Article

Cultural boycotts as tools for social change: lessons from South Africa

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Abstract

This paper examines lessons from South Africa's cultural boycott under apartheid as a tool for social change. The boycott is often held up as a model for non-violent pressure to bring about change, including by the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign. In particular, the paper examines a shift initiated by the liberation movements from a blanket boycott – where no artists were allowed into or out of South Africa – to a selective boycott, where artists could travel with the express permission of the liberation movement. This paper explores a less savoury aspect of this shift in boycott tactics, where the African National Congress (ANC) and United Democratic Front (UDF) introduced political tests for which artists or artworks were allowed to travel, that these organisations then used to pursue a form of sectarian politics that undermined the unity of the oppressed. Underpinning these tests was an approach towards art and its relationship to politics that promoted art with propagandistic intent. The paper concludes by problematising arguments that South Africa's boycott should be used as a model for cultural boycotts elsewhere.

Introduction: cultural boycotts from South Africa to Palestine[1]

Boycotts, divestments and sanctions are important tools for change in intractably repressive situations; they isolate oppressive governments, prevent them from normalising relations with the outside world and cut off important avenues of global support for their continued practices. Cultural and academic boycotts communicate the message that there can be no normal cultural and intellectual exchanges in an abnormal society, and that the government concerned is considered a pariah. The liberation movement inside South Africa, bolstered by the anti-apartheid movement outside the country, pursued a cultural boycott as part of a broader package of sanctions against the apartheid regime. More recently, pro-Palestinian activists have launched a boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign to isolate Israel, including a cultural boycott, and which has found organisational expression in the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI).

PACBI considers the cultural boycott campaign against apartheid South Africa to be a major source of inspiration. It has argued that people of conscience in the international community played a role in bringing down apartheid through the isolation of apartheid South Africa, and that a similar approach can be adopted in relation to Israel (PACBI 2005, Barghouti 2008). In view of how well-regarded South Africa's experience with the cultural boycott experience is, this paper assesses the strengths and weaknesses of South Africa's cultural boycott as a tool for social change. It focusses on a particular moment in the boycott's history, when the South African liberation movements and their international supporters moved away from a blanket boycott to a selective boycott. In doing so, it also moves beyond an analysis of the boycott as such and explores the broader realm of cultural politics, and the complex relationships between art and politics in liberation movement strategies and tactics.

Art, politics, boycotts

Cultural boycotts involve organised campaigns to abstain from exchanges of cultural goods between different institutions, or even countries. They can extend to a range of different artforms, such as theatrical performances and music, the visual arts and crafts, films and literature, and can also extend to sporting activities, too. Cultural boycotts assume that art can play a positive role in shaping social and political formations, especially those that are authoritarian or repressive in nature. However, there are many possible relationships between art and politics; and proponents and opponents of cultural boycotts all too often base their arguments on unarticulated normative assumptions about these relationships. One possible relationship is that there should be no relationship; in other, words, art should stand above politics if it is to play a broader socio-cultural role of reflecting society back to itself. This view underpins the arguments of human rights organisations such as PEN America, which has opposed cultural boycotts on the basis that they violate freedom of expression, and further that boycotts subject art to political dictates rather than allowing art to transcend politics and even heal divides (PEN 2007). These arguments tend to be underpinned by a particular theory of art, the transcendent theory, which derived its inspiration from Emmanuel Kant, and which found more contemporary expression in the critical writings of Modernists like Clement Greenberg. It assumes that artists are individuals who stand above the muddy world of social relations and who produce art to realise their great talent (Barrett 1979); these views, in turn, assume that there is such a phenomenon as an individual, whose essential character pre-dates the formation of society.

The transcendent theory of art rests on questionable assumptions, as it bases itself on a blinkered formalism that fails to recognise the situated nature of art production. It also rests on idealism, which assumes that thought can be separated from material activity (Wolff 1981:51). Materialists have argued that aesthetics are a product of broader society, and that art does not have an essential nature that stands outside of social processes (Wolff 1981, Barrett 1979). In other words, and to paraphrase Karl Marx, artists make art, but not in conditions of their own making. Creativity is situated within the broader structural frameworks of art institutions, cultural and symbolic conventions, social relations and economic systems. The fact that art has assumed a commodity form in capitalist societies, for instance, or that access to the means of art production and distribution, is often spread unevenly across society, show that artists operate within, and not above, social structures. Repressive and exploitative societies are even more likely to evolve unevenly developed art institutions than more democratic, egalitarian ones. In repressive countries, artists can misuse arguments for the transcendent nature of art to avoid accountability for benefiting from abnormal social relations. Far from violating freedom of expression, boycotts can prepare the ground for more substantial freedom of expression to be enjoyed on a universal basis, and not just by those who wield power.

This critique of the transcendent view of art, and its misuse to justify the impossibility of free cultural exchange in unfree societies, should not deny the possibilities of agency within the social structure, though. Such arguments would lapse into determinism; that is, they will condemn artists to being mere products of a society's economic 'base', with no ability to develop their critical faculties outside of the social relations they have the fortune (or misfortune) to be born into. Art is not a mere 'reflection' of existing social relations; and if this is recognised, then the possible contributions of art to social change are likely to be complex, too. However, art may make the most positive contributions to social change during periods of rupture, when existing institutions and social relations are being unmade and reimagined afresh. In contrast, more controlled societies may offer little scope for imaginative ideas, including those expressed through art.

