

THE SOUTH AFRICA "BOOK BOYCOTT": CENSORSHIP OR SOLIDARITY?

by Mark Rosenzweig and Elaine Harger

In January and February of 1988, the eminent civil libertarian, Nat Hentoff, drew the attention of readers of New York's *Village Voice* to a significant, if little known, controversy in the library and publishing world. With an article entitled *P.W. Botha's American Helpers* (VV 1/12/88), Mr. Hentoff began a series of columns attacking not, as the title might suggest, defenders of President Reagan's "constructive engagement" with South Africa's apartheid regime, but, rather, certain proponents of sanctions against South Africa. The accusation was provocative and quite serious: anti-apartheid action initiated by librarians and publishers in the form of a "book boycott" itself constituted censorship, and this "censorship" made these parties virtual accomplices of the racist South African government. Hentoff was reflecting the views of his allies within ALA's Intellectual Freedom Committee (IFC) who sponsored a 1987 resolution asking ALA members to abandon the boycott. The resolution was soundly defeated. More recently, former ALA executive director, Robert Wedgeworth, now dean of Columbia University's School of Library Service, added his voice to Hentoff's and the Intellectual Freedom Committee's in a report entitled *The Starvation of Young Black Minds* co-sponsored by the Association of American Publishers (AAP) and the Fund for Free Expression (FFE) accusing sanctions supporters of interfering with the "free flow of information" to South Africa and thereby depriving all South Africans and black South Africans in particular of access to the liberating influence of U.S. publications.

The charge that U.S. librarians and publishers, historically among the most vociferous foes of censorship, were P.W. Botha's "helpers" merits close consideration, especially because ALA members will be asked at the 1990 annual convention in Chicago to vote on a set of SRRT-sponsored guidelines which would continue support for the anti-apartheid movement (see Kagan and Nyquist article on page 18). It is the aim of this article to examine the controversy, its background, responses and reactions, and implications for libraries.

The central issue in the Hentoff columns and the Wedgeworth report concerns the character and implications of a number of measures taken by publishers, book distributors, public and academic libraries and the ALA to contribute concretely to the international campaign against the apartheid regime of South Africa. These measures, which are loosely referred to as the "book boycott", fall under the umbrella of the cultural and academic boycott and are roughly analogous to other forms of sanctions supported by the international anti-apartheid movement and carried out in various fields, e.g. the economic sanctions and disinvestment campaigns, the sports boycott, the entertainment boycott, etc. Where librarians and

library staff have supported anti-apartheid actions they have implemented the "book boycott" in several different ways: 1) libraries have boycotted companies doing business within South Africa; 2) South African vendors and publishers have been boycotted; 3) libraries have refused to send material to official South African institutions through gifts and exchange programs and through interlibrary loan; 4) librarians have not participated in professional, trade or academic events under the auspices of South African organizations nor travelled to South Africa; 5) efforts have been made to expell the South African Institute of Library and Information Science (SAILIS) from the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA). Each of these actions when proposed in the U.S. has aroused considerable controversy by those who oppose boycotts and sanctions in general and by those who always find reasons why South Africa should not be deprived of a particular item, say, IBM computers, *The Georgetown Law Review*, *DIALOG*, or American entertainers performing at Sun City.

Where did the call for sanctions come from in the first place? Not from here, but from within South Africa itself. The call for sanctions and boycotts came from a particular sector of South African society, to wit, the majority, or at least the representatives of the black majority's liberation struggle (the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Communist Party (SACP), the United Democratic Front (UDF), the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM), and most Pan-Africanist groups), and it has been opposed by other sectors (white political parties, the black spokesmen collaborating with the apartheid regime, etc.) In the international community those groups that respond to the call for sanctions are, to one degree or another, implicitly or explicitly, recognizing the leadership of the anti-apartheid movement and respecting its analysis that such measures will aid in undermining the apartheid system and creating conditions for the construction of a just social order in its place. Those who have opposed such measures despite their opposition to apartheid generally have felt that a gradual transformation of the system was underway and that white "reformers" and black "moderates" will obviate the necessity for any radical change. Always, opponents of sanctions, whether pro- or anti-apartheid, have claimed that their worst effect is on the black majority and are therefore inhumane as well as counter-productive.

