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# Humanitarianism and human rights in global anti-apartheid

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## Abstract

This chapter examines two concepts that played a significant role in providing an ideological framework that was able to foster global solidarity with the aims and agendas of South African liberation movements. International solidarity against apartheid relied on the effective reconciliation of global and local issues; on the capacity of activists to imagine themselves as part of a global endeavour that was at the same time connected to local concerns and everyday experiences. This chapter argues that humanitarian ideals helped to shape a set of shared assumptions regarding racial equality and framed global responses to the development of apartheid around perceptions of 'victimhood' 'crisis' and universal needs. At the same time, global anti-apartheid was consolidated within supra-national organisations such as the UN and became a focus of the nascent discourse of human rights. Ultimately, global anti-apartheid was constructed in the minds of individual activists; concepts of humanitarian need and human rights were significant insofar as they prompted activists to imagine the ways in which they were implicated in the injustice of apartheid.

In early 1968, shortly before the end of his tenure as Anglican Bishop of Masasi in southern Tanzania, the anti-apartheid activist and political missionary Trevor Huddleston described a scene he witnessed while in transit through the small airport at Nachingwea. Huddleston maintained that airports, already in 1968 an embodiment of global society, were often international only insofar as 'passengers of many nations pass through their lounges and their exit-ramps'. The scene he described at Nachingwea, however, was in contrast an illustration of the ways in which one town in a young African state was enmeshed in a series of global connections:

In the twenty or so people standing around, there was a group of Russian geologists, some American mission-priests, a few Chinese technicians wearing Mao-Tse Tung badges, African soldiers, a Canadian army officer, a group of Asian business-men and some other British travellers as well as myself ... They are not just passengers moving through the country: for the most part they are part of the very fabric of the country at this time; each individual has some contribution to make, for good or ill, to its future.<sup>1</sup>

During the 1950s, Huddleston had become one of the most prominent critics of apartheid, and a powerful advocate for a coordinated international campaign against the country's race policies. Having left South Africa in 1956, he had held the role of Bishop of

Masasi in southern Tanzania since 1960, shifting focus from staunch critic of white supremacy to willing participant in a very different form of state-led development.<sup>2</sup> While accounts suggest that he found his Tanzanian experiences frustrating at times, he clearly embraced the principles of African socialism and self-reliance set out in Arusha Declaration, offering an apologia for single-party rule, which, he argued was 'rooted in the idea of free discussion and the coming to a common mind'.<sup>3</sup> But the primary motivation behind Huddleston's account was the ongoing dispute between Britain and Tanzania, centred on the latter state's opposition to the white settler regime in Rhodesia. The small group at Nachingwea airport thus appeared to represent a form of internationalism that was an answer to the seemingly intractable problem of global inequality, which could be solved only 'by men and women, by nations and groups of nations learning to respect one another and to recognise that in our shrinking world there can be no room for rigid nationalisms'.<sup>4</sup>

Participatory development and international cooperation in Tanzania might appear an odd place to begin an exploration of human rights and humanitarianism in global anti-apartheid. But Huddleston's interventions lead us to core issues that have concerned recent accounts of the history of apartheid and anti-apartheid. To what extent was Huddleston describing a nascent form of 'global civil society', as others have detected in the history of anti-apartheid itself? The cosmopolitan group, bound together by a role in the grand narrative of 'development', shared many features of the transnational anti-apartheid network, what Håkan Thörn described as an 'imagined community of solidarity activists'.<sup>5</sup> The missionary values inherent in Huddleston's efforts as both an anti-apartheid activist and Anglican minister (the two being, for him, indivisible of course) were integral to the definitions of solidarity that underpinned anti-apartheid activism. One way of defining this centres on the values of universal human community, shaped by acts of identification with the plights of others.<sup>6</sup> The global political space created by anti-apartheid therefore shared a number of features in common with the transnational networks that drove the utopian development efforts described by Huddleston in 1968.

As Saul Dubow has recently suggested, the task of reconciling global and local scales of action is key to understanding the relationships between apartheid, anti-apartheid and those who sought to oppose anti-apartheid.<sup>7</sup> To address this task, this chapter examines the ways in which anti-apartheid was envisioned as a global struggle by activists, either as a humanitarian response to a political and social crisis or as a particular form of human rights struggle. It argues that these ideas – and humanitarian conceptions in particular – provided a framework that allowed activists to imagine themselves as part of a global movement, anchoring the contingent and diverse qualities of local movements to a concept of international solidarity. The chapter begins by exploring the ways in which anti-apartheid was conceptualised, both consciously and unconsciously as a form of humanitarianism. Other notions of universal solidarity, including class consciousness, diasporic black identity and Third World solidarities were all highly significant in the development of a global anti-apartheid movement identity, however, and humanitarianism provided a moral basis for anti-apartheid only in selective contexts at particular moments.

Where humanitarian motives underpinned anti-apartheid, they often represented a sense of apartheid as a form of humanitarian crisis. The emergence of organised anti-apartheid movements and coordinated sanctions campaigns in the early 1960s, for example, was, for some, a response to global crisis. The shooting of black protestors in Sharpeville in March 1960, images of which were circulated via global media networks within hours, could be incorporated into a narrative that juxtaposed events in South Africa with anti-colonial conflict in Algeria, and soon after, alongside burgeoning popular resistance to Portuguese colonialism. The arrival of the anti-apartheid 'moment' signalled the internationalisation of the problem of white supremacy in the context of decolonization; but it did so at a time when Cold War tensions and the increasingly obvious possibility of nuclear Armageddon. Two years after Sharpeville, more feverish accounts could conceive of a web that connected apartheid, global corporate interests and tensions around decolonization in central Africa, warning of a genuine threat to world peace.<sup>8</sup>

And yet, activists' sense of themselves as players in a larger struggle with world-historical significance was invariably defined in enclosed, self-referential terms. The petition which in 1963 launched the World Campaign for the Release of South African Political Prisoners (WCRSAPP) presented itself as the voice of 'supporters of the struggle against racial injustice', a formulation which simultaneously aligned with the particular agendas of South African organisations and evoked a more general campaign for civil and human rights.<sup>9</sup> It might therefore be preferable to consider anti-apartheid, not as a continuity with colonial humanitarianism, but as a vehicle for activism centred on the concept of human rights. It is certainly true that anti-apartheid activists invoked the language of human rights from the early 1950s, with perhaps the most obvious early example of a deliberate efforts to connect opposition to apartheid with an international discourse of human rights coming in the 1958 Declaration of Conscience, a global petition coordinated by the American Committee on Africa to mark the tenth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, recent accounts have suggested that human rights as a transformative, utopian vision of transnational activism only emerged in the late 1970s.<sup>10</sup> Should anti-apartheid therefore be viewed as a human rights movement in an older sense of the term, in which rights are articulated, accounted for, and enacted in the context of citizenship within an independent nation state? Was anti-apartheid, after all, simply a struggle for *national* rights?