Yet, arguably, the very need to think afresh about societies and how they are organised, challenges socially conscious artists to be both historically aware and politically independent. They need to be historically aware in order to understand, as fully as possible, the challenges that a particular society faces; but they need to be independent to reimagine a new society without being encumbered by narrow party political loyalties. In fact, even if parties are emancipatory, at times, allegiances to parties may act as obstacles to creative thinking as they may require artists to adhere to a particular political line. Tendency literature or art, as it has come to be known, has a propagandistic intent (Wolff 1981:87), which risks diminishing the creative and even transformative potential of art. Such art is based on reflection theory, which requires art to declare its political commitment through its modes of expression (Barrett 1981:88-89). Art inspired by such theory risks adopting a reductive approach to aesthetics, where audiences judge its value according to how overt its political statements are. While artists and politicians may gain in the short term from art becoming subservient to politics, in time to come, both art and politics can be impoverished by such an approach, as it closes off spaces for exploring the richness of life, questioning existing modes of existence, and envisioning alternatives.

Joseph Stalin’s administration in the Soviet Union evolved one of the most extreme examples of tendency art, socialist realism: an art movement that depicted the ideal Communist society as part of its commitment to the system, and all while critical voices that were warning against Stalin’s excesses were being silenced, even killed. In spite of it having fallen into disrepute shortly after Stalin’s bloody term of office ended, many liberation movements inspired by the Soviet model persisted with socialist realism as their preferred aesthetic model, including sections of South Africa’s liberation movement.

Art and politics in South Africa’s liberation struggle

In apartheid South Africa, all the major liberation movements endorsed the cultural boycott as a strategy to isolate the apartheid regime, including those that identified with the Freedom Charter as a guiding document (such as the ANC in exile and the UDF internally), as well as those sympathetic to black consciousness (such as the Azanian Peoples’ Organisation, or Azapo), Pan-Africanism, communism and independent socialism. These political formations have been ascendant at different periods in history, with the ANC and PAC dominating the political landscape in the early years of apartheid, until their banning after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, and the black consciousness movement assuming prominence in the next decade. However, it was eclipsed in the 1980s by those supporting the Freedom Charter. These movements developed very different interpretations of the nature of apartheid and, consequently, the political tasks the liberation movement needed to undertake to defeat it.

However, these liberation tendencies did not agree on the relationship(s) of art to politics, and these disagreements shaped how they approached the cultural boycott. The first tendency claimed that the struggle in South Africa was against an apartheid system maintained by the Nationalist government in order to secure the privileges of a white minority. The Freedom Charter, adopted at the 'Congress of the People' meeting at Kliptown in 1955, was its founding document and the ANC, formed as far back as 1912, was the driving force behind the meeting. In 1983, at the launch of the UDF, the Congress tradition was claimed as the Front's political inspiration. For the 'Charterists', as they became known, the South African struggle was projected as a national democratic struggle, which must engage democratically-minded people, irrespective of class or 'race'.

However, a socialist stream did exist in the 'Charterist' movement, especially in unions that were affiliated to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu). The exiled South African Communist Party (SACP), a party that was aligned to the Soviet model of socialism, embodied this stream of politics. The ANC, SACP and Cosatu formed an alliance on the basis that the ANC would lead the first stage of the South African revolution, known as the 'National Democratic Revolution' (NDR), which would be first and foremost a struggle for national democracy, which would be established on a 'non-racial basis': that is, those social groups that the apartheid regime had defined, controversially, as distinct 'races', would form the South African nation (Anonymous 1988:10-12). This current of political thought was not South African born and bred, though. In the 1920s the Soviet bloc, through the Third Communist International (Comintern) developed the NDR as a national liberation programme for countries in the then colonies, and transmitted it to all communist parties around the world as a one-size-fits-all approach to struggle. They argued that these countries had not developed productive forces and working classes that were sizeable enough to win socialism immediately, and that the liberation movements must form alliances with the broadest range of forces across classes to win the NDR, and then move onto the second stage of the revolution, namely socialism. By that stage the Comintern had become a conveyer belt for Stalinist politics, with liberation programmes of communist parties around the world being set in Moscow, including the SACP's.

The PAC and AZAPO, like the ANC, were largely nationalist in character, although socialist tendencies have existed both inside and outside all these major movements. Nationalists from other tendencies, as well as socialists, criticised the Charterists' approach to struggle, albeit on different grounds; but a common thread of their criticisms was that a popular front may achieve only partial liberation (Motlhabi 1984, Leatt, Kneifel and Nurnberger 1986, Murray 1987). As a result, they established what they maintained was a United Front, in the form of the National Forum (NF), launched in the same year as the UDF. According to this tendency, racial oppression is historically inseparable from class oppression, and that it would not be possible to eradicate the one without eradicating the other (Alexander 1985). The responsibility of destroying the system and of building the new socialist nation devolved on the black working class because only they – as the largest and most oppressed group in South Africa – had the least to lose if the status quo were to change.

For the purposes of this paper, though, what needs to be noted is that political diversity has always been an essential element of the South African liberation movement; while some streams have dominated in particular periods in history, it would be a perversion of history to argue that at any stage, one stream constituted the sole and authentic representative of the oppressed.

