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Lum/062/0010/03

SOUTHERN



EDITORIAL

May 1988/
No. 8

Forward with the Cultural Boycott

The Cultural Boycott of South Africa is 10 years old this year. The decision to institute the Cultural Boycott was in itself a tremendous achievement on the part of those who first advocated this important programme towards the complete isolation of *apartheid* South Africa in all aspects of cultural life. As such, the Cultural Boycott programme might one day be viewed as having been an important complement to the overall struggle for National Liberation in South Africa. More immediately, it has helped to highlight the nature of *apartheid* to the international community, particularly in such a sector of social life which some people would conveniently wish to regard as quite apart from the world of politics and struggle.

Initially, the Cultural Boycott campaign was in general greeted with some degree of disdain in many quarters; and even those who supported it were quite skeptical about its prospects for success. Thanks to the *United Nations Centre Against Apartheid* (and its *Special Committee Against Apartheid*) in particular, not to mention the general intensification of the Struggle in Southern Africa ever since the 1970's, many a cultural worker, artist and sportsperson has since learnt of the hazards of playing with *apartheid*.

This issue of *SAPEM* deals mainly with cultural workers and artists in the music field. But there have been greater successes in the field of sports in which the *Special Committee Against Apartheid* has done an outstanding job of monitoring sports contacts with South Africa; and has established a consolidated list of sportsmen and sportswomen who have participated in sports events in South Africa in the period 1 September 1980 to 31 December 1987. The Committee's report of 14 April 1988 is evidence that the international campaign against *apartheid* sport continues to make progress; and that action by Governments, sports organizations, local authorities, anti-*apartheid* groups and individuals has helped to abort many sports exchanges with South Africa. Indeed many more sportsmen and women are now pledging that they will not compete in South Africa until *apartheid* has been eradicated.

Thus, even though it spends approximately US\$100 million annually to promote international sports exchanges and subsidizes sports organizations which endorse *apartheid* policies, South Africa now finds itself able to attract

only mediocre and second rate sportsmen and women. (According to the *Report on the Special Committee Against Apartheid*, South African commercial houses which sponsor any event involving overseas participants are refunded 90 per cent of their gross outlay through tax rebates. "Thus, South Africa devotes large sums of money to attract overseas players".)

The Cultural Boycott of South Africa has been largely successful in the field of sports. But the same cannot be said about the field of music, theatre and academia. This is the subject of the main feature article in this issue. Sefako Nyaka laments the "confusion, controversy and at times bitter alienation" that the Cultural Boycott issue has caused among Black South Africans themselves. This is a situation further exacerbated by the divisions in South Africa; and, if we might also observe with regard to this subject of Cultural Boycott, by the occasional show of vacillation, equivocation and ambivalence on the part of the National Liberation Movement. (The *Graceland Tour* *refers*; and Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela should be advised henceforth to desist from any words and deeds that appear disdainful of the noble objectives of the Cultural Boycott; and member states of the O.A.U. and the Frontline should be more careful and thorough in their adherence to the Cultural Boycott of South Africa.)

As the main feature article concludes, it is imperative that progressive and democratic movements inside and outside South Africa decide on the rules and mechanisms of a monitoring system for the Cultural Boycott. Indeed, the system should be flexible and re-emphasize the point that the Boycott is intended to be more of a tool of liberation and less a mode of censorship. But we should not allow the mercenaries among us to confuse the issue any more than they have already done. For, the criteria should otherwise be quite clear: surely we are politically mature enough to distinguish between on the one hand the opponents of the South African State and who should therefore be given all assistance possible in their cultural endeavours; and, on the other, the regime and its supporters all of whom should be isolated effectively. With greater vigilance and a measure of political dexterity, we can all help to develop the Cultural Boycott into a more formidable political weapon in the Struggle against *apartheid*.

