

Chapter 15

The South African Moment

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Boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) activists who wish to learn from the South African struggle need to place the South African boycott in a larger context, the antiapartheid struggle. There was no military victory against apartheid. The end of apartheid was a negotiated settlement. Boycott and collaboration were two ends of a single spectrum. In the middle lay different forms of critical engagement. The boycott was one instrument among many. To view the boycott in isolation would be misleading. To see the boycott in a larger context is to understand the politics that informed the boycott. Thus my question: What was the decisive moment in the development of the antiapartheid struggle in South Africa? What was the South African moment?

My argument will be the following. The South African moment involved a triple shift. First was a shift from demanding an end to apartheid to providing an alternative to apartheid. Second was a shift from representing the oppressed, the Black people of South Africa, the majority, to representing the whole people. The third was the turn from resisting within the terms set by apartheid to redefining the very terms of how South Africa should be governed.

The South African moment took shape over time, in response to a set of challenges faced by the antiapartheid struggle.

I will begin with the birth of the armed struggle in the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre of 1960. The stated objective of the armed guerrilla was to liberate the unarmed population. The professional revolutionary was patterned after Lenin's injunctions in *What Is to Be Done?* He and she were part of a vanguard whose mission was to lead and liberate the people. In Maoist imagery, guerrillas were to be like fish in water—the fish would be active, the water supportive.

As the armed struggle unfolded as a project, the results were by and large negative. The more activists moved into exile, the more the population was pacified. Capital took command: the sixties were a time of rapid economic development, a time when huge amounts of foreign capital moved into South Africa. Economic historians speak of the sixties as the second major significant period in the industrial transformation of South Africa, the first being the 1930s. Unlike the 1930s, which was marked by the Great Depression, the fillip to industrialization in the 1960s came from an expanding wave of foreign investment. From the point of view of the people, however, the 1960s were a decade of relative silence, the silence of the graveyard.

That silence was shattered by two volleys. The first was the Durban general strike of 1973. The second was the wave of township protests provoked by the police shooting of protesting

students in Soweto, on June 16, 1976. I will discuss Soweto first, and then come to Durban as the counterpoint. The significance of Soweto was threefold. First, Soweto shifted the initiative from professional revolutionaries in exile to community-based activists. Second, it shifted the focus from armed struggle to direct action. The youth of Soweto had no more than stones to throw at gun-toting police. In both these, Soweto evokes the first intifada in Palestine. But Soweto also signaled an ideological shift, a shift in popular political perspective, a shift so vast that one may speak of it as a sea change.

Before Soweto, the resistance in South Africa developed within the framework set by apartheid. To understand this framework, one needs to look at the apartheid mode of governance. Apartheid divided the whole population into races: Africans, Indians, Coloureds (a “mixed race” group), whites—many so-called population groups. In response, each population group organized separately, as a race: Africans as the African National Congress (ANC); Indians as the Natal Indian Congress, first organized by Gandhi; Coloureds as the Coloured Peoples Congress; and whites as the Congress of Democrats. The Congress Alliance was an umbrella alliance of these separate racially based resistance groups—and the Congress of South African Trade Unions, which was not organized along racial lines. This is how the mode of governance of apartheid became naturalized as the mode of resistance against it.

There were two major breaches in this mindset. The first was the Freedom Charter, adopted by the Congress Alliance in 1955, and its ringing declaration: “South Africa belongs to all those who live in it.” Though a declaration by one elite to disaffected sections of another elite, this declaration marked the birth of nonracialism. As such, it turned out to be of huge ideological significance.

The second breach, just as fundamental, if not more so, was the work of Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement. This was an alliance of ordinary people, mainly students, from below. In contrast, the Freedom Charter created the basis of an alliance at the top. Its effect was to incorporate individual whites into the antiapartheid movement. Yet, its importance cannot be underrated.

South Africa claimed to be the only democracy south of the Sahara— just as Israel claims to be the only democracy in the region. Both were racially defined, and Israel still is: it was a democracy for only Jews in Israel, and only whites in South Africa. In both cases, democracy turned into a fig leaf hiding racial privilege. It is in this context that the ANC put forward a meaningful notion of democracy—not a democracy of only one racial group, not even of the majority against the minority, but a democracy for all. Soon, individual white antiapartheid activists began to join the ANC.

