The Meaning(s) of Solidarity: Narratives of Anti-Apartheid Activism

HÅKAN THÖRN
(Gothenburg University)

The global anti-apartheid movement mobilised millions of people who took part in boycotts and demonstrations. Despite the significance of the anti-apartheid movement, actual research on its nature as a transnational movement has been meagre. Most research on the anti-apartheid movement has focused on its national aspects, looking, for example, at the Australian, American, British or South African anti-apartheid movements. In this article, I argue that the most crucial aspect of this movement was its construction of transnational networks and forms of action. The central dimensions of the action forms and identification processes of the anti-apartheid struggle are analysed; historical continuities as well as discontinuities are investigated; and the movement is related to relevant political and historical contexts. The analysis is based on historical documents and interviews with 52 activists in four countries, and intends to make a contribution to the interrelated theoretical debates on (a) the relations between 'new' and 'old' social movements, and (b) transnational activist networks and social movements in a globalising world.

Introduction

There are a number of different opinions and theories regarding the causes of the end of apartheid in South Africa - and about the role that the anti-apartheid struggle played in the process that led to the transformation. In these discussions, a distinction between 'internal' and 'external' factors has been central. On the 'internal side', attention has been given to the intensified internal struggle during the 1980s, led by the United Democratic Front, in which the trade unions played a significant role.1 It is argued that, ultimately, this struggle made South Africa 'ungovernable' from the point of view of the apartheid regime. Others point to the economic decline in South Africa during the 1980s, and South African big business’s changing attitudes towards the apartheid regime, leading to negotiations with the ANC.2 On the 'external side', one argument emphasises strongly that it was the shift in the balance of power following the end of the Cold War that ultimately brought down apartheid. This meant that the 'communist threat' that had helped the South African government to sustain its position internationally was no longer there and that the Western powers and resulted in the Soviet Union starting to negotiate in an effort to find solutions to conflicts in southern Africa.3

Others emphasise the pressure of the international solidarity movement, resulting in boycotts and sanctions against South Africa.\footnote{4}

During my research on the anti-apartheid movement, I have come across a number of accounts of how the struggle ‘inside’ South Africa was constantly influenced by the ‘outside’, just as the struggle ‘outside’ was influenced by, and dependent on, the struggle ‘inside’. This indicates the difficulty to establish a clear, unambiguous ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of South Africa in the struggle against apartheid, just as it is difficult to establish any fixed or clear-cut borders in an increasingly globalised world, where people and information increasingly are moving across borders, be they geopolitical, cultural or ‘racial’.

Such an account is, for example, provided by Michael Lapsley, to many known as ‘Father Michael’, one of many anti-apartheid activists that embodied the movements across borders that characterised the anti-apartheid struggle. Lapsley, born and raised in New Zealand, and trained as an Anglican priest in Australia, was sent to South Africa in 1973 by his church community to study at the University of Natal. There, he also worked as campus chaplain to students – most of whom were black – and became involved in anti-apartheid activities. As a consequence of these activities, he was expelled from South Africa in 1976, and went to live in Lesotho, where he became a member of the ANC. In the early 1980s, he spent nine months in London as an ANC representative, speaking at meetings organised by the British Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM). He then went to Zimbabwe, where he continued to work against apartheid.\footnote{5}

Lapsley gives the following examples of the importance of both media and travel, as the Anti-Apartheid Movement outside South Africa also became present within its borders:

To give you an example of a specific moment, there was a particular day, where in three o’clock in the morning in South Africa, white South Africa got up to watch a rugby match in New Zealand, and the rugby match was stopped by this massive Anti-Apartheid movement in New Zealand. And it was electrifying, because we were told in South Africa, people were being told, look there is a few longhaired layabouts, and suddenly it’s not a group of longhaired layabouts, but it’s actually a broad cross section of society in New Zealand. I think there was enormous appreciation in the majority community that there was an international movement there. And also the (anti-apartheid) leadership and many people in prison talked about that.

\ldots Obviously, there were always people who travelled, church people loved travelling. I mean I think that the international church network was often a vehicle for communication, because often political people couldn’t necessarily travel, they didn’t have passports, they were detained, whatever. I mean the churches were having conferences everywhere, so that the South African connection of the faith community coming back into the country I think was very significant, a very significant gateway of communication. And there were people from church networks visiting South Africa as well, those communications remained throughout, they never really stopped. So there was that vehicle of communication in both directions.\footnote{6}

These quotes show that an adequate analysis of the anti-apartheid movement has to pay attention to the construction of networks, organisations, identities, action forms and


\footnote{5} However, in 1990 the violence of apartheid reached across the border from South Africa as he was targeted by a letter bomb, losing both hands and an eye. He finally returned to South Africa in 1992 and got involved in work with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

\footnote{6} Interview with Michael Lapsley. For Lapsley’s biography, see M. Worsnip, Priest and Partisan: A South African Journey (Melbourne, Ocean Press, 1996).
information flows that transgressed borders. In this sense the anti-apartheid movement could be seen as a part of a complex and multi-layered process that could be defined as a globalisation of politics. This article will discuss and analyse some aspects of the action forms and identification processes of this movement, and relate it to a political and historical context. The article consists of three parts. The first part discusses anti-apartheid as a global social movement mainly from a theoretical point of view. The second looks at anti-apartheid activism through four case studies. The third is a more general discussion of the various forms that the actions of anti-apartheid movements took, emphasising the contexts in which the movement was situated.

Anti-Apartheid and the Globalisation of Politics

The global struggle against apartheid must be seen in the context of the emergence of the ‘new social movements’ that have addressed global issues in new ways, for example, solidarity, anti-colonialism, ecology, peace and gender inequality, as well as the increased internationalisation of ‘old movements’ (predominantly labour and church movements). Since participation in anti-apartheid activities included people living in more than a hundred countries on all continents of the world, anti-apartheid action definitely constituted a global social movement. The anti-apartheid movement thus contributed to the construction of a transnational political culture that was a part of a wider, complex and multi-layered process of political globalisation during the post-war era. ‘Political culture’ here refers to processes of communication and articulation of political experiences, identities, action strategies and projects – and to the institutions in which these processes are embedded. Empirically,
a transnational political culture is composed of networks of groups, organisations and institutions. The article emphasises the importance of a historical perspective on political cultures, social movements, and political globalisation. Thus, it will look into previously existing networks and movements that influenced and conditioned the transnational anti-apartheid movement, as well as inquire into specific historical experiences that were translated into anti-apartheid activism.

Although networks and social movements are collective phenomena, it is important not to underestimate the role of individuals in the processes of their construction. Particularly in movements and networks that span over large distances, certain key activists play important roles through connecting different historical, cultural and political contexts. Through individual moves and movements they connect places, organisations and networks, carrying different cultural and historical experiences, which in the process of transnational communication get translated into new contexts. Here we reconstruct and analyse ‘activist biographies’ of four anti-apartheid activists, in order to enquire into (a) specific historical experiences that was translated into anti-apartheid activism, (b) previously existing networks and movements that influenced and conditioned the transnational anti-apartheid movement, (c) the role of certain types of key activists for a transnational social movement, and (d) the meaning of the practices that constituted the anti-apartheid struggle as a transnational social movement. The following section will consider some theoretical and methodological issues related to the study of social movements and political activism as transnational phenomena.