MAIN FEATURE



The Cultural Boycott

Sefako Nyaka

The cultural boycott of South Africa is 10 years old this year. And there is no doubt that it has been 10 years of confusion, controversy and at times bitter alienation.

Whereas in 1978 most people who pushed for the boycott were agreed that it is and can be used as a tool of liberation, some people now see it as a tool of censorship.

The divisions in South Africa have also served to further confuse issues. Instead of being taken step by step through the stages of the boycott, artists were more often than not whipped into line. Very few cultural workers understand the dynamics of the boycott. And sadly enough, organisations in the country have not provided the much-needed cultural education programmes cultural workers so dearly need. Instead some organisations were actively involved in encouraging artists to violate the boycott in order to win over the said artists into their camps. At times cultural workers based firmly within the mass democratic movement have been hyper critical of cultural workers who have yet taken up a similar committed stance.

The flexible techniques used in organising communities and factories were often ignored when dealing with cultural workers. Instead, one finds arguments based on barren moral moralism and personal accusations.

This does not mean that some South African cultural workers are not in need of serious political education. But it should be recognised that cultural workers have different levels of

political understanding and trying to push some of them to be on par with intellectuals is a good recipe for fierce resistance and alienation.

The vagueness of the boycott was also another point of contention for artists. In its purest form the boycott means severing all cultural contact with South African society. This means no South African cultural worker will be allowed to participate in any event outside the borders of the country. No South African music or other works of art shall be made available in any country outside the borders of the apartheid country. This type of approach infuriated even those cultural workers who are firmly based within the mass democratic movement. They argued that the boycott was stifling the development of the emerging culture. The boycott does not appreciate the emergence of a vibrant people's culture rooted in South African realities and steeped in democratic values. This culture is in opposition to the racist culture associated with the apartheid regime. This culture is characterised by a spirit of internationalism and a humanist perspective that derives from the best of the cultural heritage of the various peoples that make up the South African population, according to a resolution of the Culture in Another South Africa conference held in the Netherlands last year.

The culture that is emerging from South Africa expresses the social and political aspirations encompassing the artistic, intellectual and material aspects of culture in South African society.

A blanket ban on any contact with cultural workers from South Africa will stifle the development of

this culture. It is necessary for cultural workers from South Africa to interact with their counterparts in Africa and elsewhere. Cultural exchange must be encouraged and developed so as to enrich South African society and to forge and cement links with the international community.

There are those who argue: Why equip people with knowledge that will only serve to strengthen and develop apartheid culture? They argue for a total boycott.

It seems, however, that the majority inside South Africa are calling for a selective boycott. Allow only progressive cultural products (be they musical, graphic, written, theatrical or whatever form) to leave the country. As long as they do not serve to perpetuate apartheid culture they are OK.

But the crucial question is who decides on what is progressive culture and what is the yardstick. Does a few "Amandla's" and derogatory terms about the "Boers or apartheid" pass as emerging culture that is able to inform the world about the plight of South Africans?

It is no wonder that cultural workers are now arguing that years of fighting State censorship seems to have been replaced by censorship from the mass democratic movement and the national liberation movement. Their lack of understanding of the relative positions taken by the liberation forces and the South African government's severe repression and curtailing of information has made it impossible for cultural workers to respond positively to the boycott.

At times the positions taken by

some organisations verge on political point-scoring, regionalism and are at best confusing also to the most ardent members. So crucial is the issue that a few weeks from now the Congress of South African Writers (Cosaw) will hold a conference to examine the cultural boycott.

Confusion

What worries most cultural workers is the confusion surrounding the implementation of the boycott. What has it achieved in the past decade? Is it being realistically and impartially applied?

Recently the Cape Town based "District Six" musical had to cancel a performance at the Pretoria State Theatre because of the venue's links with the South African government. At that time the play was also showing at the Market Theatre in downtown Johannesburg, a venue that is associated with the development of People's Culture. Unconfirmed reports attribute the cancellation to pressure from the management at the Market.

