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Challenging Racism Abroad: Youth Activism in the American Anti-Apartheid Movement (1970s-1980s)

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Abstract

While the United States had its struggles with racial injustice, during the 1970s and 1980s, numerous American activists advocated against South African apartheid. This study uncovers why American youth activists (22 years old and younger) cared about apartheid, and how and to what extent they challenged it. To understand the connection between activists from the United States and South Africa, this paper unpacks why South African activists protested police brutality in the United States in 2020. While existing anti-apartheid scholarship covers the role of Black internationalists and policymakers, this analysis focuses on the impact of youth movements on college campuses. An analysis of speeches and university newspapers finds that student activists' motives behind fighting for anti-apartheid were diverse and complex. Although youth, playing a significant role in ending apartheid, were filled with moral outrage, apartheid's interconnectedness with themes of separateness and justice increased activists' dedication to the cause. Similar to how Black Americans supported Black South Africans through the anti-apartheid movement, Black South Africans protested police brutality in the United States in 2020, fighting for Black liberation.

Introduction

On April 24, 1978, about 1,500 Harvard University students marched from Radcliffe Yard to Harvard Yard in Cambridge, Massachusetts with large white signs filled with words like “apartheid” or “divest.”¹ This march was part of a five-day rally and an overall ten-year struggle to have the university completely withdraw its investments from United States corporations with holdings in South Africa, where the White regime enforced the racially oppressive system of apartheid.² The bustling mass soon reached Harvard Yard, holding hands to demonstrate their solidarity for the anti-apartheid movement and, later, seizing and protesting around University Hall, the main academic administration building.³ Even though the protests made it difficult for the school to function, the university’s administration obstinately refused to divest entirely, arguing that they wanted to take the constructive approach and use their influence to promote racial justice there.⁴ Despite this failure, the youth activists did help fuel a nationwide movement for divestment, a confrontational approach to pressure the South African government to end apartheid through economic isolation.⁵

¹ David Beach, *Divestment Protest at Harvard University*, photograph, April 24, 1978, Harvard-Radcliffe Southern Africa Solidarity Committee (Cindy Ruskin collection), Michigan State University Libraries Special Collections (African Activist Archives), <http://africanactivist.msu.edu/image.php?objectid=32-131-666>.

² Anjali Cadambi, “Global Nonviolent Action Database,” Global Nonviolent Action Database (Swarthmore College, September 19, 2010), <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/harvard-university-community-campaigns-divestment-apartheid-south-africa-1977-1989>.

³ Beach, *Divestment Protest at Harvard University*;

Lisa Hsia, *Harvard University Students Picketing around University Hall*, photograph, April 28, 1978, Harvard-Radcliffe Southern Africa Solidarity Committee (Cindy Ruskin collection), Michigan State University Libraries Special Collections (African Activist Archives, accessed July 12, 2020),

<http://africanactivist.msu.edu/image.php?objectid=32-131-663>;

Lisa Hsia, *No Harvard \$ for Apartheid*, photograph, April 28, 1978, Harvard-Radcliffe Southern Africa Solidarity Committee (Cindy Ruskin collection), Michigan State University Libraries Special Collections (African Activist Archives), <http://africanactivist.msu.edu/image.php?objectid=32-131-667>.

⁴ From June 1986 to January 1987, Harvard’s administration withdrew about \$230 million from South Africa-based holdings; Michael C. George and David W. Kaufman, “Students Protest Investment in Apartheid South Africa,” *Harvard Crimson*, May 23, 2012, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2012/5/23/Protest-Divestment-Apartheid/>.

⁵ Students advocated for divestment from US corporations with holdings in South Africa so it would be too costly for the companies to stay in South Africa, forcing them to disinvest, whereby completely withdrawing their investments and exiting the country; George and Kaufman, “Students Protest Investment in Apartheid South Africa.”

