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Anti-Apartheid Student Activism at Brown University

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s foreign investment from the United States grew exponentially in South Africa, as companies such as International Business Machines (IBM), General Motors (GM), and General Electric (GE) increased operations in South Africa. As business ties grew, so did opposition from civil rights groups and world leaders who condemned the relationship between the United States and the South African government. The apartheid government relied heavily on foreign investments, especially from the United States, as economic prosperity for Afrikaners grew. The relationship began to garner negative attention from colleges and universities throughout the United States in the 1970s, as students realized their institutions invested in companies with business in South Africa. Many colleges and universities fully or partially divested in response to the pressure from the student body, however in some cases, anti-apartheid student activists failed to elicit a tangible response.

At Brown University, student activists pressured university officials to cease investments in companies that operated in South Africa for nearly a decade between 1978 and 1987. Student activists initially applied internal pressure, with pamphlets and more passive forms of protests. As the university continued to support companies with business interests in South Africa, students began to engage in more active forms of protests that provoked national attention. After nearly a decade of anti-apartheid student activism on campus, the Brown University Corporation never divested from companies with operations in South Africa due to their unwillingness to take on any negative financial consequences. Though the student activism intensified as well-known figures became involved during the 1980s, the effort at Brown University played a symbolic role

in the national movement for college divestiture as student protests failed to provoke substantial change within their own institution. The example of activism and students' inability to achieve full divestment at Brown University shows that college divestment movement around the United States was not a complete success and the successes at Harvard University, Hampshire College, and University of California Berkeley did not entirely reflect other institutions' experiences around the nation.

The Brown Southern Africa Solidarity Committee

In 1978, a wing of the Harvard-Radcliffe Southern Africa Solidarity Committee (Brown SASC) developed at Brown University. The Brown Southern Africa Solidarity Committee appeared as the first group to oppose university investment in companies operating in South Africa. The group openly criticized the university's investments in companies, especially IBM, and released reports which documented and broke down the responsibility of Brown University in sustaining the apartheid government. The Brown Southern Africa Solidarity Committee promised to share detrimental information regarding their institution's investments and thus created a pamphlet called "What's the Word" to do so. In the first edition of "What's the Word," the Brown SASC publicly disclosed Brown University investments in IBM, as well as a breakdown of IBM's involvement in South Africa. The pamphlet highlighted IBM's unsuccessful 1965 attempt to provide computers for the pass laws system, and the company's involvement with South African government agencies, such as the Department of the Interior, Department of Prisons, and Department of Defense, all of which operated to preserve Afrikaner nationalist control through suppression. Furthermore, the Brown SASC highlighted that "Brown has \$3.2 million in IBM stock," and proclaimed, "it is not nearly enough to say that apartheid is

‘morally repugnant’” (Southern Africa Solidarity Committee, 1978 or 1979, 1). The committee insisted that the Brown Corporation pull funding from companies that operated in South Africa, however no evidence suggested the group organized in large numbers to petition these demands.

In the spring of 1978, the Brown SASC released a position paper which detailed their stance against not only the relationship between South Africa’s government and Brown University’s investments, but also the investments of the United States government. The organization claimed the university failed to provide substantial change because Brown stockholders refused to listen to the calls for reform. The Brown SASC referred to a statement by a member of the Brown Corporation who “admitted that stockholder’s resolutions calling for corporate change in South Africa would never gain more than 10-15% of voters’ support” (Southern Africa Solidarity Committee, 1978, 7). Though no evidence suggested the Brown SASC collectively protested in public, they stated a necessity for action outside of “boardrooms,” and advocated for serious pressure to divest. Regarding the United States’ involvement, they criticized the sale of military weapons and vehicles as a “calculated part of the creation in South Africa of a military machine capable of defending and protecting western investments” (Southern Africa Solidarity Committee, 1978, 3). The Brown SASC felt the United States government helped to sustain the oppressive South African government as they highlighted a call to support “freedom fighters” and eradicate the apartheid system.

