

# Academic boycott — political strategy or moral imperative?

## Selective support as a justifiable alternative

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### Summary

**Academic boycott has been justified as an appropriate political strategy in the struggle against the oppression of apartheid. Moral outrage against racist policies has led to the claim that academic boycott is a morally imperative component of a broader sanctions policy. This claim has neither been substantiated by a reasoned ethical argument nor weighted against an ethically justifiable approach that is consistent with universal humanitarian aspirations and which allows rejection of apartheid to be coupled to constructive endeavours.**

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The history of South Africa during the 20th century can be succinctly described as a combination of relative industrial and economic success intimately coupled with racially discriminatory political and social policies that denied the majority of its population access to progressively acknowledged human rights<sup>1</sup> and that prevented the country from achieving its long-recognised great potential.<sup>2,3</sup> South Africa's economic and other successes, with many beneficial effects on the lives of all who live in this country (these should be conceded<sup>4</sup> but not over-emphasised), have thus been totally eclipsed by its tragic political failures, by its refusal (as a nation supposedly committed to the Western tradition) to identify with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and by legislation that, until February 1990, relentlessly silenced much opposition, eroded the rule of law, entrenched the ruling party, and degraded human dignity. The failure to harness human dignity to economic progress constituted the basis for South Africa's being progressively ostracised by many countries.<sup>5-9</sup>

Academic boycott, which operated fragmentedly and informally for many decades, became consolidated into a more formal component of a political strategy of economic and cultural sanctions to pressurise the South African Government into reversing its repressive and discriminatory policies and into developing a non-racial democratic society in which there would be greater freedom and respect for fundamental human rights.

Although moral outrage against the racist policies of South Africa, with all the devastating human effects these have had, is clearly justified, the idea that academic boycott is a *morally imperative* component of an anti-apartheid stand requires more than mere assertion. Its incompatibility with academic freedom in the open societies we admire and to which we aspire, and its potential to affect very adversely higher educa-

tion, medical education, scientific endeavour, health care, and the international collaborative spirit of higher education, all of which are necessary for human upliftment now and in a post-apartheid South Africa, calls for careful examination of its justification.

Many who reject and oppose apartheid, who are also morally outraged by all forms of discrimination, who acknowledge their own unwitting enmeshment in the process, who agree that it is beyond dispute that the hegemony of a white power oligarchy cannot continue in South Africa and that all political skills need to be brought to bear on achieving peaceful change, consider that academic boycott is not morally defensible and that there are alternative justifiable approaches.

Because of the moral outrage against apartheid policies, discussion and debate on academic boycott tends to be emotive, and characterised by attempts to conflate political strategy or mass opinion with moral justification. Strategically justifiable political actions may indeed have a moral component, but I question the assertion that political imperatives of necessity embrace academic boycott as a moral imperative. I shall endeavour to examine this assertion, highlight its deficiencies and suggest to medical and academic colleagues that imaginative programmes of professional encouragement and involved support have the requisite moral consistency, justification and potential for both opposing apartheid and, equally important, contributing to the necessary infrastructure for a new, better South Africa.

### From academic boycott to selective support

In a recent National Medical and Dental Association (NAMDA) publication,<sup>10</sup> the background and rationale for academic boycott is stated, the arguments used by opponents and proponents outlined, and guidelines offered as a basis for *selective support* of academic exchanges on the grounds that it is 'now necessary to move beyond the policy of a total boycott as proposed by some associations'.

In brief, NAMDA's views are that:

'1. In the context of a general state of crisis within apartheid's health and education systems . . . the impact of a decline in international medical exchanges on health care afforded to the majority of the population, will be minimal . . . although the effect on academic institutions in the long term is likely to be more serious and there would be secondary effects on health care from this (which NAMDA views with concern).

'2. The progress and spirit of science and knowledge in South Africa is fundamentally obstructed by the policy of apartheid [and it is] the collusion of a large segment of academia (including the medical profession) in the maintenance of the system which has resulted in the academic boycott.\*

'3. As health is fundamentally determined by political and economic factors . . . apartheid is inimical to good health' and

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\* Substantive evidence for the claim of collusion is not referred to or provided. Complacency about social and political influences on health (a feature not unique to medicine in South Africa) would be a more accurate description.<sup>9</sup>

it is appropriate to develop a policy on academic exchange which encourages health professionals to make a contribution in their professional capacity to political change.

