

The Tactics of Academic Boycott

WILLIAM COBBETT, a visiting fellow at the Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations at Warwick University, discusses the debate about the academic boycott. He argues for a selective boycott in which political and trade union bodies consult with progressive academic organisations.

In September 1986 debate about the academic boycott of South Africa re-surfaced when a South African delegation was excluded from the World Archaeological Congress (WAC) in Southampton.

Just prior to this, two South Africans were admitted to the conference of the International Sociological Association (ISA) in New Delhi in August. Then there was confusion over the York conference on 'The South African Economy After Apartheid' in October, and the events surrounding Irish scholar-journalist Conor Cruise O'Brien's visit to the Universities of Cape Town and Witwatersrand in October.

The only point on which opposing parties agree is that the debate is confused: as to how effective the policy is; who is implementing it; what the respective positions are; and, more recently, how South African academics should respond to the academic boycott.

THE THREE ARGUMENTS

The wide range of opinions about the boycott generally fall into one of three broad categories: those in favour of a total boycott; those completely opposed to any form of boycott; and those who argue for a flexible, selective approach.

The central points of the three positions are:

* **Anti-boycott:** The central argument is that boycott opposes the very principles of academia. Intellectual work can only flourish with the free exchange of ideas and debate, while academic boycott undermines that freedom.

In a recent article entitled 'The New McCarthyism', Philip Gawith argues that 'the case for maintaining academic links (with South Africa) is especially strong, given the unique importance of a 'community of ideas, the unique importance of academic freedom'. He concludes that to defend academic freedom 'is not a matter of hanging onto a threadbare liberal ideal, but of recognising that universities are the repositories of many values dear to civilised society'.

There are other, more practical, objections to the boycott. It is seen not to work, to be unenforceable and, more seriously, to be counterproductive. Therefore it hits hardest at those one is trying to help - the forces aligned against apartheid - while the regime's apologists and ideologues move around the world's conferences with relative ease.

* **Pro-boycott:** Those who support the boycott do not view it in isolation, but as a crucial and logical part of the wider isolation of the South African regime by the international community. Just as trading and sporting links are targets of boycott pressure, so too must cultural and academic aspects of South African life be attacked.

Arguments pleading a special case for academics are seen as elitist and self-interested. Breaking one part of the boycott undermines all other attempts to isolate South Africa, particularly when the campaign to isolate the country is gaining momentum daily. Andrew Anderson, writing in the *Oxford Magazine* says: 'There is now a case to be made for a boycott on the grounds that, in the present crisis, it may achieve a good significantly greater than the undoubted harm it would bring about through its

effect on academic free association and the exchange of ideas'.

* **Selective boycott:** The selective boycott position argues for a flexible but tactical approach. It is usually proposed by supporters of the boycott who concede some of its practical failings. They argue that opponents of the South African state must be able to identify and aid friends of the larger struggle, while applying sanctions against the regime and its supporters.

The different positions regarding the academic boycott stem from their different answers to the crucial question: is the boycott primarily an academic or a political issue? These answers to a large extent determine the tactical approach to the boycott.

If the boycott is purely an academic issue, then arguments for free exchange of ideas and information are paramount. The boycott must therefore be opposed as it undermines the conceptions of absolute and pure academic freedom.

Conor Cruise O'Brien, writing in *The Times* curtly dismissed the academic boycott, and said of the WAC affair: 'The idea of "damaging the regime" by excluding archaeologists from a congress is ludicrous. The Afrikaner right, the cutting edge of the regime in question, generally despises eggheads and looks on the South African universities as hotbeds of treason'.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM - ONE OF MANY 

An argument often used against the academic boycott is that it undermines academic freedom, one of the most basic rights of a university. Academic freedom gives universities the necessary flexibility to decide who is taught, what is taught and by whom. This freedom includes the academic's ability to move within the international community of ideas, to argue and debate with other academics, broadening knowledge to the advantage of all.

Those supporting the boycott, however, say it is misleading to state that meaningful academic freedom exists on South African campuses: student access to certain books is curtailed by the state, as is their ability to demonstrate or discuss certain issues vital to the future of South Africa. However, it does not follow that the

best course is to add to that curtailment of freedom.

The academic boycott does affect academic freedom - just as the sports boycott curtails the absolute freedom of sportsmen, and sanctions curtail the 'freedom' of the South African economy. But we must assess the relative importance of academic freedom against other rights and freedoms currently being struggled for.