About forty years later, on June 3, 2020, activists in South Africa picked up their cardboard signs and protested outside Parliament in Cape Town, standing in solidarity with George Floyd and Collins Khoza and advocating against police brutality.⁶ On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a Black man in Minneapolis, died after policemen deliberately asphyxiated him. This instance of police brutality sparked rage and reignited a global Black Lives Matter movement, demanding justice for police brutality victims and reform of persisting systems of oppression.⁷ Police brutality frequently occurs in South Africa as Collins Khoza, a Black man, was killed by South African Security Forces. According to the *Christian Science Monitor*, “[Khoza’s] family [said] they watched as he was held down and choked inside his own house [here], slammed against a concrete wall and beaten with fists and the butt of a gun.”⁸ Although American President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act in 1968, collectively ending legalized segregation, these two events, representing the anti-apartheid movement in the 1970s to 1980s and Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, demonstrate that the civil rights movement has continued beyond the 1960s.⁹

Apartheid Legislation

In 1948, the South African National Party, the White-minority governing party created in 1924 to uphold White Afrikaner goals, instituted apartheid, a system that racially segregated its citizens and violently imposed White supremacy. Apartheid had four defining ideas: There were four racial groups – White, Colored, Indian, and African. Secondly, White people were entitled to rule over the country. Non-White populations were considered subordinate to White people, so the government did not have to treat the races equally. Lastly, there were different regions for each racial group. White people obtained the most land, meaning that millions of Black Africans were forced to move from urban, White areas to rural reserves, which further entrenched a migrant labor system.¹⁰

⁶ Ryan Lenora Brown, “An Ocean Apart, Similar Stories: US Protests Hit Home in South Africa,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2020/0608/An-ocean-apart-similar-stories-US-protests-hit-home-in-South-Africa>.

⁷ “How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody,” *New York Times*, May 31, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>.

⁸ Brown, “An Ocean Apart, Similar Stories: US Protests Hit Home in South Africa.”

⁹ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Use of the Past,” *Journal of American History* (2005): 1261-1263.

¹⁰ Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 190.

The party used legislation, which became more stringent each year, and the police to enforce segregation, leaving non-White, especially Black, South Africans politically, economically, and socially powerless. Specifically, the Group Areas Act (1950) physically separated the races, and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) helped prevent socialization and integration among the races.¹¹ These policies, favorable to the White citizens, forced different parts of the nation to develop separately, so White areas prospered while the Black regions were left impoverished with minimal resources and countless diseases.¹² For instance, from 1948 to 1970, White manufacturing and construction workers went from earning six times as much as their Black counterparts to about twenty-one times as much.¹³

Internal Anti-Apartheid Resistance

To fight apartheid, numerous internal resistance movements arose from South African organizations like the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), and the Black Consciousness Movement. They used both militant and nonviolent tactics. Eventually, as the South African regime cracked down harder on these movements, arresting most leading Black South African activists, including African National Congress (ANC) leader Nelson Mandela, external movements emerged.¹⁴ In the United States, around the 1970s to the 1980s, demonstrations, boycotts, and protests were widespread, and youth activists, political and grassroots organizations, and political leaders took action.

Research Questions

The American response to apartheid provokes the following questions: Why did youth activists in the United States care about apartheid, and how and to what extent did they contribute to the anti-apartheid movement?¹⁵ Ultimately, why did South African youth activists

¹¹ "Apartheid in South Africa," Divestment for Humanity: The Anti-Apartheid Movement at the University of Chicago (Michigan in the World), accessed July 12, 2020,

<https://michiganintheworld.history.lsa.umich.edu/antiapartheid/exhibits/show/exhibit/origins/apartheid-in-south-africa>.

¹² "A History of Apartheid in South Africa," South African History Online (SAHO), accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-apartheid-south-africa>.

¹³ Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, 195.

¹⁴ "A History of Apartheid in South Africa."

¹⁵ Youth is defined as 22 years old and younger because commonly, twenty-two is the age when undergraduate students graduate from college.

stand in solidarity with police brutality victims in the United States in 2020? Since the anti-apartheid movement in the United States was a successful grassroots movement, understanding the impact of and motives behind youth activists in the anti-apartheid movement can help youth movements thrive today. These questions will also help clarify the significance of youth activism.

Literature Review

Many anti-apartheid studies (the 1970s–1980s) cover the role of three players: political leaders during the Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan administrations, Black internationalism activists who fought for Black liberation, and American advocacy organizations.¹⁶ Covering the impact of the Carter administration’s foreign policy addressing apartheid, Simon Stevens, in “From the Viewpoint of a Southern Governor’: The Carter Administration and Apartheid, 1977-81,” argues that President Carter and his senior policymakers were committed to the issue of apartheid, but prioritizing their anti-communist agenda and believing in creating change through “cooperation rather than confrontation,” they developed a constructive foreign policy.¹⁷ Moreover, “Divestment for Humanity: The Anti-Apartheid Movement at the University of Michigan” by University of Michigan undergraduate students adds that in the 1970s there was a rise of Black political leaders who sometimes took a more confrontational approach and created a support system for the anti-apartheid issue in politics.¹⁸

