



Skinner, R. A. (2014). Struggles on the page: British Antiapartheid and Radical Scholarship. *Radical History Review*, 2014(119), 216-231.  
<https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2402120>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):  
[10.1215/01636545-2402120](https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2402120)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)  
PDF-document

© 2014 Duke University Press, published in final form at DOI: 10.1215/01636545-2402120.

## University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

### General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:  
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

## Struggles on the page: British anti-apartheid and radical scholarship

Rob Skinner (Bristol)

The history of international anti-apartheid activism might seem at first glance to be a straightforward account of one of the most significant solidarity campaigns in modern history. Parallels can be drawn with nineteenth century movements for the abolition of slavery, setting anti-apartheid as a strand in a ‘vital thread’ of radicalism stretching back through two centuries.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging these deep historical foundations is, indeed, vital. But, when addressing the place of anti-apartheid in the wider context of modern global history, historians of the movement have tended to narrow their focus to its more immediate historical contexts. Is the anti-apartheid movement best considered, as Ryan Irwin’s recent account suggests, in the frame of international politics?<sup>2</sup> Should anti-apartheid activism be approached as a form of *domestic* political protest, situation primarily within the political culture of particular nation-states? Is it best understood as an *international* tributary of South African liberation movements, or a *transnational* movement whose activity eroded the boundaries between states and nations and became an expression of something more universal? These alternate frameworks are, of course, by no means mutually exclusive, and it can be argued that the movement was an assembly of multiple and overlapping fields of political activity, rather than an endeavour that should be set within particular spatial or territorial frameworks. That said, this article combines a historiographical overview and historical case study that addresses the transnational influences that shaped histories of the movement in Britain.

Histories of international anti-apartheid movements can, in broad terms, be situated at points along a continuum between empirical and theoretical approaches. Roger Fieldhouse’s overview of the British AAM falls into the former category, providing a highly detailed account of the inner workings of the movement, although it is less successful as an analysis of the movement’s wider significance.<sup>3</sup> A more rounded and carefully considered presentation of the contours of British anti-apartheid has been provided by Christabel Gurney, in her various studies of the movement, including a general overview for the South African Democracy Education Trust’s *Road to Democracy* series.<sup>4</sup> The “International Solidarity” volume of the series provides probably the most

---

<sup>1</sup> Shula Marks, ‘Half-ally, half-untouchable at the same time’: Britain and South Africa since 1959’, paper presented at symposium to mark the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, South Africa House, London, 25-26 June 1999

<sup>2</sup> Ryan Irwin, *Gordian Knot : Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.).

<sup>3</sup> Roger Fieldhouse, *Anti-apartheid: a History of the Movement in Britain* (London: Merlin Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Christabel Gurney, “‘A Great Cause’: The Origins of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, June 1959-March 1960,”

comprehensive overview of the global reach of anti-apartheid activities, drawing together accounts of movements in diverse locations from Europe and North America through to the Eastern Bloc, China and Cuba. As a global history of anti-apartheid, the SADET volume provides an invaluable introduction, although, again, the tendency is to consider the significance of the movement from within, in terms of its “success” in contributing to the dismantling of the apartheid state in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup>

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks drawn from the political and social sciences have more directly informed other historical accounts. The emergence of anti-apartheid thus signals the construction of “new norms, institutions and practices” in the wake of a series of social transformations evident in the post-World War II period, including the decline of industrial economies in the west and an attendant shift from movements centred on material interests towards movements oriented more towards the formation of identities and production of new forms of meaning.<sup>6</sup> Other studies, such as Donald Culverson’s examination of the history of anti-apartheid activism in the US, have situated anti-apartheid movements within specific political cultures, placing emphasis upon a “political process model” of social movement activity.<sup>7</sup> More recently, accounts of anti-apartheid in the United States have established the interconnections between the national movement and the wider world. Francis Njubi Nesbitt, for example, in his study of African-American anti-apartheid activism, demonstrates the role played by pan-African networks in generating and sustaining anti-apartheid in the US.<sup>8</sup> Nesbitt’s study reflects the ongoing interest in transnational approaches to history, situating the history of anti-apartheid within the development of a global movement politics during the latter decades of the twentieth century.

In Keck and Sikkink’s oft-cited study of “advocacy networks”, anti-apartheid activism has been considered a paradigm example of a transnational movement.<sup>9</sup> Worldwide protest against apartheid appears to coincide with their “boomerang” model of transnational politics, in which the

---

*Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no. 1 (March 1, 2000): 123–144; ‘The 1970s: The Anti-Apartheid Movement’s Difficult Decade’. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35, no. 2 (June 1, 2009): 471–487; “In the heart of the beast: The British Anti-Apartheid Movement, 1959–1994,” in *The road to democracy in South Africa Vol. 3 Part 1, International solidarity*, ed. South African Democracy Education Trust (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Houston, Gregory. “International solidarity: Introduction,” in *The road to democracy in South Africa Vol. 3 Part 1, International solidarity*, ed. South African Democracy Education Trust (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2008): 37–8.