NAMDA's view that 'a policy of *selective support* can create incentives to academics to oppose apartheid more actively . . . also ensure access to ideas and research that promote democratic change' and is thus 'not anti-science or anti-knowledge but is in fact fundamentally committed to the cause of academic freedom', is, unlike total boycott or uncritical support, justifiable but with the caveat that the term 'selective support' is not used as a surreptitious euphemism for selective boycott.

NAMDA acknowledged, however, that academic boycott is an established fact; stated that it recognises 'the political and the moral imperatives on which it is based' (but that it had 'no role in initiating it') and believes that 'in the face of a total academic boycott it is now necessary to move beyond the policy of total boycott' as 'a selective support policy would now be more effective in promoting political change'. While asserting that academic boycott is a moral imperative, this document simultaneously expresses growing concern for the adverse effects of such sanctions and proposes a move towards a very different and justifiable position, which emphasises selective support.

## The ethical basis for academic boycott

The issue on which I should like to focus is the assertion that academic boycott can be considered as a *moral imperative*. I shall begin by questioning whether academic boycott can be justified within the traditional framework of professional moral codes and then I shall very tentatively try to explore whether academic boycott can be justified within an ethical theory.

### Moral codes

The term 'morality' as popularly used to define right and wrong within a particular social context, comprises a set of usually abstract, uncodified standards, pervasively acknowledged and applicable to behaviour in diverse circumstances.<sup>11</sup> Various 'codes' of morality have been features of civilisations for thousands of years. In common with the codes guiding medicine they have not been absolutely rigid and have been progressively influenced by social developments.

The World Medical Association (WMA) (which has been active in the formulation of professional codes), has rejected academic sanctions on the grounds that these are 'in conflict with the major objectives of the WMA, viz. to achieve the highest international standards in medical education, medical science, medical art and medical ethics and such restrictions will adversely affect health care, particularly of the disadvantaged. . . .'<sup>12</sup> The WMA points out that academic boycott is 'in conflict with the WMA's Declaration of Geneva, Declaration on Human Rights and Individual Freedom of Medical Practitioners . . .'.<sup>12</sup> These codes have been widely accepted and have a powerful hortatory effect. Willingness to reject the WMA view on academic sanctions must be coupled with recognition and responsibility for the effect this could have in eroding the moral force of other WMA declarations, including that of Tokyo, which help to define the universal, non-partisan role of doctors in war, armed conflict and in caring for prisoners and detainees. Valid criticisms of some actions taken by the WMA,<sup>13</sup> do not, as answered by Crawshaw,<sup>14</sup> necessarily invalidate the stand taken against academic boycott.<sup>15</sup>

Although professional codes stress the need for collegial cooperation and support, recognition that there may indeed be dire circumstances in which the imposition of sanctions may

have to be considered has been addressed by the Council for Science and Society in collaboration with the British Institute of Human Rights:<sup>16</sup>

'If any sanction is to be effective to achieve its special object, and is not to devalue the effect of other sanctions to be applied on other occasions, it must be appropriate, efficient and proportionate. To be appropriate, a sanction must be directed at the removal or mitigation of the particular evil which it is sought to combat . . . . To be efficient, a sanction must be calculated to have the desired effect. To be proportionate, a sanction must use no more external force than is needed to achieve its effect . . . . Properly used, the sanctions which scientists can collectively impose on national governments are far more powerful than most of them realise. That power, like all others, must be used responsibly, wisely and only where its use is essential in the defence of those human rights which are recognised in international law. . . .' In addition to conforming to the principles of appropriateness, efficiency and proportionality sanctions 'must not be imposed in such a fashion as to reduce the imposer of the sanction to the moral level of the wrongdoer whose conduct is under criticism. Whoever wishes to take steps to protect scholarly freedom must not himself imperil that freedom by the steps which he takes'.<sup>16</sup>

Given the consistent opposition of many South African universities, professional bodies and individual academics to apartheid and racial discrimination, it seems that the accusation that academia in general in South Africa is guilty of *colluding* with initiating, maintaining or supporting Government policies, which lead to violation of human rights, is an overstatement. That many academics have been (and remain) *complacent* about the socially destructive society in which they live as privileged members is beyond dispute. The reductionist approach to much academic work, which encourages interest in, and responsibility for, particular actions within the confines of an academic discipline is correctly criticised for failing to foster responsibility for more general social well-being. But it should also be acknowledged that complacency by individual academics, professional bodies and academic institutions in free countries about social injustices in their own environments is widespread. Under these circumstances it is not easily apparent that academic sanctions can be considered as appropriate or proportionate. Encouragement or involvement in assisting South African colleagues to oppose more actively violations of human rights and thus to contribute more effectively to change would surely be preferable.

