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“Every Bite Buys a Bullet”: Sanctions, Boycotts and Solidarity in Transnational Anti-Apartheid Activism

ABSTRACT

This article examines the genesis and development of transnational anti-apartheid activism between the 1960s and the 1980s. Underpinning anti-apartheid was the fundamental principle of “solidarity”, an emotional and ideological connection between the self and a distant oppressed other. It was this concept that served to mediate the transnational dimension of anti-apartheid as a form of humanitarianism. Calls for sanctions against South Africa represented the movement’s most explicit engagement with political systems and structures, and thus the shifting power of humanitarian values in political discourse. Participation in boycotts represented a kind of activism from the ground up, in which individual economic decisions—the refusal to “buy apartheid”—became humanitarian acts. The notion of solidarity marked, moreover, a significant break with the paternalism of “imperial” humanitarian efforts, while calls for sanctions and disinvestment promoted a global norm of racial equality and a wider sense of humanitarian justice in international relations and global business ethics. Anti-apartheid connected a humanitarian ethos to individual and community action, and the consumer boycott became a primary form in which consciousness-raising and identity-forming functions of “new” social movements were enacted.

Keywords: *Transnational activism, social movements, boycotts, apartheid, South Africa*

Shoppers in the northern English town of Blackburn in mid-1989 may have noticed the unusual presence of a protester wedged, a little awkwardly, into a costume resembling an outsized Outspan orange. Alongside him stood a fellow-campaigner whose poster revealed the focus of the campaign—a stylised black and white image of a South African armoured police vehicle of the kind that had been deployed in the country’s black townships since the onset of mass protests against the system of apartheid five years earlier. Emblazoned on the poster in red was the call to “Boycott Apartheid.” Another poster from the 1989 campaign instructed shoppers that purchases of South African fruit directly supported

the country's military with the declaration that "Every Bite Buys a Bullet."¹ Within twelve months of the launch of this campaign, the African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela walked away from prison, symbolically marking the start of a process of negotiation that resulted in fully democratic elections in April 1994. While the British Anti-Apartheid Movement followed the lead of the African National Congress in continuing to call for sanctions and boycotts of South African products through the often fraught process of transition, the "Boycott 1989" campaign was one of the final formal campaigns launched by the Anti-Apartheid Movement in its thirty-year existence.

The movement began and ended with a consumer boycott, but campaigns also focussed on sanctions and disinvestment, as well as efforts to raise public awareness of conditions in South Africa and to raise funds for southern African liberation movements. Underpinning all of these efforts was the fundamental principle of "solidarity", which represented a major conceptual shift in the framing of western support for anti-colonial movements. In its formative years, prior to the launch of the Boycott Movement in 1959, anti-apartheid activism in Britain shifted from a liberal humanitarian concern for the distant others subject to the racial injustices of segregation and apartheid to a movement centred on transnational solidarity. During the 1960s and 1970s, anti-apartheid activists elaborated an ideological platform that supported sanctions and disinvestment campaigns by emphasising the continuing links with—and by implication support of—the South African regime. Support for the anti-apartheid movement in Britain rapidly expanded after 1985 as popular resistance to apartheid intensified within South Africa.

As such, anti-apartheid has been viewed in a number of recent accounts as a prime example of a late-20th century transnational social movement. Audie Klotz has argued that the gradual turn towards policies of sanctions against South Africa by western states reflected an "international norm of racial equality" that influenced international relations in the late-20th century.² Building on the work of Audie Klotz, as well as Margeret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink's influential examination of transnational advocacy networks, Hakan Thorn has argued that analysis might be applied to the non-governmental and civil society-based activism of movements such as the British Anti-Apartheid Movement and the Isolate South Africa Committee in Sweden.³ Anti-apartheid both articulated, and helped constitute, this global norm. More recent works have sought to historicise the emergence of international anti-apartheid movements as an amalgam of moral protest, left-wing politics and anti-colonial sentiment that coalesced in a period of decolonisation,

- 1 The poster was designed by Keith Piper, 1989. Bodleian Library, Commonwealth and African Collections, Oxford (BLCAC), papers of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, MSS AAM 2512/1.
- 2 Audie Klotz: *Norms in International Relations: The Struggle against Apartheid*, Ithaca 1995, p. 5.
- 3 Håkan Thörn: *Anti-Apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society*, Basingstoke 2006; Margeret E. Keck/Kathryn Sikkink: *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca 1998.

heightened public awareness of international affairs and the radicalisation of civil society.⁴ Others have explored the alliance between anti-apartheid and South African liberation movements, and the ways in which anti-apartheid emerged from black community politics.⁵

The following sections explore how solidarity was expressed as tangible forms of action within the transnational anti-apartheid movement. Calls for sanctions against South Africa represented the movement's most explicit engagement with political systems and structures, often predicated on the belief that external pressure would be the most effective way of achieving change within South Africa. Through calls for sanctions and disinvestment, the humanitarian desire to alleviate suffering was politicised, and the focus of activism was transferred from the immediate relief of physical harm to the achievement of longer term goals of civic and social justice. Participation in the consumer boycott against South Africa, moreover, was the process through which an individual's economic decision—the refusal to “buy apartheid”—became a humanitarian act. It was the boycott, it is argued, that constituted the tangible form of transnational action, which connected concerned individuals with “distant others” in South Africa.