In order to evaluate this controversy let us examine the situation within South Africa with particular respect to the the connection between libraries, censorship and apartheid.

The South African government, based on white-minority rule and the system of apartheid, has legalized and institutionalized censorship as one of many measures aimed at securing the unjust status quo. It has practiced this censorship on every shipment of printed matter crossing its borders (from 1981 to 1984 customs officials submitted 25.4% of all the material reviewed by official censors), it has banned books, journalism, political speech and outspoken opponents not just on the pretext

of a "state of emergency" but under "normal" circumstances (Merrett, 1988, p. 182). The possession and transmission of banned texts has been a legal offense, punishable by fine, arrest or imprisonment. The recent "unbanning" of the ANC, PAC, SACP, and other anti-apartheid groups has removed from the censor's domain some materials published by these organizations and the writings of banned individuals. However, stringent censorship remains a fact in South Africa (see Merrett's article, page 32).

How have South African librarians as a whole responded to government censorship? For the most part they have obeyed, justified and implemented censorship laws.

In the spirit of censorship laws and practices, the State Library in Pretoria has long provided a valuable service to dutiful South African librarians by compiling and publishing, among other similar works, the **Bibliography of Overseas Publications about South Africa (BOPSA)**. This is an extensive, perhaps exhaustive, listing and is an ordinary bibliography in all respects but one: many entries carry the warning "Not permitted in South Africa". A survey of the 1986 BOPSA showed that 44% of books under the heading "Labor" were banned; 71% of political science titles are forbidden. In a similar vein, the South African Department of Education and Training issues a list for school librarians: **Approved Library Books**. Written approval from a Department inspector must be procured if a library wants to order, or receives as a gift, any title not on the list.

In an article appearing in the July 1988 *Wits Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, *Censorship, Academic Freedom and South African Librarians* by Donna Switzer, we read how South African academic librarians have conformed to censorship laws and how these laws have effected scholarship within the country.

Historically, South African librarians, with only a few exceptions, have chosen to take the safe road. Censorship has been reported on; it has been observed; it has been carried out; complaints have been made because of inefficiencies, paperwork, or lack of clarity; negotiations have taken place to make the system *easier*, but the librarian willing to say publicly and loudly that censorship in libraries is wrong! has been a voice crying in a professional wilderness.

Switzer then describes her personal experience as a librarian involved in implementing censorship:

It is my firm belief, having had experience with

administering censorship in a university library, having taught the legal structure of censorship to librarianship students, having thoroughly researched the subject and written about it, having experienced the problems encountered by the researcher who needs banned material and, finally, having had the experience of being told that my research results would be banned, that censorship has no place in an academic environment. Not only is the actuality of the system damaging to research and teaching, the mere threat probably does even more harm. No records exist of the number of research projects that have been avoided because the subject was "touchy" but it is likely that the number is large. Censorship has caused many "black holes" of ignorance in South Africa. Such ignorance can only be to the ultimate detriment of the country as it has been in the past.

It is time that South Africa's professional association [SAILIS] and its members seriously considered the essential conflict between the system of legal censorship in the country and the ethics which should be integral to the profession.

Christopher Merrett, librarian at the University of Natal, writes that the position of SAILIS on censorship is questionable to say the least: "No leading figure in its [SAILIS] hierarchy has made a significant statement about censorship for more than 30 years." (Merrett, 1988, p. 188). Indeed, browsing through issues of that organization's publication, the **South African Journal for Librarianship and Information Science**, is like being caught in a *twilight zone*. The word "apartheid" is never used and when a writer must refer to inequities between the races in literacy, education, library services, etc. (which are, of course, the direct result of apartheid) they are treated as natural manifestations of a more-or-less normal and smoothly functioning social order.