<sup>6</sup> C. Jennett and R. G. Stewart, eds. *Politics of the Future - The role of Social Movements* (Melbourne: Macmillan Australia, 1989): 4. See also Jennett’s study of Australian anti-apartheid movements in the same volume, C. Jennett, “Signals to South Africa: The Australian Anti-Apartheid Movement,” in Jennett and Stewart, *Politics of the Future*.

<sup>7</sup> D. R. Culverson, *Contesting Apartheid - US Activism, 1960-1987*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Francis Njubi Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions: African Americans Against Apartheid, 1946-1994* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Keck, Margaret E., and Kathryn Sikkink. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998.

contentions of a particular group, blocked within its nation-state, are given authority via the actions of solidarity movements and networks in a global arena. For Hakan Thorn, in his comparative study of anti-apartheid in Britain and Sweden, the transnational nature of anti-apartheid raises questions about the ways in which scholars understand the formation of “new social movements”. In particular, he argues the necessity to situate these movements within the historical experience of *decolonisation*. By so doing, Thorn asserts, we may begin to escape the Eurocentric implications and narrowly national focus of social movement theories which lead to the segregation of anti-apartheid into two distinct forms. For example, the analytical separation of anti-apartheid activism in Australia into a western “new social movement” and an African “historical movement”, needs to be re-framed by a post-colonial perspective that demonstrates how “the legacy of colonialism and racism in different contexts and through different practices might be re-articulated, negotiated, transformed, and sometimes even transgressed.”<sup>10</sup> However, even if analyses take account of the dynamics of colonialism and decolonisation, we are still left with the problematic task of squaring the globalizing ideologies of transnational networks – solidarity, universal human rights and democracy - with a struggle for national liberation. Taking this approach places primary emphasis on the networks of activists that connected South African, wider African, and international agendas in a movement that could be understood as a foundation of an emergent global civil society. Anti-apartheid activism thus becomes a conduit for a re-framing political participation beyond the nation-state, on the promise of a fundamental set of universal values formulated as human rights. As such, the communication of values and the transmission of ideas rest at the heart of anti-apartheid activism.

International anti-apartheid movements were concerned as much with proposition as opposition; they were far more than reactive rejoinders against an all-encompassing system of social and political control; these campaigns also entailed struggles over knowledge. This article seeks to highlight the ways in which anti-apartheid activism has engaged in framing public understanding of the idea of apartheid. Using the British African solidarity movement as an example, it addresses the mutually-constitutive relationship between the anti-apartheid movement and radical scholarship on South Africa. From the emergence of international responses to apartheid that began in the 1950s, activist research was at the leading edge of organised opposition to South African government policies. Britain’s colonial history and status as a place of exile for English-speaking opponents of the South African regime naturally made it a central node in the intellectual production of anti-

---

<sup>10</sup> Thörn, Håkan. “The Meaning(s) of Solidarity: Narratives of Anti-Apartheid Activism,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35, no. 2 (June 1, 2009): 435; see also Jennet, ‘Signals to South Africa’; Thörn, Håkan. *Anti-apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

apartheid literature. There, organisations such as the African Bureau and Defence and Aid sponsored scholarship that sought both to demonstrate the impact of apartheid on the South African population and to counter efforts by the State Information Bureau to promote a benign image of apartheid society.

In Britain, anti-apartheid activism emerged in the late 1950s as debate around the moral legitimacy of colonial rule converged with rising support for the claims of anti-colonial nationalism.<sup>11</sup> At the outset, critics of apartheid drew attention to the ways in which the South African policies of racial separation contravened the precepts of imperial responsibility, and cast the rigid maintenance of racial hierarchies as a violation of the principles of “trusteeship” and development.<sup>12</sup> As popular resistance to apartheid grew in South Africa, these moral foundations of anti-apartheid were interwoven with a growing sense that the grievances and demands of the Congress movement were legitimate, and African nationalism was worthy of support. By the early 1960s, diffuse anti-apartheid sentiment had begun to crystallise in formal organisations such as the Boycott Movement and the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), launched in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960. Recent scholarship on the history of these movements has focussed attention on the normative functions of anti-apartheid, the ideological struggles with which they engaged, their institutional character and status as forms of social movement and transnational network.<sup>13</sup> These accounts have provided a framework around which the global history of anti-apartheid can begin to coalesce, but there has been far less emphasis on the conflicts over ideas and knowledge that shaped the global movement’s political and social character.<sup>14</sup>

During these years, Anti-apartheid activists became highly influential in shaping political and

---

<sup>11</sup> On anti-colonial nationalism and Britain, see: Howe, Stephen. *Anticolonialism in British Politics: the Left and the End of Empire, 1918-1964*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Rich, Paul B. *Prospero’s Return? : Historical Essays on Race, Culture, and British Society*. (London: Hansib, 1994); Schwarz, Bill. *Memories of Empire. Vol. 1, The white man’s world*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Skinner, Rob. “The Moral Foundations of British Anti-Apartheid Activism, 1946–1960.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35, no. 2 (June 1, 2009): 399–416.