“Solidarity”: the Fundamental Principle of Anti-Apartheid

As it emerged in the years after 1948, anti-apartheid combined anti-racism and humanitarian concerns, which developed over the course of the 1950s into an ideological affinity and solidarity with African nationalism. The pioneering role of “turbulent priests”, such as Michael Scott and Trevor Huddleston in the development of public critiques

- 4 Christabel Gurney: *A Great Cause: The Origins of the Anti-Apartheid Movement*, June 1959–March 1960, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26:1 (2000), pp. 123–144; Christabel Gurney: *In the Heart of the Beast: The British Anti-Apartheid Movement, 1959–1994*, in: South African Democracy Education Trust (eds.): *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, Vol. 3 Part 1, International Solidarity, Pretoria 2008; Rob Skinner: *The Foundations of Anti-Apartheid: Liberal Humanitarianism and Transnational Activism in Britain and the United States, c. 1919–64*, Basingstoke 2010; Kevin O’Sullivan: *Ireland, Africa and the End of Empire : Small State Identity in the Cold War, 1955–75*, Manchester 2012.
- 5 Arianna Lissoni: *The South African Liberation Movements in Exile, C. 1945–1970*, Ph.D, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London 2008; Genevieve Klein: *The Anti-Apartheid Movement in Britain and Support for the African National Congress, 1976–1990*, DPhil, St. Antony’s College (University of Oxford), 2007; Elizabeth Williams: *The Politics of Race in Britain and South Africa: Black British Solidarity and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle*, London 2012.

of apartheid in Britain in the 1950s furnished anti-apartheid with the characteristics of moral protest in the mould of “classical” forms of liberal humanitarianism. Michael Scott, an Anglican minister and estranged Communist, came to prominence in the late 1940s with a series of appearances at the United Nations, championing the cause of the Herero people of South-West Africa and calling for international action against the incorporation of their country into apartheid South Africa.⁶ In his contacts with the United Nations Trusteeship Committee, Michael Scott was presented as a witness for the Other, whose brief high-profile in the British public eye might be read as a precursor to the “celebrity humanitarianism” of the early 21st-century.⁷ Michael Scott’s celebrity in the late 1940s did, on one level, serve to legitimise the agenda of the United Nations as it sought to establish its competence over former League of Nations mandated territories. Despite his disenchantment with the “delicate diplomatic finesse” he encountered in New York, his presence at the United Nations in public solidarity with the Herero people arguably legitimated the forum, and its organisational agenda, more than it advanced the Herero cause.⁸

For Michael Scott, the message of anti-apartheid was not simply one of humanitarian concern, but rather a call to action to resist apartheid’s “unjust laws.”⁹ Michael Scott’s anti-apartheid message to supporters in Britain pleaded for solidarity with black nationalists in South Africa. In calling the public to support civil disobedience campaigns in South Africa, western activists such as Scott, and George Houser in the United States, were often motivated by their faith in the Gandhian methods of non-violent resistance. But their advocacy of movements such as the 1952 Defiance Campaign also aligned anti-apartheid with sentiments that threatened the traditional humanitarian establishment. Young Africans had begun to regard western humanitarians with suspicion, as “the person who descends upon them in their miserable shacks and does good to them on the end of a barge pole.”¹⁰ Humanitarianism could no longer be defined by the west alone and that “concern” needed to be allied with action against racial inequality.

- 6 Freda Troup: *In Face of Fear. Michael Scott’s Challenge to South Africa*, London 1950; Carol Anderson: *International Conscience, the Cold War, and Apartheid: The NAACP’s Alliance with the Reverend Michael Scott for South West Africa’s Liberation, 1946–1951*, in: *Journal of World History*, 19:3 (2008), pp. 297–325.
- 7 Ilan Kapoor: *Celebrity Humanitarianism: The Ideology of Global Charity*, New York 2013.
- 8 Michael Scott: *A Time to Speak*, Garden City 1958, pp. 252–253. Debate over the United Nations’s legal position with regard to South-West Africa continued throughout the 1950s, the Mandate was only formerly terminated in 1966.
- 9 Michael Scott: *Christian Action and the Racial Problem*, London 1950.
- 10 Christian Action Meeting, Central Hall, Westminster, 2nd February 1953, BLCAC, Africa Bureau Papers, MSS Afr s 1681 29/7, f. 32.

During the 1950s, key figures within humanitarian-mission networks began to take a more sympathetic view of African nationalism. Perhaps the most prominent critic of apartheid, Trevor Huddleston, head of an Anglican mission in Johannesburg, described this in religious terms, as a demonstration of the meaning of the incarnation of Christ: support for the African National Congress was an extension of the spirit of identification between priests and their parishioners.¹¹ Others too, began to regard nationalism with more sympathy. Joseph Oldham, the veteran Scottish missionary, argued in 1955 that humanitarians should favour “African national aspirations, thereby transcending in principle the antagonism between African desires and hopes and the interests of the immigrant [settler] communities.”¹² And by the late 1950s, mission Christians were urged to “make common cause with Africans in their efforts to achieve responsible citizenship.”¹³ However, Huddleston remained convinced that the most effective response to apartheid was to stimulate external pressures upon the South African government. Anti-apartheid activism should, in his view, focus on the transformative potential of Christian faith to prompt a “change of heart” in South Africa. But he believed that the “Christian conscience needed to find expression in the isolation of South Africa—until she repents.”¹⁴ During the 1950s, then, European critics of apartheid (both in South Africa and overseas) were forced to confront the legitimacy of nationalist resistance and subscribe to novel forms of humanitarianism that cast African issues in terms of a people’s democratic ambitions.