Since the white ruling class' power and privilege depends to a certain extent on access to a wide range of information, it is not surprising that South African libraries own banned books. Kept under lock and key, prohibited volumes can be used only at the discretion of the librarian and the readers must prove the "scholarly" nature of their studies. It is doubtful, however, if a curious high school or college student, white or black, visiting the State Library would be allowed to read any book branded as "Not permitted in South Africa." (See interview, page 21)

Apartheid limits the free access to information and the exchange of ideas in ways other than through censorship. In Transvaal and Natal provinces, for instance, there live over 8,000,000 blacks. Their reading needs are served by 185 libraries which often are single rooms in churches or schools. In the same provinces live 2,000,000 whites. They are provided 571 libraries which more closely resemble the public and school libraries familiar to most U.S. citizens. Money for books, facilities and salaries are distributed according to racial criteria and are therefore disbursed most inequitably. A glance at the 1986 annual report of the Johannesburg Public Library shows that white readers in the areas served by the JPL had 28 branches to use, the colored and Asian populations, also discriminated against on the basis of apartheid, had 8. Library services available to the black population were not even mentioned.

Library administration practice as well controls access and simplifies censorship by not allowing direct orders from publishers or book distributors. All orders must be placed with white-run provincial libraries which fill requests as they please. Non-white libraries have, needless to say, no autonomy.

This sketch of some aspects of the library system in South Africa suggests that their libraries, rather than being besieged bastions of civil liberties, are deeply and completely implicated in apartheid and the censorship which helps maintain it. Censorship has long been accepted as a necessary evil by the white ruling class, even by liberal sectors which have learned to live with censorship's many and varied inconveniences. At this point, let us outline the development of involvement by ALA in the sanctions movement.

In the fall of 1977, the South African government shut down the offices of opposition newspapers and arrested or banned many of their editors. ALA responded to this act of censorship by calling on President Carter and Congress to impose sanctions against South Africa. In addition, the ALA delegation to IFLA was instructed to request that IFLA censure South Africa for violating the basic human right to free expression. Indeed, since then library associations of many nations have been calling for the expulsion of SAILIS from IFLA.

In 1985 ALA began to divest its endowment portfolio of all stock in South African concerns. ALA membership at the annual conference in 1986 passed a resolution calling for "all American librarians to support the struggle for freedom, justice, and equality within a multiracial democratic society in South Africa." When the U.S. Congress overrode a presidential veto and enacted legislation imposing strict economic sanctions against South Africa in September 1986, several local governments passed ordinances prohibiting municipal purchases of products from companies operating in South Africa. An attempt to enforce one such ordinance in Houston, Texas framed the debate between supporters of sanctions, who consider the crippling of apartheid through a sustained attack on the society's information needs an act of solidarity, and proponents of the "free flow of information", who regard as

censorial boycotts targeting information products and services.

The specific incident which began to polarize the library community involved the Houston Public Library. The library was required by the Houston sanctions ordinance to procure from some 3200 vendors notarized affidavits guaranteeing that each company from which the library purchased materials, services, and supplies did not operate in South Africa. (Many public agencies, besides libraries, have been asked to comply with similar requirements by municipal governments.) Several vendors refused to sign the affidavits and Houston Public was faced with the dilemma of boycotting such library sources as H.W. Wilson Co. and The Wall Street Journal.

In response to this situation the Intellectual Freedom Committee of ALA submitted a resolution to the ALA membership in July 1987 at the annual convention in San Francisco. The resolution stated that "access to information is pivotal in the individual's freedom of choice, and that access...must not be abridged because of the social or political ideologies of the creators of such materials or the geographic origin of their source." Further, the resolution urged ALA to join with vendors in opposing any ordinances "which affect the choice of vendors with whom the library may do business." The resolution involved two key claims: one having to do with the free flow of information, which has for a long time been a main concern of the IFC, and the other with the more novel idea that boycotts of library vendors somehow entails censorship. The resolution was defeated. It was defeated because ALA members accepted the fact that, while the call for sanctions by the anti-apartheid movement necessitated some hardship to all involved, the need for solidarity outweighed abridgments on our "freedom of choice" in the struggle to end apartheid.

