



## The starvation of young black minds

For 10 days in the spring of 1989 a prominent American publisher and a distinguished member of the American library community visited the Republic of South Africa. Their mission was to survey the availability of US books and other educational materials and to learn, at first hand, how South African writers, librarians, educators and anti-apartheid activists feel about books and educational materials being included in the cultural boycott against South Africa undertaken by certain individuals and organisations in the United States.

The mission was composed of Lisa Drew, vice-president and senior editor of William Morrow & Co, and Robert Wedgeworth, dean of the School of Library Service at Columbia University. During the course of their visit they talked with more than 75 individuals, black and white, and visited numerous schools, libraries, universities and private charitable organisations, gathering facts and opinions regarding the boycott. During an informal debriefing shortly after their

A report of a US fact-finding mission to South Africa last year to determine the effects of book boycotts on that country

return, Dean Wedgeworth told the sponsoring organisations that by embargoing the sale of US books to South Africa, Americans were unwittingly abetting the South African government in its "systematic starvation of young black minds".

The mission was carried out under the auspices of the International Freedom to Publish Committee of the Association of American Publishers (AAP) and the Fund for Free Expression. It was supported by the Freedom to Read Committee of AAP.

The International Freedom to Publish Committee of the AAP is the only group

The above report was published by the Association of American Publishers and the Fund for Free Expression.

formed by a major publishers' organisation anywhere in the world for the specific purpose of defending and broadening the freedom of written communication internationally. The committee monitors human rights issues and provides moral support and practical assistance to publishers and authors outside the US who are denied basic freedoms. The International Freedom to Publish Committee carries on its work in close co-operation with other human rights groups, including Human Rights Watch and PEN International.

The Fund for Free Expression was established in 1975 by a group of publishers, authors, lawyers, journalists and concerned citizens to promote freedom of expression throughout the world, as guaranteed by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Fund supports anti-censorship efforts around the world. The Fund for Free Expression is an arm of Human Rights Watch.

The Freedom to Read Committee is the AAP's First Amendment advocacy group:

working to promote and strengthen First Amendment rights, the committee plays a major educational role through its reports and public programmes. The Freedom to Read Committee has participated, as plaintiff and as a friend-of-the-court, in several landmark First Amendment cases and works with other organisations to promote the cause of intellectual freedom.

The following is the formal report of the mission and its recommendations, which have been strongly endorsed by the sponsoring organisations.

## Background

Prior to 1984, container shipping and the existence of a few subsidiaries of US publishing companies in South Africa made it possible for US books in quantity to be competitive in the South African market. After the US enacted the 1986 Anti-Apartheid Act imposing economic sanctions on South Africa, certain educational and cultural organisations—thinking that the sanctions did not go far enough—promoted a cultural boycott as well. A few corporations whose principal products could not be sold in South Africa due to the economic sanctions also happened to have publishing interests.

A number of local school boards, libraries and city councils around the US threatened these companies, and independent publishers and booksellers as well, with a boycott of their products if they did any business with South Africa. Some were asked to sign pledges to this effect. The immediate result was that those with South African companies sold them to local buyers at bargain prices. Other publishers, without publicising the action, have stopped shipping books to South Africa.

Such restrictions on the free exchange and dissemination of information are contrary to the traditions of publishing, education and culture in the US, and specific amendments have been proposed for the 1989 Anti-Apartheid Act making it clear that it excludes books, educational materials and medical supplies.

## The mission

The goal of the groups sponsoring the survey was to ascertain the effect of the boycott on South Africans—especially representatives of the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) who are not banned by the South African government. Although we heard a great deal about it, our mission was *not* to determine how divestment was affecting the South African government or whether it was a good strategy.