Theorising Transnational Activism: Border Thinking

During the last decades, a number of scholars from different disciplines have argued that the study of global or transnational phenomena requires a theoretical and methodological approach that is different from the dominant paradigm that equals the study of ‘society’ with ‘national society’.\footnote{11} Attempts to think about power, territoriality, identity, structure and action beyond the ‘nation state paradigm’, or ‘methodological nationalism’, have often been centred on the concept of ‘border’. Coined by Walter Mignolo, the concept of ‘border thinking’ theorises globalisation in relation to the global history of colonialism.\footnote{13} It is also used as a name for a ‘transnationalist approach’ shared by a number of scholars working in fields such as postcolonial studies, cultural studies, sociology, international relations and anthropology. Different from the images of a ‘boundless world’ of globalist ideology, ‘border thinking’ urges us to focus on, and think in new ways about, borders and boundaries, geopolitical as well as cultural or racial. It is an approach that pays particular attention to practices involving movements, mobility and diaspora – the crossing of borders and the construction of spaces across and in between institutionalised and relatively fixed boundaries – the latter understood in terms of ‘borderlands’ or a ‘third space’.\footnote{14} The approach followed here also implies paying attention to not only practices across or in between borders, but also to the prevailing importance of borders.

Although ‘border-crossing’ is key to understanding processes of organisation and identification in the anti-apartheid struggle, it is equally important to focus on and analyse the

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prevailing importance of old borders and the construction of new ones in this context. For example, as noted earlier, not all people could travel. In fact, the South African borders were closed to a number of people, who wanted to leave or visit the country. And in the sense of cultural or 'racial' borders, it was not just the policies of the apartheid regime, but also the practice of solidarity work that involved constructing a number of borders between 'us' and 'them'. Such borders were often related to national identities and interests as well as national political cultures. As this article shows, globalisation does not necessarily mean that the nation state, understood as a political space, is fading away. Rather, the nation state gains new meanings in the context of globalisation, just as globalisation has different meanings in different national contexts.

Social Movements and their Activists

Turning to a theoretical understanding of transnational social movements, the concept of 'social movement' highlights agency. The concept of 'social movement' here is defined as a form of collective action that ultimately aims at transforming a social order. Further, a social movement is a process involving as its central elements the articulation of social conflicts and collective identities, of 'us' and 'others'. The fact that social movements are defined by an orientation toward social change does of course not mean that they always achieve the changes that are struggled for. Sometimes they do, but usually not in exactly the way imagined in movement discourses. Sometimes unimagined changes might come about in the form of unintended consequences of collective action. Although there are disputes as to the extent that the anti-apartheid movement contributed to the end of the apartheid system, it might still be argued that, by and large, it was a success story. Still, present-day South African society might not seem to reflect the way it was imagined in the utopias of the anti-apartheid movement. More important, however, simply assessing to what extent a movement achieved the goals that were formulated in its programmes might not be the most fruitful way of reaching an understanding of the impact of its collective actions. In the case of the transnational anti-apartheid movement, it created networks of solidarity, as well as political action forms that made – and still makes – an impact on the political cultures of countries all over the world. To be able to reach a more complex analysis of the relations between social movements and social change it might be useful to introduce the notion of 'learning process' as an important aspect of social movement praxis. In the practices of social movements, collective experiences are constructed, which to individual participants constitute learning processes, which might be carried into other contexts.

If the concept of learning process thus highlights the role of the individual in the context of social movements and social change, it is important not to equal agency with individual action. As Keck and Sikking state in their study of transnational activist networks, 'The agency of a network usually cannot be reduced to the agency even of its leading members'.

15 Empirically, a social movement is constituted by different forms of practices: production and dissemination of information, knowledge and symbolic practices, mobilisation of various forms of resources, including the construction of organisations and networks, and the performing of public actions of different kinds (demonstrations as well as direct actions). See also H. Thörn, Modernitet, sociologi och sociala rörelser (Göteborg, Department of Sociology, Göteborg University, 1997).

16 For an analysis of the factors that ultimately brought down the apartheid regime, see Price, The Apartheid State in Crisis, which argues that two internal factors, economic decline and political violence, interacted with international pressure.


However, as a methodological approach, narratives of individual activists can be a useful tool. Through narrated ‘activist biographies’, it is possible to grasp and analyse the significant historical experiences defining a social movement, as well as the meaning of its collective actions. Except for movement leaders, the role of individuals has often been neglected in research on social movements. One important exception is Ron Eyerman’s and Andy Jamison’s *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach*, in which biographies of ‘movement intellectuals’ are used in order to ‘place social movements in political historical context’ and analyse the process of articulation through which a social movement comes into being.19 I will use a similar approach here, although I will be looking at ‘key activists’. A key activist could be an intellectual or a leader, but this is not what defines her as a key activist. A transnational social movement like the anti-apartheid movement may have a handful of leaders, but hundreds or even thousands of key activists. Key activists may be described as nodes in movement networks, co-ordinating, articulating and communicating the flows of information that constitute the everyday cultural praxis of a social movement. They are easy to locate as soon as one starts interviewing activists, since certain activists are constantly referred to as ‘someone you really should talk to’ when an issue is raised. Thus, different activists are ‘keys’ to different aspects of the practices of a social movement.

In the following I will briefly reconstruct four biographies of transnational activism. They are based on the accounts of individuals that for a substantial part of their life took part in the anti-apartheid struggle.20 They were ‘spiders’ in the webs of transnational anti-apartheid activism. My reconstruction of the activist narratives is guided by the following questions: what were the specific historical experiences that were translated into collective action against apartheid? Which movements and networks existing previous to the anti-apartheid struggle were significant? Which were the most important forms of transnational action, organisation and identification of the movement? Which were the most important forms of communication, enabling action at a distance in the context of the anti-apartheid movement?21

The following cases are chosen from a larger material of interviews, mainly with anti-apartheid activists, but also a number of journalists and public officials who in different ways took part in the struggle against apartheid. The four cases are chosen because, in relation to a larger empirical material, they ‘represent’ different ‘ideal types’ of activists (or perform different roles or functions within the movement), just as their ‘activist biographies’ reflect important dimensions of the collective experiences, the organisation and the processes of identification of the social movement of which their individual actions constituted a part.

The activists account for unique individual experiences of anti-apartheid activism, but they also articulate different aspects of the collective organisation of the transnational anti-apartheid movement. Through their reflections and narratives, they retrospectively constructed ‘activist identities’, defining one, often very important, aspect of their life history. They were thus accounting for an aspect of their personal biography and identity that was defined through their identification with the collective identity of the anti-apartheid movement. Thus, just as their individual actions were part of the construction of the movement, their individual identities were partly constituted by their participation in the movement.