In response to local initiatives such as the Houston ordinances, the publishing world gradually began to withdraw from contacts with South Africa and the ALA came to recognize the validity of these campaigns. Businesses are not often motivated by moral considerations and in publishing, as elsewhere, we can assume that their main consideration in respecting the boycott has been the "bottom line". Hentoff criticises publishers who respected the book boycott for being driven by economic interest, ie. they didn't want to lose the business of U.S. customers trying to comply with sanctions legislation, but he has undoubtedly found no problems with the not disinterested AAP's attempt to restore its South African market as expressed in the report *The Starvation of Young Black Minds*, co-authored by Robert Wedgeworth and Lisa Drew (an editor at William Morrow & Co.) The report opens with a statement of concern, not that there is censorship in South Africa, but that since 1984 U.S. publishers have not been able to be competitive in the South African market due to the boycott! Clearly the AAP is very concerned with the economic interests of its members who will certainly enjoy the profits of renewed book and database trade with South Africa if, under the banner of the free

flow of information, they manage to convince librarians and publishers that the "book boycott" is a form of censorship.

At the most general level the proposal of a book boycott of South Africa can be viewed as involving the same considerations and generating the same arguments as any sanctions. (The arguments for and against sanctions are well-presented in the *Sanctions Handbook*, Penguin 1987). The acceptance of various forms of book and information boycotts against South Africa by librarians is said to raise certain "unique" questions, if Hentoff, et. al. are to be believed, because books (and, one assumes, microforms, cd-roms, on-line databases, etc.) are apparently not of the same order as, say, live performances by American artists, machine parts, computer chips, prize fights, capital investments, and so on. Any action impeding the "flow of information" to South Africa or anywhere else is by definition "censorship". Thus authors, educators, publishers and the information industry are in violation of First Amendment - type rights if they are involved in the "book boycott". However, boycott or not, information - especially books - does not flow freely in South Africa to whites or blacks; censorship has been an essential component in apartheid's arsenal of social control and repression and it is completely unclear how business as usual with South Africa in publishing and library exchange would ever affect the situation for the better. Continuing to allow the South African censors the absolute freedom to pick and choose the books they wish to allow into the country neither challenges the principle of censorship nor threatens the system of apartheid. Unrestricted book trade merely enables the complex and variegated information needs of the apartheid state and society to be served, while all potentially discomfiting material is totally controlled or simply excluded. The free shipment of books to and from South Africa will only provide a wider selection of books for the censor while also providing ample opportunities for propagandists creating illusions of press and speech freedom in the land of apartheid. American librarians who support breaking ties with South Africa are not themselves censoring books, they are only refusing to recognize the prerogative of the South African censor.

In addition to the argument that the "book boycott" violated First Amendment rights and the principle of the free flow of information, there are those who argue that the democratic ideals contained in U.S. publications are essential to the development of a democratic, non-racial South Africa and, therefore, the book boycott deprives both black and white South Africans of liberating "western" ideals. *Publishers Weekly* provided two columns in 1987 illustrating typical justifications in this vein for sending material to the South African censors. In one, *When Freedom to Read Suffers* (PW, 7/17/87, p. 38) by Prof. Irving Louis Horowitz, we read that "my concern ... is the decisions of McGraw-Hill and other publishing firms to terminate their South African operations and what it means in terms of freedom to read in a non-democratic context." As we have shown, what freedom to read means in the non-democratic context of South Africa is the freedom of the censor to pick

and choose what one may read and who may read what. But Prof. Horowitz indulges in the fantasy that the more "democratic" American textbooks will infiltrate "dangerous" liberal ideas into South Africa and undermine apartheid. He apparently is not aware that liberal ideas have wide currency in South Africa and their proponents have lived long and well in coexistence with apartheid. If, moreover, these American books were powerful briefs for race equality they certainly would not be allowed in. If on the other hand they are so subtly anti-racist as not to offend the censors they are unlikely to challenge, in and of themselves, the ideological and institutional foundations of apartheid. And, finally, if they were let in they probably wouldn't find their way into the hands of the black majority anyway, not merely on account of censorship but because of income and resource allocations under apartheid. This is gradualism at its worst: the oppressed majority must wait for the power of enlightenment of books from the West, by infiltration past the censor, to "educate away" the system of apartheid.