We visited and/or spoke at length to more than 75 representatives of various organisations and institutions. Although

they had various reactions to the cultural boycott in general, *not one supported the inclusion of books and educational materials*. Among the organisations and institutions represented in our discussions were:

### Universities:

University of Witwatersrand (WITS)  
University of Cape Town (UCT)  
University of the Western Cape (UWC)  
University of South Africa (UNISA)  
University of the North

### Schools:

The Open School, Johannesburg  
Funda Center, Soweto  
St Barnabas, suburban Johannesburg  
Sea Point, Cape Town

### Private educational organisations:

Sached Trust, Johannesburg  
Read, Johannesburg

### National Libraries:

The State Library, Pretoria  
The South African Library, Cape Town

### City Library:

Cape Town

### Provincial Library:

Pretoria

### Black townships:

Athlone  
Mamelodi  
Soweto

### Bookstores:

Central Johannesburg Shopping Centre  
Juta, Cape Town  
Eve Jammy, Johannesburg

### Book Distributor:

Exclusive Books

### Publishers:

David Philip  
Tafelberg, Daniel van Niekirk  
*Cosmopolitan* and *Femina*, Jane Raphaely  
*South African Report*, Raymond Louw

*Numerous writers:* including Nadine Gordimer, Jonathan Paton, Ahmed Essop, Chris van Wyck and Alastair Sparks.

We acknowledge the assistance and counsel of Selma and Jules Browde, Johannesburg; Mary Burton, the Human Rights Monitor in South Africa, Cape Town; and the USIS in Pretoria, for making it possible to meet so many people in such a short time.

In the preceding list are a number of institutions which are heavily funded by the South African government. One would

normally assume, therefore, that they would support apartheid. However, it is surprising to see the extent to which government-supported libraries and universities are continually and actively engaged in challenging the system.

## The universities

There are 20 universities in the country, all of which are theoretically open to all races. A few remain almost totally white due to restrictive admissions policies. Several others are almost totally black (as used here, "black students" includes those of Asian or mixed-race backgrounds) due to their location in the so-called black homelands or as a result of their original designation as ethnic universities. This latter restriction is no longer enforced. Nevertheless, the University of the North, which was established to serve the Sotho, Tsonga and Venda populations, has attracted only a few white or Indian students out of a student body of 7,000. The University of the Western Cape, which was established to serve the coloured population, has about 60 whites in a student body of 12,000.

Most of the formerly all-white universities have steadily increased their black enrolments. WITS and UCT now have black enrolments of over 20 per cent. The Law School at WITS is 37 per cent black and the Medical School is over 40 per cent. The largest university in South Africa, UNISA, a correspondence school, is almost 50 per cent black. In each of these instances black African students comprise the largest component of the black enrolment.

## Progressive elements

Beyond efforts to diversify enrolments, several of the universities have been quite vocal in their attempts to represent a progressive element in South African society. They have issued policy statements on the importance of political rights and human rights for all of South Africa's people, and they have successfully defended themselves from interference in their internal policies by the government in an unprecedented case decided by the Supreme Court.

While these universities are demonstrably more progressive than others, the assumption that their source of funding determines their policies, as it does in the US, is incorrect.

With the exception of the determinedly all-white towns like Pretoria, the city public libraries are open to all races. Employment of black personnel above the clerical level is not common. The availability of qualified personnel is most frequently cited as the barrier to the

employment of more black librarians. The lack of evidence of any significant effort to change this, either by the employing institutions or the professional society, is some indication that it is not perceived to be a major problem. Yet the majority of users we observed in public libraries were black students using out-of-date textbooks, while the staffing and collections are oriented toward a group of more sophisticated users barely in evidence.

The schools we visited were private and charitable efforts to supplement what the government of South Africa provides for black students. We were told that the public schools situation is characterised by substandard instruction, inferior texts where available, frequent student strikes to protest against school conditions, and major distractions resulting from student involvement in the Mass Democratic Movement in black communities.

Students reported that their lives are systematically disrupted by police efforts to combat racial unrest among blacks. They are also routinely and randomly detained and questioned about the MDM for indefinite periods. There is great concern that this generation of black students is missing the opportunity to prepare for leadership responsibilities.