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20 In a movement that included the participation of millions of people, the key activists were of course substantial.
21 I borrow the concept of ‘action at a distance’ from J.B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1995). According to Thompson, it is a process that ‘enables individuals to act for others who are dispersed in space and time, as well as enabling individuals to act in response to actions and events taking place in distant locales’ (p. 82).
In the context of the anti-apartheid movement, 'solidarity' defined its collective identity. Whatever one was doing, whatever one was participating in – an organisation, a demonstration, a boycott – it was defined as an act of solidarity. But beyond any idealistic or romantic understanding of 'solidarity', what did it actually mean in this context? Through what practices was it actually performed?

The narrative of Sobizana Mngqikana articulates the experience of an ANC exile activist, moving between different national contexts of the anti-apartheid movement, representing the 'the authentic voice' of the struggle. The narratives of Margaret Ling and Danny Schechter display the importance of the post 1968 student movement and its network, through which a second phase of transnational anti-apartheid mobilisation was initiated. The story of Ling takes the perspective of a British activist, being 'politcised' through encountering exile activists at university, as well as through reflections on the unfinished business of British colonialism, including the involvement of her own 'kith and kin'. As the activities of Ling show, from the early 1980s, the processes of organisation and identification of the transnational anti-apartheid movement increasingly involved mediated symbolic communication. It is significant that the last phase of the transnational anti-apartheid movement, during which it reached its peak with regard to international support, coincided with an intensified globalisation of communication media. This is particularly evident in the case of North American activist Danny Schechter. The case of Schechter also shows that the articulation of anti-apartheid support in the USA always made strong connections to the issue of internal racism.

Finally, the biography of E.S. Reddy is not an activist biography in the strict sense, as it is the story of a UN official. However, approaching and making connections with interstate and state organisations was an important part of the activities of the transnational anti-apartheid movement, and this important role was played by the figure of the activist public official. In the case of Reddy, his narrative also articulates a historical experience of strong transnational anti-colonial links between India and South Africa.

**Working from within the UN**

On a number of occasions when I was interviewing anti-apartheid activists in Sweden and Britain about their international contacts, 'Mr Reddy' was mentioned as a key figure. Enuga Reddy was born in 1924 in a small village located outside Madras (now Chennai) in southern India. Both of his parents actively supported the Indian national liberation movement. Reddy himself participated in activities organised by the student movement in Madras. After the end of the Second World War, in 1946, Reddy went to New York for postgraduate studies. In 1949 he got a position as a political officer in the UN Secretariat, doing research for the UN on Africa and the Middle East. When the UN Special Committee against Apartheid was formed in 1963, Reddy was appointed its principal secretary, later being promoted as Director of the Centre Against Apartheid, and Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations – until he retired in 1985.22

Reflecting on an almost life-long commitment to anti-apartheid, Reddy told me that he always looked upon himself as an activist, but an activist that chose to work from within.

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an institution. However, from this ‘inside’ position he could do a lot for activists on the
‘outside’, i.e. for the people active in the liberation struggle in southern Africa as well as the
solidarity movements in other parts of the world that supported this struggle. At the time
when the Committee was formed, NGOs did not have the kind of official recognition in the
UN that they have at present. In this sense, The Special Committee against Apartheid was
unique when it became, through activities, to a large extent initiated by Reddy, a crucial node
in the network of transnational anti-apartheid activism that was created from the early 1960s
and onwards. The committee supplied anti-apartheid organisations with well-researched
information and, from the late 1970s, in a few cases, some financial support. The committee
also sent delegations to various countries to consult with national and international NGOs.
However, the most important aspect of the activities of the committee was the organisation of
conferences, where representatives from anti-apartheid organisations could make important
contacts. Here, information was exchanged, strategies were discussed, co-operation on
campaigns, national as well as international, was co-ordinated, and friendships were made.
However, according to Reddy, these events not only helped NGO-representatives to meet
each other, but also offered opportunities to make contact with the OAU and representatives
of African governments.

The activities of the Special Committee were not always popular in the UN. The Western
countries never joined the committee; it consisted of representatives mainly from Asian,
African and Latin American countries, as well as a few from Eastern Europe. However, this
was something that, according to Reddy, provided a certain space for action that would not
have been there in the presence of the dominant Western powers, which opposed sanctions
against South Africa. Reddy recalls one occasion, that illustrates the scepticism and even the
hostility that the Special Committee sometimes met with in the UN. As the committee
organised a meeting on anti-apartheid in the UN building, they put up posters, some of them
made by the British Anti-Apartheid Movement, which was strongly critical of British
companies with investments in South Africa. This upset the British mission to the UN, and
they approached a more senior official in the UN to exert pressure on Reddy. In addition,
the fact that Manhattan, through the activities of the committee, became a place of pilgrimage
for various of representatives of liberation and solidarity movements – often defining their
projects in terms of revolutionary discourse – did not please the US government. According
to Jennifer Davis, a South African exile and a leading activist in the New York based
solidarity organisation American Committee of Africa (ACOA), the UN was not popular in the
US during the Cold War, ‘it was regarded as the creature of somebody else – either the Third
World or the Soviet Union’. Davis states that the conferences organised by the committee

23 Interview with E.S. Reddy.
24 For example, expenses for NGOs to participate in Committee-sponsored conferences, seminars and sessions were
provided. However, the budget of the Committee was limited and it could only provide expenses for a few anti-
apartheid groups that did not have expenses for travel. Interview with E.S. Reddy. See Korey, NGOs and the
Universal Declaration of Human Rights, p. 96.
25 This is according to activists that I have interviewed. Among the people that have stated that Reddy and the
Special Committee played an extremely important role in facilitating the transnational mobilisation of the anti-
apartheid movement are key activists in Britain and USA such as Mike Terry (AAM), Jennifer Davis and George
Houser (ACOA) as well as journalist and author Dennis Herbstein. According to Reddy, leaders of anti-apartheid
NGOs were invited to all conferences and seminars organised by the Special Committee, with full rights of
participation. The Committee also, according to Reddy ‘avoided distinctions between government
representatives and NGOs in the conduct of discussions’ as it elected NGO representatives as officers of its
seminars and conferences. In some cases the committee formally organised international anti-apartheid events in
co-operation with anti-apartheid organisations: interview with E.S. Reddy.
26 Note submitted by Reddy to the author 000621.
27 Interview with E.S. Reddy.
28 Interview with Jennifer Davis.
were extremely important for ACOA, as well as for the international anti-apartheid movement. According to Davis, what really mattered was not so much what happened during the formal sessions, but what took place in the context of the informal meetings in between them.

