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Movement intellectuals engaging the grassroots: A strategy perspective on the Black Consciousness Movement

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Abstract: Drawing upon activist interviews and framing theory this article proposes that the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) is better understood not by focusing on the objective *status* of its leadership as middle-class intellectuals, but by instead looking at what these ‘movement intellectuals’ subjectively *did* to link their philosophy of liberation to the lifeworlds of those they sought to engage. It argues that this shift reveals three important features of social movements and movement intellectuals more generally. Firstly, it uncovers the meaningful, value-driven, emotional and collective-identity bases for action, alongside the more familiar instrumental motivations. Secondly, given the inevitable clash between movement intent and the contingent constraints under which movements invariably operate, it argues that movement success is better judged not by external criteria that are assumed to hold universally, but instead by reference to the unique strategic intentions articulated by movements themselves. Finally, it shows how, given heterogeneous audiences, the deployment of a diversity of grounded intellectual strategies can help augment the resonance of a movement’s core political message.

Keywords: Black Consciousness Movement, framing, movement intellectuals, performativity, social movements

Much literature has sought to understand the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) – an internal anti-apartheid movement that flourished in the late 1960s and 1970s – by focusing on the objective *status* of its leadership, typically identified as petit-bourgeois intellectuals. This article proposes a change of tack by instead looking at what the BCM subjectively *did* to link their philosophy of liberation to the lifeworlds of those they sought to engage. In short, it moves the focus of analysis from the social *status* of the young leadership of the movement, to an examination of the *strategies* they chose to deploy. It contends that this analytic shift helps reveal the political practices through which the leadership, acting as ‘movement intellectuals’ (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991), strove to connect their abstract ideas to the concrete concerns of the grassroots.

A common risk in emphasising these agential characteristics is a tendency to instrumentalise movement intellectuals as purely rationally-calculative actors, akin to individuals or firms competing in a marketplace (e.g. McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Olson, 1965). Understanding agency – whether individual or collective – via such a pared-down, rational choice conception ironically evacuates precisely that which it claims to foreground, reducing human motivation to a singular, flat, utilitarian

principle. Not only does this assume that actors can cognitively order preferences and confidently predict the outcome of competing forms of action, but it also removes the relative ‘cultural autonomy’ of decision-making processes (Alexander, 2005) and obscures the socially and culturally contingent nature of action.

In order to avoid these pitfalls, this article firstly emphasises the meaningful, value-driven, emotional, and collective-identity bases for action, alongside the instrumental interests that movement intellectuals may simultaneously hold in building membership bases, accumulating resources and acquiring political power. This does not mean that goal-oriented ‘strategies of action’ – whether symbolic (e.g. Swidler, 1986) or material – are absent, but that ignoring the rich composite of motivations that animate social movements typically occurs through the trick of theoretically imputing motives, rather than empirically uncovering them. This article therefore shows how politics does not occur only in the instrumental struggles that take place within labour disputes or political assemblies, but also through interventions in the realms of collective affect, identity and symbolism.

Secondly, the article suggests that movement strategies cannot always be identified by examining movement outcomes, and especially so in repressive contexts where acted intentions are often thwarted. To provide a complete picture, scholarship must go beyond judging ‘success’ on the basis of externally-defined criteria that are assumed to hold universally. Instead, the strategic intentions articulated by movements themselves must be treated as paramount in determining success or failure.

Finally, since the needs, interests, affects and pre-existent cultural mappings of the audiences that movement intellectuals wish to engage vary both internally, and across time and place, this article also demonstrates how deploying a diversity of intellectual strategies helps augment the potential resonance of a movement’s core message.

This move from *status* to *strategy* finds itself mirrored in the ‘sociology of intellectual interventions’ (Eyal & Buchholz, 2010), which in distinction from the classical ‘sociology of intellectuals’ that focuses on a particular social type – the intellectual – instead foregrounds the modes through which knowledge is put to use in public life (e.g. Osborne, 2004). However, whilst this literature – in both its ‘field’ and ‘market’ varieties – focuses upon an array of expert-intellectuals (scientists, think-tankers, technocrats and citizen-subjects), this article instead shows how a group of ‘movement intellectuals’ (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991) – i.e. explicitly political subjects, skilled in communication and translation, whose power lies as much in symbolic as in instrumental action (Burke, 1966) – were able to fuse their own political philosophy (which itself went beyond their own trained areas of ‘expertise’) with broader public concerns.

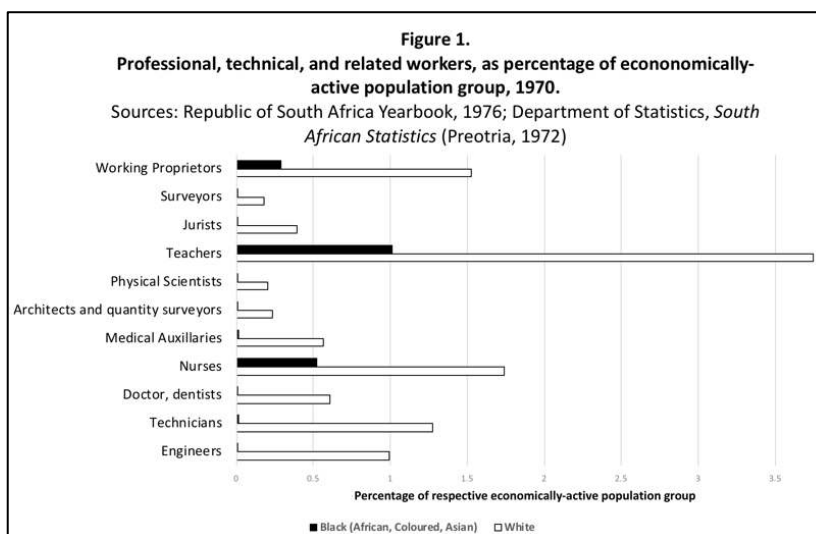
After sketching the general class landscape of South Africa during the period under interest and the place of the initial cadre of BCM activists within it, the article offers a brief overview of the *status* perspective that uses objective stratification as its primary basis for analysis. Following this, the

bulk of the article provides an alternative *strategy* based account organised around the four most significant strategic framing processes that the BCM intellectuals engaged in. The purpose here is not only to identify the broad variety of strategies, and the diversity of motivations that lay behind them, but also to illustrate the frequent checks upon their realisation, given the environment of political repression in which they were deployed.