In this context, the relationships between anti-apartheid and global institutions need to be brought into the foreground. The ways in which apartheid became a focus of discussions around human rights were not obscure or diffuse, but took place in specific spaces, in particular institutions inaugurated by the United Nations during the 1960s and 1970s. The attraction of this is that it seems to enable us to 'locate the places ... where "globalization" is being painted over'.<sup>11</sup> It also requires the careful historicization of both human rights and anti-apartheid itself. Accounting for shifting definitions of anti-apartheid, which reflected the peculiar concerns of specific moments in time, is therefore critical to a global history of the movement

But we should also not lose sight of the nature of anti-apartheid as a form of individual action, an opportunity to express and perform 'the political'. Many of the activists who appear in this chapter, and throughout this volume, were primarily interested in what they would define as the real, material, impact of their work in solidarity with the 'struggle' for liberation in southern Africa. Their interests lay in performing actions with tangible impact on political institutions, with the apartheid state as the ultimate target of their efforts. The significance of global anti-apartheid also lay in the movement's ability to connect disparate people and prompt them to enact their rejection of apartheid through everyday decisions.

### ANTI-APARTHEID AS HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION?

International anti-apartheid took root in a variety of social settings and institutions. Public debate around the issue of apartheid was stimulated by journalists, academics, trade union activists and politicians. But the efforts of particular individuals, working in specific geographical and institutional contexts, were of particular importance in the development of anti-apartheid. In Britain, the *Observer* newspaper took a close interest in apartheid in the years after 1948 and provided an early platform for critics of South Africa. Cities such as London and New York were significant nodes of anti-apartheid networks, where existing movements, including the Movement for Colonial Freedom and the International League for the Rights of Man. What these different institutions shared was a global vision of 'international society', a set of relationships that would maintain political equilibrium and offer a vehicle for progress in the years that followed the world crisis of the mid-twentieth century. Of particular importance to the development of international opposition to apartheid were religious networks, both formally connected with church denominations or loosely aligned around issues such as peace. Alongside national mission organisations, the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and World Council of Churches mediated the development of anti-apartheid in significant ways in the 1950s, placing humanitarian concerns at the heart of the nascent movement.

Individuals within church and mission circles therefore played a key pioneering role in the construction of a global discourse on apartheid in the 1950s and 60s. Often these were based on personal experiences of work in South Africa, as was the case of Gunnar Helander, who took a lead role in establishing Swedish anti-apartheid committees in the early 1960s, and Trevor Huddleston, who became a figurehead for international anti-apartheid at the time of his removal from South Africa in the late 1950s.<sup>12</sup> In Britain, the contribution of church figures to public debates around apartheid during the 1950s established a moral core to the anti-apartheid movement; similarly, Christian activists helped shape the emergence of organised protest against South African race policies in the United States, through the efforts of individuals such as George Houser in the American Committee on Africa.<sup>13</sup> This was to a degree a function of the transnational networks fostered by church and mission institutions, but the prominence of such figures in the initiation of public anti-apartheid activism gave the movement moral prestige that, arguably, stemmed from historical precedent. In popular

conceptions, the maverick pioneers of anti-apartheid were often cast in the mould of missionary and abolitionist forebears.

The public significance of the 'turbulent' priests of the 1950s derived, in part, from the peculiar and powerfully symbolic role of the Christian missionary in South African political discourse. The voice of priests not merely carried moral authority, but also resonated with a supposed historical tradition; anti-apartheid activism could thus be envisaged as a continuation of the practice of Christian humanitarianism that dated back to the first half of the nineteenth century. Like the wider anti-apartheid movement, Christian activists were cast as the contemporary embodiment of the anti-slavery campaigns of 150 years earlier. Some parallels are clear, most notably the promotion of a consumer boycott, yet the genealogy of anti-apartheid activism reveals a more complex relationship between the twentieth century solidarity movement and the liberal humanitarianism of the nineteenth century. In particular, the central figure of the humanitarian narrative – the 'foreign' Christian missionary – had by the 1950s become a reference-point, which encapsulated the difference between liberal and nationalist viewpoints. The missionary was positioned as a central actor in South African history, either as the receptacle of enlightened liberalism, or the symbol of its corrupting influence.<sup>14</sup>

These associations between anti-apartheid and nineteenth century mission humanitarianism seemed reasonable enough to contemporaries, whether they believed that post-war campaigners were following in the enlightened footsteps of their forebears or presented the self-same external threat to the natural authority of the state. The value of 'appropriate priestly gestures' for the nascent anti-apartheid movement can also be read in terms of the accumulation of moral capital. As with abolitionist predecessors, anti-apartheid emerged not as a consequence of developing discourses of humanitarianism and human rights, but as a valuable moral asset for those wishing to enhance the prestige of those ideas within the new world of national sovereignty, self-determination and independence. As Christopher Brown has argued, in the context of early abolition movements, humanitarian causes were not judged by worth alone, but by 'the ways that moral distinction can become a source of power in the world'.<sup>15</sup> Echoes of their abolitionist forebears gave anti-apartheid activists legitimacy in the ears of contemporaries.