Since the 1970s, alternative NGO-conferences are regularly held ‘outside’ of the large official UN meetings.\(^29\) Dennis Herbstein, a writer and journalist, who left South Africa for London, and who has extensively researched the role of IDAF (the International Defence and Aid Fund) in the anti-apartheid struggle, states that it was Reddy who, through his work with the Special Committee, ‘invented’ the alternative conference.\(^30\) Jennifer Davis agrees, ‘Reddy created a space for people to get together’, as he ‘pushed the limits of what people wanted to allow him to do, apparently in a very non-confrontational way’. In this sense the Special Committee was a crucial facilitator in the process that, according to Davis, ‘mobilised civil society, even if we did not use that expression then’.\(^31\)

It must be underlined that not all of Reddy’s important international contacts were at the NGO-level. He also had close relations with politicians and civil servants representing nation states that actively supported the anti-apartheid struggle. In the case of Sweden and other Nordic countries, Reddy had more frequent and closer contact on the governmental level than on the NGO-level. The anti-apartheid commitment expressed by the Nordic governments provided opportunities to ‘open up’ the bipolar division that defined the articulation of any issue in the UN during the Cold War. According to Reddy, the Special Committee’s strategy was to, … separate the Nordic countries from the major Western powers which were the real problem, so we followed that, and worked with the Nordic countries and slowly other smaller Western countries started following the Nordic countries.\(^32\)

In the case of Britain, the AAM was his main contact. Reddy states that the British AAM undoubtedly was the most important of the national anti-apartheid solidarity organisations in the world. In relation to, for example, the Swedish anti-apartheid organisations, the Special committee’s relation to the AAM in London were, according to Reddy, ‘a very different thing, it was like allies discussing, almost like a discussion with the liberation movement’.\(^33\)

This statement also points to the weight that the Special Committee gave to relations with the liberation movements.\(^34\) Although the Committee, following the decision of OAU, supported both the PAC and ANC, the Special Committees’ contacts with the ANC might be considered as more intimate, and on a personal level particularly so between Reddy and the ANC leader Oliver Tambo.\(^35\) Accordingly, it was in dialogue with the liberation movements.

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31 Interview with Jennifer Davis.

32 For example, the Nordic countries were consulted before anti-apartheid resolutions were presented to the General Assembly. In order to get as wide support on as many issues as possible, a number of resolutions on different issues were constructed. All the provisions which the Nordic countries could not support were placed in one resolution, making it possible to get a positive ‘Nordic vote’ on a number of other resolutions. Interview with E.S. Reddy.

33 Interview with E.S. Reddy.

34 This is also verified by Johan Nordenfelt, who was appointed the chairperson of the UN Centre against Apartheid in 1987. In an interview that I carried out in 2000, Nordenfelt, in comparison with Reddy a more strict and ‘non-activist’ public servant, was highly critical of the fact that close relations with the liberation movements had been developed over the years. According to Nordenfelt, the Centre, as well as the Special Committee was perceived as first and foremost the ANC’s, but also PAC’s, office of representation, that they were in command … they regarded it as their office and thought that we should follow their directives’. Interview with Johan Nordenfelt.

35 According to Reddy, the PAC had a particularly strong voice in the UN when it was represented by the charismatic David Sibekho. Interview with Reddy.
that the Special Committee developed the strategies that would guide its transnational anti-apartheid work.

In 1966, three main lines of action were agreed upon for the work against apartheid in the UN: (1) pressure on the South African government to abandon apartheid, and to seek a peaceful solution with ‘the genuine representatives of all the people of South Africa’, (2) appropriate assistance to the victims of apartheid and those who struggle against it, for a society in which all people would enjoy equal rights and opportunities, (3) dissemination of information to focus world public opinion on the inhumanity of apartheid.36

Reddy states that the first two lines of action were fundamental, but since the first could not be made effective as long as there was no agreement to implement sanctions in the Security Council, and as long as assistance to the struggle against apartheid was also met by resistance from the dominant Western powers in the UN, the third aspect became increasingly important. He explains the situation:

Without information, you can’t do the other things [i.e. (1) and (2), author’s remark], without public opinion you can’t do these things, so you had to inform and educate the public opinion, mobilise the public opinion, so that you can have sanctions and [provide] assistance to the victims of apartheid. In that sense media and information was very important.37

London and Stockholm in Exile

Sobizana Mngqikana was born in East London, South Africa, in 1938. As with many other ANC leaders and activists, he studied at Fort Hare University. In 1961, a year after the ANC was banned, he became active in the underground structures of the organisation. His anti-apartheid activities led to his expulsion from the university in 1962, and in 1963 he was arrested and sent to jail. This experience was important for his life-long commitment to the ANC:

It was a bitter experience although it was just a year, I mean I admire people who could sit there for 27 years like Mandela, and not be bitter … and of course it was an eye-opener to see the ruthlessness of apartheid, brutally implemented on the micro-cosmic level in jail, where you saw the brutality that was admitted to prisoners, especially black prisoners.38

On being released from prison, Mngqikana saw an advert for a scholarship sponsored by the University of London. He applied, was awarded the scholarship and arrived in London in 1964. A couple of minutes walk from the student’s hostel in which he was staying, were the offices of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement. Mngqikana visited the office, and learned that there was an ANC office in London. The ANC representative, Raymond Kunene, put Mngqikana in touch with a group of exiles of his own age, among them Thabo Mbeki, who became a close friend. The group formed what they called The ANC Student and Youth Section. This focused primarily on political education in the context of the black South African exile community. Members of the group were also often invited by the AAM to address public meetings, in order to represent ‘authentic voices’ of South Africa.

After finishing his studies, in 1969, Mngqikana joined the ANC as a full-time member of staff. In 1973 a decision was made that the ANC should open a mission in Sweden (the second

37 Several conferences on the role of media in the anti-apartheid struggle were organised by the Special Committee Against Apartheid in co-operation with other organisations. There was one in East Berlin in 1981, one in London in 1985, and one in Lima in 1988.
38 Interview with Sobizana Mngqikana.
in Europe). By this time ANC had established close contacts with the Social Democratic government, and had begun to receive financial support.

There were many contrasts between living and working as a black and as a political activist in London and Stockholm respectively. In terms of working as an anti-apartheid activist in England in the 1960s,

... there was a lot of hostility, we were called terrorists you know, and there was a strong opposition from the government, the Conservative Party, so it was not easy there, it was a challenge to penetrate British Society, whereas in Sweden, there was an understanding, a revulsion against racism and apartheid. But of course there was a difference as how to tackle the issue, that was where the problems started between me and some of the people who were working here.

The problems to which Mngqikana refers emerged soon after he arrived in Sweden. He felt caught in the web of conflict-ridden relations of the Swedish political arena of the early 1970s. If the churches, the Unions, the Social Democratic Party, the Liberals and the Africa Groups (a post-1968 solidarity organisation) all expressed a commitment to the anti-apartheid struggle, it was also affected by their different and conflicting agendas in relation to national as well as international politics. Much of the tension was of course related to the Cold War divide. In certain circles leaning politically to the right as well as to the left, the ANC was regarded with suspicion because of its alliance with the South African Communist Party as well as its contacts with the Soviet Union, and in some cases it was even perceived as a 'pro-Soviet force', steered by Moscow.

In the 1970s, even old supporters from the early 1960s criticised the ANC for its Soviet contacts. In 1977, Mngqikana became involved in a public debate about the issue with Per Wåstberg, then the leading anti-apartheid journalist and writer in Sweden, and at that time chief editor of the liberal Dagens Nyheter, Sweden’s largest morning newspaper.