The status perspective

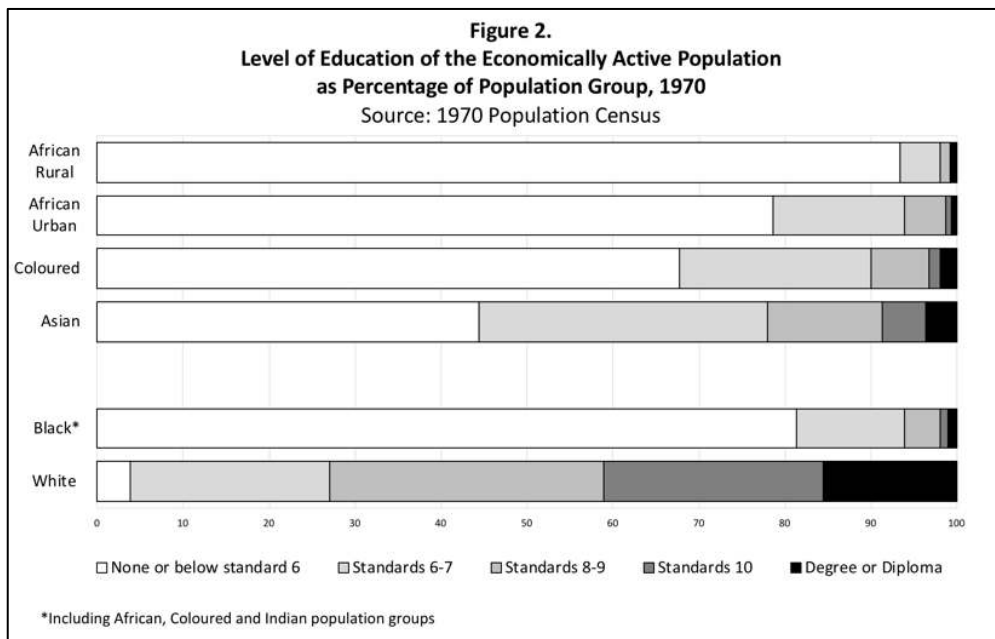
Academic accounts of the BCM have typically emphasised the status of its leadership as a middle-class intellectual elite (e.g. Fatton, 1986; Gerhart, 1978; Halisi, 1999, pp. 84– 85; Hirson, 1979; Magaziner, 2010, pp. 5–6; Marx, 1992, p. 42; Noluthshungu, 1982). Whilst these accounts differ as to the relative importance they ascribe to this status, agreement exists on its significance as a basis for analysis, and in many ways it is easy to see why.

Although the salaried African middle-class grew rapidly during the 1970s – doubling in absolute terms from 1969 to 1979 (James, 1986, p. 45) – Africans, and Blacks more generally, were still severely underrepresented, with minimal capital ownership and concentrated in certain professions whilst being almost entirely absent from others (Figure 1).



Following the establishment of apartheid in 1948, the ‘Bantu Education’ system (initiated in 1953) had successfully ensured the smooth transition of the overwhelming majority of African students into the ranks of the non-skilled working-class. Those Africans who managed to access traditional bourgeois professions typically avoided this system by attending church or mission schools, as was the case for a disproportionate number of the activists that formed the initial campus-based BC association, the South African Student Organisation (SASO) (Khoapa, 2017; Mazibuko, 2017; Mpumlwana, 2017; Nengwekhulu, 2017; Pityana, 2017). These religious schools, whilst often

strict, vastly increased the possibility of entering tertiary education, which, though expanding for Blacks during the 1970s, nevertheless remained inaccessible to the vast majority (Figure 2).¹



Since White students were taken as a ‘reference group’ (Brewer, 1986b, p. 290), relative deprivation of rights and resources became apparent to many Black university students (Gurr, 1970), contributing to feelings of ‘double consciousness’ amongst many of the students (Du Bois, 1994; Pityana, 2017). On the one hand, expectations existed that Black students should aspire to the careers, lifestyles and statuses modelled by their counterparts on the White campuses; on the other, it was utterly unrealistic that such aspirations could ever be met under the structural inequalities of apartheid. Nevertheless, university did afford relative freedom from the material struggles faced by most Blacks, providing time and space to reflect on the role that Blacks themselves might be unwittingly playing in perpetuating the apartheid order. Biko – the de facto leader of the BCM – remarked that whilst there were a limited number of ‘intellectuals within the Black situation . . . on the campus you do get a little bit of free thinking and experimentation, and this is why Black Consciousness evolved from there’ (1979, p. 184).