Although this was true – to a degree at least – of western, white and 'left-liberal' anti-apartheid campaigners, there is danger in reading the moral dimensions of anti-apartheid in culturally-specific ways. Other strands of nascent anti-apartheid activity in the Atlantic world drew weakly upon, or even rejected, the moral-humanitarian ethos embodied in individuals such as Scott and Houser. The radical and Africanist strand of anti-apartheid evident in the Committee of African Affairs (until its demise in the mid-1950s) and its successors in the United States, represented an ethics of anti-apartheid that challenged the moral authority of white, liberal and anti-communist voices.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, such tensions may not have been manifest, but anti-apartheid nevertheless accrued prestige in ways that accorded with the norms of local political cultures. In Sweden, for example, the influence of Christian activists should be set alongside a political consensus around social-democratic models of the nation

state, while in Norway, anti-apartheid was initiated by networks of students with links to mainstream politics.<sup>17</sup>

In the African diaspora, the moral value of anti-apartheid was rooted in its status as a focal point for an ongoing general struggle against racial discrimination, social marginalisation and political injustice. Anti-apartheid offered a moral justification for campaigns that were otherwise dismissed by supremacist forces and dominant regimes as self-centred or dangerously radical.<sup>18</sup> Opposition to apartheid operated in a similar fashion in independent Africa, as a focal point for unity, a reminder of the fragility of decolonisation - in the face of political realities from racial and ethnic conflicts within independent states through to realist accommodations with the apartheid regime, and low levels of practical commitments to South African liberation movements. In global anti-apartheid, therefore, humanitarian discourse was mobilised in very particular public and political contexts; where political culture necessitated the representation of apartheid within a specific framework of needs, the language of humanitarianism was a useful tool. It was by no means the only, or always the most significant, reference-point for anti-apartheid solidarity, but it provided an important focus in a moral discourse of anti-apartheid, particularly when developments in South Africa were conceived in terms of political and social crisis.

### APARTHEID AS HUMANITARIAN CRISIS?

Another method of distinguishing between humanitarian and human rights movements focuses on the ways in which the former build on a 'discourse of needs'.<sup>19</sup> When, therefore, did the question of 'human needs' arise in the global anti-apartheid narrative? One answer might return to the perennial concerns of the moral campaigners discussed above, who generated an implicit sense of 'victimhood' around the political and social injuries inflicted on black South Africans by racial injustice in politics, law, work and the routines of everyday life. But, as anti-apartheid developed as a global political discourse, it introduced a sense of harm rooted in the particularities of the South African situation; black South Africans were not merely victims of generalised racial injustice, but a collective defined by needs that arose as a consequence of apartheid itself. A humanitarian discourse of anti-apartheid developed, which emphasised questions of housing, rural slums and child welfare.

Representations of apartheid as a catalyst of humanitarian crisis had been deployed when international efforts to promote sanctions began in the early 1960s, but they intensified as the effects of the 'bantustan' policies inaugurated under Verwoerd and accelerated by the government of Vorster in the late 1960s and 1970s. One significant example was the documentary *Last Grave at Dimbaza*, filmed secretly in the early 1970s by Pan Africanist Congress activist Nana Mahomo with a group of British and expatriate South African filmmakers, and released in 1974. Its core political messages relayed themes that would have been familiar to contemporary observers: the centrality of migrant labour in the South African economy and its impact on family life, the contrasts between black poverty and white opulence, and the portrayal of apartheid as a political system bolstered by military power. A

focus on the particular plight of Africans in the Bantustans gave a new dimension to the film's critique of apartheid, however, as territories such as the Transkei were characterised as sites of historical plenty, contrasted with the contemporary crisis: 'today the children are in tatters and the women grow old in their twenties'.<sup>20</sup> Malnutrition and the failure to meet the basic needs of the population of the bantustans was the central focus of film, alongside the impact of apartheid on children. Infant mortality rates became the key proxy measure of inequality under apartheid; the film concludes with images of freshly-prepared graves for children in Dimbaza, a resettlement location in the Ciskei bantustan, set up in the last years of the 1960s. Within the first few years of its existence, over four hundred children had been buried there, while the film-makers claimed that another sixty had died as audiences watched the hour-long film.

*Last Grave at Dimbaza* is certainly vulnerable to a critical reading: its authoritative white narrative voice, its presentation of black South Africans simply as victims of apartheid, together suggest a particular set of power relations and hierarchy of needs. And yet, its primary purpose was to elicit an emotional response in western audiences – Mahomo argued that his aim was to present visual evidence to enhance the authority of claims he had been making as a political activist over a number of years.<sup>21</sup> Thus, while it is perhaps difficult to incorporate the film within more nuanced readings of identity and subjectivity in South African documentary, it cannot simply be written off as an example of liberal paternalism.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the film vividly illustrates the main themes and claims of the humanitarian discourse within global anti-apartheid in the 1970s. It also prompted swift official counter-claims coordinated by the South African Department of Information, whose efforts were just as 'global' as those of anti-apartheid activists.<sup>23</sup> Humanitarian concerns were key resources in a 'struggle for representation' between anti-apartheid groups and the South African government in the mid-1970s.<sup>24</sup>

One of the most significant actors in the information war was the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF), set up to channel financial assistance to South African activists and their families in the 1960s. Formed out of the British Defence and Aid Fund launched during the Treason Trial in the late 1950s, IDAF established branches in various countries in Europe as well as in Australia, New Zealand and the United States<sup>25</sup>, and was designated by the UN as a channel for member states to provide financial assistance to South African liberation movements. It also became a key source of anti-apartheid propaganda, produced by its research and publications service, initiated by the former leader of the South African Labour Party, Alex Hepple, when he moved to the UK in the mid-1960s. For some, the humanitarian dimension of IDAF campaigns was highly problematic, and the UN official at the heart of the Special Committee Against Apartheid, Enuga Reddy, had pressed IDAF founder Canon John Collins to dilute the humanitarian agenda of his speech at the UN in 1964, which he feared would distract attention from the political campaign for sanctions.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, a strong humanitarian thread ran through IDAF publications, such as the campaign booklet, *Apartheid and Children* published in 1980. Presenting children as the 'main victims of the apartheid system', it argued that children's opportunities were fatally



shaped by the racial taxonomies of apartheid. Fundamental demographic measures of racial inequality, such as starkly increased mortality rates of black children, were set alongside cultural deprivation, the exploitation of child labour, denial of the 'basic right to family life', poor housing and homelessness. When it came to questions of health, especially in rural areas, the message was unequivocal:

The health of black children in South Africa rests upon many independent factors, virtually all of which are governed by race. In a land of plenty, a black child is lucky to escape some form of preventable illness, or to be able to obtain adequate treatment if sick. It has been truly said: apartheid kills.<sup>27</sup>

The intersection between divisions of race and the urban-rural divide were also revealed in images that dealt with the segregation of leisure facilities. One set of photographs contrasted 'whites only' outdoor pool in a park with two images of black children playing in what was described as 'a waterhole in a rural area'. The white children running through fountains or lie in their swimsuits on the edges of the pool, while two teenage black girls stand naked facing the photographer. Although both seem comfortable – the eyes of one girl meet the gaze of the viewer – it is difficult to avoid a feeling of complicity in the re-assertation of racial hierarchies implied by the composition of the images on the page. They reinforce the impression that humanitarian visions of anti-apartheid sought to reduce multi-layered issues of social inequality in an uncomplicated narrative.

The exploitation of child labour was presented as further evidence of the humanitarian crisis engendered by apartheid. This was, moreover, an issue in which the complicity of western liberal democracies might be demonstrated, in ways that evoked parallels with historical campaigns against slavery. As well as being employed in factories or casual workers in cities, the booklet described how young children were employed as migrant workers on sugar plantations in Kwazulu-Natal. On the Doornkop plantation run by Illovo Estates, it alleged that a 'small juvenile' worker would be paid less than one rand per day for carrying just under 50 kilograms of sugar. Until 1977, the company had been owned by the major international sugar conglomerate Tate and Lyle, for whom associations with apartheid had been increasingly problematic.<sup>28</sup> In *Last Grave at Dimbaza*, which showed a 12-year old boy working on sugar plantation, Tate and Lyle and the US government (which guaranteed to purchase a specific yearly quota of South African sugar) featured prominently in a cavalcade of international complicity in apartheid.

Aside from their international reputation, South African sugar plantations had also become a significant site for labour mobilisation in the resurgence of trade union activism in the mid-1970s.<sup>29</sup> The humanitarian issue of child labour thus became an illustration of the contested 'politics of representation' between nationalist, 'workerist' and 'traditionalist' versions of proletarian consciousness at play within populist struggles against apartheid.<sup>30</sup> And, as recent work has demonstrated, sugar production in South Africa in both historical and contemporary contexts has been shaped by the interconnected dynamics of capital and state operating within environmental constraints. Labour conditions on sugar plantations remain

insecure, reliant on migrant workers and increasingly casualized.<sup>31</sup> In the context of global anti-apartheid, images of child labour might call to mind a complex and indeterminate combination of humanitarian, nationalist and workerist responses.

The IDAF booklet declared that, like their parents, black children were subject to the arbitrary discipline of forced removals to dispersed rural 'homelands', where they became 'aliens in the land of their birth'.<sup>32</sup> This (unacknowledged) reference to the opening of *Plaatje's Native Life in South Africa* deftly folded African nationalist ideologies around humanitarian concerns for distant others; it bound together discourses of needs and rights. The booklet was published alongside a photographic exhibition commissioned by the Belgian government, which opened in 1979 on the anniversary of the Sharpeville Massacre. It formed a segue between the United Nations International Anti-Apartheid Year and the International Year of the Child. In June 1979, the exhibition transferred to Paris under the auspices of UNESCO. As the Belgian Foreign Minister remarked on its opening, the exhibition reiterated the long-held proposition that international communities could not ignore the effects of apartheid. Its main purpose thus remained that of arousing the concerns of distant others.

As Emily Bridger has recently argued, anti-apartheid campaigns tended to generalise accounts of children's involvement in activism, and that individual voices were subsumed within western conceptions of 'human rights and child victimization'.<sup>33</sup> In the case of transnational connections between the global anti-apartheid movement and activist youth in South Africa, the narratives employed to define the activities of township children were invariably centred on their victimization, denying the agency, political vision and resilience of black youth. Nevertheless, anti-apartheid activists seemed convinced that efforts to expose the humanitarian crisis faced by South Africans displaced by apartheid laws and 'influx control' were crucial to the development of popular support for their campaigns.

The resurgence of popular protests against apartheid in South Africa in the mid-1970s intensified international concerns around the basic cruelties of the apartheid state. The killing of schoolchildren in Soweto in 1976, the extra-judicial murder of political activists and increasing evidence of the systematic repression of protest appeared not only as an infringement of fundamental rights, but also as a crisis that could easily be described in humanitarian terms.<sup>34</sup> Apartheid might, then, be configured as a catalyst for humanitarian crisis and campaigns in support of the transformation of state institutions defined by race (and their replacement with those that aligned with liberal democratic norms) seemed simultaneously a question of basic needs and fundamental rights.

Both human rights and humanitarianism conjure the concept of a universal human, with shared basic needs and vulnerabilities. The disequilibrium that humanitarian efforts seek to resolve, and human rights regimes seek to provide a legal bulwark against, often reflect relationships between local and external centres of power, for example between South African diplomats and their counterparts at the United Nations. Similarly, contested conceptions of justice, as post-apartheid efforts at reconciliation have revealed, are by no means universal, fixed or settled, but are often defined in the interplay between various scales of social interaction, from township to nation to international relations.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, claims made

with reference to 'universal' values or frameworks are invariably normative. As such, anti-apartheid became part of a process by which certain forms of political dispensation, legal rights and practices of governmentality were constituted as globally legitimate.<sup>36</sup> It is in this context that anti-apartheid might be examined as an example of a movement for human rights.