Despite lacking political power, Black people on the grassroots level made a significant impact on the anti-apartheid movement. In *Race for Sanctions*, Francis Njubi Nesbitt highlights the contributions of Black Americans to the anti-apartheid movement, explaining that “the [anti-apartheid] movement emerged in the radical Black politics of the 1940s and was adopted by the civil rights leaders in the 1960s and the nationalists of the 1970s, before becoming a multiracial coalition for South Africa in the 1980s.”¹⁹ Additionally, *The Americans Are Coming! Dreams of African American Liberation in Segregationist South Africa* by Robert Trent Vinson argues that civil rights veterans not only fought against

¹⁶ Black internationalists are activists who stand in solidarity with Black people and movements around the world that fight for Black emancipation. Black internationalists and Pan-African activists are used interchangeably.

¹⁷ Simon Stevens, “From the Viewpoint of a Southern Governor’: The Carter Administration and Apartheid, 1977–81,” *Journal of the Historians for American Foreign Relations* 36, no. 5 (November 2012): 845-846.

¹⁸ “Apartheid in South Africa.”

¹⁹ Francis Njubi Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), viii.

apartheid but also acted as role models for anti-apartheid activists in South Africa.²⁰ Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood's *Pan African History* demonstrates that Pan-African activists like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Claudia Jones used their unique platforms to fight racism, helping the anti-apartheid movement and globalizing the Black freedom struggle.²¹

In addition to leading internal movements in Africa, many of these Black internationalists created American organizations that diligently advocated against apartheid. Specifically, according to Eric Morgan in "His Voice Must Be Heard: Dennis Brutus, the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and the Struggle for Political Asylum in the United States," "[confrontational, multi-racial] organizations such as the American Committee on Africa (ACOA), the TransAfrica Forum, and the Washington Office on Africa pressured Congress to act through sanctions or other punitive legislation."²² In "The World is Watching: Polaroid and South Africa," Morgan describes the significant role of grassroots labor movements like the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers' Movement, which held their employers and US multinational corporations accountable for perpetuating apartheid. Because existing scholarship overlooks the contributions of youth movements on college campuses, this paper shifts the historiography's focus, adding the youth perspective to the anti-apartheid discussion.²³

Thesis

While there is ample literature on the global anti-apartheid movement, scholars are still piecing together the impact of American youth movements. Building on this robust literature, this paper argues that American youth activists' motives behind advocating for anti-apartheid were diverse and complex. Youth activists on college campuses made a significant impact by attracting international and national attention to apartheid through divestment campaigns, which in turn added more pressure on the South African government. Although apartheid filled youth with moral outrage, apartheid's interconnectedness with universal themes of separateness, justice, and equality strengthened

²⁰ Robert Trent Vinson, *The Americans Are Coming! Dreams of African American Liberation in Segregationist South Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012), 12.

²¹ Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood, *Pan-African History* (London: Routledge, 2003), 102, 106, 129.

²² Eric J. Morgan, "His Voice Must be Heard: Dennis Brutus, the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and the Struggle for Political Asylum in the United States," *PEACE & CHANGE: A Journal of Peace Research* 40, no. 3 (July 2015): 379.

²³ Eric J. Morgan, "The World is Watching: Polaroid and South Africa," *Oxford University Press* 7, no. 3 (June 2006): 522.

activists' commitment and passion for the cause. Like Black American activists protesting apartheid, Black South Africans stood in solidarity with George Floyd in 2020 to fight for the goal of worldwide Black freedom.

Origins of External Anti-Apartheid Activism

On March 21, 1960, numerous Black South Africans, galvanized by the PAC, gathered in Sharpeville, South Africa, advocating against apartheid. To stop the protest from growing, the police fired at the mass of 4,000 people. Officially, sixty-nine people died and about fifty were wounded, but the death count could have been at least 200 as the South African government was infamous for manipulating death counts. Indignation spread like wildfire. Attracting international attention, the Sharpeville massacre mobilized global movements in support of Black South Africans and against apartheid.²⁴ In the United States, civil rights activists drew connections between American segregation and South African apartheid. Notably, civil rights activists like Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, and Dr. King advocated against the injustices their Black brothers and sisters faced in South Africa. Many students held anti-apartheid campaigns at universities, such as the University of Michigan.²⁵ But issues like civil rights and the Vietnam War overshadowed the anti-apartheid cause in the 1960s. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that the anti-apartheid movement gained immense momentum, following the Soweto Uprising.²⁶