**'Many publishers, librarians and educators are increasingly uncomfortable with the irony of the US role in helping the government of the Republic of South Africa to isolate its population by stemming the free flow of information and ideas from the US.'**

For the most talented black students a few private schools are the only alternatives at the elementary and secondary level. For others, several private educational and cultural organisations attempt to combat illiteracy, train teachers and provide materials to students and teachers. The work of all of these organisations, schools, libraries and universities is vitally affected by the cultural boycott.

Non-fiction books and other educational materials from the US are generally unavailable to South Africans in schools, libraries or bookstores. Orders

sent to US publishers and booksellers are returned routinely with notices that the firm does not do business in South Africa. Some of the more obvious effects are:

- ① Those books that manage to make their way to South Africa via third parties are expensive and very slow to arrive.
- ② In certain fields, universities must use inferior texts as alternatives to US books.
- ③ South African university students are cut off from vital sources of information and access to postgraduate research in the US by private firms and by some libraries, including the Library of Congress, who simply do not respond.
- ④ There has been a dramatic increase in photocopying and a decrease in efforts to combat it, since a text now costing \$50 to \$60 can be made affordable by sharing the cost through selling photocopies.
- ⑤ An even poorer education is being provided for those who need it most. The emphasis of the majority of blacks is now on education. With the government spending five times more on education for whites than blacks, the book boycott weakens the meagre alternative resources for blacks.
- ⑥ American books of general interest in South Africa—civil rights movement, ethnic children's and young adult litera-

ture, books of Jewish interest and non-racial, non-geographical picture books for children—are in short supply.

⑦ An indirect effect is a more insular South African white population which is not exposed to the realities of the world. For these and other similar reasons, *all of the persons with whom we spoke, even those who support economic sanctions and the general cultural boycott as it affects athletic contests and rock concerts, oppose the boycott on books.* Some US books (mostly fiction and politics), find their way to South Africa in British editions and they are popular despite their expense. They carry the banner of American culture, but the bulk of exposure is represented by movies and television. (The most popular TV show in the black township of Soweto is "Dallas", while in the white Orange Free State it is "The Cosby Show".)

Many publishers, librarians and educators are increasingly uncomfortable with the irony of the US role in helping the government of the Republic of South Africa to isolate its population by stemming the free flow of information and ideas from the US.

However, it also seems clear that removing books from the cultural boycott might appear a self-serving action on the

part of the US publishing industry. Whatever action is proposed by the publishing industry and supported by library and educational interests should be directed toward expressing a commitment to the free flow of information and support for individuals and organisations working to build a non-racial society in South Africa.

## Recommendations

- 1 That the Association of American Publishers urge its members and other publishers to discontinue the boycott of books and other educational materials to South Africa.
- 2 That the AAP request the support of the American Library Association, African Studies Association and other relevant educational and cultural organisations for this action. The basic tenets of these organisations support this position, it is consistent with US economic sanctions, and it is supported by the African National Congress in its most recent policy statement on the cultural boycott issued in Lusaka, May 1989. Paragraph 2.6 of that policy statement reads as follows:

The suppression and circumscription of the inflow of information, cultural products and artefacts from outside South Africa is an important weapon in the arsenal of the

oppressor regime, which it wields to consolidate its power vis-à-vis the oppressed and exploited majority. The NLM and the MDM support the inflow of progressive cultural products, artefacts and ideas into our country so that these become readily accessible to the widest sections of our people. We support and encourage the dissemination of all cultural products, artefacts and ideas that enhance the struggle for democracy and promote democratic human values as opposed to the oppressive, retrograde values and misanthropic ideals. This applies to books, newspapers, magazines, video, film and sound recordings manufactured and produced outside of South Africa.

- 3 That the AAP encourage its members to donate books to designated schools, libraries and charitable organisations active in the struggle for a progressive, non-racial society in South Africa.
- 4 That the AAP encourage those US corporations that have divested their South African holdings to continue some of their charitable contributions to worthy and progressive recipients.

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