In the status view’s least sophisticated form, the interests, ideology and actions of the BC activists (understood as tightly linked) have been presented as an effect of their elite student status. For example, in an otherwise valuable history of the events leading up to the Soweto uprising, Baruch Hirson offers a lengthy characterisation of the movement almost exclusively through the ‘problem of class identity’ (1979, p. 300; see also Legassick, 1985). Imploring his readers to focus upon the ‘class

¹The state acknowledged that economic growth was being retarded by the lack of an educated Black intelligentsia (Feinstein, 2010), and that a compliant cadre of Black leaders was necessary to administer their vision of separate development. However, as the BCM case illustrates, this cynical attempt at social engineering was to backfire spectacularly.

interests' of the BCM, he contrasts the 'young intellectual' BC activists to 'the workers', claiming that the 'petty bourgeois aspirations' of the former:

. . . coloured their entire outlook. They looked inwards to their own problems. They sought 'awareness', 'self-identity', 'liberation from psychological oppression', and some mythical 'Black value system' . . . the wordy statements that emanated from the Black Consciousness Movement were meaningless to most of [the workers]: few, if any, of the pretentious statements coming from these young 'leaders' had any bearing on their lives . . . [this] led the one group to endless philosophising, while the working class tackled the real problem of exploitation. (1979, p. 284)

The notion that class was 'the real problem' facing Blacks in 1970s South Africa fails to account for way in which class formation was itself largely racially-determined, and the fact that being Black typically meant being subject to super-exploitation in ways that simply did not exist for the majority of Whites. By consequence, it also ignores the historical continuation and formalisation of colonial relations in the apartheid system. Furthermore, tying the BCM tightly to a particular class interest in this way also overlooks the internal class diversity of the movement itself, a matter frequently noted within its various constituent organisations.²

Other commentators, such as Marx (1992), offer greater nuance. Drawing upon Gramsci to grant more autonomy to the BCM's own subjective interventions, Marx nevertheless paints BC as a fundamentally ideational movement, problematically detached from the material struggles of Black workers, and draws directly on Hirson in providing a status-based explanation for this fact, founded on their 'elite' standing, and 'relative privilege' (1992, pp. 41–42). As such, he tends towards reading the history of the movement backwards, characterising it as exclusively concerned with 'a change in the realm of ideas' (p. 60) that was a necessary but insufficient precursor to developments in internal apartheid opposition that followed the movement's heyday.

Treating the BCM's class position as equivalent to a bourgeois class in most liberal capitalist societies misjudges the force of apartheid's race-based political subordinations, most obviously in its systematic denial of full citizenship status to non-Whites. Alongside political exclusion, most SASO members inevitably originated in the working-classes, with their parents often employed in domestic service (e.g. Jones, 2017). Their emergent middle-class status (thanks to this education) did not miraculously dismantle their denial of the franchise and free movement, limited access to jobs, or

² In a context of sparse education amongst the Black population, taking relative 'intellectuality' as a cipher for a cultural dimension of class, the student organisation, SASO, was understood to be 'more intellectual' (Biko, 1979, p. 224) than the Black People's Convention, the movement's political wing. Similarly, the South African Student Movement – the more loosely-affiliated high school organisation – was criticised by the 'lumpen element' as being 'intellectual' but was itself 'in turn apt to see SASO as being "too intellectual" ' (Nolutshungu, 1982, p. 170).

promotions once they had secured jobs (Karis & Gerhart, 1997, p. 101). Nor did their education ensure they would escape poverty, or that those whom they had grown up with would not remain mired in it. Formal and informal racism continued to operate at all levels, and their degrees were consistently treated as inferior to those awarded on White campuses. Nevertheless, cognisant of the dangers of becoming separated from their roots, the young BC activists emphasised shared interests, stressing that ‘the isolation of the Black intelligentsia from the rest of the Black society is a disadvantage to Black people as a whole’ (Biko, 1978, p. 18).

Some commentators nearer the time, such as Brewer (1986b, p. 283), critiqued the tendency to read interests off status. However, even in these more critical accounts, the status thematic tended to endure, albeit in a less determining form. Traces, for instance, remained in Brewer’s explanation of the ethnic tolerance of the BCM as ‘a direct reflection of its support base in the better-educated, economically privileged sections of the African community’ (1986a, p. 220).

Nolutshungu’s contribution to this literature stands out in its showing emergent signs of moving away from the ‘status’ framework entirely. Whilst he provides the customary acknowledgement that it ‘would be odd if the social composition of the Black consciousness organisations had no influence on their susceptibility to certain economic and political ideas or on how they understood their own role in a struggle of liberation’ (Nolutshungu, 1982, p. 161), he nevertheless identifies that the BCM’s

. . . objective class characteristics are perhaps not all that matters. . . . What is crucial is whether their limited political aims, and the ways in which they sought to achieve them, were inherently disposed to advance, in their political context, the interest of a ‘Black middle class’ in opposition to that of the proletariat. (p. 161)

His conclusion – in contrast to Hirson – is that their aims lay alongside the Black proletarian majority, accusing the exclusively class-based critics of the movement of missing the glaring ‘broad political interest that all but a very narrow, relatively apolitical stratum of Blacks share in self-government and freedom’ (p. 207). As we shall see, this conclusion chimes both with BC participants’ own accounts, and with an examination of the various strategies that the movement developed to bridge any social distance that existed between themselves and the broader Black population.

The strategy perspective

Goffman’s concept of ‘framing’ emerged from the insight that reality is made sensible and significant by different social actors in large part through decisions concerning which information is included or excluded within particular symbolic projections. Frames provide answers to the question of ‘what is it that’s going on here?’ (Goffman, 1974, p. 8), and therefore allow information to be experienced in a coherent and meaningful manner. It has been widely applied in social movement studies to understand how movements ‘reframe’ issues and events to alter how their audiences

interpret and hence act towards them, therefore defining both what is real and what is possible (Diani, 1992, p. 9).