This view may be disputed by those who reject the 'liberal' position or who consider that even the open universities in South Africa represent white, racist, capitalist dominated institutions that, by their Eurocentric nature, serve to reproduce power relations and perpetuate injustices in our society.<sup>17</sup> Such criticism from an Afrocentric or any other world view does indeed deserve closer attention than it has received. Overemphasis on polar extremes and failure to engage in open-minded discourse between different ideologies has impaired access to the extensive mutual understanding, the basis for our common humanity, which needs to be developed in the quest for global peace.<sup>18,19</sup>

### Politics and science

Concern for the role of politics in science has been expressed both in relation to the social implications of scientific work and to the role of the scientific community in upholding international human rights. The American Association for the Advancement of Science Committee on Scientific Freedom and Responsibility has expressed deep concern that disputes between powerful government forces and scientists regarding basic science programmes, secrecy in science, technology and

innovation should be dealt with and resolved in a responsible fashion, which includes fair hearings, due process and public access to all relevant information.<sup>20</sup> They also endeavour to apply the same criteria in dealing with controversies on the role of medicine and science in upholding human rights.

The Committee on Human Rights of the National Academy of Sciences<sup>21</sup> has also focused 'on the plight of individual scientists, engineers and medical personnel suffering severe repression', and in so doing has stated its intention to try to 'maintain the same standards of evidence, balance and open mindedness that characterises academy assessments on scientific matters'. While acknowledging Sir Andrew Huxley's statement that: 'If a scientific body publicly takes a step whose justification is political and not scientific, it will lose the right to claim that it is acting purely in the defence of science on some future occasion when it wishes to speak out . . .' the Human Rights Committee has also pointed out that: 'We find it more difficult to grapple with the continuum of repression, to determine just what is science and what is political.' Nevertheless, the committee has affirmed that: 'Our position continues to be to hold to the universality principle, to not restrict the channels of scientific communication in the name of trying to maintain and extend them.'<sup>21</sup> The committee acknowledges that this institutional position is not necessarily held by all individual scientists and it remains troubled (as we should all be), about the dilemma surrounding and dealing with 'the questions raised by the profound distortions of humanness, nationhood and science that follows in the wake of repression'.<sup>21</sup>

## Ethical theory

Inability to resolve the dilemmas posed leads to consideration of the more formal alternative means of exploring the moral validity of academic boycott — by trying to determine whether it can be justified within an ethical theory. The complexity of this task requires an extent and depth of philosophical knowledge and wisdom that I cannot claim to possess. My limited exploration of justification in moral theory will, I hope, be viewed as a sincere attempt to grapple with and better understand justification, or lack of this, for an action (academic boycott) which seems to threaten widely acknowledged academic, medical and humanitarian values and as such calls for more than mere assertion. The gap between ethical theories and their direct application to everyday problems,<sup>22</sup> and the interactive relationship between theory and practice are acknowledged.<sup>23</sup>

Moral philosophy is a process of reflecting on 'morality' in an attempt to separate dogmatic, personal or group attitudes from a substantive moral position that can be justified on rational grounds. It develops ethical theories within which major ethical principles are offered to frame and justify moral decisions. The choice and analysis of principles and debate on these form the heart of modern ethical theories.<sup>11</sup> Controversies in moral discourse should be focused on the ways in which ethical principles are derived and applied and should be distinguished from disagreement about factual information (which, when it is of a social nature, may be almost incapable of resolution) and from major differences in ideological paradigms which determine 'world views' and are even more difficult to reconcile.<sup>18,19</sup>

One general ethical tradition (deontology) focuses on ethical principles, which subtend and justify right actions independent of their consequences, and on the moral agency of persons faced with making moral decisions.<sup>22</sup> Specific actions are considered right if they conform to an over-riding moral duty (principle) and wrong if they violate such duties. The moral principles that guide conduct can be derived from many sources, including divine will, intuition and pure reason, within a spectrum of deontological theories.

A chief deficiency in the deontological position is the lack of guidance on how one ought to act when two or more moral principles are in conflict. In relation to academic boycott, for example, it could be argued that to distance oneself from academics in a repressive country is a morally principled means of expressing moral outrage and of preserving moral integrity. But it could also be argued that actively to support education and academics who oppose the repressive regime is equally principled. How does one choose between these two courses of action? To choose the easier may be more popular and provide quick emotional satisfaction, but this would be an arbitrary rather than a reasoned choice.

