State”, turns to explore the mobilisation of its ideas behind an expressly political purpose to birth, the shaping of what Magaziner describes as “Black Consciousness the Movement” (p 140). As state repression quickened and the movement radicalised, “events spun out of Black Consciousness’s control” (p 141). The expulsion of SASO president, Themba Sono, indicated its change from intellectual openness to doctrinaire party politics over the issue of Bantustans (p 147).

The Law and the Prophets shows particular sensitivity to the gendered dimensions of Black Consciousness discourse, which is synthesised into the overall analysis, noting the early efforts of black students to counter the emasculating effects of apartheid. Magaziner takes a strong stand on the question of Black Consciousness’ apparent blindness to gender oppression, asserting the concurrent movement of “international feminism” (pp 34–35), and asserting a strategic choice to mute the challenge of gender and assert the primacy of black masculinity. The discourse conflated this masculinity with maturity, as Black Consciousness laid claim to mature, adult selves.

The Law and the Prophets is impressive in its mastering of sources. Substantial oral history research conducted with close to 60 activists, archival material and secondary literature are all deftly interwoven. Trial transcripts are a prominent source, pursued in search of the interior lives of activists and the human drama, personalities and disappointments of the decade. A real strength of the book is thus its ability to depict clearly the language of Black Consciousness activists. The reader is introduced to a wide range of characters including theological student Sabelo Ntwasa, theologian Manas

Buthelezi and martyr Abraham Onkgopotse Tiro. Magaziner is particularly strong when unpacking complex concepts, for example exploring in detail the links between Kaunda's humanism and Biko's concept of African culture (pp 45–46) and the deployment of Paulo Freire's concept of conscientisation by South African activists (pp 125ff). Not surprising, given its university birthplace, Black Consciousness was a modern enterprise, a self-aware and self-conscious search for identity, and thus very much a product of the "Western academic tradition" (p 41). Cultural production is also a prominent theme; Magaziner acknowledges the creative ferment associated with Black Consciousness and is quick to use the insights of literary analysis. He concludes his study with a consideration of South African consumer culture and artistic production.

The Law and the Prophets is strong on context, asserting the primacy of the radicalism of the global 1960s movements for social change. The book helpfully links Black Consciousness to the literature of Black Power in the United States and the detailed footnotes draw comparisons with wider contexts in African history and the history of the US Civil Rights Movement and the American New Left. The critical South African context, Magaziner asserts, was the loss of the freehold township, Sophiatown, and its crushing blow to black creative and intellectual ferment. This was an event that left a gaping void that the black students of the 1960s and 1970s were painfully conscious of. However, the study stresses the original and new in the discourse, asserting its preoccupation with existential questions of being rather than the more conventional "political" debates of Africanism or multiracialism (p 8). As the pressure on the Black Consciousness Movement intensified, a shift to a more conventional politics finally overtook the "totally new reality" South African activists initially envisioned, prioritising the narrower and immediate focus of victory over apartheid.

One weakness is that the study lacks an engagement with other political movements underway; a requirement of a history of Black Consciousness surely must pose the question of its importance vis-à-vis concurrent political movements for change. The lack of consideration of contemporary labour activism, for instance, looms large and the 1973 Durban strikes are passed over with the briefest mention. At worst this omission misrepresents the 1970s because the study claims to bring this decade back into critical consideration. Without a focus on the momentum of civic organisations through the 1970s, Magaziner is also not able to adequately address the burst of "civic organisations" (p 185) he mentions, or the mutations of Black Consciousness into a leftist vanguard party in the 1980s. The close focus on theology also renders silent those in the movement, such as Strini Moodley, who rejected the premise of faith. Biko's own highly individual form of religious expression fits somewhat uncomfortably within the delineation of the pervasive religiosity of the movement that Magaziner asserts was characteristic and ubiquitous.

The Law and the Prophets comes as a particularly welcome addition to the scholarship on Black Consciousness, bringing a high calibre of research to bear on a vivid decade and a powerful legacy that needs to be intelligently and rigorously revisited as an integral element in the struggle for the democratisation of South Africa.

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