### ANTI-APARTHEID AND THE POLITICS OF HUMAN RIGHTS

While popular struggles against apartheid elicited humanitarian reactions at specific moments, a humanitarian framework for an understanding of the global history of anti-apartheid seems limited at best. Life under apartheid was harsh, state power was exercised to maintain white supremacy both in systematic and arbitrary ways, and the fundamental issue for anti-apartheid movements often settled on the rhetoric of rights. High profile critics of apartheid had, from the 1950s, cast the policy as an abuse of 'basic', 'fundamental' or 'human' rights. These were often diffuse and undefined notions of rights, which were not necessarily compatible with conceptions of human rights as they have come to be understood since the late twentieth century.<sup>37</sup> But, while international anti-apartheid campaigns often deployed human rights in support of the claims around sovereignty made by nationalist groups within South Africa, global concerns would also develop around specific juridical questions: around the treatment of political opponents of the apartheid state, the status of 'political' prisoners and the authoritarian imposition of state power.

Apartheid, as liberation movements and solidarity campaigns continually asserted, implied a disdain for the basic body of universal human rights adopted as international norms in the post-war era. Anti-apartheid was therefore consonant with, and central to the elaboration of, global norms of anti-racism, democracy and human rights. Black South Africans, as disenfranchised non-citizens, were, as far as anti-apartheid campaigners were concerned, clearly victims of a system at odds with democratic standards. But, parallel with the development of global anti-apartheid, the language of human rights underwent, as recent accounts have suggested, a 'breakthrough' moment in the late 1970s.<sup>38</sup> Before this point, it is argued, human rights were something of an empty metaphor, employed as a vague reference to individual rights, claims around sovereign rights within a nation state, or as an instrument for legitimizing state power in a decolonizing world. By the turn of the 1980s, however, human rights had witnessed a rapid rise of popularity as a central point of reference for social movements. The prominence of Amnesty International, the human rights centred foreign policies of the Carter administration in the US, and the willing embrace of human rights by political activists in the eastern Bloc all signalled a new engagement with human rights activism as a workable path to political transformation – the 'last utopia' of the twentieth century political imagination.<sup>39</sup>

In some respects, human rights activism, international anti-apartheid activism and a formal 'system' of human rights share a similar point of historical origin. There is some irony in the conjunction of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 with the election victory of the National Party in South Africa, under its slogan of 'apartheid'. But, it was

possible for segregationist ideologies to sit alongside universal declarations of equality and justice as the international order of the world began to re-shape after the global conflicts of the 1930s and 40s.<sup>40</sup> Nor was the South African delegation entirely alone when it abstained from formally supporting the Universal Declaration, having objected to many of its key principles. At the same time there were significant intersections between nascent human rights and anti-apartheid movements in New York in the late 1940s. The Reverend Michael Scott gained accreditation from Roger Baldwin's International League for the Rights of Man in order to facilitate his attempts to lobby the Trusteeship Committee over the planned incorporation of Namibia within the Union of South Africa.<sup>41</sup> Yet, even as Scott observed the workings of the Human Rights Commission, into which he felt 'thousands of years of human history and struggle for justice' were being woven, he felt increasing frustration at the trading, compromise and dutiful adherence to legal process that he encountered in the workings of international diplomacy.<sup>42</sup> Outside of the United Nations, moreover, public concern for anti-colonialism and anti-apartheid was marginal at best. Unlike Amnesty in the 1970s, the International League had little success in promoting popular engagement with questions of human rights.<sup>43</sup>

The United Nations was, of course, a site of active debate on the question of apartheid in the late 1950s and 1960s, and for a moment it seemed as if the organisation could play a critical role in the construction of effective international pressure against South Africa.<sup>44</sup> If we wish to develop a non-teleological history of global anti-apartheid, alive to the historical contingencies that shaped the movement, it is important that we understand that this moment passed, as global anti-apartheid became oriented towards non-state actors and a call for solidarity with African nationalist movements.<sup>45</sup> Human rights enter into this new history in various ways, but two points are of particular importance. The first is that, despite numerous references to human rights in the public rhetoric of anti-apartheid from the 1950s onwards, there is no strong evidence upon which to base a claim that anti-apartheid might be regarded as movement *for* human rights.<sup>46</sup> Allied to this point is the contention that, even when liberation movements began to fully embrace the concept of human rights as a political principle, the negotiating stance of African nationalists in the 1990s retained a degree of ambivalence over the desirability of a broad-based bill of rights for a 'new' South Africa.<sup>47</sup> The implication is that human rights came into serious contention as an organising principle of the struggle against apartheid only very late in the story, and even then, on terms that were attenuated by party and factional interests.

One explanation centres on the parallel development of human rights as a universal principle of international relations and the nation state as the standard unit of international politics in the second half of the twentieth century. In fact, debates surrounding the nature of human rights as an international system preceded the emergence of 'national sovereignty' as the norm of international politics. As such, humanitarian needs and human rights began to be discussed in ways that did not necessarily assume narrowly delineated forms of citizenship. At the same time, notably but not exclusively in western states, social rights and the conception of 'state welfare' expanded the rights of citizenship. But, as Cooper has recently

demonstrated, alternative possibilities to the nation state were in play as decolonization became a possibility in the 1950s, particularly in the case of federal alternatives to French colonialism in Africa. The independent nation state should not be assumed to have been the inevitable end point of this process.<sup>48</sup> Could divergent models of citizenship and sovereignty in fact be held as reasonable and in accord with broad principles of rights?