I am tempted to ask: How many anti-Zionist organizations in historic Palestine have opened their doors to Israeli Jews opposed to a Jewish state? Not only as ordinary members but also as leaders? I ask because I do not know the answer. If the answer is not any or hardly any, why not?

The historical significance of Black Consciousness (BC) was that it constructed a unity from below, a unity of all the oppressed: Africans, Indians, Coloureds. Apartheid power had fragmented the subject population into so many groups, recorded separately in the census: Africans, Indians, Coloureds. The great historical achievement of BC was to pull the rug from

under apartheid. Black, said Steve Biko, is not a color, Black is an experience—if you are oppressed, you are Black!

Is there a lesson here for the anti-Zionist struggle?

The Palestinian predicament is not the same as that of South Africans under apartheid; it is worse. Only a small minority of South Africans were driven out of their country; the majority of Palestinians live outside historic Palestine. When a Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) delegation visited Tanzania in the 1960s and went to pay a courtesy call on President Nyerere, he told them: “We lost our independence, you lost your country!”

One cannot but be struck by the extraordinary resilience of the Palestinian people in the face of overwhelming odds. We live at a time when political violence has been conflated with criminal violence, when all forms of resistance are being redefined as terror, when repression is embraced as a war on terror. The major exception to this global trend is Palestine. It is a tribute to the tenacity of the Palestinian people, led by those in Gaza, and the political work done by the Palestinian resistance, including the BDS movement, that Israel and the United States have been unable to tar popular resistance in historic Palestine with the brush of terrorism. More than ever, the world is convinced that the cause of the Palestinian people is just.

What, then, is the major hindrance to a forward movement? Is it the military power of the United States and Israel? It would be a mistake to think so.

The problem is twofold. It is certainly a problem that the United States and Israel are not yet convinced that a military solution to the Palestinian resistance is out of question, but it is a *secondary* problem. The *primary* problem is that the Israeli people, the majority Jewish population within the state of Israel, is not yet convinced it has an option other than Zionism. The Zionist message to the Jewish population of Israel is this: Zionism is your only guarantee against another Holocaust. Your only defense against a second Holocaust is the state of Israel. The real challenge the Palestinian resistance faces is political, not military.

Let me return to apartheid South Africa to clarify that challenge. Consider two facts. The party of apartheid, the National Party, came to power through elections in 1948 and was returned to power with greater numbers throughout the 1950s. The dissolution of political and juridical apartheid also involved a Whites Only referendum—whereby a majority of the white population authorized its government to negotiate with representatives of the Black majority. The referendum went alongside a debate in both the Black and the white population. In the Black population, the rejectionist view was advanced by the Pan Africanist Congress in its mobilization, though not in its official pronouncements: *one settler, one bullet!* The white rejectionists belonged to a number of organizations, from the Conservative Party to the separatist Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging. Their point of view was best reflected in a popular book by Rian Malan, *My Traitor's Heart*. Malan was a descendent of a former South African state president. As a reporter for the Jo'berg *Star*, Malan covered the crime beat in the Black townships of Jo'berg. He wrote a book about what the apartheid press called “black-on-black crime.” One chapter narrated the story of the Hammer Man—a big Black man who wielded a heavy hammer with which he smashed the skull of his victim. The violence was largely

gratuitous, out of proportion to the benefit he got from it. The story had a subscript: If they can do this to one another, what will they do to us if given half a chance?

Rian Malan failed to convince the majority of whites in South Africa. Why? Because important sections of the liberation movements had moved to thinking in holistic terms. They told anyone who would listen—and there were plenty—that the struggle was not against settlers, but against settler power. Without a state that legally underwrites settler privileges, settlers would turn into just ordinary immigrants.

The South African moment was when important sections of the liberation camp redefined the enemy as not settlers but the settler state, not whites but white power. By doing so, they provided whites with an alternative—not a democracy for whites only, but a nonracial democracy.