Along similar lines, the childrens' book writer, Gloria Miklowitz, in an article entitled *Why Deny the Children* (PW 10/9/87, p. 66) argued that "perhaps publishers should think again about boycotts...Books can help shape attitudes and change perceptions...Who knows, maybe that's the best way to end apartheid." Never mind that those who are leading the struggle against apartheid have long since rejected the idea that that's the "best way", because they know only too well that "changing perceptions" hasn't worked up to now.

There is another revealing aspect to Miklowitz's column, one which illuminates the idea that if only books containing the ideals of American democracy could find their way into South Africa peaceful change would be possible. She refers to a discussion in which Dr. Andree Jeanne Totemeyer examined the changes in South African children's books as an example of "changing perceptions."

Only a few years ago blacks were shown in picture books barefoot and with protruding bellies. Whites in contrast were always depicted as the boss, the hero...Totemeyer recapped the plots of more recent children's books and illustrated how genuine attempts are being made to change the stereotypes and bring about understanding between the races. One difficulty, of course, is that friendships between white and black children aren't likely...because the races are separated in schools and living areas by apartheid.

The "one difficulty" is the central problem: the emphasis here is on changing the representation not the reality. Just as in the U.S. where interracial children's books have not led to racial harmony, so too attempts to change perceptions by showing some white and black South African children playing together will not bring an end to apartheid. To suggest, as this does, that racial problems within a society are

merely a question of lack of "understanding between the races" is naive to say the least. Such understanding can not be developed anyway by creating children's books which obscure the real injustices, degradations and violence of apartheid with false images of non-existent types and situations to replace racist stereotypes. Nor would it necessarily be fostered by books from abroad which represent (and in their own ways, misrepresent) a preferable set of relations between races which is not, in any case, realizable in South Africa without first destroying apartheid.

In their zeal to find arguments for ending the "book boycott" its opponents do a little distortion of reality on their own and concoct evidence that American boycotters bear responsibility for depriving the black majority of access to information and books. The AAP report epitomizes these efforts. In order to substantiate the hardship supposedly inflicted on South African blacks by the boycott, this report seriously misrepresents the information situation in South Africa and indeed the entire social system in which it is embedded. For example, after listing the places where interviews were conducted for the report we are told that:

In the preceding list are a number of institutions which are heavily funded by the South African government. One would normally assume, therefore, that they would support apartheid. However, it is surprising to see the extent to which government-supported libraries and universities are continually and actively engaged in challenging the system.

We would like to know the details of this opposition, especially in light of regular and ongoing protests by black students against the policies of South African universities. In addition, contrary to all previous evidence, the report creates the impression that South African librarians have been vociferous defenders of free access and opponents of censorship, that censorship is not as widespread or as effective as Americans think and that black libraries are basically suffering from a lack of resources rather than problems endemic to the whole apartheid system.

Worse yet, Hentoff, Wedgeworth and the Intellectual Freedom Committee argue, in spite of all we have described above, that, besides there being no positive case for the information and book boycott, the ANC no longer supports these sanctions in any form. Hentoff in an article aimed at publishers with reservations about dealing with South Africa (*Washington Post* of 12/5/89) quotes a passage from the ANC's statement on the cultural and academic boycott concerning the need for an "inflow to South Africa of progressive cultural products...and ideas". He interprets this to mean that the ANC is opposed to the book and information boycott. Wedgeworth quotes the same passage in the AAP report, and in his *Point of View* column in the 2/21/89 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

But, the quote has been taken out of context and if one reads the entire document from which it is excerpted it is clear that the ANC continues to be firmly opposed to open exchange of information with apartheid South Africa. Hentoff and Wedgeworth distort the ANC's actual stand and fail to inform their readers of a central point in the ANC's statement on the academic and cultural boycott, published in *Sechaba*, June 1989:

The cultural and academic boycott of apartheid South Africa (that is, those bodies, institutions, cultural workers and their product that promote, defend and give aid and comfort to the system of white minority domination) must consistently and continuously be strengthened as part of our overall strategy for the isolation of the apartheid regime.