Mngqikana’s mission in Sweden, in line with ANC’s strategy of ‘rainbow politics’, was to seek to broaden the ANC’s support in Sweden. The model was the co-operation between ANC and the inclusive and broad anti-apartheid coalition in Britain. One of the tensions that Mngqikana encountered in this work was related to an internal divide within the Labour movement regarding its strategy in relation to the anti-apartheid struggle. While the SDP leadership under Olof Palme had decided not to look at the ANC through Cold War lenses, and give the organisation full support, the Unions were more sceptical toward the ANC and its call for isolation of South Africa. In fact, in the debate on isolation versus involvement (in Sweden, the latter was called ‘the new strategy’) in the 1970s, the blue collar LO and the white collar TCO – under the umbrella of ICFTU (International Confederation of Trade Unions) – ‘embraced the “new strategy”’. The position taken by the LO and TCO at this time must be related to international conflicts as well as national interests. First, strong ‘anti-communism’ within ICFTU did not make the ANC popular, since its main union ally at this time was SACTU (South African

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40 The direct support to ANC from the Swedish state started in 1972/73 with the modest sum of 35,000 Swedish kronor (SEK). In the following year it increased to 215,000 SEK. By 1994, ANC had received a total sum of 896 million SEK, Sellström, Sweden and National Liberation in Southern Africa, Volume Two, pp. 34, 397, 900.
42 Interview with Sobizana Mngqikana.
43 Mngqikana was received at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in March 1974 (see Sellström, Sweden and National Liberation, Volume Two, p. 398) and also had frequent contacts with the international secretary of the Social Democratic party, Bernt Carlsson. (Interview with Sobizana Mngqikana).
44 Quote from Sellström, Sweden and National Liberation, Volume Two, p. 441.
Confederation of Trade Unions) which was affiliated to the Communist-dominated WFTU (World Federation of Trade Unions). Second, support for isolationism might have been limited in that it could be seen to contradict the ‘self-interest’ of the organisations, since it could have resulted in creating unemployment in Sweden.

However, since this position was a source of controversy, the LO and TCO, following the example of the British Trade Union Congress (TUC), decided to send a ‘fact-finding mission’ to South Africa in 1974. As soon as the mission was publicly announced it was heavily criticised. For the first time Mngqikana, in an interview on public radio, argued that the mission would serve to give the apartheid regime recognition and he denounced the trip as a ‘propaganda stunt’. After this interview the Swedish public knew who Mngqikana was.45

In his criticism of the Unions, Mngqikana was supported by the Africa Groups (AGIS), a Swedish NGO, which also protested publicly against the trip. However, this did not mean that the relations between the ANC representative and the Africa Groups was easy – at least not in the beginning. Through the small but politically active South African exile community – also ridden by internal conflicts between supporters of PAC, ANC and the Unity Movement – Mngqikana made contact with the Africa Groups. The Africa Groups was part of a young and fervent, Marxist-oriented left-wing political culture, that had come out of the student protest of the late 1960s, which was now forming different ideological and party factions, as well as solidarity organisations focused on different parts of the world.46 When Mngqikana arrived, in Sweden, AGIS had been focusing their work mainly on the Portuguese colonies and had not yet recognised the ANC as a leading force in the South African struggle. (They did so in November 1974.)47

Soon after his arrival in Sweden, Mngqikana was invited to a meeting held by AGIS. At the meeting, he was confronted with the statement that ANC was ‘run by Moscow’. The speaker referred to a study book on ‘imperialism and struggle for liberation’ in Africa, written and published by AGIS. In this book, FRELIMO, MPLA and PAIGC are referred to as the avant-garde organisations of the African struggle for liberation, and praised for their ‘successful struggle for liberation since the early 1960s’. The ANC, on the other hand, is criticised both for their non-violent strategy in the 1950s and for being too close to the Soviet Union.48

This, according to Mngqikana, was, ‘the beginning of my fights with them, sort of clashes’. These clashes, however, were not about ideology as much as about strategy, as is shown in the following example of how Mngqikana argued regarding the issue of how to define the struggle in public:

Someone would come up with some silly idea that if they are going to organise a demonstration, it must be on the basis of anti-imperialism. Any organisation that would not support anti-imperialism would not be welcome. I said, ‘No, that is not acceptable to us, we want a broad support from the Swedish people. If you want to talk about anti-imperialism, we can discuss that with you, we are capable of doing that, but here we are talking about an anti-apartheid struggle, which can be part of anti-imperialism. What you are doing is antagonising people who are concerned about helping us, you are making your own demands, out of your own intellectual

45 The interview was published in Dagens eko, and was also referred to in Dagens Nyheter, 23 December 1974 (‘Sydafrikresan blir ett propagandajippo’).
46 In the early 1960s in London, Mngqikana had met representatives from the locally constituted Swedish South Africa committees, one of the earliest transnational contacts of the AAM. The AAM had in fact been mentioned as a model in the discussions of the Swedish committees, T. Sellström, Sweden and National Liberation in Southern Africa, Volume One: Formation of a Popular Opinion 1950–1970 (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1999), and they also borrowed the ying and yang symbol that had been redefined as an anti-racist symbol by the AAM which was worn in the form of badges. However, in the early 1970s, these early solidarity organisations had been replaced by the Africa groups (AGIS) which to a large extent emerged from the student-based Anti-Vietnam War movement.
47 Sellström, Sweden and National Liberation, Volume Two, p. 429.
mirages, I mean... we can not put conditions to people, ... why are you not trying to focus the whole Swedish community towards the goal of dismantling apartheid?'

In spite of these differences, the young leftist political culture which AGIS was part of was familiar to Mngqikana. In fact, it was a transnational political culture born out of the global student activism of the late 1960s. The activists belonged to his generation, they were all Marxists and Mngqikana did not mind discussing how best to counter imperialism. However, Mngqikana's association with these circles was not looked on kindly by other political camps. On one occasion, Oliver Tambo told Mngqikana that he had received a letter from a Swedish MP for the Social Democrats, complaining that the ANC representative was 'flirting with people who are attacking us' ('us' referring to the Labour movement), indicating that if this continued, it could mean the withdrawal of support to the ANC.

However, at the end of the 1970s, this situation would start to change, partly as a consequence of Mngqikana's efforts to bring together the conflicting camps of the Swedish anti-apartheid movement. In 1979, the same year that Lindiwe Mabusa replaced Sobizana Mngqikana as ANC representative in Stockholm; AGIS initiated a new organisation, ISAK (The Isolate South Africa Committee), quite similar to the British AAM. It was a broad umbrella organisation, including solidarity organisations, churches, the Youth Sections of all the political parties except the Conservatives, and a few unions.

This change of strategy on behalf of AGIS also involved an appeal for co-operation with the Labour movement. Partly related to the forming of ISAK, partly to a large national campaign to support to the liberation struggle in southern Africa that the LO was launching in 1978. The Chairperson of AGIS, Sören Lindh, felt it necessary to publish a reflective and self-critical article in the organisation's monthly magazine Afrikabulletinen. This was partly a response to the formation of ISAK, as well as to a large national campaign launched by the LO in 1978 to support the liberation struggle in southern Africa. Lindh admits that AGIS has been 'guilty of indiscretions which have neither served the liberation movements, nor the common struggle against the Swedish monopoly companies' exploitation of ... the African Workers', and apologises to the Labour movement for an earlier article in which the LO was called 'an organisation for class collaboration'. Finally Lindh states that 'we should now leave our remaining differences aside', inviting the LO to a joint act of 'an effective campaign to isolate the Vorster regime'.