In 1974, in response to the dwindling use of Afrikaans, the South African government enacted the *Afrikaans Medium Decree*, mandating Black schools to teach their students solely in Afrikaans and English. Considering Afrikaans, the “language of the oppressor,” as Bishop of Johannesburg and anti-apartheid activist Desmond Tutu stated, Black students were outraged. On June 16, about 10,000 to 20,000 students

²⁴ “The Sharpeville Massacre, 1960,” Divestment for Humanity: The Anti-Apartheid Movement at the University of Chicago (Michigan in the World), accessed July 12, 2020,

<https://michiganintheworld.history.lsa.umich.edu/antiapartheid/exhibits/show/exhibit/origins/apartheid-in-south-africa>.

²⁵ “Apartheid in South Africa;”

“Campus Anti-Apartheid Movements before Soweto,” Divestment for Humanity: The Anti-Apartheid Movement at the University of Chicago (Michigan in the World), accessed July 12, 2020,

<https://michiganintheworld.history.lsa.umich.edu/antiapartheid/exhibits/show/exhibit/origins/apartheid-in-south-africa>.

²⁶ The American anti-apartheid movement did not always have a linear progression; its momentum fluctuated depending on South African and American events, such as President Reagan's election.

marched to the Orlando Stadium in Soweto, South Africa, protesting the decree.²⁷ Confronted by the police, the children threw rocks at them, which prompted the police to fire. Violence engulfed the nation until April 1977, and, according to the Commission of Inquiry, about 575 people died, of which 451 were killed by the police. However, other sources, safe from government manipulation, state that the death count was about 1,000.²⁸ To add to the death count, on September 12, 1977, Steve Biko, a notable South African anti-apartheid activist who spearheaded the Black Consciousness Movement, which was popular amongst the youth, died in police custody. Police forces interrogated and tortured Biko for violating his banning order by traveling to South Africa and most likely for his resistance. Drawing international awareness, the Soweto Uprising and Steve Biko's death, acting as a symbol of the atrocities of apartheid, transformed the American anti-apartheid movement from a few protests to a mass movement with thousands of students from more than a hundred universities participating.²⁹

American Anti-Apartheid Movement (1970s–1980s)

Motives

After the uprising, American universities, ranging from Dartmouth College to the University of Utah, advocated for divestment by holding protests, signing petitions, and erecting shantytowns, a symbol of crude townships Black South Africans were forced to live in.³⁰ Constructing these shantytowns was a form of protest, reminding university administrations of their connections to them. On June 27, 1986, students from nineteen different colleges assembled at the Special Committee against Apartheid to share updates on the state of the anti-

²⁷ "The Soweto Uprising, 1976," Divestment for Humanity: The Anti-Apartheid Movement at the University of Chicago (Michigan in the World), accessed July 12, 2020, <https://michiganintheworld.history.lsa.umich.edu/antiapartheid/exhibits/show/exhibit/origins/apartheid-in-south-africa>.

²⁸ United Press International, "Soweto Uprising Recalled," *New York Times*, June 17, 1986, sec. A, pp. 8-8, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/06/17/world/soweto-uprising-recalled.html>.

²⁹ Susan F Rasky, "Anti-Apartheid Protest Gains Ground," *New York Times*, September 15, 1985, National edition, sec. 1, pp. 16-16, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/09/15/world/anti-apartheid-protest-gains-ground.html>.

³⁰ United Nations Centre against Apartheid, "United States Student Movement against Apartheid: Hearings at United Nations Headquarters," September 1986 (African Activist Archives), <http://kora.matrix.msu.edu/files/50/304/32-130-1702-84-UN%20december%201986.pdf>, 30.

apartheid movement on their campus.³¹ These speeches gave insight into the goals, impact, and problems of the movements at each university. Statements like “apartheid constitutes colonialist and racist oppression in its crudest and most disgusting form” and “apartheid a crime against humanity that must be eliminated” by the students suggest moral aversion and that numerous youth activists believed that the apartheid issue required immediate action.³²