However, in the early 1980s, the ANC enjoyed a popular resurgence as thousands of youths joined its armed wing in the wake of the 1976 uprising and subsequent repression. The UDF's emphasis on the broadest possible front of opposition to apartheid, paid political dividends, although its growth was constrained by two successive States of Emergency declared in 1985 and 1986. These emergency powers allowed the apartheid regime to ban organisations, prohibit meetings, detain people without trial for long periods, and ban media coverage of these measures on national security grounds. These measures made open organising extremely difficult. As the UDF expanded its influence, relations between these different streams became strained. In 1985, tensions between the UDF and Azapo spilled over into bloody violence, with members attacking and murdering members of opposing organisations (Murray 1987:294), and the emergency regulations made it difficult for both organisations to contain their own members. Cosatu also became split by these fights; in fact, the Cosatu affiliate, the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union (Ccawusa) becoming a battleground between UDF supporters who wanted to see the union adopt the Freedom Charter, and unionists who did not want to see the working class movement divided along ideological lines. Many of these unionists were branded 'counter-revolutionary', marginalised, and some were routed violently from the union movement. While these conflicts were manipulated by the apartheid state, in its report, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – set up to pursue restorative justice after apartheid – laid the blame for 'necklace killings' of Azapo members and political dissidents throughout the Eastern Cape at the door of the UDF (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998: 111). In other words, sectarianism was a less savory feature of Congress Alliance politics, which was accentuated by the Stalinist politics infused into the Congress movement through the SACP.

These competing political tendencies adopted very different approaches to art. The Charterist organisations favoured tendency art, especially socialist realism, although there was debate about its appropriateness. In fact, in 1990, as the transition to democracy picked up speed, ANC member Albie Sachs argued that ANC members should be banned from saying that culture is a weapon of the struggle, as this attitude had impoverished art. Instead, Sachs argued, the revolutionary duty of an artist is to 'write better poems and make better films and compose better music, and let us get the voluntary adherence of the people to our banner' (Sachs 1990:19-28). However, by that stage, reflection theory, and even socialist realism, had become firmly rooted in the Charterists' approach towards art, which led to this tendency expecting artists to align themselves to this political movement. This view was expressed at the Culture in Another South Africa (CASA) conference held in Amsterdam at the end of 1987, where a resolution was adopted stating that,

> …cultural activity and the arts are partisan and cannot be separated from politics. Consequently, a great responsibility devolves on artists and cultural workers to consciously align themselves with forces of democracy and national liberation in the life and death struggle to free our country from racist bondage. (Campschreur and Divendal 1989:215)

However, the relationship between artists deriving their inspiration from the ideologies more broadly aligned to the NF, and the political movement itself, was not nearly so simple. Playwright Maishe Maponya, who described himself as ‘an adherent of the Black Consciousness philosophy’,[2] stated in an interview in 1988 that he ‘…will not hold a flag for anybody, not even AZAPO’.[3] The head of AZAPO, Oupa Ngwenya, responded at the time: ‘We do not expect him to. All we can expect of artists is to recognise that they are members of the community before they are artists’.[4] Indeed, the ‘independent but situated’ position was favoured by many artists of Black Consciousness, Africanist and socialist sympathies. This relationship of artist and political movement could be traced back to the 1970s, when, according to poet Farouk Asvat, writers were at the forefront of liberation thinking (Sole 1988a:75). In fact, Black Consciousness was not just a political movement; it was also a cultural movement devoted to the self-emancipation of black people, by black people. As a result, many artists found their ideological home in the movement, although the movement did not attempt to control artists. In other words, while it recognised the need for artists to be conscious of the iniquity of apartheid, the movement did not subordinate art to politics.

A brief history of the cultural boycott in South Africa

Apartheid became official South African policy in 1948, and by the next decade, boycotts and sanctions had become an increasingly important tool to mobilise international solidarity against apartheid and to isolate the increasingly intransigent regime. In 1958, the ANC predicted at its conference that boycotts of various forms were going to become a major political weapon to bring about change. In 1960, the leaders of a ‘Boycott South African Goods’ campaign, launched the year before, transformed it into the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) and began to lobby for political support (Lodge 1989).

The reasons that the British actors union, Equity, gave for their ban on cultural exchange with South Africa from 1965 onwards were directed specifically at the cultural arena, in that they rejected the normalisation of apartheid in South African cultural institutions. The apartheid regime had gradually clamped down on mixed audiences and ‘multiracial’ productions through a series of proclamations and laws, resulting in the 1963 Publications and Entertainment Act. In 1965, a law enforced the segregation of ‘any place of entertainment’, and Equity responded with a boycott call. More playwrights in Europe and America also prevented their work from being produced in the country (Kavanagh 1985:57).