Through this process, relations between AGIS and the unions were stabilised, even though parts of the Union movement would continue to oppose the call for isolation of South Africa, something that at particular moments resulted in the issue of anti-apartheid strategy being hotly debated in the Swedish public arena.

Organising Movement Culture

Margaret Ling came from an English liberal-minded middle-class family with an international orientation. One of her relatives was a missionary in India, and another was involved in the International Alliance of Women, which grew out of the suffragette movement. Ling states that from early childhood, she was always aware of international issues and conferences, and remembers people from different parts of the world that frequently came to stay in her aunt's house. She clearly remembers the 21st of March 1960, the day of the Sharpeville massacre. At the time, her father was a teacher in a public school as well as Housemaster of one of the boarding houses. By coincidence, Bishop Trevor

49 Afrikabulletinen, 43 (1978).
50 The Metal Workers' Union in particular argued publicly for 'constructive involvement'.
Huddleston, who had chaired the founding meeting of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement in 1959, and who would stay as a front man of the organisation until its dissolution in 1995, was staying in the boarding house where Margaret Ling and her family lived. As news of the events in Sharpeville was reported around the world, the Editor of the *Times* phoned Huddleston for a quote regarding the massacre. This was the first time that Margaret Ling, then 13 years old, became aware of apartheid. It would be more than ten years before she would become involved in the AAM and the IDAF in London, becoming one of the key anonymous communicators and organisers of the everyday life of anti-apartheid activism. This was a full-time commitment that lasted two decades.

In the years following the Second World War, the capital of the old Empire became the meeting place for anti-colonial political activists and intellectuals in exile. In the 1960s, the organisations of the African liberation organisations all had their offices in the Africa Unity House in Collingham Gardens. The exiles also interacted with British solidarity activists, and these links were manifested in British based anti-colonial and solidarity organisations such as the Africa Bureau, Movement for Colonial Freedom and Christian Action. The influence of the anti-colonial struggle was also present in what was called ‘new politics’, first and foremost related to the post-war peace movement, led by CND, but also involving direct action groups like The Committee of 100. ‘New politics’ in this context referred to political action forms largely inspired by the Indian anti-colonial struggle, in which civil disobedience and boycotts played an important role.

The early anti-apartheid activities in Britain emerged in this context. The chairperson of IDAF, formed in 1952 out of Christian Action, was Canon John Collins, who was also at the time the chairman of CND. The Anti-Apartheid Movement was initiated at a meeting in the held in June 1959 by the Committee of African Organisations, and including Julius Nyerere and Trevor Huddleston as speakers. As a response to a call made by South African anti-apartheid organisations, a committee was formed in order to organise a boycott of South African goods. It became the Boycott Movement, run by South African exiles and a few British supporters. In 1960, it was renamed as the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), with the intention of creating a British mass movement in solidarity with the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa.51 Several prominent British MPs, such as David Steele of the Liberal Party, and Barbara Castle of Labour, fronted the organisation in the early 1960s. However, the organisational work was, to a large extent, run by South African exiles until post-1968, when a new generation of student activists entered the organisation.52 One of them was Margaret Ling, who in 1972, after a trip to India, became a sociology student in Oxford.

In Oxford, Ling got involved in solidarity organisations such as Third World First, which was campaigning on issues of global poverty and the North-South gap. She also met and became friend with South African exiles Frene Ginwala (who after the democratic elections became Speaker of the House of Parliament in South Africa), and Ethel de Keyser, who at the time was executive secretary of AAM. Margaret Ling states that de Keyser had a strong influence on her and when an anti-apartheid group was being formed in Oxford, her involvement with the AAM started.

Reflecting on how she became an anti-apartheid activist, she recalls the complex process that began during her trip to India, and that was a result not just of encounters with exiled South Africans, but also included theoretical reflections emerging from her university courses, as well as personal reflections on her family history:

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52 One of them was Michael Terry, a former general secretary NUS, the national student union, who in 1975 became the executive secretary of AAM, a position he held until 1995.
I wouldn’t say that I was politicised in India, but that gave me an awareness of the situation in the so-called Third World and the gap between the North and the South. I was quite late to be politicised. I was doing a course in Sociology and I remember coming across apartheid as part of that, looking at sociological theory, and the experience of having been in India and visiting a member of my family who had gone out to be a missionary, who was continuing to be supported by my family, who had a business which at one time had a subsidiary in South Africa. I started to put things together and really began to understand where I stood in the British class system, and the relationship of that class system of the society in Britain to what was going on in South Africa. So there was both a politicisation through friendships and emotional involvement, and through theory, and through beginning to understand a bit more about of who I was and where I fitted in.53

Once Margaret Ling had finished her university studies, she moved to London, where she became a full-time activist. Known as an AAM activist, she was offered a job in IDAF, working in the research and information department, a position she held for nine years. For a period, she was also the editor of AAM’s magazine, AA News.

As an activist, she spent her everyday life in the context of what I would call a ‘movement culture’, a particular form of political culture, emerging through the interactions between individuals, groups and organisations involved in social movement activities. The student protests in the late 1960s resulted in the growth of a new movement culture in Europe and other parts of the world. This emerging culture of ‘new social movements’ had its national differences, but must be conceived as a transnational phenomenon, a context in which global issues and identities related to themes such as peace, solidarity, anti-imperialism, gender and ecology were articulated. These processes of articulation were related to regular activities taking place in ‘invisible networks’ as well as within the framework of ‘visible’ movement organisations and institutions: journals, small publishing houses, cooperatives and festivals including performances, theatres and other events related to political issues.54

Although often involving antagonistic relationships, the different movements had in common that their identities were defined in ‘anti-establishment’ terms, and the context of the various groups, organisations and networks was defined by the activists as an ‘alternative culture’. The relation to old movement cultures, specifically labour, was however ambivalent. In some cases there were sharp antagonisms, as in the political discourse of ‘jobs against environment’. As we have seen, tensions between labour and ‘new’ solidarity movement organisations were also present in the anti-apartheid movement. But more important, unions provided a very important dimension of everyday life of anti-apartheid activism.

As Ling recognised that the AAM was part of a movement culture, she emphasised the importance of the labour movement:

... yeah anti-apartheid was located within that whole galaxy of left or progressive movements, and that’s how it was organised ... this whole context within which AAM was organising, and without the support of the organised trade union and labour movement, it would never had got the strength that it did in Britain, and funding without the trade movement would have been very difficult.

As the women’s movement was increasing its influence in the context of the new movement culture the late 1970s and early 1980s, gender became an issue in AAM, partly expressed in terms of solidarity with black South African women, emphasising gender aspects of the apartheid system. But it was also raised as an issue of male dominance within the anti-apartheid movement. In 1980, the same year that 30,000 women gathered at a peace camp in Greenham Common, an AAM women’s committee was formed by Margaret Ling and a few other activists.55

53 Interview with Margaret Ling.
54 Melucci, Challenging Codes.
55 MSS AAM 333.
... if you looked at the top leadership of the movement, it was rather male, whereas if you looked at the local groups, you found that who was actually doing the work, who were the secretaries of local groups, they were often women, so that committee was concerned about that, but I wouldn’t say that that was as big an issue as the race issue actually...