<sup>13</sup> On the history of anti-apartheid in Britain, see Fieldhouse, *Anti-apartheid*; Gurney, “‘A Great Cause’: The Origins of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, June 1959-March 1960,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no. 1 (March 1, 2000): 123–144; Christabel Gurney, “In the heart of the beast: The British Anti-Apartheid Movement, 1959–1994,” in *The road to democracy in South Africa Vol. 3 Part 1, International solidarity*, ed. South African Democracy Education Trust (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2008); Skinner, Rob. *The Foundations of Anti-Apartheid: Liberal Humanitarianism and Transnational Activism in Britain and the United States, c. 1919-64*. Basingstoke: (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). For histories of international anti-apartheid set in the framework of social movement theories, see: Culverson, Donald R. *Contesting Apartheid: U.S. Activism, 1960-1987*. (Boulder, Col.: Westview, 1999); Klotz, Audie. *Norms in International Relations: the Struggle Against Apartheid*. (Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1995); Hostetter, David L. *Movement Matters: American Antiapartheid Activism and the Rise of Multicultural Politics*. (London: Routledge, 2006); Thörn, Håkan. *Anti-apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Aspects of these conflicts in the United States have been explored in Francis Njubi Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions: African Americans Against Apartheid, 1946-1994* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

historical scholarship, both within the academy and the wider public. Individuals such as Ronald Segal, in his role as editor of the Penguin African Library, helped shape the ways in which the nature of apartheid was communicated to a wider public – and in Segal’s case, helped to provide a platform for radical views on South African history and politics, including Govan Mbeki’s *Peasants’ Revolt* and Brian Bunting’s *Rise of the South African Reich*. This article explores the historical development of radical scholarship and anti-apartheid, and addresses how that legacy now shapes the way in which the history of the movement is being configured. It sets more recent accounts of the history of anti-apartheid alongside this tradition of radical scholarship, and addressing the ways in which the history is being shaped by the tradition: to what extent might the history of global anti-apartheid be enriched, or constrained, by the contributions of activists themselves?

Radical anti-apartheid activists became highly influential in shaping political and historical knowledge about South Africa within the academy and, more pertinently, for a wider public. Furthermore, in the case of the recent development of the history of global anti-apartheid, activist scholarship has become the activists’ history. What kind of history is being presented, and does it present a challenge for future historians of one of the most significant global movements of the late twentieth century?

### **From ‘development’ to ‘rebels’**

In Britain, some of the earliest critiques of the race policies developed by the post-1948 Nationalist government were intertwined with an emerging literature extolling the virtues of colonial ‘development’. An archetypal example of the genre is the Penguin Special, *Attitude to Africa*, co-authored by one of the leading development economists of the day, W. Arthur Lewis, alongside the Africa editor of the *Observer*, Colin Legum, the historian Martin Wight and the anti-apartheid cleric Michael Scott.<sup>15</sup> It presented the case for an extensive programme of social and economic development, while outlining for the general reader the challenges for policymakers in Africa. The authors described the rapid changes that had occurred in Asia following the Second World War, arguing that the “three cornered struggle between nationalism, Communism, and Western interests” in Asia would inevitably spread to Africa.<sup>16</sup> The British government was thus required to demonstrate to Africa, through its policies, that democracy was a valid and more attractive alternative to communism in Africa. The major challenge to Britain was the tension between two

---

<sup>15</sup> W.A. Lewis, Michael Scott, Martin Wight and Colin Legum, *Attitude to Africa*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-16.

emergent and conflicting nationalisms. On one hand, a “rising tide” of African nationalism based upon “an emotional affinity ... on grounds of colour” was spreading across the continent.<sup>17</sup> On the other white settlers watched the emergence of African nationalism with increasing fear and a determination to maintain their hold on political power. The authors cite Bechuanaland (Botswana) as the primary example of the benefits of a collaborative policy of development and education; although their optimism was tempered by a perception that the policies of settler nationalism posed a danger for the British developmental programme.

For Michael Scott, this danger was represented by the spectre of apartheid, which had begun to loom over discussions of development policy in southern Africa. Conjuring an image of an African population crushed between the millstones of residential and economic segregation, Scott’s treatise positioned British efforts in Bechaunaland as a model for development-based intervention that could provide a counter to the effects of apartheid. However, despite references to “fundamental” human rights and post-war development projects, the substance of Scott’s critique of apartheid resonated more strongly with inter-war liberalism than the radicalism of the liberation struggle. The roots of the problem lay, Scott implied, in a migrant labour system that had rapidly undermined the “tribal system” that had provided “cohesion and social order”. The solution, he argued, was dependent upon the restoration of “a faith that can be translated into practical action”, ultimately a resuscitated form of Christian mission, driven by individuals with “a vocation to disinterested service in Africa”.<sup>18</sup> It is telling that Scott, who was on the verge of being banned from returning to South Africa, and had built up a deserved reputation as a critic of South African race policies, appeared unable to articulate a radical alternative to the paternalist discourses of South African liberalism. His personal trajectory from covert supporter of the Communist party to avowed anti-Communist goes some way to explaining the apparent contradiction between the strength of his opposition to apartheid and the weakness of his model for change. But it also reveals something of the trajectory of international anti-apartheid activism over the course of the 1950s.