In 1968, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted resolution 2396, calling on '…all states and organisations to suspend cultural, educational, sporting and other exchanges with the racist regime and with other organisations or institutions in South Africa which practice apartheid' (Anonymous 1987:19). In the 1970s various cultural institutions, aided by the state, attempted to outmanoeuvre the boycott by presenting a veneer of racial integration. Soon, many black artists were touring South Africa, playing either to all-black audiences or in venues especially desegregated for the occasion (Kavanagh 1985:29). Alarmed by the influx of these musicians, AZAPO embarked on an 'Isolate South Africa campaign' in 1977 (the year of AZAPO's formation). The arrogant attitude of several stars touring the country had, in part, prompted AZAPO to act, as was the fact that local acts played 'second fiddle' to the overseas acts when they toured. Their efforts represented an attempt to ground the isolation campaign within the country, rather than having decisions being controlled by outside organisations, however well-meaning. AZAPO also recognised that the boycott was not purely a punitive tool; it could also be used to create space for a burgeoning local culture (Anonymous 1988b:32).

In 1980, the UN again passed a resolution calling for South Africa's isolation. In 1983, the UN Special Committee against Apartheid was formed and a register listing the names of artists who had performed in South Africa was compiled, and was updated regularly: this meant that the boycott was both individual and institutional. Attempts to implement the boycott and other sanctions were undermined by the Ronald Reagan conservative administration's policy of 'constructive engagement', which sought to promote ties with South Africa to promote an incremental approach to the resolution of the country's internal problems. The US Congress eventually replaced this policy with an Act that imposed sanctions against South Africa, which increased pressure on the regime. The ANC became particularly active in lobbying for a cultural boycott in the early 1980s, and other overseas pressure groups adopted a total boycott position. By 1983, both the UDF and AZAPO had begun to recognise the need for a selective cultural boycott, where progressive work was allowed in and out of the country, while work supportive of apartheid would fall foul of the boycott. Both organisations came to recognise that not doing so was self-defeating, as it prevented information about the real state of life under apartheid from reaching an international audience (AZAPO 1983:23).

However, implementing this new approach involved not only identifying which cultural work was progressive, but which culture was supportive of the state: a task that was fraught with difficulty, as it meant developing political tests for art. These tests could encourage tendency art that rejected the autonomy of the aesthetic by tying itself to the apron strings of political organisations, and offering crude, propagandistic representations of struggles for liberation. Artists could be tempted to produce art that was pleasing to political parties in order to have their work 'cleared' for exhibition outside South Africa, which in turn could impoverish art, and ultimately, politics too.

The impact of the UDF on South African cultural politics

The liberation movements had important intentions in embracing the selective boycott, namely to shift decision-making about its application out of the hands of overseas solidarity groups and into the hands of progressive groups inside the country. Yet, soon, different organisations began to squabble for control over who made the decisions, and how. The squabbling was most pronounced among the political organisations, as they had assumed a leading role in the boycott campaign from the start.

In order to see why these tensions emerged, it is necessary to understand the tensions that developed in the cultural arena more generally in the late 1980s. Kelwyn Sole traced ideological differences in the cultural arena back to 1981 when black writers – many of them with Black Consciousness sympathies – broke away from the non-racial PEN writer's organisation and formed the African Writers Association (AWA) (Sole 1988b). Then when the UDF became more ascendant, organisations such as the Medu Arts Centre in Botswana, consisting mainly of South African exiles were established, heralding a more Charterist-aligned initiative in culture. In 1986, the UDF established an interim committee to boost its work in culture; at that stage, the UDF had no cultural organisation affiliated to it. Then in 1987, at a National Working Committee meeting, a resolution was passed on the academic and cultural boycott, which suggested an internal discussion had taken place on the efficacy of a selective boycott (United Democratic Front 1987a). Once the resolution was passed, the UDF and Cosatu took upon themselves the task of taking decisions on who would be allowed access to the country, or not, and this work was co-ordinated by the UDF's cultural desk. This role was meant to be temporary, at least until cultural organisations were established for each discipline. The UDF set about forming cultural organisations, including the South African Musicians' Association (SAMA), which consisted of a nine-member executive, including stars like Johnny Clegg and Mara Louw. However, the organisation had no solid grassroots constituency to speak of, and most of its members were high-profile musicians (Gordon 1987:21). Weak grassroots membership was one of the factors that led to the collapse of SAMA in 1988.[5]

The UDF also encouraged the establishment of new organisations in theatre and in writing, and it was in relation to these areas that sectarianism became particularly apparent. The Congress of South African Writers (Cosaw) was formed in 1987, as was the Theatre Alliance, but by mid-1988 it still consisted of only a steering committee with no clear identity. Yet, established theatre groups and cultural centres that focussed on theatre already existed at the time, as did other writers' collectives; so it could not be argued that artists were not organised. However, the ideological complexion of these existing organisations did not appear to be to the UDF's liking. Benjy Francis, Director the Afrika Cultural Centre, claimed that they were never brought in on the initial formation of policy on the boycott: something that would have occurred had the process of consultation on the part of the UDF cultural desk been truly democratic.[6] The Centre claimed to be politically independent, although many in the UDF viewed it as being sympathetic to the Black Consciousness and Africanist movements. While it could be argued that organisations within the broad liberation movement were subjected to high levels of repression, and that proper consultation was an impossibility, there were opportunities for consultation within these constraints that were not optimised.