By the 1960s, solidarity had emerged as the primary ideological principle of anti-apartheid. Within liberal and faith-oriented activism such as that practiced by Scott and Huddleston, the principle of solidarity transformed classical humanitarian responses to South African race policies. In the years before 1948, liberal humanitarians had seen themselves as mediators between African nationalism and colonial authorities, and saw the notion of “trusteeship” as the measure of colonial good governance, that might restrain nationalist politics. During the 1950s, though, the development of apartheid in South Africa had prompted groups and individuals in Britain to focus their attention on the demands of black nationalists. Humanitarian sympathies were aroused in favour of nationalism as a response to what were increasingly seen as the authoritarian policies of the South African government.

The liberal humanitarian principle of solidarity sat alongside socialist visions of unity with the South African people’s struggle against apartheid. British trade unionists had been ambivalent about the Congress movement, although leading members of the Labour Party began to take up anti-apartheid as a cause, and played a lead role in the establishment

11 Trevor Huddleston: *Naught for Your Comfort*, London 1956, pp. 74–75.

12 Joseph Oldham: *A New Hope in Africa*, London 1955, p. 89.

13 John Taylor: *Christianity and Politics in Africa*, London 1957, p. 98.

14 Trevor Huddleston: Don’t let’s be beastly to South Africa, 19th May 1955, BLCAC, Africa Bureau Papers, MSS Afr s 1681 190/1 Item 2.

of the formal Anti-Apartheid Movement in Britain in 1960.¹⁵ The radical strand of anti-apartheid was enhanced by the arrival in Britain of a number of South African exiles, many of whom were members of the banned South African Communist Party. Some, like Harold Wolpe, established themselves in academic posts and began to articulate a radical interpretation of the historical structures of segregation and apartheid. Others addressed an informed public, facilitated by Ronald Segal's editorship of the Penguin African Library, which republished key works including Jack and Ray Simons' *Class and Colour in South Africa*, as well as Brian Bunting's polemic account of the development of apartheid, the *Rise of the South African Reich*.¹⁶ Britain also continued to be a destination for black South African students, including the future President Thabo Mbeki, who led a delegation of Sussex students to Downing Street in 1964.¹⁷ Solidarity with the struggle for democracy in South Africa thus became a foundational element of 1960s student politics in Britain. As a symbol of unredeemed colonialism, apartheid represented a form of racialised imperialism increasingly rejected by radical youth.¹⁸

In August 1967, just months after students had occupied the main entrance of the London School of Economics under the banner, "Beware the Pedagogic Gerontocracy", a small group of young British students and workers travelled to South Africa to secretly distribute leaflets and banners in support of the banned African National Congress. They had been recruited by Ronnie Kasrils, a South African Communist who had arrived in London in 1965. Following the first group of volunteers in 1967, the so-called "London Recruits" orchestrated propaganda actions in South Africa via increasingly complex means, including leaflet bombs and tape-recorded messages.¹⁹ The "London Recruits" were motivated by strong feelings of left-wing internationalism, and saw themselves in the tradition of the International Brigade. A number had grown up in politicised families, for whom the colonial "Emergencies" of the 1950s had a formative affect on their views of the Third World. This was, then, a form of ideological solidarity that ran parallel to the humanitarian solidarity that had informed the first generation of anti-apartheid activists.

- 15 John Major: *The Trades Union Congress and Apartheid, 1948–1970*, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 31:3 (2005), pp. 477–493; Christabel Gurney: *A Great Cause: The Origins of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, June 1959–March 1960*, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26:1 (2000), pp. 123–144.
- 16 Harold Jack Simons/Ray Esther Simons: *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850–1950*, Harmondsworth 1969; Brian Bunting: *The Rise of the South African Reich*, Harmondsworth 1964.
- 17 Mark Gevisser: *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred*, Johannesburg 2007.
- 18 Adam Lent: *British Social Movements since 1945: Sex, Colour, Peace and Power*, Basingstoke 2001.
- 19 Ken Keable (ed.): *London Recruits: The Secret War against Apartheid*, Pontypool 2012.

Parallel, but incompatible, notions of “solidarity” underpinned the development of transnational anti-apartheid in the 1950s and 60s. But solidarity was not merely a form of political expression, it was also a spur to practical efforts. This was certainly the case with the London Recruits, but it might also be applied to public engagement with anti-apartheid through donations in support of South African liberation movements. In 1952, both U.S. and British activists made calls for donations to support the legal costs of Defiance Campaign volunteers—in essence the roots of the Defence and Aid campaigns that expanded into a major source of funds for activists within South Africa.²⁰ The genesis of Defence and Aid was more precisely located in international responses to the arrest on charges of treason of over 150 Congress movement leaders in December 1956. The subsequent trial itself was a major international event, attracting observers including the British barrister and future Lord Chancellor Gerald Gardiner and the Labour MP Barbara Castle, who went on to become the founding President of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement.²¹

As a stimulus to political engagement, “solidarity” had much greater success in mobilising “privatised” forms of activism than it did in promoting more direct forms of civic and political participation. As such, the careful harvesting of support from individual members of Canon Collins’ organisation Christian Action was a precursor of the relationships that developed between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and their supporters in the latter decades of the twentieth century.²² “Solidarity” might therefore be seen as a mask for political inaction, or at least the diversion of direct political action into empty gestures.