The paucity of Scott’s historical analysis of southern Africa is striking. He failed to elaborate a sense of historical development that extended greatly beyond the characterization of the post-war years as a moment of epochal change, ‘the beginning of the era of the agricultural revolution in Africa’.<sup>19</sup> Scott’s view of history in southern Africa was that of witness rather than analyst. His model of historical change centred on sweeping teleological assumptions shaped largely by

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 114; 144.

<sup>19</sup> Lewis, et. al, *Attitude to Africa*, p. 109

contemporary anthropology and social science. Africa was, in his eyes, living through an era of rapid change, prompting the breakdown of “tribal life”. In general, his focus was on the moment, rather than the past. Scott’s reluctance to historicize contemporary South African issues is in part explained by the strong anti-communist stance he took from the mid-1940s. Having had close connections with Communist movements in India and Britain in the 1930s and 1940s (he discussed his plans to travel to South Africa in 1943 with Harry Pollitt of the Communist Party of Great Britain), Scott had turned firmly away from the Party by the time he returned to Britain.<sup>20</sup> His base of support in London thus came from within radical non-Communist anti-colonial networks. These included the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), a campaign group who had been closely-connected with the inter-war peace movement, who published, ‘Shadow over Africa’, one of the first political pamphlets authored by Scott on his return to Britain in 1949. From 1950, the General Secretary of the UDC was the journalist Basil Davidson, who guided the organisation to focus greater priority on African affairs. The position of the UDC on Africa paralleled Scott’s prescriptions in *Attitude to Africa*, namely that development was a necessary protection against reactionary black nationalism.<sup>21</sup>

Davidson outlined his own position on South Africa in his 1952 book, *Report on Southern Africa*, in which he predicted that, without real political reforms and economic development programmes, South Africa was destined for violent racial struggle and international isolation. ‘Already’ he asserted, ‘the racial oppression of South Africa has become a bye-word on the shores of the Red Sea, of the Mediterranean, of the middle Atlantic’.<sup>22</sup> Davidson’s argument has been, somewhat reductively, characterised as a ‘classic’ moral position against colonialism.<sup>23</sup> His historical analysis of the social and economic transformations that had shaped twentieth century South Africa appeared underpinned by a confidence in the ultimate inevitability that economic modernization would result in the liberalisation of race relations. ‘In the long run’, Davidson asserted, ‘industrialisation will produce the conditions for racial equality without which South Africa cannot survive’.<sup>24</sup> Davidson’s significance as a historian is rooted not in his commentary on South Africa, however, but his pioneering role in shaping an Africanist history in the late 1950s and 1960s. Along with his UDC colleague Thomas Hodgkin, Davidson began in the 1950s to elaborate a new history of Africa, one that placed emphasis on the depth, diversity and complexity of historical experiences on the

---

<sup>20</sup> File on Michael Guthrie Scott, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), Records of the Security Service, KV 2/2053

<sup>21</sup> Howe, p. 192-3

<sup>22</sup> Davidson, Basil. *Report on Southern Africa*. (London: Cape, 1952): 199

<sup>23</sup> Howe, *Anticolonialism*, p. 195

<sup>24</sup> Davidson, *Report*, p. 196.



continent.<sup>25</sup>

Davidson, who would become a major contributor to the Penguin African Library, was a significant influence on the reconfiguration of attitudes to Africa that gathered pace during the second half of the 1950s. Whereas African nationalism had been a subject of concern and a potential danger, commentators and activists came to argue that concern for distant others in Africa should acknowledge the legitimacy of anti-colonial nationalism. This political position, which set its advocates against more the cautious liberal viewpoint, nevertheless continued to place emphasis on the need for development and ‘civilisation’. But it was also cast as a moral position, set within the frameworks of the new global definitions of sovereign rights and self-determination that had taken shape in the postwar world.

The moral case against apartheid, indicting the policy as contrary to international norms, was a powerful tool for the mobilisation of popular anti-apartheid sentiment in 1950s Britain. The most well-known expression of this sentiment was the Anglican priest Trevor Huddleston’s 1956 book *Naught for Your Comfort*, a modern-day missionary account of life under apartheid and unstinting condemnation of its social and spiritual basis.<sup>26</sup> Like Scott, Huddleston’s rejection of apartheid was rooted in a Christian moral framework; his reading of the South African crisis was shaped by his conviction that, in fighting the moral evil of racial domination, theology had primacy over ideology. But for Huddleston, the moral imperative to stand against apartheid impelled the Church to take a prophetic – and thus political – stand. Beyond this, Huddleston’s radicalism was rooted in a deep sentimental attachment to the people and places to which he had devoted his spiritual and physical efforts.<sup>27</sup> In his writing, Huddleston inscribed the struggle against apartheid as a personal experience, a shared human story. In so doing, he constructed a landscape in which the western observer could empathise with the African nationalist. Through Huddleston, anti-apartheid became an act of alliance with, rather than mere concern for “the African”.

Huddleston’s fiercely personal account of apartheid’s iniquities set the scene for an autobiographical genre that became one of the more authoritative modes of anti-apartheid writing. Critical accounts of apartheid published in Europe and North America increasingly took the form of personal testimonies bearing witness to a descent into political crisis, authored by a developing body of

---

<sup>25</sup> Hodgkin, Thomas. *Nationalism in Colonial Africa*. (New York: New York University Press, 1957); Davidson, Basil. *The African Awakening*. (London: Cape, 1955).