Unfortunately, framing literature has too often treated the concept as a culturalist appendage to the traditional instrumentalist concerns of mainstream social movement studies (Goodwin & Jasper, 1999, pp. 46–51). Whilst this article disagrees with using framing as merely a mediating concept that defers priority to the ‘mobilization of resources’ or broader macro ‘political opportunity structures’ (e.g. McAdam et al., 1996), or else as a substitute for the earlier role played by ‘cognitive liberation’ (McAdam, 1982), it sees the groundwork laid by framing theorists as valuable in enabling a stronger constructivist explanation of movement processes. The remainder of this article is therefore organised around a fourfold schema of ‘strategic framing processes’: frame bridging, amplification, extension and transformation.

Strategic framing processes are typically understood as ‘deliberative, utilitarian, and goal directed’ (Benford & Snow, 2000), and their success is measured by their capacity to resonate with an audience’s pre-existent cultural beliefs (Schudson, 1989). The analysis presented here is set apart from these understandings in two ways. Firstly, it understands such framing as expressive of consciously-forged identities and guided by the deeply normative, moral and emotional concerns of the movement (Jasper, 1997). The BCM’s framing was not therefore ‘strategic’ in the narrow instrumental sense of that term, and some of it (the reframing of Christianity, for instance) was instead expressive of a broader background shared culture, what is sometimes called a ‘master frame’ (Snow & Benford, 1992). Secondly, the analysis (especially, for instance, in the section below on the ‘frame amplification’ that took place through listening surveys) reveals how the BCM intellectuals’ framing did not simply shape, or attach itself to, pre-existent community beliefs, but was also consciously shaped by them. The fact that such feedback-loops were intentionally built into the BCM’s framing strategies again disrupts the status perspective’s picture of the BCM as enacting a purely ‘top-down’, elitist mode of doing politics.

Frame bridging via Black Theology

‘Frame bridging’ refers to the ‘the linking of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem’, something that can often occur through ‘the linkage of a movement organization with an unmobilised sentiment pool’ (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 624). The BCM deployed various such strategies to link themselves with the communities they sought to mobilise, such as by framing education ‘as a community resource’ rather than as ‘a means of personal advancement’, in an effort to render ‘their immediate elite status . . . irrelevant’ and to be understood instead as ‘servants of the people’ (Brewer, 1986a, p. 222; see also Hadfield, 2016, p. 36). This section, however, focuses upon the bridging of BC with Christianity, through the development of Black Theology (BT). The bridging of these two traditions became forged

so strongly that Barney Pityana (1973), a BC leader and theologian, suggested that ‘a study of Black Theology is a study of black consciousness . . . the one is a genus of the other’ (pp. 58, 63).

The use of existing institutions as recruitment pools is a well-established method of movement mobilisation, and it has been demonstrated how Black churches played key networking and organisational roles during the US Civil Rights Movement (McAdam, 1982; Morris, 1981). Likewise, whilst the BCM faced various barriers with organising in Black workplaces, the churches, and in particular the ‘reframing of Christianity’ propagated by BT ‘gave the movement an entry point into the heartbeat of the community’ (Mangcu, 2013, p. 175). BT found itself rapidly disseminated throughout Black communities in large part thanks to the enormous emotive influence that ministers held over Black congregations so that, as Gerhart writes, ‘even where the nuances of the message failed to register, a mood was communicated which could not fail to stir new thinking’ (1978, p. 295).

Using Christianity as an instrument of resistance against Black oppression in South Africa was subversive, since historically in that country – as elsewhere in the colonised world – mission churches had provided theological legitimacy for White supremacy by teaching Blacks of the inferiority of their own traditions, and the “nobility” of servitude’ (Maluleke, 2008, p. 120; Moore, 1973, p. ix). The Dutch Reformed Church (NGK), which promulgated a reformed version of Calvinism, had, for instance, been particularly instrumental in legitimising racial separation and hierarchy long before the National Party enacted it into law in 1948. Alongside deprecating African belief systems as superstitious idolatry, it had also instituted segregation in the form of three ‘daughter’ churches (for Indians, Coloureds and Africans) to operate independently of each other, and separate from the exclusively White ‘mother’ NGK (Hopkins, 1991, pp. 194–195).

More liberal churches had played some role in resisting apartheid but typically did so through symbolic celebrations of racial mixing that did little to challenge the structural subordination of Blacks. By the time BT arrived, the hypocrisy of these liberal institutions was becoming apparent: leadership positions were typically monopolised by Whites, even whilst membership was majority Black, and White clergy were almost always paid more than Blacks for carrying out the same work (Gerhart, 1978, p. 294). Since Black priests were typically trained by White superiors, the interpretation of Christianity they preached was inevitably ‘firmly rooted in the perspective of whites’ (Moore, 1973, p. ix).

The University Christian Movement (UCM) – the primary institution out of which BT developed – represented a definite improvement on this situation but, at least initially, failed to entirely resolve it. In a letter to student leaders, Biko (1970) welcomed the UCM’s radical theology, but – alluding to its White president, Basil Moore, who had written a seminal treatise on the topic – added that ‘the fact that the blacks are in the majority in the organisation has not been sufficiently evidenced in the direction of thought and in the leadership’. Moore’s contradictory situation was not lost on him (Moore, 2013), and he notes his ‘impertinence’, as a White man, in having written the treatise in the first instance (1971, p. 14). A national Blacks-only seminar of the UCM was called for

1971, indicating a major shift from the liberal church's multiracial approach. This meant that Moore (whose statement was included in the invitations and who had been instrumental in organising the event) stepped aside.