Forming special committees could be seen as AAM’s primary strategy to deal with the internal diversity of the political culture of which it was a part, and which it was partly embracing, and the potential tensions and conflicts following this diversity. The earliest one was the Union Action Group formed in 1968. A Religious Committee was formed in 1984, and a Black and Ethnic Minorities Committee were formed in 1988.56

A movement culture is not defined only by networks of groups and organisations; it is also a context in which people construct their personal identities, through different processes of identification. This means identifying with collective images and symbols created by the movement, and also, as we have seen, identifying with other people in the context of personal encounters. For some people, participation in this cultural process came to define a large part of their everyday lives, Margaret Ling expresses this experience succinctly,

... your whole social life gets wrapped up in it, which was very very important for the anti-apartheid movement, that became our social life, going to meetings, and then not just political meetings but also social events and people in the region became friends and there were relationships and marriages . . .

For others, participating in a movement culture might have been limited to occasional visits to collective events, such as going to demonstrations, wearing a ‘political t-shirt’, and boycotting South African goods when shopping in the local supermarket, thus largely performing anti-apartheid activism as an individual action. Whatever the degree of the involvement in the movement culture of which anti-apartheid was part, these everyday actions can be conceptualised as ‘life politics’. Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck define life politics as part of the process of increasing individualisation of late modernity, signifying an individualisation of politics that might be said to have taken off in the 1980s.57 This process must also be seen as part of wider economic, political and cultural changes, including an increasing globalisation of the economy and the media, as well as a global process of political liberalisation led by the Reagan and Thatcher governments. Although I agree with Giddens and Beck that the phenomenon of life politics can be conceived as an individualisation of politics, I would rather define it as expressing a new relation between individual and collective political action emerging in contemporary society, largely depending on communication through the media. Participating in a boycott, through not buying South African goods, is certainly an individualised form of political action, but it presupposes a collective organisation of the boycott and a collective articulation of its political meaning, which in the case of anti-apartheid was done by organisations such as the AAM and the ANC, using established and alternative media as channels of communication.

An important part of ‘life politics’ is that it politicises consumption through the notion that the individual can perform a political action not just as a citizen, but also as a consumer, as in the boycott. When Margaret Ling set up the independent AA Enterprises in 1985, the idea was to take the boycott campaign a step further: anti-apartheid activists and supporters were urged to buy goods from the frontline states to support these states in solidarity against apartheid. This, according to Margaret Ling, was a ‘concept of positive purchase, of using your power as a consumer – in a positive sense – boycott apartheid, buy from the frontline

56 MSS AAM 107.
states, that was the slogan'. AA Enterprises was part of a merchandising co-operative whose purpose was to create and disseminate the products.

Comparing the activities of the British AAM in the early 1970s and in the mid and late 1980s, when the anti-apartheid movement was at its peak with regard to public support, there is no doubt that the practices of the movement culture that it was part of were affected by wider societal changes taking place, predominantly in the 1980s. On the one hand, the AAM was largely perceived as having a leftist profile and even became a major forum for extra-parliamentary criticism of Thatcherist politics. On the other hand, the economic, political and cultural climate of the 1980s was clearly reflected in its new strategies for getting a message across to a wider public. The AAM, as well as the ANC, developed new skills in Public Relations, improving its media strategies, and getting involved in merchandise on a scale different from earlier periods. These changes, as well as its paradoxes, are clearly expressed by Ling as she reflects on her involvement in AA Enterprises, and on the functions, meanings, as well as the context of, merchandising in the context of a movement culture:

... I think merchandise was also extremely important in conveying a message, in creating and sustaining a sense of identity of the movement, it communicated a message about the movement, it was also a way for people to identify with the movement through wearing t-shirts, buying the merchandise ... Getting involved in merchandising myself, I certainly saw that very much as a contribution to the AAM campaigns, and in building a movement and at the same time raising money for it. And in that time, the late 80s, it was a period in this country when merchandise was very important for political activism, all the campaigning organisations had merchandise, and wearing a political t-shirt was very much of a fashion thing. Marxism was quite fashionable, I suppose it was partly a reaction to Thatcherism, that political t-shirts were fashion items.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, enterprising anti-apartheid became an extremely successful adventure for AA Enterprises, and even more so for the ANC. The products were sold not just by all the 205 local AA groups in Britain, but also by other organisations and groups in the transnational anti-apartheid network. At the time when the BBC in April 1990 broadcast the Mandela concert, organised by the AAM, anti-apartheid t-shirts were 'being worn from New York, to Vancouver, to Moscow, to Sweden, to South Africa', to quote an ANC public relations officer.

The Media Activist

Danny Schechter is a well-known name to all of those who are familiar with alternative media in the USA. In 1997 he published The More You Watch the Less You Know, which in the spirit of critical theory critiques the far-reaching mediatisation of American society. However, Schechter's account of his own life as an anti-apartheid activist shows that his activism was also a part of the process of mediatisation – and that this process can have different meanings. Schechter was born in 1942 to a Jewish family in New York. As a young student he became active in the civil rights movement in the late 1950s. In the 1960s, together with Jerry Rubin and Abbe Hoffman, he was one of the founders of the so called 'yippie movement'. The yuppies staged spectacular and media-oriented actions that became an important part of the public image

58 ANC PR relations officer Tariq Mellet (Patrick de Goude) states that this was a development that started in 1979, as ANC developed a new media strategy, constructing an ANC logotype and thus 'branding the ANC'.
59 Interview with Tariq Mellet (Patrick de Goude).
of the student protests against the Vietnam War. In 1967, Schechter went to England to study at the London School of Economics. In London, he met a number of South Africans in exile, among them Ruth First and Joe Slovo, both members of the South African Communist Party and well-known exile activists. According to Schechter, these encounters were the beginning of a long and deep commitment to the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. In 1968, he went to South Africa, partly on behalf of Ramparts Magazine, partly "to see for himself", what apartheid really looked like. Schechter states that in a way he never left South Africa – and that since that journey, most of his political activities have been related to South Africa.

As an anti-apartheid activist, Schechter was first and foremost involved in media work, producing articles, and radio and television programs. Together with Steven van Zandt, guitarist in Bruce Springsteen’s E Street Band, he produced the record and video Sun City, succeeding in getting 54 well-known artists to participate in it. In the beginning, few radio stations in the US played the song. The charity video We are the World had been extremely successfully received, but Sun City was regarded as too political. Furthermore, it seemed to fall between the lines in the segregated world of US radio stations; white stations regarded it as too black; black stations thought it was too white. Eventually there was a breakthrough when the then relatively young and ‘radical’ MTV decided to play the video. The song became a signature for the transnational anti-apartheid movement’s intensified campaign on sanctions against South Africa at the end of the 1980s.

If Schechter started out being a voice mainly speaking from a position outside of the established media in the US, with the media company Globalvision he tried to establish an alternative voice within the world of established media. His greatest success was the production of the television programme ‘South Africa Now’, which was aired every week in the United States between 1988 and 1991, and was also sold to a number of other countries. This was the reason why Schechter was asked to bring a film team and follow the newly released Nelson Mandela on his world tour in 1990.