<sup>26</sup> Trevor Huddleston, *Naught for Your Comfort* (London: Collins, 1956).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

African specialists in the international media or – often more persuasively – by a burgeoning array of South African exiles, whose presence in Europe and North America increased as the apartheid State took on ever more repressive means to subdue internal political dissent. Huddleston’s depiction of Sophiatown as akin to an Umbrian village said much about his heartfelt sense of connection with the place and its people; it also spoke of the bitterly romantic vision of the exile. Soon after Huddleston’s powerful account was published, he gave his seal of approval to E.S. Sachs’ account of his time as a trade union organiser within the South African garment industry, *Rebels Daughters*.<sup>29</sup> Sachs, who had arrived in the UK – for some, a premature exile – in 1954, had sought to engage the British trade union movement in active support of “non-white” unionism in South Africa, only to fall foul of the cautious conservatism of figures such as TUC leader Vincent Tewsen.<sup>30</sup> By the time of the publication of *Rebels Daughters*, Sachs had ceased his attempts to set up a Fund for African Democracy and had taken up the offer of a research fellowship at Manchester University. From Scott’s treatise on “Britain’s responsibilities” to Sachs’ exile history of South African radicalism, we can begin to discern a shift in perceptions of the agencies of change in southern Africa: from metropolitan guidance to the espousal of indigenous resistance. This transformation was concomitant with a shift towards the call for ‘solidarity’ and alignment with nationalism in Africa that became embedded in the discourse of the international anti-apartheid movement.

### **The Penguin African Library - Africanist history and the politics of liberation**

The British Anti-Apartheid Movement was formally established in 1960 during the crisis that followed the Sharpeville shootings and the subsequent suppression of internal resistance to apartheid with the banning of the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan-African Congress (PAC). The AAM was formed as a permanent successor to the Boycott Movement that had been launched in mid-1959 as a response to the call from the ANC for an international boycott of South African products.<sup>31</sup> While public engagement with anti-apartheid campaigns might be measured by the success of the Boycott Movement and AAM in mobilising opinion in Britain, any assessment of the public profile of anti-apartheid must also take into account a range of factors beyond the organised endeavours of the movement itself. These included the extension of anti-apartheid campaigns into party political discourse, with the issue taken up with increased verve by the Labour Party in the early 1960s. The party highlighted misgivings over Britain’s trade relations with South

---

<sup>29</sup> E.S. Sachs, *Rebels daughters* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1957).

<sup>30</sup> On the TUC and apartheid in the 1950s, see John Major, “The Trades Union Congress and Apartheid, 1948-1970,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 31, no. 3 (2005): 477–493.

<sup>31</sup> Gurney, “A Great Cause”; Skinner, *Foundations*, pp. 162-170.

Africa, and its lucrative defence contracts in particular, and took the question up as a campaign issue in the months leading up to the 1964 election.<sup>32</sup> More broadly, though, popular engagement with anti-apartheid embodied the anti-Establishment values and identity of a new generation of social movement activists. Moreover, it reflected a burgeoning interest in African affairs that both encouraged and was shaped by popular publishers such as Penguin.

Penguin had from the outset sought to address political and social issues, which after 1945 included a developing interest in African issues, embodied in the development-oriented West African series, launched in 1953. It was not until the early 1960s that Penguin began to promote more radical anti-apartheid views, which came as a result of the collaboration between South African exiles and Tony Godwin, the publisher's dynamic, bohemian (and somewhat abrasive) General Editor. Godwin's connections with counter-cultural London and a "radical spectrum of left opinion", resulted in Penguin publications being mobilised, in the words of one commentator as a "branch of campaigning journalism".<sup>33</sup> This new agenda accompanied the transformation of public intellectual life in Britain in the early 1960s, characterised by the foundation of a series of new universities between 1961 and 1965. Under Godwin, Penguin positioned itself as a popular vehicle for the scholarship that emerged from these new institutions; the universities became a fertile ground, whose "campuses were trawled for aspirant academics eager to reform the intellectual agenda and turn a shapely sentence between strongly coloured covers".<sup>34</sup>

It was in this context that Godwin came into contact with the South African activist and editor Ronald Segal in 1961. Segal had travelled to Britain the previous year, having left South Africa with the ANC leader Oliver Tambo in the aftermath of Sharpeville. He had already come to prominence as the founder and editor of *Africa South*, an independent, centre-left journal that presented critical examinations of the policies of apartheid as well as broader commentaries on colonialism, African history and literature.<sup>35</sup> Upon arrival in London, Segal quickly became involved with anti-apartheid activism, taking particular interest in promoting economic sanctions against South Africa. He initially continued the publication of *Africa South* in exile, but within a year the enterprise had run into serious financial difficulties. At this point, Godwin proposed that Segal instead run a new series

---

<sup>32</sup> Although in power, Wilson's government was more equivocal about trade relations with South Africa. See for example Lodge, Tom. *Sharpeville: An Apartheid Massacre and Its Consequences*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 224-5; Skinner, *Foundations*, p. 188.