In an address at the University of Cape Town, one academic, ironically opposing the boycott, stressed the indivisibility of the struggle for various freedoms: 'Academic freedom is a genuine value, and a precious one; but it does not come very high in the hierarchy of human values. The right to academic freedom is not as high as the right to live where one chooses, or the right not to be forcibly separated from ones' family'. He concludes: 'A society which sets a high value on academic freedom and a low value on the other rights may be...far worse than a society which denies academic freedom while respecting the more elemental human rights'.

For academics, therefore, the academic boycott must not be seen as a separate issue affecting them only, but rather as one issue in the context of struggles for other, more basic, human rights. Academics who concern themselves only with issues directly affecting them will be seen to be acting out of self-interest and attempting to further sectional privilege.

Therefore it is necessary to see the logic behind pro-boycott argument as political and not academic. The argument also contains an overriding morality which dictates that the governing principle must be political.

So academic freedom must be subordinate to the larger freedoms, and if the defence of academic freedom ever undermines the struggle for more universal freedoms, then that defence is wrong.

This is the position O'Brien faced on his recent visit to South Africa. In a *Times* article before his visit he said: 'I shall be glad to have my visit taken as a demonstration of solidarity with the staff and students of the University of Cape Town'. He also said his visit was 'a gesture of defiance against an intellectually disreputable attempt to isolate what I know to be an honest, open and creative intellectual

community'.

This individualistic arrogance led to his downfall. By linking his visit to an attack on the 'Mickey Mouse' politics of the academic boycott, O'Brien was asking students to show their agreement with his position by giving him an audience. He implicitly gave them a choice between himself and the liberation movement. He added insult to injury by showing solidarity with the South African Tourist Board - 'taking a break' in the Kruger National Park.

WHY A SELECTIVE BOYCOTT?

The strongest argument for a selective boycott is the way South African intellectual life has changed in recent years. In some disciplines, South African academics and students are challenging and replacing the intellectual colonialism which has dominated the universities for so long. In its place they are forging a vigorous and innovative academic climate in South Africa - particularly in the social sciences, which are more attuned to the particular demands of society and the struggle.

Evidence of this new yet flourishing climate is the high quality of debate within the universities, growing numbers of small publications and newspapers, and tentative but increasing links between campus and community.

This growing confidence of progressive academics takes place at the same time - and is in no small way responsible for - the dramatic and far-reaching collapse of apartheid ideology and the utter confusion of its supporters. The left is gaining the dominant position in the ideological battleground in South Africa. Ideas generated in the universities have filtered outwards into union, community and political organisation.

But - and a big but - progressive teaching staff and students on campus are in a minority. The 'liberal' reputations Wits, UCT, Durban and Rhodes enjoy result from the activities of a small minority. While the majority of staff and students at all these universities may not actually support apartheid, they do precious little to challenge it. This, though, rather than reflecting left-wing weakness, indicates

that universities are dominated by people in positions of privilege.

It is the small, active minority that the selective boycott must seek to identify, support and widen, while applying the strictest censure to the rest. The same principle must be applied, internally, to the 'homeland' universities.

THE INTERNAL BOYCOTT

The academic boycott debate is mirrored inside South Africa, although it is not discussed as much, and is probably as confused as the larger debate.

Just as the international community regards South Africa as a pariah state, so the majority of South Africans regard the bantustans. Academic contact with bantustan and ethnic universities is not welcomed, as it legitimises them. These 'bush colleges' have strong links with conservative Afrikaans universities.

Yet selective boycott arguments can be applied to relationships between open and bantustan universities. Many people at bantustan universities reject the bantustan fraud with which they are unwittingly identified. These strong and courageous voices of dissent are often subject to greater repression than their counterparts at Wits or UCT.

Those South African academics looking for a constructive approach to the international academic boycott, should examine their relationship with universities within South Africa.

THE SELECTIVE BOYCOTT: WHO DECIDES?

Those proposing a selective boycott argue that if effectively and representatively administered, its impact is potentially more powerful than a total boycott. Total boycott draws no distinction between those actively fighting the regime and those who support it or do nothing.

This raises the thorny question many think it better to avoid: who decides if certain academics are to be exempted from the boycott, and on what criteria?

There are a host of problems, for example in ensuring that the policy is evenly and fairly applied, and that

personal dislikes do not sway decisions. Is not the danger of faceless committees judging individuals very real?

These real concerns must be addressed openly and honestly. And if they prove insurmountable, then a total, rigorously enforced academic boycott must be understood to be the only alternative. But I believe a serious attempt by all concerned can result in a workable selective boycott.

Many current academic exchanges take place through personal networks. South African academics are invited overseas, or their counterparts are invited to this country because they have friends and contacts in the right places. No questions are asked, and the visits are generally not subject to the scrutiny or approval of the wider academic community.