Sanctions: Solidarity in International Relations

In the aftermath of the Sharpeville shootings and the clampdown on internal political opposition, anti-apartheid campaigners began to focus their efforts on the material isolation of South Africa. South African exiles, together with the Anti-Apartheid Movement, focussed their attention initially on expulsion of South Africa from the Commonwealth, and thereafter on the task of lobbying for the imposition of economic sanctions against South Africa.²³ Anti-apartheid campaigners had proposed sanctions as

- 20 Håkan Thörn: *Anti-Apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society*; Denis Herbstein: *White Lies: Canon John Collins and the Secret War against Apartheid*, Oxford 2004.
- 21 Christabel Gurney: *A Great Cause: The Origins of the Anti-Apartheid Movement*, June 1959-March 1960.
- 22 Matthew Hilton/Jean-François Mouhot: *The Politics of Expertise: How NGOs Shaped Modern Britain*, Oxford 2013.
- 23 Roger Fieldhouse: *Anti-Apartheid: A History of the Movement in Britain*, London 2005, pp. 38–40.

early as the mid-1950s, and the Government of India had imposed an embargo on South African imports during its protests against the treatment of Indians in South Africa at the United Nations in the late 1940s.²⁴ But it was a combination of international political opportunities and the changing tactics of resistance movements within South Africa that drove the development of an international sanctions campaign. With the dismantling of European empires, former colonial territories became advocates of sanctions, although anti-apartheid rhetoric was not matched with material support for the liberation movement. But the representatives of Third World states at institutions such as the United Nations meant that international organisations became an increasingly important site of anti-apartheid activity. A key development came with the establishment of the United Nations Special Committee on Apartheid in late 1962, following a General Assembly resolution that had called for sanctions against South Africa.²⁵ In Britain, anti-apartheid campaigners continued to campaign for a more extensive sanctions regime, culminating in the first international conference on sanctions held in London in April 1964. The conference organisers, perhaps unsurprisingly, concluded that sanctions were a “feasible and practical” response to apartheid that would have a “marginal” impact on countries boycotting South Africa.²⁶

Contemporary observers saw sanctions as a question of practicalities and the rational interests of states—“the case against coercion”, argued one commentator, “rests on the enormous difficulties involved in any attempt to change the South African situation from outside.”²⁷ But, as Audie Klotz suggests in her analysis of anti-apartheid as a force in 20th-century international relations, it was not realism, but advocacy of the “norm of racial equality” that shaped calls for sanctions and the responses of states.²⁸ As the Legal and Political Commission of the sanctions conference argued, the apartheid state had violated a number of multi-lateral agreements and “flies in the face of international standards and fundamental freedoms.”²⁹ At the same time, proponents of sanctions argued that the systematic racial injustice of apartheid was an international threat and that sanctions were therefore a practical response. Political realism and the perceived interests of western

24 Corrie Gerald Haines: *The United Nations Challenge to Racial Discrimination in South Africa 1946–1950*, in: *African Studies* 60:2 (2001), pp. 185–204.

25 Newell Maynard Stultz: *Evolution of the United Nations Anti-Apartheid Regime*, in: *Human Rights Quarterly* 13:1 (1991), pp. 1–23.

26 Sanctions Conference, *Findings and Recommendations of Commissions I and II*, 1 May 1964, BLCAC, MSS AAM 1700.

27 Dennis Austin: *Britain and South Africa*, London 1966, p. 20.

28 Audie Klotz: *Norms in International Relations: The Struggle against Apartheid*.

29 Sanctions Conference, *Findings and Recommendations of Commissions III*, 1 May 1964, BLCAC, MSS AAM 1700.

powers ensured that sanctions were blocked in practice.³⁰ At the United Nations, official endorsement of anti-apartheid was tempered by the realisation that measures to isolate South Africa were unlikely to be implemented through the Security Council.

By the 1970s, debates around sanctions began to take on an increasingly anti-capitalist character—in line with revisionist historical interpretations that set South African race policies into a narrative of modernisation. In their 1972 book *The South African Connection*, Ruth First, Jonathan Steele and Christabel Gurney provided a forensic analysis of the links between British business and the apartheid economy. Up until that point, they argued, anti-apartheid had focussed on political institutions and cultural links rather than addressing the deep-seated ties between South Africa and western businesses. Examining a wide array of case studies, including General Motors, British Steel and Rio-Tinto Zinc, the authors argued that the 1960s had witnessed a deepening “interpenetration of Western and South African business interests” that were both highly influential on their own but also inter-twined with political organisations associated with the apartheid state.³¹