<sup>33</sup> Blackburn "Penguin Books", p. 236; Lewis, *Penguin Special*, p. 347.

<sup>34</sup> Rylance, Rick. 'Reading with a Mission: The Public Sphere of Penguin Books.' *Critical Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2005): 59.

<sup>35</sup> Segal, Ronald. *Into exile*. (London: Cape, 1963).

of books on Africa for Penguin.<sup>36</sup> The Penguin African Library (PAL) was launched in 1962, its initial titles including a sketch of contemporary African leaders by Segal himself, and the series' most commercially successful title, the *Short History of Africa*, co-authored by John Fage and Roland Oliver.<sup>37</sup>

Penguin also published a number of special publications on the subject of apartheid in the early 1960s, including, *Guilty Land*, the 1962 account by Patrick van Rensburg, the South African Liberal Party organiser who had played a central role in the Boycott Movement in London in 1959.<sup>38</sup> Then, in 1964, Penguin agreed to publish the collected papers from the first major international conference on sanctions against South Africa, for which Segal was one of the key organisers.<sup>39</sup> Delegates were drawn from a broad range of the political spectrum, as well as academic specialists in legal and economic aspects of sanctions. The South African delegation, however, included a number of leading members of the South African Communist Party for whom London had become a hub of exile activity.<sup>40</sup> Segal would draw on this pool of radical activists in securing a series of publications for the Penguin African Library.

In 1964, just as he began his prison sentence alongside Nelson Mandela on Robben Island, Penguin published Govan Mbeki's account of the Pondoland uprising, and forceful condemnation of the apartheid state's Bantustan policy, *The Peasant's Revolt*. Initially conceived as a handbook for African National Congress organisers, the book instead provided the first major critique of the grand vision of "separate development" elaborated under the oversight of Hendrik Verwoerd, first as Minister of Native Affairs and then, from 1958, as Prime Minister. But, as a long-time communist, Mbeki's interpretation of apartheid rested not on moral condemnation, but on a materialist reading of the Bantustan policy and its functional relationship with South African capitalism – in his eyes, the "fraud" of "separate development" was revealed in the ways in which industrial development was encouraged only insofar as it supported labour migrancy, forcing African workers "to pay the costs of building the new capitalist empire of Afrikaerdom".<sup>41</sup> Beyond this, Mbeki's focus on peasant resistance set his book within an emerging literature on the role of the African peasantry in a supposed process of "modernization", which identified the rural masses as a powerful site of radical opposition to colonialism and a fundamental force in the shaping of

<sup>36</sup> Hare, Steve, ed. *Penguin portrait: Allen Lane and the Penguin editors, 1935-1970*. (London: Penguin, 1995): 283

<sup>37</sup> Segal, Ronald. *African Profiles*. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1962); Oliver, Roland, and J. D. Fage. *A Short History of Africa*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962).

<sup>38</sup> Van Rensburg, Patrick. *Guilty Land*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962).

<sup>39</sup> Fieldhouse, *Anti-Apartheid*: pp. 49, 59

<sup>40</sup> Ellis, Stephen, and Tsepo Sechaba. *Comrades Against Apartheid: the ANC & the South African Communist Party in Exile*. (London: James Currey, 1992): 40

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 88

national identity.<sup>42</sup>

In his preface to Mbeki's study, Segal described the policy as a method of "turning the tumult of African struggle against white rule into the safe manageable sluices of tribal contest and conflict."<sup>43</sup> Again, Segal's radical instincts were watered down in the editorial process. While the published version of his preface is forthright in its opposition to apartheid, an original version – sadly purged from the archive – prompted Tony Godwin to cable Segal, stating that his initial draft was "too strident and too partisan" and requesting a "more moderate" introductory comment.<sup>44</sup> In a subsequent letter, Godwin explained that, in his view, "one of the great strengths of the Penguin African Library has been ... the balance and moderation of tone throughout".<sup>45</sup> In this assessment, Godwin included Brian Bunting's *The Rise of the South African Reich*, a controversial and highly partisan interpretation of South African history.

The decision to accept the book from Bunting - son of one of the founders of the South African Communist Party – was in itself a statement of Penguin's preparedness to engage with, and provide a platform for, individuals whose voice had been suppressed by the South African government. Subject to banning orders since the early 1950s, Bunting was under house arrest when his book was accepted – prompting an internal memo informing staff that correspondence should be despatched "in plain envelopes with no Penguin on them".<sup>46</sup> In 1963, he left South Africa and set up home in north London, where he had completed work on the book – exploiting, as Denis Herbstein recalled in his obituary, the resources of the library of the South African embassy.<sup>47</sup> As Segal's preface suggested, Bunting's first hand experience of the increasingly authoritarian measures employed by the South African government to silence opposition gave credibility to his attempt to equate the apartheid state with the Third Reich. Using brief quotations from Adolf Hitler as epigraphs to a number of chapters, the book follows a relentless path through the contours of the apartheid system, drawing parallels with the Nazi past all the while. "South Africa is not yet Nazi Germany", Bunting states in his concluding chapter, before making clear his belief that the distinction was maintained by only the thinnest of margins by asserting that "it needs only the whiff of a crisis for White South Africa to throw aside its remaining civilized pretensions".<sup>48</sup> In case the casual reader was left unaware of the author's sentiments, its swastika-emblazoned cover emphatically reinforced the

<sup>42</sup> John Lonsdale, "The Emergence of African Nations: A Historiographical Analysis," *African Affairs*, 67, no. 266 (January 1, 1968): 23-25.