The ANC's main concern when it modified and clarified its position on the academic and cultural boycott was with assuring that the anti-apartheid movement itself did not become cut off from the rest of the world. This is the policy of "selectivity" in the cultural boycott. Note that selectivity is not a general revision of sanctions extending to economic relations, etc. It is restricted to the cultural sphere and strictly defined in relation to contacts with the "other South Africa" subject to the approval of the MDM/ANC. (See *Culture in Another South Africa* for a discussion of the cultural alternative movement within South Africa and Kagan/Nyquist article here for an overview of selective sanctions and Wedgeworth report.)

The free flow of information argument may have been substantive if misguided, but it was absurd to claim (and this is what, in the final analysis, is at the heart of the Hentoff, Wedgeworth, IFC argument) that the interference with a library's choice of vendors constitutes a violation of our First Amendment rights especially when alternative sources could be found if one were to go to the trouble and expense of doing so. Foregoing particular equipment or formats of information produced or distributed by one company or another which might provide allegedly better access is not a fundamental violation of the free flow of information either. To call this censorship is merely polemical. Limitations on choices of vendor or format is not aimed at the content of the "information package" but, in this case, is a strategy aimed at the economic interests of businesses for whom "information" is a mere commodity which they provide access to not freely but only at considerable profit. In any case, our decisions about what to purchase are routinely based on budgetary constraints and economic considerations and yet these decisions which take place daily in libraries across the country would seldom be considered as censorship. Of course, they often end up restricting access to all kinds of material and sometimes in a "biased" way.

With regards to the free flow of information argument - yes, the "book boycott" has hurt South Africans. It was meant precisely to hit at the vital need for information for the normal functioning of this most abnormal and abhorrent social system. As long as their basic information needs are met, and access to a wide range of printed materials from abroad is available, white South Africans have been willing to endure the undoubted indignity and inconvenience of censorship by their state authorities in the interest of preserving the status quo. But an international information and book boycott has made life considerably more difficult for them although, it is important to point out, it did not substantively worsen the situation of blacks who are systematically denied quality information access anyway. It is hard to see how simply maintaining U.S. book commerce with South Africa would ever help significantly extend access to the disenfranchised who are hampered not just by censorship, but by the whole institutional arrangement of society. For blacks, unequal access to information is of a piece with their unequal access to everything in that society. It is part and parcel of the everyday world of complete subjection which is apartheid. Frankly, the aim of a book boycott is to make the functioning of the entire system which sustains white privilege more difficult, yes, to starve it of more or less necessary information until the costs of apartheid become too high to bear. The difference between sanctions and mere statements of protest is that sanctions can help make apartheid as uneconomical and inefficient as possible and are, unlike pious proclamations, difficult to ignore.

The situation in South Africa is developing rapidly since the unbanning of the ANC and the release of Nelson Mandela. Now more than ever, it is important to understand the continuing problems of South Africa as consequences of the continued existence of apartheid and not the effect of conditions imposed on that country from outside by international attempts to isolate the apartheid regime. The greatest disservice of the anti-boycott faction has been to try to shift our perception of the responsibility for black problems away from Pretoria and to attempt to redirect the focus of the resolution of the problem from the internal struggle to a kind of "peace process" lubricated by infusions of American books. They counterpose an analysis and an implicit strategy completely at variance with that of the MDM and ANC, but one which has all the earmarks of the political perspectives of the United States Information Agency and the State Department.

We feel that despite the arguments of Wedgworth, Hentoff, the Intellectual Freedom Committee, etc. there is no reason, in principle, why U.S. libraries and publishers should not contribute to the rapid elimination of apartheid through the use of sanctions in our respective fields. Any boycott (or strike for that matter) can be said to interfere with certain freedoms. Claiming, however, that an information and book boycott violates the freedoms protected by the First Amendment suggests that the content of writing and speech or the right to expression is being tampered with rather than freedom of contract and trade and other less sexy things. If books are considered "special", why not phonograph records, computer programs, sports

events, databases, business contracts, and so on, until the very idea of sanctions disappears and there is only the possibility of talking the racists out of it. The black majority cannot and will not wait until the white supremacists are persuaded. They are fighting with everything at their disposal. Librarians, like all other citizens, can stand aside and watch, or take sides. It is to the credit of many American librarians that they have taken sides against apartheid and supported concrete action.

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