Other anti-apartheid campaigners had begun to recognise the importance of private investment and corporate support for apartheid, notably the End Loans to Southern Africa campaign, established by a Methodist minister, David Haslam, in 1974. Initially focused on Midland Bank, End Loans to Southern Africa played a formative role in prominent disinvestment campaigns aimed at Barclays’ Bank and Shell in the 1980s.³² Even before the formation of End Loans to Southern Africa, the role of British banks in providing financial support for the apartheid government had become the focus of protest as a result of British companies, including Barclays’, investment in the Cabora Bossa dam project in Mozambique. Opposition to the project was coordinated in Britain by a coalition of groups including the Anti-Apartheid Movement, the Committee for Freedom in Mozambique, Angola and Guiné, and the Haslemere Group. The campaign, which was launched in 1970 included a call to boycott Barclays’ and marked the start of a sixteen-year long effort to compel the bank to withdraw its interests in South Africa. The Haslemere Group had emerged in 1968 after a number of disaffected NGO workers published a declaration that set out a radical approach to global poverty and inequality that moved beyond traditional forms of humanitarian relief.³³ Underpinning the declaration was the belief, articulated by the Catholic Archbishop Dom Helder Camara, that poverty was in itself a form of violence that fed a spiral of rebellion and repression throughout the so-called

30 See Ryan M. Irwin: *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order*, Oxford 2012.

31 Ruth First/Jonathan Steele/Christabel Gurney: *The South African Connection: Western Investment in Apartheid*, London 1972, p. 279.

32 Nerys John: *The Campaign Against British Bank Involvement In Apartheid South Africa*, in: *African Affairs* 99:396 (2000), pp. 415–433.

33 *The Haslemere Declaration*, London 1968; see also Hélder Câmara: *Spiral of Violence*, London 1971.

Third World.³⁴ As the Haslemere Group declared in 1971, transnational business networks meant that “your government, your friendly bank manager, your Barclay account and YOU are all implicated” in the system of apartheid.³⁵ Disinvestment campaigns brought anti-apartheid back to the level of everyday individual decisions—apartheid was situated on High Streets and in the wallets of citizens far removed from South Africa.

The rhythms of anti-apartheid sanctions campaigns tended to match the “opportunities” that emerged from shifts in the political cultures of western powers and the degree of stability within South Africa itself. When resistance in South Africa was relatively subdued, the case against sanctions prevailed; when popular protest escalated it became more difficult to justify what could be cast as support for an authoritarian regime. With the resurgence of internal opposition to apartheid in the mid-1970s, the anti-apartheid movement in the west moved into a new phase of activity. In Britain, this was characterised by convergence of campaigns for sanctions, disinvestment and consumer boycotts in what would be its most intense period of activity. The boycott, in particular, provided a particularly powerful ritual of solidarity, a form of performance that could create and sustain new forms of political community.

The Boycott and the Birth of Anti-Apartheid

The exhortation to not “buy apartheid” remained at the heart of the anti-apartheid movement from its inception through to the 1990s. The roots of this mode of protest can be found in the 1950s, when anti-apartheid campaigners had called for a “personal boycott of South African goods” and sought to instigate a cultural boycott of South Africa.³⁶ It was, however, the Boycott Movement, launched in June 1959 that sparked popular anti-apartheid activism in Britain and provided a way of practicing solidarity in everyday life. Initiated by South African campaigners and the London-based umbrella-organisation for African nationalist movements, the Committee for African Organisations, the Boycott Movement drew inspiration from calls for an embargo on South African products that had been heard at the pan-Africanist Accra Assembly in late 1958.³⁷ Boycotts had been employed to some effect by grassroots campaigns in South Africa and Congress leaders saw them as a “devastating weapon” against apartheid.³⁸ To a certain extent, support for

34 *Ibid.*

35 Haslemere Group: *You and Your Money*, London, [n.d. c. 1971].

36 *Daily Herald*, 29 July, 1954; *Observer*, 10 October, 1954; *Art & Sport Manifesto*, 7th October 1957, BLCAC, Africa Bureau Papers, Mss Afr s 1681 196/5, f. 1.

37 See Elizabeth Williams: *The Politics of Race in Britain and South Africa: Black British Solidarity and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle*.

38 Christabel Gurney: *A Great Cause: The Origins of the Anti-Apartheid Movement*, June 1959-March 1960; Scott Thomas: *The Diplomacy of Liberation: The Foreign Relations of*

the Boycott Movement in Britain was confined to a narrow, metropolitan elite that had formed the bedrock of anti-apartheid protest. Trevor Huddleston and Michael Scott, Labour MPs including John Stonehouse and Fenner Brockway provided individual support, while Co-operative Societies, Constituency Labour Parties and Trades Councils (mainly based in the south-east of England) provided organisational backing. Nevertheless, the organising committee ran a series of small public demonstrations at shopping centres, with volunteers handing out leaflets urging the public “Don’t buy slavery. Don’t buy South African.”³⁹

A matter of weeks after the launch of the Boycott Month in February 1960, the shootings at Sharpeville had sharpened public opinion around the world against apartheid, and prompted the formation of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Britain. The consumer boycott was a centrepiece of the movement’s repertoire of action, but it could not claim to be a significant success, in terms of its impact on South African trade. Britain would remain a key market for South African produce (estimated at 35 per cent of total food and animal exports in 1968), and (as discussed above) activists began to see that it was necessary to target broader economic links, especially capital investment.⁴⁰ In the late 1960s, grassroots protest and direct action against apartheid turned to focus on cultural, particularly sporting, links with South Africa. The *Stop the Seventy Tour* protests against South African rugby and cricket teams formed part of a wider—and largely successful—campaign against South African participation in international sport. By the late-1970s, disinvestment, rather than consumer boycotts, would be the main focus of anti-apartheid engagement with business. From the mid-1980s, however, the consumer boycott would again provide a primary mode of anti-apartheid activism and an expression of solidarity that connected the apartheid state with local politics.

the African National Congress since 1960, London 1996, p. 181.