The UDF adopted a top-down, centralised approach to organising artists, and to consulting on the selective boycott, as opposed to allowing networks to emerge organically and then working with those. The network method of organising had strategic advantages over forming organisations, given the high levels of repression at the time. Organisations could be banned, whereas networks could survive, making them a more resilient method of organising artists. In fact, Francis argued that mobilising artists and community centres through networks allowed individuals and groups to retain a 'dignity of intent' as they are not obliged to compromise their own ideological programmes.[7] Thus, if consultations were to take place on who community groups would like to see visiting the country, groups and individuals of diverse ideological persuasion could be consulted: a difficult task in a cultural arena wracked by division. But largely this was not to be an organising strategy favoured by the UDF and the ANC in exile. When asked about the factors that determined this organisational behaviour, a member of the UDF cultural desk, who requested anonymity at the time, replied:

> You know, the situation in the cultural sphere is very different from what it was like in 1986. There was a time when musicians were so paralysed with fear – fear of being branded agitators – they couldn't even move, and so somebody had to do something. We couldn't say, OK, we'll wait for the cultural workers themselves to get organized because there was this fear that if I stand up and challenge the promoters, I might not be put on any bill...so we had to step in there.[8]

Yet artists who were not aligned to the UDF proposed other approaches to administering the selective boycott. For instance, poet Don Mattera, who had also been associated with the Black Consciousness and Africanist movements, argued that the boycott should be 'made accessible to popular consent' (Koch 1988:15), and doing so required it being administered by a non-aligned platform, such as an independent artists' equity.[9]

Maponya and another artist associated with the Africanist tradition, Matsemela Manaka, also argued that consulting with the UDF cultural desk and its structures was tantamount to 'asking for permission' to go overseas. Both were clearly affronted by the UDF and COSATU deciding on who should be allowed in and out of the country. However, they did not experience problems with taking productions overseas, as they had established networks through which their work travelled, which made 'asking for permission' a rather spurious exercise.[10] However, they and other artists not aligned to the UDF feared a situation emerging where artists who identified with the liberation movement, but who were not prepared to 'ask for permission', could have their passage blocked as the touring productions had not received clearance from the UDF cultural desk and associated organisations.

Sectarianism in action: the Culture in Another South Africa Festival

The UDF's approach to organising in the cultural arena broadly, and the cultural boycott specifically, were reaffirmed at the CASA festival held in Amsterdam in December 1987. The purpose of the festival was to bring artists, political organisations and solidarity movements together to develop a programme for the transformation of culture once apartheid was defeated. CASA was a joint ANC/Dutch AAM venture, mediated by the newly-created

CASA foundation. The festival absorbed much of the cultural desk's energy until they created the CASA committee and delegated the task of organising to them.[11]

After discussions in the various disciplinary streams, the plenary passed a series of resolutions, including a resolution reaffirming the need for a selective cultural boycott, and the need for '...South African artists...who seek to travel abroad to consult with the mass democratic movement and the national liberation movement' (Campschreur and Divendal 1989). At an ANC press conference held during the festival, an official reiterated the organisation's stand on the cultural boycott, namely that the boycott had been refined, not relaxed. The resolution on the boycott stated: 'No cultural exchange would be possible in future without approval from the mass national democratic structures within South Africa – namely the UDF and its affiliates' (*Weekly Mail* 1987-8:7).

However, these statements and resolutions, which suggested a homogeneity of opinion, did not reflect some of CASA's more controversial aspects, such as the fact that it left out artists who would not agree with the UDF and ANC's politics. According to a UDF cultural desk document at the time, 'The UDF cultural desk accepted the responsibility for co-ordinating the SA participation in this festival. This provided the opportunity to...organize cultural workers under the auspices of the UDF, since only those with UDF sanction will participate' (United Democratic Front 1987b).

When Maponya attended a UN seminar on the cultural boycott in Athens ten months later, he was told by one of the CASA foundation organisers, who also participated, that he had received a telegram from the organisers inside the country informing him of their decision not to invite both Maponya and another playwright to CASA. It was felt that they both might 'cause trouble' at the festival.[12] Also, according to a media report at the time, one of the Dutch organisers had said that the festival '...excluded groups...like Inkatha and Black Consciousness artists...' (*Weekly Mail* 1987), equating the former organisation, an apartheid front, with the latter, a legitimate part of the liberation movement.

The CASA festival showed that the Charterists were prepared to practice censorship in order to secure a homogenous position. Other problems also surfaced at the festival. Filmmaker Angus Gibson found that the ANC delegates did not know much about the intricacies of filmmaking; in fact they viewed fiction-filmmaking as a 'right-wing' activity. Rather, they endorsed community-based documentary as the only 'acceptable' form of filmmaking, underlining the fact that they subscribed to tendency art.[13]

The CASA resolution on structures was also telling, as it stated that the national democratic movement was delegating the task of co-ordinating the formation and consolidation of local, regional and national structures; the artists who attended the festival had a special role to play in this regard (Campschreur and Divendal 1989: 214-24). Through this resolution, CASA consolidated organisational initiatives that – because of the nature of the brief that underscored the festival – could only be understood as UDF initiatives.