<sup>43</sup> Govan Mbeki, *South Africa: the peasant's revolt* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964): 7.

<sup>44</sup> Godwin to Segal, 13 May 1964, UOB, Penguin Archives, DM1107/AP9.

<sup>45</sup> Godwin to Segal, 14 May 1964, UOB Penguin Archives, DM1107/AP9.

<sup>46</sup> Internal memo, 16 November 1962, UOB, Penguin Archives, DM1107/AP12.

<sup>47</sup> Denis Herbstein, "Brian Bunting," *The Guardian*, 9 July 2008.

<sup>48</sup> Brian Bunting, *The Rise of the South African Reich* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964): 317.

message. Despite Tony Godwin's later protestations, this was by no means a non-partisan examination of apartheid.

Given the book's partisan tone, reviewers - even when disposed to be sympathetic to Bunting's argument - were quick to question whether this undermined its authority. George Doxey, writing in the *International Journal*, described the title alone as "unnecessarily sensational" and dismissed the work for "overstating the case in highly-coloured and emotive terms".<sup>52</sup> Some were more positive in their responses, although the review in *International Affairs*, noting that Bunting's book was "much more than simply the smear-pamphlet that its title and cover-design proclaim" was perhaps less than unequivocal praise.<sup>53</sup> While it presented in great detail the networks of Afrikaner nationalist influence that exerted powerful control over the apartheid state, Bunting's book did little to extend historical analysis of racial domination in South Africa. It was, in essence, more of a continuation of the anti-fascist campaigns against nationalism of the 1940s than a fresh assessment of the foundations of the apartheid state. As Lodge, has pointed out, Bunting invoked the fascist analogy "descriptively rather than analytically".<sup>54</sup> By the 1960s, the Nazi parallel, while providing the basis for a suitably chilling and compelling read, appeared less valid as a historical comparison than the southern United States.<sup>55</sup> While Bunting paid attention to the economic power of Afrikaner nationalism, and made passing reference to class as an issue, he did not, as Dan O'Meara noted some decade later, develop a sustained examination of the relationship between class and race. Rather than providing an assessment of "colonialism of a special type", this was a "conspiracy view of Afrikaner nationalism".<sup>56</sup> While Bunting's calls for democracy for the "taxed and unrepresented masses" of South Africa might seem a quiet echo of the SACP programme of national democratic revolution, his vision of the forces at play in the struggle for national liberation was internationalist in tone. It was, he argued, the "influence which world opinion can bring to bear on the situation" that would determine the degree of suffering that struggle would entail.<sup>57</sup> This was not a survey written for comrades, but anti-apartheid propaganda, aimed for an international audience.

---

<sup>52</sup> G.V. Doxey "Review of *Rise of the South African Reich*," *International Journal*, 20, 2, (1965): 290-1.

<sup>53</sup> C.A.W. Manning "Review of *Rise of the South African Reich*," *International Affairs*, 41, 2 (1965): 356-8.

<sup>54</sup> Lodge, *Charters from the Past*, p. 175

<sup>55</sup> Pierre L. van den Berghe, "Racial Segregation in South Africa: Degrees and Kinds," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 6, no. 23 (January 1, 1966): 415 fn.

<sup>56</sup> Dan O'Meara, "The Afrikaner Broederbond 1927-1948: Class Vanguard of Afrikaner Nationalism," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 3, no. 2 (April 1, 1977): 157.

<sup>57</sup> On the SACP programme of 1962, see Filatova, Irina. "The Lasting Legacy: The Soviet Theory of the National-Democratic Revolution and South Africa." *South African Historical Journal* 64, no. 3 (April 23, 2012): 507-537; Ellis & Sechaba, *Comrades*, p. 40

A more significant, and historiographically influential, volume of the Penguin African Library was Jack and Ray Simons' *Class and Colour in South Africa*, published in 1969. The Simons' book was a significant development in constructions of the South African past, as it traced a narrative of modernization shaped by the interplay of race and class. As a lecturer in African Studies at the University of Cape Town until 1965, Jack Simons had combined a career teaching 'Native administration' with active membership of the South African Communist Party – an association that had led to a series of banning orders. Their account was self-consciously an activist's history, intended to provide “a guide and a background” for contemporary resistance movements.<sup>58</sup> With the exception of Edward Roux's *Time Longer Than Rope*, the Simons' book represented the first major study of the history of working-class struggles in South Africa.<sup>59</sup> In six hundred richly detailed pages, the authors outlined the development of socialist and African political movements from the onset of industrialisation up to the emergence of the Congress Movement in the 1950s. They concluded that “South Africa's malaise” was the result of “the impact of an advanced industrialism on an obscure, degenerate colonial order”.<sup>60</sup> Like Bunting, they argued that fascist “coercive techniques” were evident in contemporary South Africa, but they began to articulate a more explicit understanding of the role of class in that process; fascism functioned as a way of maintaining “pre-industrial social rigidities”. Importantly, they recognised that class and racial divisions had coincided in South Africa, and that the class struggle had therefore become synonymous with “national liberation”.<sup>61</sup>