39 Boycott Movement: “Boycott Slave-Drivers Goods”, n.d. [1959], BLCAC, MSS AAM 1; see also Christabel Gurney: *A Great Cause: The Origins of the Anti-Apartheid Movement*, June 1959-March 1960.

40 For the 1968 trade estimates, see Barbara Rogers: *South Africa’s Stake in Britain*, London 1971; for a wider discussion of economic relations between South Africa and the West, see Ruth First/Jonathan Steele/Christabel Gurney: *The South African Connection: Western Investment in Apartheid*.

Boycott: Solidarity Via Individual and Community Protest in the 1980s

The 1980s saw the heyday of the British anti-apartheid movement, in terms of an active membership and the public profile of its campaigns. As in the past, the volume and frequency of anti-apartheid protests tended to mirror the ebb and flow of protest within South Africa. The formation of the United Democratic Front in 1983, and the surge in popular protest that followed the Vaal Uprising in September 1984, were chronicled by international television correspondents, thus returning the issue of apartheid to public attention across the world. In Britain, the rising tensions within South Africa coincided with what appeared to be growing warmth in diplomatic relations when the South African President, P.W. Botha became the first apartheid leader to visit the United Kingdom in 1984. While the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, reportedly advised Botha that apartheid was “unacceptable”, the visit did little to alleviate concerns that the Thatcher government was sympathetic to Pretoria. In the first half of the decade, the number of local Anti-Apartheid Movement groups in Britain doubled, and increased again by four-fifths in the following year alone.⁴¹ The rise in the number of local groups might be taken as a proxy for a rapid growth in “grassroots” support for anti-apartheid, as it became part of a portfolio of political campaigns and movements supported by a broad, anti-Thatcherite left in the mid-1980s. In this sense, anti-apartheid formed an important strand in resurgent protest politics in the United Kingdom, rooted in opposition to the ideological foundations and political values of the ruling Conservative party, increased Cold War tensions (which resulted in a similar dramatic upturn in popular support for CND) and growth in campaigns focussed on environmental issues.

The growth in popular support for anti-apartheid meant that localised and personal forms of activism became a major feature of the movement’s repertoire. The Anti-Apartheid Movement continued to lead calls for the British government to support sanctions and members intensified efforts to persuade businesses and organisations to disinvest, but the mid-1980s also saw a return to the boycott as a primary weapon of anti-apartheid protest. Efforts had been made throughout the 1960s and 70s to promote specific, as well as more generalised boycott campaigns, but the early 1980s saw the launch of new, nationally-coordinated boycotts.⁴² A sustained campaign in 1985 prompted a rapid expansion of boycott activity across the country, as activists monitored the sale of South African produce in stores and organised pickets and protests outside a number of leading retailers and supermarkets. Correspondence between the Anti-Apartheid Movement and major retailers hints at an incremental change in attitude towards the sale of South

41 Roger Fieldhouse: *Anti-Apartheid: A History of the Movement in Britain*, p. 313.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

African produce in the second half of the 1980s. While retailers' maintained that it was not "part of our role [...] to dictate to the public the type of goods they should buy", a shift in tone can be discerned that suggests increasing public unease over contacts with the apartheid regime.⁴³

In 1986, the Argyll Stores group noted that, as "the customer is the proper arbiter on what they wish to buy", the company would seek to supply alternatives to South African goods in their stores.⁴⁴ Some producers and retailers maintained that they had wound down their supplies of South African produce, while others, including Tesco, claimed that they would purchase from South Africa "only when there are no other goods available of suitable quality."⁴⁵ These were minor concessions, and sufficiently loose to allow continued stock of South African goods, certainly, but they nevertheless signalled a discursive shift on the part of retailers. The consumer boycott was of sufficient strength to warrant a response, an explanation, and at times adjustments to buying policies on the part of organisations that simultaneously argued that politics had no place in business. At a time when the values of "the market" appeared to have triumphed in political discourse, any acknowledgement of concern over apartheid seemed a success of sorts. As Anti-Apartheid Movement Research Officer, Stuart Bell, noted in 1989, however, the retailers' argument that their decisions were dictated by consumer choice was somewhat disingenuous, as marketing and buying departments would habitually make decisions that moulded the options offered to the consumer. Bell argued that the more pertinent issue was the criteria used to judge which goods would be available to consumers: just as "goods of unacceptable quality are rejected by shops, so should good from unacceptable sources."⁴⁶ Bell's assessment of the aim and purpose of the consumer boycott was in accord with more recent studies of the Fair Trade movement, which suggest that movements might mobilise their supporters as consumers in order to transform the structures of the market itself.⁴⁷