However, the anti-apartheid cause’s connection with other issues that the students personally witnessed or cared about, such as racism in the United States, made the movement more significant for them. According to an article titled “Coalition Will Set Up Campus Shantytown” in Columbia University’s *Columbia Spectator*, “The key theme linking all these issues is separateness.”³³ Some universities, including Reed College and the University of Washington, perpetuated separateness by accepting a small number of Black students and faculty and building a White-centric and Eurocentric Black studies curriculum.³⁴ Not only did the anti-apartheid movement allow youth activists to fight separateness or racism abroad but also on campus.³⁵ In addition, they often drew parallels between the White minority regime’s oppression of Black South Africans with their university administration’s oppressive crackdown on their shantytowns and freedom of expression, which further galvanized the movement. Debbie Stachel, a student from Boston University (BU), clarifies, “In an ironic way, this continual repression of activism has helped to strengthen commitment within the anti-apartheid movement at BU, for it serves as a daily reminder of the oppressive conditions under which people struggle for freedom in South Africa.”³⁶

This theme of separateness was almost inescapable on campuses as well as in the United States as a whole, due to its history of segregation and racial oppression. Only recently in the late 1960s was segregation deemed illegal. The youth activists might not have been alive

³¹ United Nations Centre against Apartheid, “United States Student Movement against Apartheid: Hearings at United Nations Headquarters,” 10.

³² “Successful Activism,” *Michigan Daily*, June 20, 1986, pp. 6-6;

United Nations Centre against Apartheid, “United States Student Movement against Apartheid: Hearings at United Nations Headquarters,” 25, 27.

³³ Asha Badrinath, “Coalition Will Set up Campus Shantytown,” *Columbia Spectator*, March 19, 1986, pp. 14-14,
<http://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19860319-01.2.3&srpos=28&e=-----en-20--21--txt-txIN-anti%252Dapartheid----->.

³⁴ United Nations Centre against Apartheid, “United States Student Movement against Apartheid: Hearings at United Nations Headquarters,” 22, 35.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 11, 24.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

or old enough to personally face or comprehend the Jim Crow era, but their parents' experiences and persisting injustices could have allowed the students to viscerally relate to apartheid. For instance, Atlanta University student Keith Jennings acknowledged, "As conscientious youths, living in a region of the United States that has historically witnessed the forced removal of Native Americans from their lands, the enslavement of our ancestors – the African peoples whose blood, sweat and tears fertilized the plantation south, Jim Crow segregation, Ku Klux-Klan terror and the economic exploitation of the poor, we can identify closely with the people's cause in southern Africa."³⁷ With personal connections and stakes in an issue occurring in South Africa, many youth activists were able to advocate more passionately. Since apartheid was a form of racism, demanding universities to completely divest and holding them accountable were ways to promote racial justice in the United States.

The personal connection was stronger for Black students as they could often relate with Black South Africans through a shared experience of facing systems of oppression. Through the article "Why the silence?" in *The Hilltop*, Howard University student Raymond H. Brouhn reminded other Black students of this attachment, saying "The struggle of our brothers and sisters in South Africa should touch the heart and soul of all Blacks all over the world. We as [Black] students must take a stand."³⁸ Black South Africans and Americans were described as a family because of their common ancestors and the land of origin, and this close, figurative relationship implies that many Black people believed they had a moral obligation to support each other. Moreover, on December 10, 1965, Dr. King proclaimed in his speech, "Appeals for Action against Apartheid," at Hunter College, "American Negro is giving moral leadership and inspiration to his nation, he must find the resources to aid his suffering brothers in his ancestral homeland. Nor is this aid a one-way street. The civil rights movement in the United States has derived immense inspiration from the successful struggles of those Africans who have attained freedom in their own nations."³⁹ Despite the difference in nationality and being an ocean apart, Black South Africans' and Americans' skin color made them targets of exploitation and

³⁷ Ibid., 27.

³⁸ Raymond H Brouhn, "Why the Silence?," January 25, 1985, pp. 4-4, https://dh.howard.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1112&context=hilltop_198090.

³⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., "Appeal for Action against Apartheid" (speech, New York, December 10, 1965), Cheryl Johnson-Odim Collection, College Archives & Special Collections, Columbia College Chicago, <https://digitalcommons.colum.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=fsa>, 3.

discrimination. Therefore, a victory for Black people in one country was an accomplishment for the entire Black community, meaning that Black South Africans and Americans contributed to each other's achievements and were stakeholders in each other's movements. This Black solidarity, or Pan-Africanism, encouraged numerous Black students to fight for the larger goal of global Black emancipation and, therefore, against apartheid. In addition, since denying slaves in the United States their African culture was a way to psychologically oppress Black people, participating in the anti-apartheid movement could have been a way for Black Americans to rediscover their roots and further free themselves.⁴⁰

Beyond separateness, larger themes of justice, equality, and democracy attracted broader support for the anti-apartheid movement from groups of various races, cultures, and political ideologies.⁴¹ According to "Anti-apartheid Protest Gains Ground" in *The New York Times*, a sociology professor at the University of California at Berkeley, Neal J. Smelser, declared "[apartheid] a motherhood issue,' ... meaning one that nearly everyone says he supports and that few dare to say they oppose."⁴² Apartheid could have been a motherhood issue as it enabled youth activists to not only fight for equality in South Africa but also for a more just global movement, the United States, and the future.