Human rights, as Roland Burke has argued, were instrumentalised by African and Asian leaders in the 1960s, just as western leaders sought to push the idea of universal rights into the background. The emphasis on social and economic rights promoted by the Iranian hosts of the 1968 Tehran conference on Human Rights, and the Senegalese chair of the UN Human Rights commission, Ibrahima Boye, epitomised the shift of emphasis from individual to collective rights. By the mid-1970s, Third World leaders identified the state as the legitimate holder of the right to make claims to the global community, a move which simultaneously downplayed efforts to protect the civil and political rights of individuals. Human rights, Burke suggests, became viewed as a concern of international relations between states, even as abuses of individual rights within states might be tolerated.<sup>49</sup> In this context, apartheid was both a reminder of the incomplete struggle for colonial liberation and self-determination and a useful diversion from the limits on individual rights prevalent in former colonial territories. In the mid-1960s, principles of individual rights could engender support where they pertained to political and civil rights and liberation from colonialism. At the UN, apartheid became for a time the focus for the performance of collective rage and disgust, as the diplomacy of human rights became subject to the emotions of Third World solidarity.<sup>50</sup> As post-colonial states, often in strategic alignment with the Soviet Union, came to dominate General Assembly debates, settler colonialism in southern Africa became the touchstone for the exercise of Third World power. An alternative view, however, would highlight the decision of the International Court of Justice in 1966 that it could not rule on the legality of South Africa's control over the mandated territory of South-West Africa, in stark contrast to the General Assembly's votes to terminate the mandate in the same year, and to re-name the territory Namibia two years later. The contest over Namibia revealed a fissure between the politics of the General Assembly and the legal competence of broader UN institutions, which strengthened the confidence of the South African regime and allowed western powers to turn toward 'constructive' relations with the apartheid state.<sup>51</sup> By the 1970s, anti-apartheid remained a significant point of reference in the drama of international diplomacy, but while the discourse of individual human rights retained moral force, its capacity to materially affect questions of international law and diplomacy was severely diminished.

Contemporary observers were by no means ignorant of these developments, and the limitations of the United Nations as a force for the protection of human rights, despite efforts to build institutions with that remit. In 1967, the UN co-hosted an International Seminar on Apartheid, Racial Discrimination and Colonialism in Southern Africa, held in Kitwe, Zambia, which marked a significant moment in the development of both the international politics of anti-apartheid and the struggle for control of the discourse of human rights. The seminar attracted a wide range of speakers, including leading US civil rights campaigner James

Forman, international director of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, who had made explicit connections between US civil rights movements and the anti-apartheid struggle. In his address to the seminar, Forman argued that racial disorder in US cities should be regarded as similar to anti-colonial rebellion, part of an 'indivisible' human rights struggle.<sup>52</sup> Others, however sounded a more pessimistic note. South African journalist and Africa editor of the British *Observer* newspaper, Colin Legum, who suggested that the United Nations was losing its capacity to engender political transformation in the region.

While the reluctance of western powers to act against white supremacist regimes was driven by pessimism and fear of what would follow in their place, their ambiguity heightened African suspicions. In this context, armed struggle had become the normative mode of resistance in the region, fostered also by international support from independent African states, as well as the Soviet Union and China. These were, Legum argued, 'the seeds of a race war'.<sup>53</sup> But, he notes, another view would contend that the survival of the 'White Redoubt' was more likely, given evidence that regimes might adopt a more flexible approach to reach an accommodation with neighbouring African states, and thus enhance their capacity to thwart any attempts to forcibly remove them from power. Legum's gloomy prediction was that southern Africa was 'on an escalator of violence', a situation that had been tacitly accepted by the international community, but over which, it seemed, it was either unwilling or unable to act. As Scott Thomas would later suggest, the 1967 seminar had focused attention on the entanglement of western economic interests and apartheid in order to highlight – and thus counter – efforts by South Africa to entice support from African states. The 'outward' policy of South African Prime Minister B.J. Vorster had already met some success with Malawi, whose President, Hastings Banda, had become the first leader of an independent African state to visit Pretoria just months before the seminar.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, alongside its references to the international dimensions of apartheid as an abuse of human rights and a 'crime against humanity' and the entwined material interests of South Africa and western powers, the seminar provided an attempt to secure African solidarity, to legitimise armed struggle, and secure legal protection for fighters associated with exiled South African political movements. A realist account of the international politics of apartheid and white supremacy, such as Legum's, paid little attention to the ideological dimensions of a struggle cast in terms of human rights. It might, perhaps, be possible to imagine a humanitarian imperative implicit in Legum's prediction of a descent into racial conflict, but fundamentally, apartheid was a political question. As Irwin has recently suggested, the 1967 seminar represented a politicisation of the United Nations efforts at knowledge-production, with the primary result of its discussions being calls for the coordination of information and publicity designed to counter SA propaganda.<sup>55</sup> But, the seminar can be seen as a transition from nationalism to human rights as the primary focus of anti-apartheid discourse.

The final report highlighted the burgeoning violence in southern Africa, and the threat this represented both to the regimes themselves, but also to the surrounding states. Explicit discussion of perceptions that the UN no longer had a 'useful role to perform', but the main focus of that discussion was the recognition of the legitimacy of liberation movements – even

where violence was employed – and the need to continue to arouse public opinion against apartheid, racism and colonialism in southern Africa. In conclusion, it proposed that the solution to the crisis in southern Africa involved the twofold recognition of political rights of 'self-determination, freedom and independence' and the 'full application of human rights and fundamental freedoms to all'.<sup>56</sup> Within the circles of the UN at least, nationalist imperatives sat alongside universal values. The implication nevertheless remained, that human rights could only be fully achieved within a nation state governed by principles of popular sovereignty and democracy.

The seminar thus called for international recognition of the legitimacy of, and support for, liberation movements within southern Africa. It suggested that the Security Council should be ready to enforce abandonment of policies of racial discrimination, and that a mandatory arms embargo was 'imperative in order to promote a peaceful solution'. Ultimately, though, the main practical recommendations of seminar participants were focused on efforts to mobilise public opinion. The most prominent references to human rights were as instrumental to that objective, in a call to make apartheid a focus of the programmes associated with the United Nations Human Rights Year in 1968. Apartheid was thus positioned as one of the 'major obstacles' to achieving human rights. But, as Secretary General U Thant's message to the seminar showed, a general willingness to proclaim the vital necessity of 'fundamental human rights' often masked a silence around the ways that these universal values might be applied without the cooperation of the ruling authorities in individual nation states. Thant chose to focus on those 'positive gains' that the UN had fostered, such as the establishment of the Special Committee Against Apartheid, as a symbol of the 'recognition by the international community that the struggle for human equality and dignity must continue'. It seemed a weak expression of the supposed successes of an international human rights agenda. As the Tanzanian UN representative John Malecela argued, in closing the seminar, 'we came here to discuss more effective *action*'.<sup>57</sup> What action there was, however, configured anti-apartheid as a human rights issue insofar as it served the agenda of a Third World struggle for the rights of political actors over universal rights of citizenship.