"How do you expect us to explain your performance at the Market and the State Theatre without losing face?" was the loaded question posed to District Six's David Kramer.

Management at the Market reportedly undertook to extend the booking at the Market to make up for the cast's cancelled performance.

It was at this point that some theatre-goers started asking questions. Jonathan Clegg (of Juluka and Savuka) and Pieter Dirk-Uys had previously performed at both the Market and the State Theatre without raising eyebrows. Clegg apparently told the Market management that by performing at the Market he believed he was preaching to the converted whereas a performance at the State Theatre might convert a few conservatives. The question was never even raised to satirist Uys a "rebel Afrikaner" who is not worth alienating. And surprisingly both have since gone back for performances at the market and still manage to attract a full house.

If apartheid is to be isolated, then all its cultural institutions should be

shunned. Theatres and other venues heavily dependent on State-funding, apartheid's broadcast facilities and the Bantustans should be out of bounds for the committed cultural worker, the argument goes.

The problem is that there is no other broadcast media in the country and musicians depend on the sale of their records to make a living. And the only way their fans can know about these records is through the South African Broadcasting Corporation's radio and television stations.

Refusing to have their discs spinned on SABC will most certainly result in a heavy loss of revenue for the musicians and their managers. The State compounded the confusion by purchasing some taped interviews with community leaders and screening them on SABC channels. "If such-and-such a leader can appear on TV why can't we?" asked the musicians. If leaders of the mass democratic movement can address meetings in the bantustans, why can't artists perform there? In any case those people in the homelands are not there because of choice and we should consider them as South Africans and not make them suffer for something that is not of their making.

Some highly politicised songs have inadvertently crept into the SABC. The naive censors only removed the discs after having received considerable airplay. This is a positive spin-off.

International Reaction

The international scene has also been very confusing. The reaction of some anti-apartheid groups did nothing to clear up the murky waters of the cultural boycott. The Graceland tour and Clegg's long sojourns overseas only added more confusion. Paul Simon was wrong in coming to South Africa to recruit Ray Phiri and the Black Mambazo group to record and perform in the United States, some people argue. However a few months earlier Hugh Masekela had recorded with South African artists in

Botswana. It was also rumoured that Harry Belafonte had asked for, and was given, demo tapes of South African Kwela music.

Try explaining that to some cultural workers and all you will succeed in doing is to confuse them even further. To some artists it is not entirely clear why Amampondo were jeered and picketed overseas while Mbongeni Ngema's "Sarafina" had the red carpet laid out for them.

Why even people like Brenda Fassi with her "bubblegum" music are embraced by the likes of Miriam Makeba and some anti-apartheid forces, is the argument heard at home. If the criteria of relevance is art or music that explains to the outside world about the plight of South Africans, then Fassi's music falls hopelessly short of the mark. If anything her music tends to enhance the seed of cultural domination and sexualism as propounded by capitalist society.

The argument advanced by some activists is that Fassi's songs raise emotional themes related to the everyday oppression of urban South Africans. This in itself is debatable if not downright apologetic to Brenda's popularity among people who love bubble-gum music.

It was the African National Congress, after the Paul Simon fiasco, that came forward with the selective boycott tactic. In order not to stifle People's Culture, some cultural workers should be allowed to travel overseas to engage in cultural exchange programmes.

The position seem to have appealed to both Inkatha and the Azanian People's Organisation. Politicians agree that cultural workers should be responsible for the implementation of the boycott. But, they argue, artists are not yet ready for such responsibility. In the interim politicians should vet all work.

Some artists argue that while it is all well and good for politicians to argue for a boycott, it does not affect them directly at all. Cultural workers, and not politicians should be responsible for implementing the boycott. Most cultural workers appreciate the

aim of the cultural boycott - the total isolation of the apartheid regime. However until the thorny question of who monitors it is worked out in conjunction with the artists themselves, the waters are far from clearing.