In its concern with linking a politics of empowerment with people's everyday problems, BT emphasised the importance of making Christianity 'relevant' by reinserting it into political struggle (e.g. Biko, 1978, pp. 32, 60). It was a decidedly 'this-worldly' theology, aimed at relating 'God and Christ once more to the black man and his daily problems', a crucial endeavour, since, as Biko memorably put it, 'God is not in the habit of coming down from heaven to solve people's problems on earth' (1978, pp. 94, 60). Its influences were the African Theology emerging in newly-independent nations across the continent and, most importantly, the Black Theology that had developed in connection with the Black Power movement in the United States.

Basil Moore had met James Cone, the leading light of American BT, in 1967. Cone's theology focused on existential concerns, on the life and example of Christ, and on the social struggles experienced by Black Americans (Cone, 1969). Moore developed these themes, outlining three 'situational' facts about Christ. First, that he was poor, and his was a 'political poverty' produced by Roman colonisation (1971, pp. 15, 18). Second, that 'he was a man living in the land of his birth deprived of his rights as a citizen by white Western rulers from Rome' (p. 17). Third, that Christ chose never to condemn those violent revolutionaries, such as the Zealots, who fought to overthrow the Romans. What's more, BT argued against interpreting Christ's message 'about going the second mile, turning the other cheek, loving one's enemies' (p. 35) as meaning that Black Christians should willingly submit to White power. BT instead sought 'to depict Jesus as a Fighting God' (Biko, 1978, p. 31).

BT's existentialist themes emphasised the violence done by racism to one's sense of being. Racism robbed (in different ways, and to different degrees) both oppressor and oppressed of their full humanity, reducing subjects to objects; beings to things. The manner in which such themes were sometimes expressed may have rendered BT vulnerable to the charge of a detached intellectualism if it were not for its explicit goal of overcoming the intellectual authority invested in priests and theologians. This was achieved by offering BT as a democratised practice, open to all who cared to contribute. Biko, for instance, railed against 'the tendency by Christians to make interpretation of religion a specialist job', arguing that this resulted in a 'general apathy' towards an unjust world (1978, p. 58; see also Maluleke, 2008, p. 119).

Via these three focuses – its 'relevant', combative and anti-elitist characteristics – BT bridged the secular frame of BC with the religious frame of many ordinary Black South Africans. Evidence that this strategy reaped at least some success comes from the fact that BT rapidly became the focus of repression. Justice Moloto, who had taken over the presidency of the UCM from Moore, was the first BC member to be banned in 1971. The following year, two more permanent UCM staff – Moore (who then managed to flee the country) and Stanley Ntwasa (an Anglican BT preacher) – were also

banned. Funding was withdrawn, and the UCM was investigated under the Schlebusch Commission, which eventually found it guilty of ‘anti-South African activities’. Another government commission set up to investigate the BCM’s role in the disturbances at the University of the North in 1974, drew an implausible link between BT and terrorism, and in 1974–5, the Federal Theological Seminary, where BT had been debated and elaborated, was closed (Gerhart, 1978, p. 294). Whilst most of these charges against BT were fabricated, its targeting by the state suggests that in contradiction to the status view, its political influence was conceived as something more than mere ‘endless philosophising’.

Frame amplification via ‘listening surveys’

Frame amplification refers to the ‘idealization, embellishment, clarification, or invigoration of existing values or beliefs’ (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 624). A movement’s capacity to amplify the values and beliefs that an audience already holds is key to ensuring its frame resonates. Using a diverse set of empirical examples, a very similar idea has been elaborated in a more dramaturgical vocabulary in recent cultural sociology (e.g. Mast, 2012; McCormick, 2015; Smith & Howe, 2015). Alexander, for instance, has argued that under conditions of modernity, where the constituent elements of social performance have become ‘de-fused’ from one another, political actors carry a ‘fervent interest in refusing the audience-performance gap’, and to do so they must ‘“keep their ear to the ground” and try to gauge “feedback” from the grassroots in front of whom their social performances are staged’ (2004, p. 564; see also Flynn & Tinius, 2015). This section briefly describes how the BCM enacted frame amplification through conducting ‘listening surveys’ informed by radical pedagogical theory, in which the movement served as an inductive mouthpiece for poor Black communities.

In 1972, an adult literacy programme that had originally been established under the auspices of the UCM, was transferred to SASO after the former found itself subject to the repression described above. That same year, the SASO leadership met periodically over a six-month period with Anne Hope, an adult education expert, in order to learn about a radical approach to literacy training that Hope had learnt from the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire whilst studying in the US.

As with BT’s attack upon the figure of the theologian, at the forefront of this Freirean approach was a questioning of the authority of the educator. One’s own political awareness was not seen as providing licence to lecture others. The educator, Freire had written, ‘may not elaborate a programme to present *to* the people’ (1970, p. 108). The relationship should be one of facilitation. The idea was not to tell, but to listen; not to force one’s own consciousness upon another, but to ‘conscientise’ – a slightly awkward term derived from the Portuguese word *conscientização*, meaning ‘to be brought to awareness’.