The United States prided itself on being a champion of democracy and equality. But President Carter and President Reagan's constructive foreign policy portrayed the United States' support of governments, like the South African White regime, that violated democracy, equality, and basic human rights.⁴³ Getting the United States government to economically isolate South Africa would help promote peace and justice in both South Africa and the United States, perhaps even restoring the United States' reputation. Participating in the anti-apartheid movement would also empower students who were once stereotyped as apathetic to "[lay] the foundation for a new student movement [dedicated to the principles of peace, justice, equality, social progress and development for all humanity] so vitally needed in the

⁴⁰ King, "Appeal for Action against Apartheid," 3.

⁴¹ Rasky, "Anti-Apartheid Protest Gains Ground;"

United Nations Centre against Apartheid, "United States Student Movement against Apartheid: Hearings at United Nations Headquarters," 26.

⁴² Rasky, "Anti-Apartheid Protest Gains Ground;"

⁴³ In addition to forming a constructive policy, President Reagan vetoed the Comprehensive Anti-apartheid Act, which imposed sanctions against South Africa.

Congress ultimately overrode the president's veto in 1986;

United Nations Centre against Apartheid, "United States Student Movement against Apartheid: Hearings at United Nations Headquarters," 26.

country today.”⁴⁴ This role in “building long-term and broad-based coalitions for peace and justice” was, according to Jennings and other students, their generation’s greatest contribution.⁴⁵ Thus, the anti-apartheid movement involved people who were interested in creating such an impact and fighting for justice, equality, and democracy broadly.

Although the fight against apartheid brought a diverse group of people together, the speeches also reflect that apartheid created further political tension between liberals and conservatives. Three of the nineteen students described right-wing students destroying anti-apartheid shantytowns. Specifically, several “right-wing ‘vigilantes’” firebombed a shantytown at John Hopkins University, setting it aflame and almost murdering the occupants.⁴⁶ Additionally, according to a Harvard University student Douglas C. Rossinow, “[the Harvard anti-apartheid movement was not that ideologically diverse ... As far as I know, I was the only one in the group who had voted for [President] Reagan.”⁴⁷ President Reagan’s election in 1981 reflected the growth of neoconservative ideology in addition to a culture of apathy because of the unprecedented low voter turnout.⁴⁸ This lack of political diversity went beyond Harvard University, as Professor Smelser explained, “The anti-apartheid movement was both a reaction to and a reflection of the conservative political environment in which it has emerged.”⁴⁹

Even though some student representatives described right-wing students as opponents, multiple conservative students, like Rossinow, were involved in the anti-apartheid movement. “Anti-apartheid Protest Gains Ground” states, “[anti-apartheid movement had] won support from a band of young Republican conservatives who [saw] the apartheid issue as an important opportunity to strike a new tone for their party.” Therefore, providing a political motive, the political landscape impacted the movement’s support system: apartheid was a problem that awakened people who were branded as apathetic to respond to the rise of conservatism and continuing injustices as well as allowed conservatives

⁴⁴ Rasky, “Anti-Apartheid Protest Gains Ground;” United Nations Centre against Apartheid, “United States Student Movement against Apartheid: Hearings at United Nations Headquarters,” 27.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27, 38.

⁴⁶ “Bail Set in Hopkins Bombing,” May 27, 1986, National edition, sec. B, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/05/27/us/bail-set-in-hopkins-bombing.html>; United Nations Centre against Apartheid, “United States Student Movement against Apartheid: Hearings at United Nations Headquarters,” 16.

⁴⁷ George and Kaufman, “Students Protest Investment in Apartheid South Africa.”

⁴⁸ “Conservatism and the ‘Reagan Revolution,’” accessed July 27, 2020, https://saylordotorg.github.io/text_a-history-of-the-united-states-vol-2/s16-01-conservatism-and-the-reagan-re.html.