Consultation and the Salman Rushdie affair

It was perhaps inevitable that this shoehorning of progressive culture into the same political mould would lead to consultations, and ultimately decisions, that would reinforce the hegemony of the UDF. This is precisely what happened with the invitation of Salmon Rushdie to South Africa. COSAW and (to a lesser extent) the UDF cultural desk facilitated his visit. After the 1987 *Weekly Mail* Book Week in Cape Town (the *Weekly Mail* newspaper was a forerunner of the still-existing *Mail&Guardian*), the organisers decided to invite an overseas writer. Salmon Rushdie was chosen.[14]

The Book Week organisers then approached the UDF cultural desk in order to ‘get permission’ for the writer to enter the country. COSAW – which was delegated the task of facilitating Rushdie’s visit to the country – then approached the AAM to obtain permission for him to visit the country, which involved them in two months of negotiation. When asked what process of consultation took place with other organisations in the broad liberation movement in order to sanction his visit, the COSAW spokesman replied:

> One must go back to the CASA festival in Amsterdam 1987 last year. One of the resolutions was that organisations should urge artists to form their own structures – writers and musicians and so on – and COSAW had constituted itself nationally. So we had mobilised progressive writers in our ranks and as such, it was not necessary to consult with any other organisation because we were given our mandate, or the task from CASA and from our membership that we the executive would approve or disapprove who would come into the country. It was certainly discussed at our executive levels, but we couldn’t have mass rallies of our membership for obvious reasons, and our executive was mandated by our members to take such decisions.[15]

It was only after this process of consultation was complete that the *Weekly Mail* officially announced Rushdie's invitation. However, his newly published novel, *The Satanic Verses*, became hugely controversial. About three weeks before he was due to arrive, the *Weekly Mail* and COSAW heard that a world-wide 'fatwa' had been declared against Rushdie, because his book was considered blasphemous to Islam. After numerous meetings with Muslim organisations, death threats against some of the organisers and a bomb scare at the *Weekly Mail*, COSAW decided that they could not guarantee Rushdie's safety and advised the *Weekly Mail* accordingly. Rushdie was subsequently disinvited.

The process of consultation that took place in order to facilitate his visit to the country showed just how sectarian decision-making had become. The COSAW executive was mandated by CASA and its membership to make decisions about which artists would be allowed into South Africa. Although the power to make such decisions was vested in the COSAW executive through discussion at CASA, the festival itself was not representative of South African progressive culture. The structures of decision-making were self-referential: in other words they referred only to events that occurred on the UDF cultural desk – CASA, 'non-aligned' organisations axis. COSAW did not, for instance, consult with the African Writers' Association (AWA) – the other writer's body constituted nationally since 1981 – about inviting Rushdie since it was not in the logic of the decision-making process to do so. For Es'kia Mphahlele, a writer that had long been associated with the Africanist tradition:

> The cultural boycott has been moving at cross-purposes for some time. We here [in South Africa] haven't even made a statement of our position as a united force, we haven't. We keep on and when we meet we say, you know, we really should get together and make a statement that we can send to the outside world, to let the lobbies and the political movements in exile know exactly what is happening here.[16]

Clearly, at that stage, and through Mphahlele's eyes, the process of evolving a common national position had not even begun.

'They cannot live our cultural history for us':[17] the cultural boycott and the overseas anti-apartheid movement

The UDF resolution passed at the 1987 National Working Committee stated that a tour would not be affected if it was ' ...approved by overseas solidarity groups' (United Democratic Front 1987a). At times, these solidarity groups conducted themselves in highly problematic ways, arrogating to themselves the right to decide which organisations were sole and authentic representatives of the oppressed inside South Africa. By that stage, the most significant organisations mobilising against apartheid from outside South Africa included exiled South African groups like the ANC, PAC and the Black Consciousness Movement of Azania, as well as overseas pressure groups like Artists united against Apartheid and the UN Special Committee against Apartheid.

By 1986, the ANC was campaigning overseas for it to be accorded status as decision-maker about artists' comings and goings from South Africa; in the ANC's pronouncements at that stage, there was no mention of it being controlled from inside the country, or ensuring consultation with other exiled organisations. It was only in 1987 that the efficacy of a blanket boycott came under scrutiny. The incident that really seemed to precipitate a policy change was the controversy surrounding Paul Simon's 'Gracelands' tour, and the ANC's failed attempts to have the tour stopped: in fact when they called for a picket of the Royal Albert Hall – where Simon was due to play – they were ignored. Soon after, in his Canon Collins Memorial Lecture, ANC president Oliver Tambo announced that the ANC recognised an emerging peoples' culture and that this culture should not be boycotted (Tambo 1987). By July, the UDF cultural desk had been launched, together with progressive cultural organisations inside the country. By that stage, the ANC was able to defer some of the responsibility of administering the boycott onto these structures. It was clear that, like the UDF internally, the ANC in exile decided to 'act alone' on the crystallisation of policy on the selective boycott, not including the PAC and the BCMA in its deliberations.

The Anti-apartheid Movement (AAM) proved to be extremely stubborn in its insistence on a total boycott. When 'Bijers Sunbird', a play by South African playwright Robert Kirby, was picketed by the AAM, national AAM secretary Mike Terry stated that they recognised that certain plays were 'genuinely anti-apartheid', but were not in a position to run a boycott campaign that allowed exceptions through (Perlman 1987:23). At that stage, the AAM was still smarting over another South African play, 'Saturday Night at the Palace', which had run in London for some time, and which they discovered later had been sponsored by a notorious 'boycott-buster', the South African national airline carrier, South African Airways. Even after the announcements made by Tambo, as well as announcements made by the ANC and the CASA festival, the AAM proceeded to ignore messages from progressive organisations inside the country to let South African band Savuka and five other bands perform at the Mandela 70 Birthday concert held in London in mid-1988 (Bauer 1988:10-11; *New Nation* 1987:12).