A key technique of this method was the use of ‘thematic investigation’ through listening surveys (Freire, 1970, pp. 109–113). This was a way of learning what and how communities thought

by simply listening to them. The idea was to understand the problems faced by the ‘oppressed’ as they were expressed in their own language and in natural settings. Once this had been established, one could then go about raising critical awareness amongst these communities to facilitate them to produce their own solutions to their problems. Biko described in court what this practically involved:

Your role there was particularly passive, you are there just to listen to the things that they are talking about, and also to the words that are being used, the themes being important . . . we listened to women in queues waiting to see a doctor or nurse at a clinic, some of them had babies on their arms or on their backs, we listened to people congregated in sports fields watching sport, we listened to people in *shebeens* . . . in buses . . . and trains. (1979, pp. 26, 27)

He went on to recount the unsurprising findings of such exercises: expressions of anger, frustration, injustice, and in particular a ‘round condemnation of white society in general’ (1979, p. 32).

In a clear illustration of frame amplification, Biko defended the use of ‘harsh language’ in BC publications as simply ‘a summarized version, so to speak, of what Black society knows from experience’, adding that ‘I do not think we create grievances, I think we recognize existing grievances’ (1979, pp. 261, 268). This approach – which one analyst, drawing upon Scott (1990), has described as ‘a re-working of the hidden transcripts which circulated within the networks submerged in Black South African neighbourhoods, schools, and streets’ (Charney, 2000, pp. 338–339) – provides another example of a framing strategy aimed at abolishing the social distance between the BC’s university-educated intellectuals and the Black communities they sought to ‘bring to political awareness’. Importantly, it shows how the frames deployed by the movement intellectuals did not merely shape, but were themselves shaped by, the beliefs and cultural codes they discovered, thereby throwing into question the status perspective’s presentation of the movement as imposing their own narrow and alien concerns on an unreceptive audience. Focusing on the movement’s listening survey techniques again reveals a strategy through which the movement intellectuals aimed to draw their more abstract formulations closer to the lifeworlds of ordinary Black South Africans.

Frame extension via community development and labour organisation

‘Frame extension’ refers to the process of extending a movement’s framing ‘beyond its primary interests to include issues and concerns that are presumed to be of importance to potential adherents’ (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 625). In contradiction to the status view that the movement ‘tended to concentrate on their own problems on the campus . . . curiously insensitive to the struggles around them’ (Hirson, 1979, p. 283), this section offers two illustrations of this strategy. First, the work carried out by the BCM’s development wing, the Black Community Programmes (BCP), which

tried to extend the concern of ‘conscientising’ to the very real problem of material underdevelopment amongst Black communities. Second, the efforts at organising Black workers, which aimed at extending the BCM’s philosophy of Black empowerment into the exploitative world of the Black workplace. Whilst the former enjoyed moderate successes, the latter’s impact – again, mostly due to repression – was more limited. As with those framing processes reviewed above however, paying attention to the strategies themselves reveals the movement’s understanding of their own interests as equivalent to those of Blacks in general.

Although BC was born within a student organisation, it quickly expanded its institutional structure. A key step in this process was the establishment, in 1971, of the BCP (Hadfield, 2016, p. 25), directed by Bennie Khoapa, and with four regional branches throughout the country. The BCP set up clinics, including a mobile clinic that operated in Soweto, and most famously the Zanempilo ‘bringer of health’ clinic run by Biko’s girlfriend, Mamphela Ramphele. It also created a leather-working cottage industry, various publication ventures, a fund for ex-political prisoners and their families, a crèche, and a trust to support poor students.

These development initiatives were motivated by awareness of the effects of one’s material environment upon one’s consciousness, and it was on this basis that they expressed frame extension. Improving the material conditions that Blacks were forced to live under, and doing so via Black-led projects, extended the BC concern with tackling psychological issues of inferiority and internalised racism (Gwala, 1973, pp. 164–168; Khoapa, 2017; Ramphele, 1991). Biko expressed this link between materiality and consciousness in observing that in Black schools, students usually had ‘shabby uniforms if any’, whereas ‘the white kids always have uniforms’. He noted that in Black neighbourhoods the ‘homes are different, the streets are different, the lighting is different, so you tend to begin to feel that there is something incomplete in your humanity, and that completeness goes with whiteness’ (1978, p. 101).

The BCP operated on the conviction that the Black community could only ‘become aware of its own identity’, and ‘create a sense of its own power’ through self-directed development (BCP, 1973). Although these projects provided material improvement to many, the engendering of this psychological and political awareness – as opposed to the unrealistic task of reversing the overwhelming nationwide material underdevelopment of Black communities – was the primary, and more profound goal of their activities (Khoapa, 2017; Morgan & Baert, 2017, p. 481).

As a consequence of this more profound goal, the purpose of the BCP’s work was therefore emphatically not one of charity – an approach the movement associated with the White liberal mindset that did little to empower its recipients or challenge the structures that made such activity necessary in the first place. The possibility that the projects might inadvertently become mere charity was understood as their ‘greatest danger’ (Nengwekhulu, 1976) and to defend against this threat, it was deemed necessary for communities to take ownership, an aspiration left partially unfulfilled by their premature demise at the hands of the government (Hadfield, 2016, p. 157). Nevertheless, the

BCP's goal of distributing control, decision-making and agency away from the intellectual and charismatic leadership of the movement was certainly evident, and critiquing Hirson, Brewer suggests that acknowledging this 'must negate the idea that Black Consciousness was "apolitical" . . . a view which misunderstands the dialectic relationship between welfare, culture, and politics' (1986a, p. 226).