⁴⁹ Rasky, “Anti-Apartheid Protest Gains Ground.”

to rebrand themselves, maybe even dividing conservatives.⁵⁰ Overall, even though apartheid was repulsive enough to have youth activists care about it, the issue's ability to easily be interlinked to American problems and motifs and benefit both sides of the political spectrum helped it become a more popular topic among youth activists.

Impact

Approximately a decade later, in 1994, apartheid was abolished, and Nelson Mandela became the first Black president of a democratized South Africa.⁵¹ American anti-apartheid divestment movements on campuses were pivotal to this success. Highlighting the contributions of student activists, Archbishop Tutu said, "Students played a leading role in that struggle, and I write these words of encouragement for student divestment efforts cognizant that it was students who played a pioneering role in advocating equality in South Africa and promoting corporate ethical and social responsibility to end complicity in apartheid."⁵² Continuous protests often convinced university administrations to divest partially or completely. The largest university divestment occurred in July 1986 when the University of California Regents agreed to divest \$3.1 billion from companies that were in business with the South African government.⁵³ *The Washington Post* added, "According to antiapartheid organizations, 109 other schools have voted to divest \$558 million," meaning that by mid-August 1986 111 schools divested about \$3.6 billion.⁵⁴ These divestments added to the pressure on American corporations in South Africa by making it more expensive to function there, further persuading them to disinvest, which would damage the South African economy. From a moral standpoint, many students were successful at holding their universities accountable.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ "The End of Apartheid," US Department of State (US Department of State), accessed July 27, 2020, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/pcw/98678.htm>.

⁵² Timber Grey Beening, "From Sitting In to Camping Out: Student Protest, Shanties, and the Struggle against Apartheid South Africa Public Deposited" (honors thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2017), <https://core.ac.uk/reader/210595364>, 83.

⁵³ "How Students Helped End Apartheid," University of California, May 4, 2018, <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/how-students-helped-end-apartheid>.

⁵⁴ United Nations Centre against Apartheid, "United States Student Movement against Apartheid: Hearings at United Nations Headquarters," 46.

⁵⁵ Cecelie Counts, "Divestment Was Just One Weapon in Battle against Apartheid," *New York Times*, January 27, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/01/27/is-divestment-an-effective-means-of-protest/divestment-was-just-one-weapon-in-battle-against-apartheid>.

However, since the total amount of money American investors divested from 1970 to 1988 was \$55 billion, meaning that slightly less than 10 percent of the money came from universities, calling for divestment was more useful in drawing attention to the issue of apartheid than economically isolating South Africa.⁵⁶ Student divestment campaigns attracted substantial media coverage, increasing national and international consciousness and political discussions about apartheid. This ability to augment awareness was critical in ending apartheid as the campaigns “sparked state and municipal divestment efforts affecting billions in holdings linked to South Africa” and “helped create a national climate against United States complicity with apartheid,” influencing policies.⁵⁷

Black students were crucial to the anti-apartheid movement on and off campuses, often leading protests. In fact, according to the national student coordinator of ACOA Joshua Nessen, “proportionate to the student body, Black students have been more heavily involved in direct action protests than White activists.”⁵⁸ But in many university anti-apartheid movements, there was less Black participation in direct action protests, like the construction of shanties, than that of White people.⁵⁹ In fact, at the University of North Carolina, the anti-apartheid organization went from being Black dominated to White-led with primarily White membership.⁶⁰ This drastic transformation was not because of a loss of interest but because of racial inequalities at universities and the insensitivities of White members of the movement. Specifically, Black students were a minority in White-dominated institutions, putting them in a vulnerable position.⁶¹ They were often excluded implicitly and explicitly by White student coalitions who “turned an insensitively deaf ear to the concerns, suggestions, analyses, and leadership of the students

⁵⁶ Beeninga, “From Sitting in to Camping Out: Student Protest, Shanties, and the Struggle against Apartheid South Africa Public Deposited,” 82; “Divestment as an Activist Strategy,” *Divestment for Humanity The Anti-Apartheid Movement at the University of Chicago (Michigan in the World)*, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://michiganintheworld.history.lsa.umich.edu/antiapartheid/exhibits/show/exhibit/legacies-of-the-movement--1987/divestment-as-an-activist-stra>.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*; United Nations Centre against Apartheid, “United States Student Movement against Apartheid: Hearings at United Nations Headquarters,” 9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁹ Beeninga, “From Sitting in to Camping Out: Student Protest, Shanties, and the Struggle against Apartheid South Africa Public Deposited,” 68.

⁶⁰ United Nations Centre against Apartheid, “United States Student Movement against Apartheid: Hearings at United Nations Headquarters,” 34.