In spite of this arrogance, when consultations did take place, the AAM, particularly the British AAM, became known for favouring the ANC. At a convention on sanctions held by the British AAM in June 1987, the ANC, UDF and COSATU were portrayed as the sole representatives of the liberation movement both inside and outside South Africa. In a November 1988 Meeting, the AAM resolved to accord the ANC sole representative status (in exile) of the South African liberation movement, confirming officially what was unofficially the case for quite some time (*Sowetan* 1988). Yet there was internal dissent within the British AAM about its sectarian approach to the South African liberation movement. A section of the AAM called the City-group began to distance itself from the main AAM in 1985, and provided platforms for the exiled PAC and, from inside the country, AZAPO (*Work in Progress* 1985). William Cobbett, commenting on the conduct of the AAM at the time, argued:

> As support organisations, solidarity movements derive their legitimacy from other organisations. They cannot become autonomous bodies deciding strategy and tactics independently... lf the AAM is a solidarity movement for all South Africans fighting apartheid, then their support must be carried out on a completely non-partisan manner, offering concrete help to all strands of the progressive organisations within the country. (Cobbett 1987:10)

However, on the whole, the AAM did not heed this warning. As a result, the British AAM become notorious inside South Africa for their insistence on cultural groups consulting with the ANC before their work could be seen in Britain. When the Afrika Cultural Centre's Benjy Francis toured the production 'Burning Embers' with the Azanian National Theatre in 1986, the problem of consultation cropped up. In Edinburgh, members of the cast decided to distribute pamphlets advertising the production at an anti-apartheid rock concert being held one night by a group known as the Red Wedge. According to Francis, the group was associated with both the Labour Party and the AAM, and the rock concert – which included ANC speakers – was hosted by the AAM. The marshals at the concert, who were members of the AAM, told the members of the cast that no pamphlets could be distributed until they had been cleared by 'head office'. Francis was not sure whether 'head office' referred to the ANC or the AAM executive, but the members of the cast told him that at some stage in the argument that ensued, they had been asked whether their production 'had ANC approval'.[18]

Although at no stage during the three-and-a-half month tour did the AAM actually picket 'Burning Embers', the production continually experienced problems with Labour Party-run councils in various towns and cities, which would not let them perform at venues that had not been 'cleared' by the AAM. In these instances, AAM officials were directly involved. Francis reported veiled threats against his theatre group: venues would not be supplied and the tour would even be stopped. He described the play as 'strongly anti-apartheid', and even challenged the AAM to a television debate if they had problems with the content of the play (which they still declined to see). Francis characterised the treatment that he and his troupe received from the AAM as 'an affront to the fact of our struggle', and he considered them 'petty and ill-informed'. Staging his production for working class audiences in makeshift venues in keeping with the group's socialist principles, they avoided the bigger, more commercial theatres.[19]

Yet, Market Theatre[20] productions being staged at the Edinburgh Festival at the time, were allowed to run without incident. In an interview, the Theatre's co-founder, Barney Simon, stated that on sending productions overseas, he always asked the UDF Cultural Desk for approval.[21] However, Francis did not feel that his problems with the AAM issued from the ANC: he attributed them rather, to the myopic vision of the AAM itself.[22]

A welcome attempt to address confusion and sectarianism in the administration of the boycott occurred at the end of September 1988, when the UN Special Committee against Apartheid hosted a seminar on the issue in Athens. According to the New York Anti-apartheid Movement, the seminar was an attempt to place initiatives for the cultural boycott in the hands of artists, instead of ideologues. South African participants included authors Njabulo Ndebele, Hein Willemse and Nadine Gordimer for COSAW, Maponya and Manaka and exiled poets Mongane Wally Serote and Dennis Brutus, as well as Johnny Clegg. The conference resolved to endorse a selective boycott after an appeal was drafted by delegates, stating: '...We recognise that certain cultural contacts undermine apartheid and that, in consultation with the national liberation movements in South Africa, these should be supported' (United Nations 1988). The conference also resolved to set up a committee which would be under the auspices of the United Nations, but would not include people attached to the UN or the non-governmental organisations who sent observers – such as the AAM

(*Weekly Mail* 1988). The conference also resolved to approach artists who were planning to travel to South Africa to inform them of the existence of the register (or the 'blacklist' as it was called). The resolution that was adopted echoed the resolutions passed by the UDF National Working Committee and the CASA conference. In spite of the original stated aim of the seminar – to place the management of the boycott in the hands of artists, not ideologues – the ideologues had, in fact, re-entered through the back door.