The Academic Boycott

The academic boycott is unfortunately not as widely debated as it should be and as a result it is surrounded by a lot more confusion than the cultural and trade boycott.

It often comes up in times of controversy when there is a visiting academic at a particular South African university and shelved again as soon as the crisis is over. Lack of a clear standpoint in the broad progressive movement on this issue leaves many anti-apartheid bodies confused as to whether all South African academics should be boycotted or only those known to be active opponents of the apartheid states should be allowed to participate in academic conferences on an international level.

The academic boycott is viewed as one of the many strategies aimed at the international isolation of the Pretoria government. A University of Cape Town academic, in making this point, argued that the academic boycott was indivisible from the struggle for various other freedoms. It is, in fact, a lesser freedom to other more basic freedoms like the right of one to choose where one wishes to live or the right of one not to be separated from one's family.

The academic boycott mainly calls for a ban on all South African students, scholars and academics to either study, do research or gain any knowledge or skills from any relevant institution outside the country that will be used in South Africa for the benefit of the apartheid regime. Similarly there should be no students, scholars and academics coming to South Africa for the purposes of carrying out any academic activity. There are three opposing parties in the academic boycott debate whose positions can be loosely defined as the anti-boycott stance, who are totally

opposed to any form of academic boycott and believe that the exchange of ideas should be encouraged in all universities in the recognition of the ideal of academic freedom. The other stance, the pro-boycott advocates, feel that the international isolation campaign against South Africa should not only be applied in trade, sport and culture alone but should also be extended to the academic field in order for sanctions to be effective. There is also the third approach which is somewhat the middle path, here the advocates of this position concede that there are some practical problems with the pro-boycott stance which they support, and they argue for a flexible approach in applying it. One main criticism often advanced against the academic boycott is that it undermines academic freedom, the basic right of every university to decide what is taught and whom is taught, and it affects the free exchange of ideas and debate amongst all universities in the world community.

Academic Freedom

To this the pro-boycott stance argues that this argument is often advanced by academics themselves who are directly affected by the boycott and view it as a separate issue affecting them only. Granted the academic boycott does affect academic freedom just as the sports boycott affects the absolute freedom of sportsmen and the cultural boycott affects the absolute freedom of cultural workers, like artists. But, argues the pro-boycott lobby, the argument behind the boycott is political rather than academic and it also contains the overriding moral which dictate that the governing principle must be political. Further, academics who view the boycott as a matter affecting them alone are viewed to be acting out of self-interest and attempting to further their sectional privilege. Therefore the logic behind the academic boycott must be seen as political and any defence of academic freedom, which

has the effect of undermining the struggle for more universal freedoms, must be wrong.

The anti-boycott stance argues that intellectual work can only flourish with the free exchange of ideas and debate and one advocate of this stance argued that the case for maintaining academic links with South Africa was especially strong, given the unique importance of a "community of ideas, the unique importance of academic freedom". He said that the case for academic freedom was more than "merely hanging on to a threadbare liberal ideal, but recognising that universities are the repositories of many values dear to civilised society".

The other more persuasive argument against academic boycott is that it will harm the very people it is trying to help, while the apartheid government's apologists and ideologues will move around conferences with relative ease. Further the boycott is seen to be having a counterproductive effect, that it is likely not to work and will be unenforceable. The practical problem in enforcing this boycott is that many of the academic exchanges take place through personal networks. South African academics are invited to this country because they have friends and contacts in the right places. A visiting scholar to South Africa, O'Brien said during his disastrous visit to the University of Cape Town, that the idea of using an academic boycott to bring down the regime was ludicrous because the Afrikaner Right, who can be said to be the targets in the boycott, despised intellectuals and regarded South African universities as "hotbeds of treason."