Attempts at organising workers were on the whole less successful than the development initiatives, in part because the state perceived a labour confrontation as more threatening than what they misrecognised as the BCM's identity politics.³ Nevertheless, they demonstrated a similar commitment to a strategy of extending the BC frame to include tackling the exploitation of Black workers (Mafuna, 2017). Various organisations were formed, such as the Black Allied Workers Union (BAWU), established by Drake Koka as an 'umbrella trade union that would cater for and embrace all workers in various job categories' (BCP, 1973, p. 123), the Black Workers' Project (BWP), a joint initiative of SASO and the BCP, and the Union of Black Journalists (UBJ), established by Bowke Mafuna who had experience working with the Engineering Workers' Union in the 1960s. Frame extension was at the forefront of these organisations' goals, as evidenced, for instance, in the assertion that the BWP was created 'to conscientise [Black workers] about their role and obligation towards black development' (BCP, 1973, p. 121).

Although African unions were not officially recognised, neither were they prohibited from operating. However, they had virtually no legal rights, and were severely hamstrung by their inability to strike, an interdiction that courageous workers in Durban broke in 1973. Racially-mixed unions had been outlawed since 1956, hampering BC's efforts at forging workplace unity on the basis of their extensive definition of Blackness (a definition that unified the apartheid categories of 'Africans', 'Coloureds' and 'Indians'). Mthuli Sheza, a BWP organiser, was pushed in front of a train in 1972 by a White transport worker, Bokwe Mafuna and Drake Koka were both banned in 1973 for their participation in the Durban Strikes, alongside other organisers such as Welile Nhlapo and Strini Moodley. Onkgopotse Tiro, who had taken over Sheza's job, was forced into exile and murdered by a parcel bomb in 1974, and the UBJ was banned in 1977.

Such repression was of no real surprise to the activists (Mafuna, 2017), and Nolutshungu concludes that given the draconian context, the 'real significance of BCM's involvement with workers is not that it was a strategy with any hope of real or lasting success but that it represented a commitment to identify with the working class' (1982, p. 191). Just as with the development programmes, the efforts at organising workers signalled a strategic attempt to reach beyond class divides.

³ Indeed, the state initially welcomed the BCM's break from White liberal apartheid opposition on the mistaken assumption that its politics were congruent with apartheid's own segregationist ideals (Nengwekhulu, 2017).

Frame transformation: Converting fear into hope

At the core of BC philosophy, and standing behind many of the more specific frames mentioned above, was a concern with ‘frame transformation’, with ‘changing old understandings and meanings and/or generating new ones’ (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 625). This section focuses on the BCM’s endeavours towards transforming collective affects of fear, self-doubt and despair, into those of hope, self-confidence and pride, arguing that in enacting these transformations, BC presented a potent prefigurative challenge to the apartheid order.

To fully appreciate its novelty and impact, it is necessary to place this strategy within its historical context. Whilst in Western Europe and North America the 1960s are often evoked as a decade of liberation and of the loosening of social norms, in South Africa, for Blacks, the experience was very different. In 1960, a Pan Africanist Congress-led demonstration against the pass laws in Sharpeville turned into a police massacre of unarmed protestors. In an outburst of disgust and anger, strikes, more protests, and riots occurred throughout the country, leading to the banning of the main resistance organisations (the ANC and the PAC), the imprisonment or exile of their leaders, and the establishment of clandestine armed wings. A major turning point in the liberation struggle had been reached.

This context of repression led to a climate of fear and resignation throughout the 1960s, in which, ‘[a]pathy and silence were all-pervasive’ (Gerhart, 1978, p. 258). As one BC activist put it to me, ‘parents didn’t want their children involved in politics, everyone was afraid, they’d seen what the consequences were’ (Kgakong, 2017). The psychological effects of this repression fed upon a more chronic and pervasive double-consciousness, which had been encouraged since the arrival of the Dutch settlers, but Gerhart notes that ‘at no time had these problems been more starkly apparent than in the 1960s, when all African initiatives and voices of dissent had been forcibly stilled’ (Gerhart, 1978, p. 286).⁴

By the late 1960s however, and largely thanks to BC initiatives, this fear and quiescence began to crack. Black university students synthesised New Left countercultural currents with ideas of national liberation from elsewhere on the African continent and, most importantly perhaps, US Black Power. BC took what was relevant from these traditions and added their own psycho-political diagnosis, expressed most succinctly in Biko’s maxim that the ‘most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed’ (1978, p. 68). Given their vast demographic majority, BC proposed that the smooth operation of apartheid relied upon Black cooperation in their own oppression. Above all, BC took direct aim at the ubiquitous fear that had developed amongst Blacks, and the associated pathological feelings of inadequacy, dependency and incomplete humanity (Mbembé, 2007). ‘Black people are steeped in fear’, Biko declared, ‘We want them away from this’

⁴ Fear and paranoia pervaded White society too, in the form of *Swart gevaar* (‘black threat’), and Biko talked of a ‘tripartite system of fear – that of white[s] fearing the blacks, blacks fearing whites and the government fearing blacks and wishing to allay the fear among whites’ (1978, p. 80).

(1979, p. 71). He identified ‘this sense of defeat’ as an internalised enemy and proposed that Blacks should ‘not just give in’, but instead ‘develop a hope . . . some form of security to be together to look at their problems, and in this way build up their humanity’ (1978, p. 114). Hope, in contrast to optimism, can be a subjectivising force (Morgan, 2016) and Biko understood it as a means of provoking Blacks into realising ‘they have a way out’ (1979, p. 201). In many ways Biko himself personified this hope and the assertive self-confidence that sprung from it, and it was for this reason that he served as such an effective embodiment of BC philosophy, his fearless and charismatic public performances acting as prefigurative illustrations of what a dignified and unrepressed Black pride might look like (Morgan, 2018).⁵

The transformation of a framing of despair into one of hope was also reflected in the reappropriation of language, itself a common dynamic in political struggle (Hardt & Negri, 2017, p. 151). ‘Black’ – now frequently capitalised by the movement – was converted from a stigma into a category of pride; from a derivative shadow of Whiteness to an assertive identity of strength, beauty and defiance. Crucially, it became redefined as a unifying concept, aimed at overcoming both ethnic and ‘racial’ divisions that had been cynically cleaved open by apartheid’s divide-and-rule approach.^{6,7} ‘Blackness’, in essence, became a political, rather than racial category, a matter repeatedly misunderstood by its status-based critics (e.g. Hirson, 1979, pp. 72, 295, 326). The conditions for being considered ‘Black’ were both objective – one had to be ‘by law or tradition, politically, socially, or economically discriminated against as a group’ – and subjective too – one had to identify oneself ‘as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of [Black people’s] aspirations’ (SASO, 1971, p. 1).