The boycott campaigns of the 1980s were no more than minor successes, in terms of their impact upon the policies of retailers themselves, let alone government. This has led some to conclude that the boycott was an inherently flawed mode of protest. Roger Fieldhouse, for example, has dismissed the boycott campaigns of the 1980s with the contention that they were simply "difficult to sustain over long periods." He notes that attempts to launch a large-scale boycott campaign in 1989 (which included a "Boycott

43 P. Stubbs (Director, Dee Corp) to R. Hughes, M.P., 3 May 1985, BLCAC, MSS AAM 1556.

44 W. Burton (Argyll Stores) to AAM, 4 April 1986, BLCAC, MSS AAM 1556.

45 Tesco to National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers, 25 July 1986, BLCAC, MSS AAM 1556.

46 S. Bell to R. Sahota, 26 May 1989, BLCAC, MSS AAM 1556.

47 M. Anderson: Fair Trade, in: N. J. Crowson/Matthew Hilton/James McKay (eds.): *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-State Actors in Society and Politics since 1945*, Basingstoke, 2009, p. 224. See also Clive Barnett/Nick Clarke/Paul Cloke/Alice Malpass: *The Political Ethics of Consumerism*, in: *Consumer Policy Review*, 15:2, 2005, pp. 45–51.

Bandwagon” bus) faltered, and that a planned Boycott Festival at Alexandra Palace was cancelled.⁴⁸ On this reading—which underplays the public impact of what was a nationwide campaign—the consumer boycott might be seen as a high profile, but relatively insignificant dimension of anti-apartheid. As James Jasper has argued, national boycotts differ considerably from localised boycott campaigns generally characterised “visible, physical act of solidarity.”⁴⁹ In national and transnational campaigns, compliance with the boycott cannot be sustained by the kinds of close supervision and discipline that typically characterise the ways in which obedience is maintained in community-level action.

Anti-apartheid campaigners devoted significant efforts to persuade ordinary shoppers to snub South African produce through pickets and other “grassroots” forms of intervention, but they did not believe it possible to operate the kind of blanket surveillance of a community that was evident, for example, in the operation of the bus boycotts organised by the inhabitants of Alexandra township in South Africa during the 1950s.⁵⁰ Instead, as with other examples of larger-scale boycott movements in the 1960s and after, Anti-Apartheid Movement activists sought to communicate a symbolic connection between South African fruit and the brutality of the apartheid regime. The array of South African produce displayed on a leaflet published by the Anti-Apartheid Movement in 1978 resembled and reproduced the visual narrative of retail advertising, depicting an enticing array of fresh and canned tropical fruit. The viewer is instructed, however, to “LOOK before you buy” and their eye is drawn to the images of armed South African police and dead protestors—including Sam Nzima’s iconic image of the dying thirteen-year old Hector Pieterse that has come to embody the shocking repression of the protest by schoolchildren that sparked the 1976 Soweto uprising—that are affixed to tins as labels, juxtaposed with the brand names and retailers familiar to British shoppers.⁵¹ The consumer boycott was sustained, at least in part, by efforts to define South African fruit symbolically as political objects rather than mere commodities.

Nevertheless, the ebb and flow of popular support for the consumer boycott between the late 1950s and late 1980s certainly reflected something of the difficulties of establishing an effective boycott on a large scale. An exaggerated focus on the “success” of the boycott campaign obscures, however, larger significance within anti-apartheid, and the historical development of humanitarian politics more broadly. The campaign call—“Don’t Buy South African”—condensed a complex set of messages that reinforced the anti-racist values and transnational solidarity that lay at the heart of anti-apartheid. It enabled the movement to make a connection with supporters’ everyday lives and

48 Roger Fieldhouse: *Anti-Apartheid: A History of the Movement in Britain*, p. 72.

49 James M. Jasper: *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements*, Chicago 1997, p. 254.

50 Tom Lodge: *Black Politics since 1945*, London 1983.

51 Poster, “Look Before You Buy; Boycott the Products of Apartheid”, produced in 1978 BLCAC, Oxford, AAM Archive, MSS AAM 2512/1.

imbued the quotidian (and “loving”) act of shopping with a layer of political meaning.⁵² As Stuart Hall has suggested, the boycott was of particular significance through its ability to transform political consciousness into “staged every day encounters.”⁵³ The national boycott campaign was distinct from everyday encounters but levels of organisational and popular support for the campaign indicates the contingencies that shaped the historical successes of anti-apartheid at specific moments in its history. In 1959, the central role played by the Committee of African Organisations locates the boycott within a broader anti-colonial and pan-African agenda, while the campaigns of the mid-1980s added a political, anti-Thatcherite, dimension. The boycott was more prominent in anti-apartheid when the distance between the activist and the target of the campaign could be reduced; the boycott worked when apartheid was set alongside an impetus for decolonisation, or where it responded to perceived corporate approval of South African race policies. Wide-scale support for the boycott required, therefore, extensive efforts at “cultural framing” to ensure that South African produce remained relevant.