⁶¹ ACOA was a multiracial nonprofit that advocated for social justice in Africa, including the end of apartheid; United Nations Centre against Apartheid, “United States Student Movement against Apartheid: Hearings at United Nations Headquarters,” 6.

of African descent to cultivate and court the support of the White liberal student population,” leading to the decrease of Black participants in the shanty building.⁶²

Even though student activists sometimes perpetuated racism, the anti-apartheid movements even made some activists, including the student representative of the University of North Carolina at the special committee, aware of racial injustice on their campuses and movements.⁶³ Because of the anti-apartheid movement’s connection to Black internationalism and the themes of separateness, justice, and equality, the anti-apartheid movement was more diverse than past social movements. In addition to “[popularizing] divestment as an activist strategy,” the anti-apartheid movement acted as a model for future multi-ethnic and multi-racial student movements dedicated to fighting for justice and human rights globally, influencing modern-day youth activism, like perhaps in the Black Lives Matter movement.⁶⁴

George Floyd Solidarity Protests in South Africa (2020)

Decades after the end of apartheid, in June 2020, Black people all around South Africa joined the Black Lives Matter movement, protesting George Floyd’s murder. Despite possessing differences in culture, location, and language, Black Americans and South Africans connected through the themes of separateness, equality, and justice.⁶⁵ Even though apartheid and legalized segregation had concluded, racial inequality and injustice persist in manifestations like police brutality. According to Solomzi Henry Moleketi, a protester at the US Consulate in Johannesburg, “The experience of police brutality is something extremely common to the Black South African experience.”⁶⁶ These common experiences and struggles for equality, justice, and Black freedom encouraged Black South Africans to stand in solidarity with

⁶² Beeninga, “From Sitting in to Camping Out: Student Protest, Shanties, and the Struggle against Apartheid South Africa Public Deposited,” 69.

⁶³ United Nations Centre against Apartheid, “United States Student Movement against Apartheid: Hearings at United Nations Headquarters,” 34.

⁶⁴ “Broader Legacies and Conclusions,” *Divestment for Humanity: The Anti-Apartheid Movement at the University of Chicago (Michigan in the World)*, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://michiganintheworld.history.lsa.umich.edu/antiapartheid/exhibits/show/exhibit/legacies-of-the-movement--1987/conclusion>; “Divestment as an Activist Strategy.”

⁶⁵ Vivien Chang, “Black Lives Matter Now Represents America’s Best Ambassadors,” *Washington Post*, June 8, 2020, [vhttps://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/06/08/black-lives-matter-is-now-americas-best-ambassador/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/06/08/black-lives-matter-is-now-americas-best-ambassador/).

⁶⁶ Brown, “An Ocean Apart, Similar Stories: US Protests Hit Home in South Africa.”

Black Americans as well as fight for their rights in South Africa.⁶⁷ Tumi Moloto, a South African graduate of Mt. Holyoke College, explained, “We can and we should be outraged for both the United States and for ourselves. ... It’s not either/or. We can hold both those things in our conscience.”⁶⁸ Overall, both the anti-apartheid and Black Lives Matter movements demonstrate that Pan-African unity and support make movements more powerful and impactful.

Conclusion

Youth activism, especially in the Black Lives Matter movement, has been critical in fighting systemic racism persisting today.⁶⁹ Understanding successful grassroots movements, like the anti-apartheid movement on college campuses, and the power of Pan-African solidarity, can inform today’s youth activists on how to better fight racial injustices. Additionally, researching the significance of youth activism in the anti-apartheid movement is important to grasp how apartheid came to an end. Unlike the work of numerous historians, this research evaluates the motives and impact of youth activists, using youth movements as a lens through which to better understand the complexities of the larger anti-apartheid movement. While it does cover the role of youth activists with the limited amount of declassified information, more work is still needed on the role of women and the impact of religious institutions and counter-movements against the anti-apartheid to completely understand the success of the American anti-apartheid movement.

⁶⁷ Ibid.; Chang, “Black Lives Matter Now Represents America’s Best Ambassadors.”

⁶⁸ Brown, “An Ocean Apart, Similar Stories: US Protests Hit Home in South Africa.”

⁶⁹ Christopher Rim, “How Student Activism Shaped the Black Lives Matter Movement,” *Forbes*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/christopherrim/2020/06/04/how-student-activism-shaped-the-black-lives-matter-movement/#1d3a0d054414>.

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