In Bunting's *Rise of the South African Reich* and the Simons' *Class and Colour in South Africa*, the Penguin African Library disseminated politically-charged, but ground-breaking works of history. These books were shaped by their author's political sensibilities, designed to serve a particular political purpose, and did so with unashamed partisan zeal. However, it would be a mistake to dismiss these titles simply because of their polemical mode of expression. Instead, they played a part in efforts to “broaden the perspective in which many of the important issues of South African history and politics are considered”.<sup>62</sup> Both books provided a kind of popular precursor to the school of radical scholarship that would challenge orthodox interpretations of the nature and historical origins of South African racial policies from the 1970s. Chris Saunders describes the

---

<sup>58</sup> Harold Jack Simons and Ray Esther Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969): 10.

<sup>59</sup> Edward Roux, *Time Longer Than Rope* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1948).

<sup>60</sup> Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour*: 610

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>62</sup> R. Johnstone, “Review of *Class and Colour in South Africa, The Rise of the South Africa Reich*” *African Affairs*, 69, 275 (1970): 195-6.

Simons' work in particular as a 'bridge' between earlier polemical writings and the radical scholarship of the 1970s. Describing it as "widely read by the new generation", Saunders sees the ways in which the authors sought, for the first time, to address the links between race and class in the making of South African society as the key contribution of *Class and Colour* to the developing analysis of the South African past.<sup>63</sup>

The 1960s and 70s witnessed, arguably, the heyday of activist scholarship on South Africa. The Penguin African Library under Segal continued to publish campaigning literature for a wider audience beyond the circles of the movement itself, notably *The South African Connection*, a detailed account of Britain's ongoing commercial links with apartheid South Africa, published in 1973. Within the academy, South African Communist Party activist Harold Wolpe, who had escaped from jail whilst awaiting trial alongside the leaders of the ANC's armed wing in 1963, established himself as a key figure at the heart of the 'revisionist' history of South Africa. Wolpe, within a group of South African emigres in the UK, including Shula Marks and Martin Legassick, expanded the critical and intellectual depth of the history of segregation and apartheid.

## Conclusions

As Stephen Ellis has argued, Africanist scholars of the 1950s-70s "swam in the currents of their time", their work guided and influenced by broad perceptions of the pressing political issues of newly-independent Africa. Historians divided the study of the African past into pre-colonial, colonial and post-independence periods, an intellectual exercise influenced in part by the chronological division of European history into "ancient", "medieval" and "modern" periods, but just as importantly by the teleological assumptions of development and modernization theory. The onset of independence was by no means the beginning of a new history for Africa, and the crises, trauma and failures of the last three decades of the twentieth century were a cruel response to the optimism of the early 1960s. As Ellis puts it: "the ambitions, fears and aspirations of the 1960s, although still within living memory, now seem so distant as to be barely comprehensible".<sup>64</sup> Should we view this moment as the fleeting brush of hope that so often accompanies times of profound change; a cliched honeymoon of Afro-optimism that can only be understood in the context of the pessimism that followed?

---

<sup>63</sup> Christopher Saunders, *The making of the South African past : major historians on race and class* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988): 165-6.

<sup>64</sup> Stephen Ellis, "Writing Histories of Contemporary Africa," *The Journal of African History* 43, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 4; 6.



The radical histories of South Africa that came to be elaborated in the 1960s, while shaped in part by the intellectual and political discourses of African independence, were also expressions of an emergent transnational language of liberation. The Penguin African Library was, despite the cautious professionalism of the publisher's executive editors, a significant platform for anti-apartheid activism. In Britain, it provided a space for radical readings of the South African past and could exploit public engagement with African issues that today's Africanists reflect on with envy.<sup>65</sup> The contribution of activist scholars to the foundation and development of the British anti-apartheid movement was of immense significance. It was also an important, if overlooked, transnational influence on British counter-culture and 'New Left' thought in the 1960s. But, as Peter Alexander has suggested in a recent commentary on the work of Wolpe, the frameworks of enquiry employed by anti-apartheid scholar-activists were shaped not only by ideology, but also by the psychology of exile.<sup>66</sup> The activism that underpinned the radical scholarship of the 1960s drew on notions of home and identity that had a distinctively nationalist identity. Reconciling this with a desire to elaborate a transnational history of anti-apartheid that can set the movement in a global framework and define its significance in terms of connections across borders, is an urgent necessity for the current generation of scholars.

---

<sup>65</sup> Lonsdale, John. 'African Studies, Europe & Africa'. *Africa Spectrum* 40, no. 3 (1 January 2005): 377–402.

<sup>66</sup> Peter Alexander, "History, Internationalism and Intellectuals: The Case of Harold Wolpe," *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa* 63, no. 1 (2007): 109–126. See also Martin Legassick and Alexander C. Lichtenstein, "The Past and Present of Marxist Historiography in South Africa," *Radical History Review* 82, no. 1 (2002): 111–130.