The pro-boycott lobby, which advocates the application of a total ban on all South African academics and scholars leaving the country to participate in conferences and seminars abroad, or overseas scholars coming to this country for research or other academic activities, also put up a persuasive argument for their case. They propose that researchers from universities, research institutions and other official organs of the regime must be

barred from international seminars and conferences and vice-versa because any knowledge gained from these activities will be used in the perpetuation of the system of torture, resentment and distortion to maintain apartheid. Also they argue, no works of South African origin should be disseminated outside South Africa.

To those who argue for academic freedom, they say it is misleading to suggest that in South Africa there is meaningful academic freedom because often, especially in the social sciences, students are often denied access to certain books by the state their ability to discuss certain issues vital to the future of this country is impaired.

What can be said to be the middle path in the debate, on whether there should be a total or no academic boycott is the partial or selective ap-

proach. This stance calls for a more flexible approach instead of a rigid one. The advocates of this position call for the involvement of the progressive or democratic movements in the making of rules and decisions in the boycott is impaired.

A Middle Path

The question here is not whether there should be a boycott or not. These advocates support the isolation campaign against the South African government, including the strategy of the academic boycott, but they argue that opponents of the South African state must be identified and aided while sanctions must be applied against the regime and its supporters. This approach also tries to side step the practical failings of the total boycott and anti-boycott positions.

The main reason the proponents of the flexible approach oppose a total application of the academic boycott is that there is a small minority in South African universities, that is totally opposed to the apartheid system and are responsible for the evident change in the intellectual climate in so called liberal universities like Wits, Rhodes, Durban and UCT. It is this minority that has to be identified and widened and protected from the boycott. Further, they argue, the ideas generated by this minority through debates, small publications and newspapers have filtered through to the community and the growing resistance to the apartheid government and the utter confusion amongst its supporters can, in no small way, be attributed to this small group.

Cultural Boycott: The Position of the ANC

The ANC Department of Arts and Culture

The events of the first quarter of this year have shown, now more than ever, that Pretoria is not about to dismantle apartheid. The barrage of fire directed towards the African National Congress (ANC), the mass democratic movement and the Frontline States and the unleashing of assassination squads as far afield as Paris and Brussels are a call to the international community to strengthen the academic and cultural boycott with its aim of isolating apartheid South Africa.

The assassination of Dulcie September in France, a senior member of the ANC, and a Chief Representative; the car bomb attacks on Albie Sachs, an able lawyer of the ANC, in Mozambique, and Jeremy and Joan Brickhill in Harare; the raids in Bulawayo, Brussels, Zambia and Gaborone; the banning of 17 internal anti-apartheid organisations; the restriction of the major labour federation, COSATU,

and the continued State of Emergency only prove that the apartheid Government is determined at all costs to maintain its minority control.

The reform policy of the Nationalist Party is daily being exposed as a hypocritical gesture. Detentions, bannings, capital punishment, forced removals are the order of the day, and now, too, the democratic press, which has struggled hard to expose the ugly realities and voice the aspirations of the majority, face extinction at the hands of the State. Repressive censorship laws are in force, foreign journalists have been expelled, the *New Nation* has been suspended and gazetted warnings of closure hang over the *Weekly Mail*, *South, Saamstan*, *Work In Progress*, *Grassroots* and *Out of Step*.

It is critical that the ANC, the mass democratic movement, in its various formations inside the country, the Frontline States and the world community act together in isolating apart-

heid South Africa. The Cultural and Academic Boycott is an integral weapon for achieving this isolation as part of the broader struggle, bringing about the dismantling of apartheid and the transformation of South Africa towards a united, democratic non-racial society.

As a tactic the Cultural and Academic Boycott can change its form and method of implementation in accordance with the changing political situation internally and internationally. The principle is inviolate. Undoubtedly there has been some confusion in the implementation of the boycott at certain times and in certain places, but overall there have been enormous gains in the isolation of apartheid South Africa as a result of the boycott in the sports, academic and arts fields, as Barbara Masekela, the ANC Secretary for Arts and Culture, articulates in her keynote address to the CASA Conference:

The gains (of the struggle) made

must be guarded and augmented. Among these gains has been the success of the Cultural Boycott of apartheid South Africa. These gains cannot be reversed even with the support given to the doomed apartheid regime by some Western governments by opposing the boycott.