As anti-apartheid was interwoven into debates around human rights in UN institutions in the late 1960s, it did so in highly particular form, as a platform for the legitimisation of armed struggle and the claims of established nationalist movements upon global sources of aid and assistance. Human rights became a token for the material benefit of liberation movements, and in particular the activities of the World Campaign for the Release of South African Political Prisoners and the African National Congress. The Kitwe seminar report appealed for financial aid and assistance 'not only as a humanitarian action but also as a demonstration of opposition to these evil policies'. Even though the appeal was somewhat diffuse, calling in general for aid directed at 'liberated areas' of southern Africa, the particular plight of political prisoners became a way of mobilising specific human rights conventions including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Racial Discrimination.<sup>58</sup>

With its specific remit, the World Campaign was able to access networks and institutions that sought to evaluate the conduct of the apartheid state against these human rights norms, for example by sending witnesses to a meeting of the Human Rights Commission's Working Party on political prisoners in London in 1968.<sup>59</sup> But it was the positioning of support for armed resistance movements within the boundaries of human rights that perhaps provides the most striking illustration of the instrumentalization of human rights in the late 1960s. At the end of July 1967, as the discussions at Kitwe were in full flow, contingents of armed South African and Zimbabwean fighters crossed into Rhodesia. Although unquestionably a military defeat with significant loss of life, the Wankie and Sipolilo campaigns marked the onset of a new phase of armed confrontation between liberation movements and the South African state.<sup>60</sup> On the international stage, they provided a new point of reference in debates around human rights, notably at the UN International Conference on Human Rights, held in Tehran in April 1968. Attending the conference as a representative of IDAF, South African exile, poet, campaigner for an international sports boycott and leading figure in the WCRSAPP, Dennis Brutus, reported that it allowed him to build contacts with officials responsible for channelling funds to IDAF as well as discuss the treatment of prisoners.<sup>61</sup> Of particular importance, though, were the references in the conference report to the rights of those fighting against 'racist regimes' in southern Africa, together with the recommendation that they should be treated as prisoners of war.<sup>62</sup> By the twentieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it was evident that the language of human rights could be considered as compatible with a rationale for armed struggle. In September 1968, the British Anti-Apartheid Movement organised a conference on 'Human Rights and the struggle against Apartheid', during which the extent of human rights abuses within South Africa were cited as justification for the turn to violence by South African liberation movements in their efforts to obtain rights and freedom.<sup>63</sup>

Recent histories of human rights have rightly noted the contingent nature of debates around human rights in the late 1960s, and the ways in which the concept was moulded to meet the particular agendas of a faction of 'non-aligned' states. The inclusion of apartheid as a central concern within this Third Worldist conception of human rights was nonetheless significant, at the very least as an indicator of the importance of apartheid as a touchstone issue. Thus, although there is no evidence of 'breakthrough' of human rights in the 1960s, the human rights language became intertwined with struggles for political power at the UN, as way of leveraging access to resources, and as legal recognition of (and protection for) armed struggles against colonialism. Most significantly, the 1960s saw the emergence of a international human rights institutions that enabled the development of transnational anti-apartheid activism. Central to this process were the UN Special Committee Against Apartheid and the UN Centre Against Apartheid, and the individual efforts of the UN official Enuga Reddy. Transnational anti-apartheid germinated in identifiable international institutions and was in many respects the crystallisation of associations generated by interactions of individuals in shared buildings, halls and seminar rooms.



This should not imply that the relationship between global anti-apartheid and global conceptions of human rights can be presented in uncomplicated terms. These rooms and the people within them mediated forms of anti-apartheid that were always subject to other agendas, other connections. For example, a glance through the signatories of the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1973, reveals (perhaps unsurprisingly) fundamental Cold War divisions. Solid support from the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, African and Asian states contrasts with no official recognition from western European states, Scandinavia, the US, Canada or Australia. The construction of global anti-apartheid, as with the wider development of human rights as a discourse of international law, was never straightforward. Anti-apartheid might be regarded, not within the framework of human rights, but as part of the process through which those rights were framed. Global anti-apartheid was not a struggle for human rights, but a space within which those struggles were defined.

### INDIVIDUAL COMPASSION AND THE BOYCOTT

In examining the operation of humanitarian and human rights discourses within anti-apartheid campaigns this chapter has provided a partial account focused on the contingencies of international politics. The political labour of contesting the legitimacy of the apartheid state, and promoting solidarity with black liberation movements often took precedence over efforts to define principles of rights and duty. Human rights language was moulded to serve the anti-apartheid cause. But, we have seen how institutions established to coordinate international anti-apartheid efforts were in themselves spaces in which human rights were defined and re-defined. Moreover, these were places where globalisation happened, the physical locations where 'global' and 'local' were connected. The concept of human rights was never an abstract or universal reference point for anti-apartheid, but a crystallisation of social interactions. Debates around apartheid and anti-apartheid within organisations such as the UN, in diplomatic missions, in anti-apartheid movements and (although much more work is required in this area) within business, financial and trading networks constituted the ground out of which global conceptions of rights and humanity were formed.

Mapping out the particular spaces in which anti-apartheid efforts were conceptualised, coordinated and actively undertaken is therefore an essential task. It is tempting to suggest that this will reveal that there is not, and never has been, a gap between the global and the local. It would be rash to make such a claim, but it directs us towards the necessary task of sketching the ways in which activists themselves conceptualised and defined the global and local configurations of anti-apartheid. The period between 1964 and 1976 witnessed increased efforts at international diplomacy (and coordinated international efforts at isolation), which suggests that the issue of apartheid and the struggle against apartheid was always a global affair, or more importantly, it was conceived as such by key participants. The pressing question, therefore, is how far were ordinary and everyday forms of everyday anti-apartheid embodiments of a sense of 'being global'.