The consumer boycott connected the organised with the spontaneous, and linked fleeting moments of political performance to the wider, extended anti-apartheid campaign. But it also operated, in some cases at least, at the level of civic and community action. During the 1980s, anti-apartheid provided fertile ground for the acting out of broader political tensions between national and local government, particularly in larger provincial and former industrial cities, often controlled by Labour-run local authorities instinctively and ideologically opposed to that of the national government. Civic leaders underlined their distance from Westminster through expressions of solidarity with southern African liberation movements and by inscribing the struggle against apartheid in civic identity via the naming of streets and buildings after prominent black South African activists. A typical example was that of Morley House in Hackney, named after a prominent 19th-century philanthropist and abolitionist, that was re-christened Nelson Mandela House in 1984 in a gesture that was “intended to help promote good race relations in the borough, to demonstrate the Council’s solidarity with the ideals of Nelson Mandela.”⁵⁴ A number of civic authorities established formal bodies and policies, including Bristol, which formed an official committee to examine the issue of apartheid, and Sheffield, which passed an official declaration of solidarity with Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress in 1981.⁵⁵

52 Daniel Miller: *A Theory of Shopping*, Cambridge 1998.

53 Stuart Hall: *The AAM and the race-ing of Britain*, paper presented at symposium on the Anti-Apartheid Movement: a 40-year Perspective, London, 25–26 June 1999, p. 54.

54 Hackney Council Press Release, 1984, BLCAC, AAM Archive, Oxford, MSS AAM 717.

55 Bristol Advisory Panel on Apartheid operated between 1986 and 1992, Bristol Records Office, M/BCC/AAP/1/1; Sheffield Declaration Against Apartheid, 1981, BLCAC, Oxford, AAM Archive. It is worth noting the fact that Sheffield Council identified the anti-apartheid struggle

Anti-apartheid in urban centres could also take the form of localised movements and protests that supported the creation and maintenance of allegiances, symbolic meanings and values within particular communities. In Bristol, the creation of an “Apartheid-Free Zone” reaffirmed community identities in the wake of racial tensions and unrest in St. Paul’s area of the city, home to a large Afro-Caribbean population. Anti-racism had been a formative element of community politics in Bristol, notably in the 1963 bus boycott sparked by the refusal of the local bus company to hire black conductors or drivers. Madge Dresser, in her study of the bus boycott, has suggested that the campaign might be linked to attempts on the part of veteran anti-colonial and anti-apartheid campaigner, Fenner Brockway, to introduce anti-racist legislation to parliament.⁵⁶ At an anti-apartheid rally in London at the height of the dispute, the Labour Party leader Harold Wilson had described the Bristol Bus Company’s recruitment policies as “the last example of the colour bar.”⁵⁷ Ongoing tensions in the St. Paul’s district had resulted in riots in 1980 that prefigured the discontent that came to the surface of a number of British cities in the following summer. The Apartheid-Free Zone was launched in 1985 by the St. Paul’s Community Council, and persuaded a majority of retailers to refuse to stock South African produce. By 1989, this included the local branch of Tesco’s, one of only two stores (the other being in Brixton, London) in the whole group that had taken South African goods off its shelves.⁵⁸ This apparent “success” suggests, therefore, that the anti-apartheid boycott was most effective when it could be localised through intensified community action, and where race was already a salient issue in local politics. But the success of the St. Paul’s protest also hints at the adaptability of the market—the banning of South African produce in an area with a significant black population was by no means incompatible with the idea that the consumer was the “proper arbiter” of which goods a retailer should stock.

Conclusions

It is significant that the sovereign rights of the consumer underpinned the popular boycott of apartheid produce in Britain. While the refusal to buy South African goods represented a politicisation of personal life, it also marked a withdrawal from formal political action and hinted at the marketisation of political action itself. Did the boycott reduce political action to a set of retail choices that held no threat or challenge to the structural inequalities that gave rise to apartheid? Or did the choices made by anti-apartheid consumers

solely with the African National Congress, something which many international organisations studiously avoided until the 1990s.

56 Madge Dresser: *Black and White on the Buses: The 1963 Colour Bar Dispute in Bristol*, Bristol 1986, p. 57.

57 *Western Daily Press*, 3 May 1963.

58 Press Release, *Haringey Anti-Apartheid*, 21 April 1989, BLCAC, Oxford, MSS AAM 1556.

perform a new kind of politics that imbued everyday actions with the agency to affect the practices of governments, businesses and social movements themselves? A brief study of the modes of anti-apartheid activism cannot, on their own, provide an answer. But the ways in which anti-apartheid was mobilised as a form of transnational activism in a decolonising, and thence post-colonial, world provides us with some clues to broader transformations in humanitarianism and the ways in which it could be embodied in action. The post-war notion of solidarity marked a significant break with the paternalism of “imperial” humanitarian efforts, despite the continuing echoes of earlier modes of concern for a subordinate colonised Other. Campaigns for sanctions and disinvestment helped to promote a global norm of racial equality as well as a wider sense of humanitarian justice in international relations and global business ethics. Most importantly, in terms of connecting a humanitarian ethos to individual and community action, consumer boycotts were the form in which the consciousness-raising and identity-forming functions of “new” social movements were enacted. At the same time—in the anti-apartheid movement at least—boycotts were a method of connecting the movement with more “traditional” institutions including churches and trades unions. While transnational anti-apartheid remained at heart a relationship between distant parties linked only by an abstract desire to alleviate the suffering of unknown others, grassroots consumer boycotts, both at the individual and community level, broke down the distance and made it possible to construct a sense of common endeavour. Solidarity was the fundamental principle and emotional expression of apartheid; the consumer boycott transformed affect into concrete action.

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