Undeniably the imposition of the Sports, Academic and Cultural Boycott by the international community has struck at the confidence of the ruling class.

Problems of Implementation

How to effectively implement the Academic and Cultural Boycott, but not at the expense of the progressive, democratic culture was a topic of discussion at the CASA (Culture In Another South Africa) Conference held in Amsterdam in December when over 400 cultural workers from South Africa and outside met. The recommendations and resolutions of the CASA Conference are highlighted in the following excerpts from the Preamble to the Conference resolutions:

After six days of extensive discussion, including thought provoking papers covering every discipline of the literary, graphic, visual and performing arts, the participants adopt this statement and these recommendations as their collective view of the place and role of the arts and cultural workers in the struggle for national liberation and democracy in our country.

1.1 That in the course of the struggle of our people against racist domination and exploitation there has developed a vibrant people's culture, rooted in South Africa's realities and steeped in democratic values, in opposition to the racist culture associated with the apartheid regime. This democratic culture is characterised by a spirit of internationalism and humanist perspective that derives from the best of the cultural heritage of the various peoples that make up the South African population..

1.2 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 the forces of democracy and national liberation in the life and death struggle to free our country from racist bondage.

1.3 That in order to play an effective role in the struggle artists and cultural workers must create the appropriate organisational structures at the local, regional, national and international levels to enable themselves to take collective action, consult and co-ordinate their activities.

1.7 That the struggle for the total isolation of the apartheid regime must continue. Among the tactics to be employed during this campaign the academic and cultural boycott are crucial, and must be maintained. However, in view of the growing significance of democratic culture as an alternative to the racist, colonialist culture of apartheid, the conference recommends that South African artists, individually or collectively, who seek to travel and work abroad should consult beforehand with the mass democratic movement and the national liberation movement.

On the boycott issue itself the following resolution was passed and forms the basis for the implementation of the Cultural Boycott:

Resolution On The Cultural Boycott

Confirming:

That apartheid South Africa must be totally isolated;

And Noting:

1) that the objective of the cultural boycott to isolate the regime is inviolate and needs to be pursued with even greater vigour;

2) the need to recognise and strengthen the emerging progressive and democratic culture in South Africa;

3) that the cultural boycott as a tactic needs to be applied with a degree of flexibility which takes into consideration the developing situation within the country.

We Therefore Resolve:

1) that apartheid South Africa be totally isolated and that cultural

workers and academics not be allowed to enter the country, save and except in those instances where such movement, after consultation with the national liberatory movement, is considered to be in furtherance of the national democratic struggle;

2) that South African artists, individually or collectively, who seek to travel and work abroad should consult with the mass democratic movement and the national liberation movement.

This resolve was a reiteration and in agreement with the statement of O.R. Tambo made at the Canon Collins Lecture on the 28th May 1987:

Without doubt the developing and vibrant culture of our people in struggle and its structures need to be supported, strengthened and enhanced. In the same way as apartheid South Africa is being increasingly isolated internationally, within South Africa this people's culture is steadily isolating the intellectual and cultural apologists of apartheid. Indeed, the moment is upon us when we shall have to deal with the alternative structures that our people have created and are creating through struggle and sacrifice, as the genuine representatives of these masses in all fields of activity. Not only should these not be boycotted, but more, they should be supported, encouraged and treated as the democratic counterparts within South Africa of similar institutions and organisations internationally. This means that the ANC, the broad democratic movement in its various formations within South Africa, and the international solidarity movement need to act together.

The full and proper implementation of the cultural boycott should encourage the development of the emerging people's culture whilst increasingly isolate and crush the apartheid culture.