The extent to which we might regard humanitarian duty or human rights ideals as a substrate for anti-apartheid nevertheless remains open to debate. The examples examined in this chapter suggest that these notions of duty and rights were constructed through anti-apartheid activity as much as they were constitutive of the movement itself. But, the broader conceptual and ideological frameworks remain significant, insofar as they were understood in relation to the political praxis of the movement and the ways in which activists engaged in ordinary, everyday acts of solidarity. In Britain, consumer boycotts formed a major part of organised anti-apartheid activity alongside its efforts to mobilise support for official sanctions in the late 1980s, just as they had provided an initial focus of the movement in the late 1950s. While records show that the boycott – or ‘peoples’ sanctions’ – was typically framed as a practical exercise targeting direct connections with South African business, campaigners also cited moral justifications motivated by human compassion. In its 1988 report, the AAM described a candle-lit vigil held outside the Tesco supermarket in Brent, north London, where local activists ‘explained to shoppers the connection between boycotting South African goods and campaigning against the detention and torture of children.’<sup>64</sup> Shortly before the report was published, the convenor of the movement’s Consumer Boycott Committee set out the value of framing the campaign in humanitarian terms:

While guarding against sentimentalising or infantilising the struggle, I think we must make sure our basic humanitarian message gets over at an immediate emotional level far more effectively ... For my money I would wish to see popular agitational boycott leaflets as well as the leaflet being currently printed which gives detailed information on apartheid produce, which stress the links with children. We know that the general public responds to general calls about suffering in Africa. We know the children of southern Africa are suffering appallingly ... We must link very effectively the issue of starvation of black people with the obscenity of the export of prime foods to this country by the white racist regime.<sup>65</sup>

This candid summary, set out in a letter to the AAM women’s committee, was coupled with a call to address an apparent ‘gender gap’ in public support for sanctions. As the movement laid plans for a major boycott campaign (launched in 1989), gendered assumptions around the potential impact of humanitarian discourse on women’s engagement with the boycott reveal ways in which practical efforts to attack apartheid were bound up with, not only generalised and universalist notions of humanity, but also embodied practices that linked consumers with producers in ‘transnational food commodity cultures.’<sup>66</sup>

Whatever the nature of the ideological glue that bound global anti-apartheid activists in solidarity with South Africans, the crux of the issue was that it prompted them to imagine the ways in which they were implicated in the injustice of apartheid. Participation in the consumer boycott marked recognition of the relationship between economic ties and the maintenance of racial injustice under apartheid. Not buying South African arose from this act of recognition. To refuse South African grapes became an act of sacrifice, atonement for association with the systems of racial injustice and colonial power that western consumers

might recognise. Does this present anti-apartheid as a form of co-dependence between activists around the globe and the objects of their concern in South Africa? We might, at least, begin to recognise the need to assess the relationship between anti-apartheid 'solidarity' and the liberation movements in ways that move beyond international institutions. Histories of anti-apartheid, boycotts and ethical consumption prompt new questions about the nature of global efforts to lay bare the realities of racial injustice. But they also shape the ways in which we might grasp 'how humanitarianism must come to terms with its relation to human rights'.<sup>67</sup>

### CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have suggested that a humanitarian worldview was critical to the development of conceptions of anti-apartheid activism as a global enterprise. Histories of the movement should therefore take account of the ways in which notions of victimhood, crisis, and definitions of human needs shaped and informed international responses to apartheid. Moreover, international solidarity against apartheid relied on the effective reconciliation of global and local issues; on the capacity of activists to imagine themselves as part of a global endeavour that was at the same time connected to local concerns and everyday experiences. For some, particularly in Britain and Scandinavia, humanitarian ideals underpinned perceptions of the global relevance of local campaigns. Although by no means universal – racial solidarity and socialist internationalism were equally significant – humanitarian notions of duty, responsibility and connectedness were a foundation for Universalist readings of the struggle for racial justice and democracy in South Africa.

Humanitarian conceptions of universal humanity became particularly compelling where discussions of apartheid related to notions of social and political crisis. Alongside conceptions of humanitarian need, anti-apartheid discourses were often inflected with the language of human rights. This does not, however, suggest that anti-apartheid should be understood as a human rights movement; the forms of rights invoked in the cause of the struggle against apartheid were contingent and contextual. But, the development of anti-apartheid in specific spaces of political interaction, including the United Nations and its associated bodies, but also other supranational organisations such as the European Community, can be linked to the development of utopian human rights agendas. Human rights were significant in terms of the material spaces in which processes of globalization were enacted – from UNESCO seminar rooms to shareholder meetings of transnational corporations. In this sense, anti-apartheid was a site for the construction of a global discourse of human rights.

Ultimately, though, ideological notions of universal human experience and the global relevance of anti-apartheid were mediated through the actions of individual campaigners. Very few people who felt a sense of solidarity and engagement with the struggles of South Africans were enmeshed in networks of transnational movements or international diplomacy. Individual actions, especially the everyday forms of political activism embodied in the boycott, were at the heart of anti-apartheid practice and the primary ways in which the movement established connections between the global and the local and enacted 'solidarity'.

Often, it seems that the ideological principles that underpinned such actions were un-stated, and by the 1980s, the ‘anti-apartheid cause’ was justification in itself. But, evidence suggests that anti-apartheid organisers recognised the value of humanitarian ideals in promoting boycott campaigns; anti-apartheid boycotts, like their anti-slavery forebears, were built on the connections between rich consumers and oppressed producers embodied in material commodities. The Cape apple came to stand for structures of global economic inequality and racial injustice, a tangible presence that connected humanitarian sentiment to its distant objects of concern. The search for the ideological foundations of global anti-apartheid can provide no more than a partial sketch of the histories of the movement around the world. But, a closer examination of the forms of agency the movement embodied might just allow us to illuminate the ways in which anti-apartheid and the universalising visions it mobilised were incorporated into a politics of the everyday set within an imagined global community.

### Abbreviations

IDAF International Defence and Aid Fund

UN United Nations

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

WCRSAPP World Campaign for the Release of South African Political Prisoners

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- <sup>3</sup> Huddleston, *Anglo-Tanzanian Relations*, p. 8. On Huddleston's experience in Tanzania, see also Robin Denniston, *Trevor Huddleston: A Life* (London: Macmillan, 1999).
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