As well as subjectivising its referents, and forging unity across ethnic and ‘racial’ barriers, ‘Blackness’ at the same time provided an identity that could cut across educational and class divides, providing a further strategy to connect the intellectual leadership with the grassroots. One leader, Harry Nengwekhulu, recounted how:

. . . the emphasis was on the fact that we were Black first, before we were students. . . . We shared the experiences of the Black community, so we could not look upon ourselves as students in separation from that community. We were intellectuals, but we wanted to identify with the community and help our community. We were not fighting any students’ struggle . . . we fought for Black freedom. (Nengwekhulu, 2017)

The redefinition of ‘Blackness’ was therefore not merely a semantic innovation. Rather, it offered a new and compelling way of ‘being’ in the world, transforming what had previously been

⁵ Reed (2013) details how charismatic leaders establish audience connections through their embodying particular principles in iterated public performances.

⁶ BCM’s heyday coincided with the government’s Bantustan policy, aimed at forcibly separating and relocating ethnic groups into their so-called ‘homelands’.

⁷ ‘Blackness’, as defined by the BCM, was inclusive of so-called ‘Coloured’ and ‘Indian’ groups too.

framed as a predicament into a resource. Since this condition of Blackness was shared between the leadership and the grassroots – ‘language, culture and experience were common between them despite their different levels of formal education’ (Karis & Gerhart, 1997, p. 148) – the strategy was therefore open to potential success.

Conclusion

This article has proposed a shift of analysis from *status* to *strategy* in understanding the role played by the intellectual leadership of the BCM in bridging, amplifying, extending and transforming various powerful frames so as to connect their ideas to the communities they sought to engage. Through its analysis, the article has revealed three important implications for studying movement intellectuals and social movements more generally.

First, it has shown how insofar as framing strategies are not mutually contradictory, deploying a diversity of grounded intellectual strategies helps augment the potential resonance of a movement’s core message. The degree to which the BCM leadership relied upon a particular framing strategy changed depending on both the context and the constituency they intended to engage, since needs, interests, affects and cultural mappings varied both within and across audiences. Frame extension through community development, for instance, was deployed more extensively in rural areas, where need was often most acute and literacy levels were typically at their lowest. By contrast, frame amplification through listening surveys was used more frequently, and to greater effect, in urban centres and amongst more politicised communities, who were often already linking their daily experiences of injustice to political solutions.

Second, it has shown how whilst the BCM’s leadership enacted various intellectual strategies to make their own history, they did not do so under conditions of their own choosing. Sociology in a sense begins from acknowledgement that the outcome of social action is never entirely determined by actors alone. Many of the BCM’s strategic aspirations failed to come fully to fruition, constrained as they were by contingent and repressive conditions. Analysing the BCM exclusively through its objective characteristics ends up painting an inaccurate picture of its leadership as either a group of traditional vanguardist intellectuals, or worse, as a petit bourgeoisie acting on the basis of a narrow class partisanship *against* the interests of the majority Black proletariat (Hirson, 1979). In contrast to this view, Karis and Gerhart write that thanks to the example shown by the BC leaders, the

. . . stereotype of the African intellectual as nothing but a big talker lost currency because it was evident that many students put community goals and grievances above the promotion of their own careers. Black consciousness might be the creation of an intellectual elite, but it was not a philosophy of elitism . . . it challenged everyone to put political commitment above personal advancement. (1997, p. 127)

A narrow empiricism that confines its attention only to successful strategic outcomes fails to provide a complete picture, for it ignores the clash between movement intent and the contingent constraints under which movements are forced to operate. The temptation to offer such an account is particularly strong when seeking to analyse historically or culturally remote movements, where thwarted internal strategies (as opposed to the more easily accessible objective outcomes) are typically more methodologically challenging to reconstruct.

Finally, though ‘strategic’, the BCM’s framings were never entirely instrumental but instead expressive of a sense of indignation at the injustices of apartheid, and the manner in which its victims’ minds had been unwittingly recruited into its perpetuation. They were also often expressive of a newfound hope in the possibility of change, and a belief that a new collective identity – Blackness – could bring about this change. Attachment to this identity was not the simplistic result of any rationalistic calculation; given the risks involved such a calculation could just as reasonably turn potential recruits away from the movement. Instead it involved an emotional draw that promised not only objective social transformation, but also the possibility of subjective renewal by ridding its participants of debilitating feelings of fear, self-doubt and inferiority. Moving attention from ‘status’ to ‘strategy’ reveals the complex motivations out of which movement ‘interests’ are in fact constructed. Movements can only be understood as purely calculative and narrowly rationalistic from a distance. Thick empirical description of the symbolic environments that furnish action with its meaning reveals the actual combination of emotional, value-led, moral, identity-based – and of course also instrumental – motivations that lie behind particular collective action processes.

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