In 1993, when the head of the South African Communist Party, Chris Hani, was assassinated in a suburb of Jo'berg, hundreds of thousands gathered at his funeral to pay him homage, and to listen to Mandela, police said they were not sure they could control the crowds. The National Union of Mineworkers said they could and they did. That day, Mandela addressed the whole country, not just the mourners at the stadium in Soweto. The day after, though de Klerk was still the president of South Africa, Mandela was its undisputed leader.

I gave my inaugural lecture at the University of Cape Town in 1998. I asked: When does a settler become a native? My answer was, "Never." Native, I argued, is the creation of the settler state. The native is invented as the other of the settler. If the settler is defined by history, the native is said to be defined by geography. If the settler makes his and her own history, the native is said to be the unthinking captive of an unchanging custom. My conclusion was that the settler and the native go together. They are joined by a relationship. Neither can exist in isolation: should you destroy one, the other would cease to exist.

Liberation in South Africa was the result of a combination of factors: war in the region, direct action within the country, and a changing balance of power globally. War in Angola was the epicenter of the war in the region: South African Defense Forces were defeated by Cubans and Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola at Cuito Cuanavale in 1987–88. This development precipitated the independence of Namibia. South Africa's regional isolation was complete and the limits of its military power were clear. Direct action developed in waves: from Durban 1973 and Soweto 1976 to insurrection in the townships and the international campaign for divestment and boycott in the 1980s. Internationally, there was a marked change with the end of the Cold War—once the Cold War ended, there was no morally or politically compelling reason to support apartheid. All three developments were important, but the decisive development was internal. This will be my last point.

Direct action began in the 1960s and developed in the 1970s and 1980s. It was a response to what was evident to all, that the armed struggle was a propaganda weapon at best and an empty boast at worst. The beginning was in the late sixties. It came with a split in the liberal white student organization, the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), which had admitted Black members. Led by Steve Biko, the Black section formed a separate organization, the South African Students' Organization (SASO). And out of SASO grew the Black Consciousness Movement.

Both wings of the antiapartheid student movement, white and Black, reached out to mobilize wider sections of society against apartheid. Black consciousness students moved to the township, and white students to organize migrant workers in hostels on the fringe of townships.

Out of this two-pronged initiative developed two wings of the labor movement, one based in migrant hostels, the other in the community (the township), the former drawing its intellectual vision from white students, the latter from Black students in townships. The first to be organized, in 1979, was the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU). Its core was unions organized following the spontaneous strike wave by Black workers in Durban and Pinetown in 1973. The constitution emphasized nonracialism, workers' control of trade unions, and worker independence from party politics. In contrast, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), organized in 1985, made the alliance with the ANC and the South African Communist Party a central part of its strategy.

Though relatively few in numbers, white students were of strategic significance. They were key organizers of FOSATU. Later, they joined the Communist Party, and then the ANC. When the time came, they provided effective channels of communication to the white population.

Conclusion

The antiapartheid struggle educated white South Africa: that apartheid's claim that there would be no white security without white power was a hoax. Indeed, the reverse was true: their security required that whites give up the monopoly of power. The Palestinian challenge is to persuade the Jewish population of Israel and the world that—just as in South Africa—the long-term security of a Jewish homeland in historic Palestine requires the dismantling of the Jewish state. The South African lesson for Palestine and Israel is that historic Palestine can be a homeland for Jews, but not only for Jews. Put differently, Jews can have a homeland in historic Palestine, but not a state.

My second conclusion is that legal and political apartheid ended in 1994. But 1994 was also the year of two events that outlined two very different destinies for Africa. It was the year of the end of apartheid in South Africa and the genocide in Rwanda. Both took place in the first half of 1994. Ten years earlier, if you had told African intellectuals and activists that a decade hence there would be reconciliation in one of these countries and a genocide in another, the vast majority would have failed to identify the countries correctly—why? Because in 1984, the South African army had occupied most key Black townships and Rwanda was the site of an attempted reconciliation. In ten years, everything had changed—testifying to one fact: nothing is inevitable in political life!

Ed. Note: This text is based on remarks as discussant for a talk given by Omar Barghouti of the BDS campaign, at Columbia University, New York City, December 2, 2014.