These difficulties in deciding what is right lead to the consideration of an alternative group of ethical theories that argue for the selection of a course of action that will lead to the greatest net balance of good over bad outcomes. In this context it is the ends which justify the means. Stated differently it is the maximisation of good consequences and minimisation of bad consequences which determines the moral validity of specific actions, in contrast to deontological theories in which it is the universal moral imperative of the rules and principles themselves that determines the rightness of actions they permit. The central criticisms of consequentialist positions are, firstly, that, in weighing and balancing principles, they tend towards sacrificing the individual for the common good (to maximise the good) and, secondly, that it is not possible to know without empirical cost-benefit data whether the consequences will be good even in the short term let alone in the long term.<sup>22</sup> It is often very difficult to predict consequences, let alone the consequences of consequences. The utilitarian argument that the benefits of academic boycott will outweigh its adverse consequences<sup>24-26</sup> remains unsubstantiated. The adverse effects of the cry of 'liberation before education' have already become apparent in South Africa and they seriously undermine the hoped for effectiveness of academic boycott. The move away from total academic boycott towards selective support as outlined in the NAMDA document<sup>10</sup> reflects clear recognition of the harmful effects and inefficiency of boycotts and an attempt to diminish these in the future.

Yet another approach would be to argue that while moral principles and rules are valuable they should be treated merely as useful guidelines. This enhances the personal discretion of moral agents and allows for greater flexibility in reaching decisions in unique situations. Such a situational approach, which could lead to decisions to *boycott selectively* those academics who do not seem to be actively opposing the repressive regime and to support those who do, gives rise to the problems of determining the criteria for identifying these two groups and the method for implementing the intended actions consistently and effectively. This approach lends itself to arguments 'from authority'<sup>24,26</sup> and to symbolic gestures but fails to meet the clarity, internal consistency and comprehensiveness required of moral theories.

Academic boycott is essentially a non-violent political strategy aimed at stimulating much needed change in South Africa. *The arguments I have used neither attempt to negate the strategic value of academic sanctions at a political level nor to minimise the cogent reasons which give rise to the call for boycotts. They do attempt to show, firstly, that it is difficult to justify academic boycotts on the moral grounds that they are inherently right or that they have good consequences and, secondly, that there is a need to consider morally justifiable alternatives that, in addition to their anti-apartheid effect, may help to create the infrastructure necessary for a new South Africa.*

## An alternative to academic boycott

Living and working as a scientist, academic or health care professional in South Africa demands not only high standards

of service but also entails the onerous tasks of challenging injustices, striving towards abolishing racial discrimination and achieving internationally recognised human rights by working towards human progress in ways that are true to the humanitarian ideals of science and the professions. Consistency and clarity in articulating and trying to uphold these ideals is demanding and poses risks that, at a minimum, may include unpopularity with the present government, with revolutionaries, counter-revolutionaries, some well-meaning do-gooders in other parts of the world, with economic and political opportunists and possibly post-apartheid South African governments. The strength and vigour of endeavours to uphold ideals with constancy (wherever this is needed in the world) is dependent on global co-operation and active support not only for those already working in this way but also for those who could and should be motivated to do so.<sup>6,10,21,27-29</sup>

The strong case made by Berwick<sup>30</sup> in favour of applying the very successful Theory of Continuous Improvement (which assumes that people are trying hard and will respond to encouragement) instead of the Theory of Bad Apples (which assumes that inspection, criticism, and punishment are the best ways to improve performance) in relation to health care can be extended by analogy to the way in which professional and academic interaction should be encouraged globally. This point is further emphasised by Shaw<sup>31</sup> in a skillful, sensitive and comprehensive analysis of the moral implications of economic, cultural and academic boycotts of South Africa. After correctly describing South Africa as a 'morally debilitated social system' and rebutting 'familiar apologies' for apartheid, he points out that slogans and moral counsel to abstain from all contact with South Africa are facile 'because of the difficulty of identifying a set of principles which would dictate these injunctions, yet permit us consistently to carry on other types of personal and national commerce, the legitimacy of which we take for granted'.<sup>31</sup>