Today, Schechter argues that the anti-apartheid movement as a solidarity movement did not just make a difference for the South Africans that struggled against the apartheid regime. Through the building of broad political ‘rainbow coalitions’, that bridged a number of tensions, it also had an influence on the political cultures in a number of countries where it had a base:

The anti-apartheid movement showed that people can make history, that people can bring about change, and that sometimes very diverse groups of people can unite across borders and boundaries, racial lines and national lines.

Conclusion: Transnational Activism and its Contexts

Collective action against apartheid came out of, and involved, a number of different historical experiences, related to different historical processes and structural contexts. As we have seen in this chapter, pre-existing networks played a crucial role in the emergence and organisation of anti-apartheid as a transnational social movement. In the different waves of anti-apartheid mobilisation, the churches, the labour movement and the student movement were particularly important influences, also bringing particular historical legacies, political and cultural learning processes and ideological commitments, as well as conflicts, into the movement.

61 Sun City is a holiday resort in South Africa, where many internationally well-known artists played for an exclusively white audience, in spite of the cultural boycott.
62 MTV was the main music programme on television.
63 Interview with Danny Schechter.
On the level of sustained personal commitment, the process of becoming a ‘transnational
activist’, could involve direct experiences of the brutality of the South African apartheid
system, as in the case of Sobizana Mngqikana. In the case of solidarity activism, it could
develop through participation in other social movements, which through processes of
political articulation became linked to the anti-apartheid movement, such as the North
American civil rights movement (Schechter) or the Indian anti-colonial struggle (Reddy).
Sustained solidarity commitment could also, as in the case of Ling, emerge out of a process
including encounters with exiles, and theoretical reflections on the legacy of colonialism in
contemporary society as well as on the personal level of family relations.

Linking the inside and outside of the movement, individual experiences of anti-apartheid
activism could partly be seen as articulations of the conditions of the historical and social
contexts that conditioned its action space. The activist biographies of this article point to the
condition of postcoloniality, the Cold War, and the latest phases of political, economic and
cultural globalisation as crucial contexts for the anti-apartheid struggle.

Regarding ‘postcoloniality’, the legacy of colonialism was not just present in the
inter-state alliances in the UN Security Council, opposing isolation of South Africa, but also
in the movement itself, creating tensions and ambivalence. However, this does not mean to
state that colonialism is simply unambiguously reproduced in different ways around the
world. The different activist narratives of this article show how the legacy of colonialism and
racism in different contexts and through different practices might be re-articulated,
negotiated, transformed, and sometimes even transgressed.

As the cases of Mngqikana and Reddy also show, globalisation of politics during the
post-war era was also, to a large extent, a matter of the division of any significant political
field, national as well as transnational, along Cold War lines. The Cold War was a crucial
factor in the circumstances that made it possible for the South African apartheid government
to sustain its position internationally. It was also the Cold War that made it possible to define
ANC as part of a bloc that threatened world peace and security.

Further, the final phase of the anti-apartheid movement, in which it reached its peak in
terms of public mobilisation, coincided with an intensified globalisation of media and
economic relations, developments that were related to the politics of neo-liberalism led by the
Reagan and Thatcher governments. As the biographies of Schechter and Ling show, these
developments in different ways influenced the practices and strategies of the anti-apartheid
movement. Through symbolic actions and media-oriented campaigns like the Sun City and
Free Nelson Mandela campaigns, it used the space opened up by the global media in order
articulate an anti-apartheid message and facilitate collective solidarity action in a global
context. Through activities like AA Merchandise, it initiated forms of economic practice,
which attempted to rearticulate the concept of international trade. Thus, through these
practices, transnational economic relations and global media became embedded in the
context of a movement culture in which solidarity was constructed as a fundamental value.
In relation to the activities of global corporations, it meant that ‘globalisation’ was redefined
to emphasise global solidarity rather than reproducing commodification.

However, within this very general frame of meaning, ‘solidarity’ could be defined in various
ways in movement discourses, and it could refer to many different, and sometimes conflicting,
practices. As we have seen, internal divisions were an integral part of anti-apartheid activism,
sometimes even leading to the construction of relatively permanent borders between ‘us’ and
‘them’ within the movement, sometimes leading to the exclusion of groups and individuals.

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64 On the intensified globalisation of economic relations and media during the 1980s, see for example S. Sassen,
Losing Control?: Sovereignty in the Age of Globalization (New York, Columbia University Press, 1996) or
Held et al. Global Transformations.
Following my argument about the interconnectedness of ‘the inside’ and ‘the outside’ of the movement, these ‘inner’ tensions and differences of the anti-apartheid struggle were largely articulations of conflicts defining the historical and social contexts of the movement.

In spite of the many structural and historical conditions constraining opposition against apartheid, anti-apartheid collective action that, at certain moments, transgressed boundaries and borders – national, racial and cultural – did take place, and was sustained for four decades. This was made possible through a set of practices and strategies that were either taken over from pre-existing transnational movements, or invented in the movement.

Relating border thinking to social movement activism, the selection of four cases from a larger material in this chapter was partly made in order to point to the importance of the emergence of a number of transnational activist roles in the context of the anti-apartheid movement. These roles represent a set of activist practices, involving different forms of transnational communication and border-crossing.

‘The movement mediator’ connected geographically dispersed places, organisations and networks through travel, acting as a negotiator and a translator of different cultural, historical and organisational experiences. ‘The movement organiser’ played a crucial role in the everyday life politics of anti-apartheid movement culture, facilitating formal and informal activities, often transgressing the different organisational cultures of new movements, labour unions and churches. Such locally situated activities also had a transnational dimension, as an integral part of any anti-apartheid organisation in any part of the world involved linking up with distant groups. ‘The movement intellectual’, often acting in between movements and established media, played the role of public opinion maker, often authors and journalists by profession. Even though they were often appearing publicly in a national context, their ‘professional activism’ was to a large extent transnational, as their books were translated to different languages, and as they travelled extensively. ‘The media activist’ engaged in cultural and media-oriented activities, often performing the two interrelated strategies of trying to influence established media, and to develop alternative media and information networks across borders. Finally, outside, or rather on the border between the movement and official political organisations, ‘the activist public official’ played an important role as s/he, sympathetic to the anti-apartheid cause, often stretched the limits of the organisation in which s/he worked.

To conclude, one of the important structural changes facilitating anti-apartheid activism across borders was obviously the increasing role of the media during the period of the anti-apartheid struggle. However, the role of the media must not be over-emphasised, as is so often the case in studies of transnationalism and globalisation. As we have seen, travel or mobility was also a crucial aspect of transnational activism. As the narratives of the activists profiled in this article show, the existence of a transnational network of ‘political exiles’ seems to have played a particularly important role in the emergence of solidarity groups and movements in different parts of the world. Thus, face-to-face interaction with ‘distant others’, was an integral part of sustained global anti-apartheid activism.

HÅKAN THÖRN

Gothenburg University, Department of Sociology, Box 720, 405, 30 Gothenburg, Sweden.
E-mail: hakan.thorn@sociology.gu.se