A more concrete example is that of the two South Africans accepted to the ISA congress in India in August. They were never told what criteria were used in vetting them or why they were acceptable while others were not.

These points need to be clarified so that other academics in similar situations can know what is expected of them. As the academics concerned themselves stated, 'Our conclusion is that...(vetting) cannot be done on an individual basis. It is extremely difficult for international organisations who know very little about you to judge you as individuals'.

Organisation of the conference on the post-apartheid economy at York in October was even more confused. After well-founded rumours that it was to be boycotted, the conference finally took place and included an ANC delegation with observer status. But none of the delegates had been vetted - only the Urban Foundation was definitely not welcome.

The supreme irony was the speech at the formal dinner, delivered by Anti-Apartheid Movement President Trevor Huddleston, who took the opportunity to stress that organisation's commitment to the academic boycott. He was apparently unaware that the speech was delivered to the largest collection of South African academics assembled in Britain for many years. The audience also included employees of South African parastatals, and an academic who made a statement congratulating the conference organisers for allowing the boycott to be broken.

The above examples are not intended to

knock the good intentions of the persons concerned, but rather to show the need for open debate. It is therefore necessary to stop criticising and put specific proposals forward.

An effective selective boycott requires some form of vetting. If one accepts that the dominant logic of the boycott is political and not academic, it follows that representative and democratic political organisations should be involved in this process. UDF publicity secretary Murphy Morobe said when presenting the emerging UDF policy of 'tactical flexibility': 'It is the regime we want to isolate, and to achieve that we support the boycott. But there are cases in which inflexibility is not appropriate. What is important to us is that progressives are screened in some way by the broad democratic movement'.

There are two points which support such a position. It is vital that organisations within South Africa have a central role in the vetting of local academics, allowing for informed decisions to be taken. By accepting organisational vetting, the debate shifts away from the dangerous ground of individuals being vetted by self-appointed committees. What is then important is which organisations can and should be involved in the vetting process.

A non-sectarian approach is crucial, so those vetted would have to stand within the broad progressive movement aligned against the apartheid state, rather than subscribe to one particular ideological position.

The major stumbling block to such a proposal is whether organisations have the time or personpower to engage in vetting academics.

THE ACADEMIC INVOLVEMENT

However, this proposal is only half-complete without academic's involvement.

Ideally a joint committee with representatives from progressive organisations and those from academic bodies should deal with vetting. However, at the moment there is no co-ordinated academic response to the crisis, and nor does a progressive academic organisation exist to provide political leadership.

Resurgence of debate around the academic boycott has been partly responsible for South African academics discussing the creation of a national organisation. But the greater impetus has been increasing political conflict on campuses, police invasions and detention without trial of staff and students.

An organ representing progressive academic staff is long overdue. Practically, it will enable academics to respond to student demands for solidarity action in a coherent, strategic and unified manner. It should further facilitate solidarity between staff and students who find themselves under political attack, locally and nationally.

University academic staff have staff associations, but these are more concerned with protecting members' statutory and material rights and do not present themselves as appropriate vehicles to represent their members politically. It is also doubtful whether the inert University Teachers Association of South Africa (UTASA) has the potential to emerge strongly enough to meet the challenges currently facing the universities.

A break with the past is necessary and the time is right for an independent yet overtly political national academic organisation to be formed. While progressive academics are in a strong ideological position on campus, their limited numbers leave them somewhat vulnerable. A political academic union would have an important role in defending members' political rights. It could facilitate confident and cohesive initiatives and campaigns, such as increasing links between community and campus. Such an organisation should not emerge merely in response to the pressure of the academic boycott. But if this pressure leads to constructive

internal responses, the boycott's value is clear.

INVOLVING ACADEMICS IN STRUGGLE

There have already been significant changes on some campuses. At UCT the political crisis surrounding the first state of emergency was the catalyst for academic initiative. The resultant organisation was independent of the Academic Staff Association, and tried to involve staff, students and workers. Such initiatives need to be actively encouraged.

Such organisations will facilitate successful application of the selective boycott through contact with political organisations and trade unions to decide the fairest and most appropriate method of implementation. Of course mistakes will be made, but must be counted as part of the cost of attempting a more sophisticated position.

The burden of the boycott will fall on South African academics and students who wish to attend conferences and study abroad. But the same principle of selectivity must apply to foreign academics wishing to visit South Africa. Organisations representing academics overseas could meet with the external mission of the liberation movement, in consultation with internal progressive organisations, and so control the boycott from the outside.

The real value of a successful selective boycott will be to involve the academic world in struggles off campus. The universities have shown themselves to be an important site of struggle. Political organisations closely associated with wider struggles off campus now seems essential for taking that struggle further.

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