Conclusion: the past in the present

There are disagreements about whether sanctions work as tools for social change; on the one hand, Thompson and Beinart found that sanctions exacerbated an already-dire economic situation in South Africa, hastening negotiations (Thompson 2001:241-2; Beinart 2001: 260-75), while on the other, Levy found that sanctions had limited effects, and the demise of apartheid could be attributed to other factors, such as the collapse of Communism, which meant that the apartheid regime could conceive of a negotiated settlement with the ANC. However, even sceptics admit that the psychological effects of sanctions on recalcitrant regimes cannot be denied, as they signal that a country is isolated from the international community (Levy 1999:11). Cultural boycotts are particularly effective in this regard as they intensify feelings of isolation from major international cultural trends. The cultural boycott was part of an arsenal of weapons that drove home the message that apartheid policies were abhorrent and constituted crimes against humanity. However, there were fundamental problems with how the boycott was implemented, which became especially apparent when its implementers inside and outside the country changed from a blanket boycott to a selective boycott. More fundamentally, the boycott exposed one of the most serious faultlines in liberation politics: the unwillingness of the major actors to seek unity of the oppressed. Even if complete political unity was an impossibility, programmatic unity on specific issues was possible. In the case of the cultural boycott, this was certainly possible, as all streams of the liberation movement agreed on its necessity, and further agreed on the need to shift from a blanket to selective boycott. However, one current in the movement, the Charterist current, arrogated to itself the title of sole and authentic representative of the oppressed and, buoyed by powerful and likeminded international organisations, saw no need to build a bottom-up front that embraced political or cultural diversity. Sectarianism remained a clear and present danger to unity right up until South Africa's transition to democracy. The Charterists also clung to a highly problematic understanding of the role of art in the struggle, as being an appendage to political struggle, rather than as being an independent but broadly sympathetic sphere of activity, that could play an important role in its own right in contributing to social change. Artists continued to play second fiddle to political organisations, even when those very organisations claimed they wished to defer to artists' organisations. In reality, they would only accept deferring to organisations that were of their own creation, and that consequently knew their place in the NDR.

In view of these flaws, it is ironic that the Palestinian BDS movement has derived such inspiration from South Africa. It does not help if solidarity movements internationally adopt an uncritical approach to struggles against oppression and exploitation. Many of these struggles are highly complex and rarely clear-cut, although these complexities do not detract from their overall legitimacy or the justness of their causes. In South Africa's case, uncritical international solidarity led to a transition that remains unsatisfactory in many respects: to this extent, the country's present remains very much defined by its past. More could have been won. While South Africa has achieved formal democracy, it remains one of the most unequal countries in the world. Unemployment remains stubbornly high, and is structural in nature. These problems threaten to reverse some of the country's considerable democratic gains, especially for the country's poorest and most marginalised inhabitants. While South Africa's democratic centre still remains largely intact, state authoritarianism, even repression, has become a disturbing feature of the socio-political landscape. Official attempts to censor artists and journalists have intensified. For instance, the Film and Publications Board – a government entity falling under the Department of Home Affairs – has attempted to censor several films and artworks, although thankfully, the Board has an excellent appeal structure that has overturned some of the Board's more problematic decisions. As far back as the 1980s, and even the 1970s, many warned about the dangers inherent in the political trajectory the liberation movement was taking. Some who did were routed from their organisations, attacked, and even killed.

However, given South Africa's mounting social problems, and especially in the wake of the terrible massacre of mineworkers in Marikana in 2012, it has become increasingly apparent that society needs to be reimagined afresh. Already, there are clear signs that consciousness is shifting away from the ruling hegemonic bloc. Once again, artists can play an important emancipatory role in tracing these shifts in consciousness and envisioning alternatives, but only if they claim their intellectual independence to do so. Political movements that do not recognise the importance of such independence, must have their emancipatory credentials questioned.

Notes

1. This article draws on unpublished research I undertook in 1988, at the time of the shift from the blanket to the selective cultural boycott in South Africa. It examined contending ideologies in the development and administration of the selective cultural boycott in South Africa, and included interviews with many political and cultural organisations at the time, as well as artists. I also worked in the community art centre movement at the time, and so was familiar with the key tendencies and debates in cultural politics. Down the years, and especially since the establishment of the Palestinian BDS campaign, I have been asked to make the research available so that the South African experience can be examined and the necessary lessons learnt. This article is a response to these requests.
2. Interview with Maishe Maponya, April 15, 1988.
3. Interview with Maishe Maponya, April 15, 1988.
4. Interview with Oupa Ngwenya, May 2, 1988.
5. Interview with Lloyd Ross, July 21, 1988.
6. Interview with Benjy Francis, August 8, 1988.
7. Interview with Benjy Francis, August 8, 1988.
8. Interview with UDF Cultural Desk member who requested anonymity, July 23, 1988.
9. Interview with Maishe Maponya, April 15, 1988.
10. Interview with Maishe Maponya, April 15, 1988; interview with Matsemela Manaka, April 28, 1988.
11. Interview with UDF Cultural Desk member who requested anonymity, July 23, 1988.
12. Interview with Maishe Maponya, April 15, 1988.
13. Interview with Angus Gibson, July 21, 1988.
14. Interview with Gail Behrmann, December 1988.
15. Interview with COSAW spokesperson who requested anonymity.
16. Interview with Es’kia Mphahlele, June 4, 1988.
17. Interview with Benjy Francis, August 8, 1988.
18. Interview with Benjy Francis, August 8, 1988.
19. Interview with Benjy Francis, August 8, 1988.

20. The Market Theatre is a theatre based in Newtown, Johannesburg, which developed a reputation for giving platforms to anti-apartheid plays.
21. Interview with Barney Simon, August 10, 1988.
22. Interview with Benjy Francis, August 8, 1988.

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