While agreeing that it is naive to view academic and scientific discourse as something pure and above politics and that there are certain things of an academic or cultural nature that it would be wrong to do (with South Africa), he proposes (with caveats) that 'nothing but good for the anti-apartheid cause, it seems, could come from the freest exchange of ideas at the cultural, scientific and academic levels'. He does not find 'any reason for claiming that certain forms of intercourse with South Africa, though frequently reproved by anti-apartheid militants, are necessarily inconsistent with sincere and dedicated opposition to apartheid'.<sup>31</sup>

Colleagues in free countries have much to offer in analytical and negotiating skills, in the formulation of (for example) health policy, in ethical debate, and in striving to bring the forces of reason to bear on many issues regarding human rights, health care and education in South Africa. It is necessary for those who support academic boycott to consider whether they have accorded the appropriate moral weighting to these issues and to such principles as justice and beneficence if they advocate academic sanctions before they have made reasonable attempts to use these skills as fully as possible to help their colleagues maintain professional standards and through this to contribute to the development of a better society in South Africa.

Academic boycott is not the inseparable Siamese twin of opposition to apartheid. Interacting with South Africans can be a constructive academic, sociological and political endeavour. Contributing academically while experiencing and speaking out against apartheid can also be an enriching human activity as some with intellect, courage and an existentialist appreciation of life have found.<sup>32</sup> Neither the depth and breadth of the effects of apartheid nor the prolonged, intense efforts needed to reverse these should be trivialised by simplistic moralistic posturing.

## Conclusions

It is correct to understand, to empathise with and to express the frustration, anger, despair and moral outrage that have led to advocacy for academic boycott as part of a physically non-violent political strategy to abolish racial discrimination in South Africa. It is also necessary to understand the political and sociological basis for these endeavours and to participate actively in the process of striving for a more just society in South Africa. It must, however, be acknowledged that the forces that motivate and drive political strategy are not necessarily the same as those we perceive as motivating scientists, physicians and educators in their professional roles (the pursuit of knowledge, truth, wisdom, virtue and advancement of the human condition), although we must recognise the pervasive interactions between politics, science, health and education and we must strive to achieve internationally recognised goals in human rights.<sup>20,21,27</sup>

World history, filled with the tragedies perpetrated in the name of politics or (religious) fundamentalism, should surely provide the lesson to caution scientists, physicians and educators about allowing enduring professional ideals to be coupled to and subverted by shifting, often internally inconsistent and coercive, political strategies. This is the message that the international medical profession conveyed to the South African medical profession after 'the Biko affair',<sup>33</sup> under which cloud the profession and many individuals have since laboured to try to rectify their previous complacency.<sup>5-9,34-43</sup> These considerations are also the basis for the formation of the organisation International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, and for the growing recognition of the need for an International Physicians Movement<sup>44</sup> concerned with global health interdependence.<sup>44,45</sup>

The sincerity of many who advocate or impose sanctions should not be doubted and neither should the sincerity of many others who oppose them. The anguish with which reputable academics have asserted both positions (without any attempt to structure any formal moral justification) is well documented in a book recounting the events leading up to the World Archeological Congress in 1986.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, an unintended by-product of academic boycott is the creation of opportunities for many others to turn this into self-serving activities that have the potential to brutalise science, medicine and higher education and to lead to great damage, in particular over a prolonged period of time. It must also be acknowledged that the concept of freedom is not the same in all ideologies,<sup>18,19</sup> that academic freedom is gravely impaired in repressive countries and that it is possible for completely unfettered academic freedom to be abused by privileged academics. Freedom must be used responsibly and in ways which expand freedom and which do not curtail the freedom of others — consistent with the concept of freedom built over centuries into the 'social contract' within the Western tradition.

The assertion that academic boycott can be labelled 'moral' cannot stand unchallenged. The ethical basis should be clearly explicated and justified as relevant and sufficient, as it is those who wish to impose restrictions on freedom who must be able to justify this. Coercive imposition of academic sanctions in the absence of ethical justification can both reduce its protagonists to the moral level of the regime of which they are quite rightly critical and have counter-productive effects on the human and institutional resources necessary for the well-being of post-apartheid South Africa.

The alternative, ethically justifiable, approach of pressure for change through active, involved support on a selective basis without attempts to combine this with selective boycott is now being publicised<sup>46,47</sup> and, it is to be hoped, will grow. The challenge of overcoming discrimination and violation of internationally recognised human rights, and of unravelling

the 'profound distortions of humanness, nationhood and science associated with oppression and repression'<sup>21</sup> involves global co-operation in working towards human progress in ways true to the humanitarian ideals of science and the professions.

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