The Southern Africa Group for Education

In continuation with the more passive activism attempts of the Brown SASC, another activist group formed at Brown University in 1980 called the Southern Africa Group for Education (SAGE). Founded by John F. Kennedy, Jr. after attending the Freetown OAU Summit

Conference and spending four weeks in South Africa, SAGE focused more heavily on education than simply a call for university divestment. Kennedy claimed that many South Africans criticized the ignorance of most Americans regarding South African politics and that calls for divestment without knowledge of the situation mainly provided superficial gratification. He emphasized that students needed to be informed on the situation to be taken seriously by anti-apartheid activists and furthermore propose meaningful solutions: “There is a general confidence that informed American students will help, not hinder, a process of positive change” (Kennedy Jr., 1980). This approach contrasted heavily with the Brown SASC, who supported total divestment and eradication of the apartheid system. SAGE adopted an extremely moderate approach to activism, but still managed to capture the attention and support of anti-apartheid activists such as Ambassador Andrew Young and the American Committee on Africa. For Kennedy and SAGE the positive attention from Young and the American Committee on Africa, though less largely publicized, coincided with the successes in Massachusetts at Harvard University and MIT (Goodman, 2008, 153).

The pressure created by the Brown SASC and SAGE proved to be unsuccessful, as evidenced in a 1980 letter from Brown faculty member Dean E. McHenry, Jr. McHenry stated the university shared a responsibility to completely divest from businesses operating in South Africa. He emphasized that fact that other universities divested and reminded the university, “unless Brown divests, Brown will continue to profit from racial exploitation in South Africa. Such profits are a kind of ‘blood money’ won as a result of the apartheid system” (McHenry Jr. 1980, 3). However, the letter illustrated a minor success of the two groups, or an attempt by the university to appease student activists, with the reference to the newly formed Advisory Committee on Corporate Responsibility in Investment (ACCRI). Though for many student

activists the reaction fell short of truly tangible results, SAGE managed to garner some national attention with a visiting lecture from Ambassador Andrew Young. The limited symbolic success at Brown failed to match the successes of institutions such as Michigan State University, Columbia University, and the University of California, all of which agreed to divest (McClendon & Scully, 2014, 6). In the first period of student activism against Brown University's investments in companies that operated in South Africa, students failed to influence comprehensive divestment initiatives. The inability to organize within one cohesive group, as well as conflicting approaches and demands between the Brown SASC and SAGE, contributed to the lack of success in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The Brown Free Southern Africa Coalition

By participating in public sit-ins, shantytowns, and fasting, the second period of student anti-apartheid and divestment activism at Brown University followed the national model more closely. In 1986, a new group called the Brown Free Southern Africa Coalition (BFSAC) organized protests on the Brown University campus and elsewhere in Providence, Rhode Island. As 750 students rallied outside their meeting, the Brown University board voted to partially divest in companies that operated in South Africa by 1988, unless the companies improved conditions for black workers (Zuckoff, 1986, 1). Angered and disappointed by the university's decision, the BFSAC demanded full institutional divestment by February 28, 1986. They announced that several members would fast until the university fully divested from companies in South Africa. They claimed the fast served as "an act of personal revulsion at the genocidal policies of apartheid and Brown University's continued immoral support for the white minority government in South Africa" (Alder and Gellman, 1986, 1). University officials responded by

withdrawing the students from classes until they ended their fast. This proved to be another failure to achieve divestment, however the event invigorated the BFSAC, which resulted in a series of protests and events across campus. The Brown Corporation extended a symbolic olive branch and allowed students to present a list of demands at a board meeting. But school officials quickly dismantled students' shantytown in the middle of the Main Green. The anti-apartheid activism garnered limited and underwhelming responses from the University and Brown Corporation but displayed an increased urgency and inclination to pressure for full divestment, which also reflected the activities at other comparable ivy-league schools in the Northeast (Soule, 1997, 873).

This new phase of student activism, similar to the foundation of Brown SASC years earlier, indicated a willingness amongst students at Brown to match the efforts of students at other universities, such as the University of California Berkeley and Harvard University. Though the student activists at Brown managed to capture the attention and support of other students at this time, they never fully garnered support out in the Providence or Rhode Island communities in the same way that Boston and Massachusetts as a whole rallied around the divestiture movement. Hampshire College in Massachusetts became the first college in the United States to divest as the anti-apartheid and divestiture movements in the Greater Boston community managed to capture the attention and support of international figures like Themba Vilakazi, Bob Marley, and in the late 60s, Oliver Tambo. In Massachusetts the movements gained the support of *The Boston Globe*, the Fund for a Free South Africa, and state officials who pushed for legislation that pushed for divestiture in companies operating in South Africa (Goodman, 2008, 153). The anti-apartheid movement in the Boston community galvanized the movements on college campuses, which put external pressure on universities in Massachusetts to divest. Brown

University, though only 50 miles away from Boston, never faced intense external pressure from the community like other universities had. Some protests managed to include students from surrounding colleges, but most of the activism remained on the Brown campus, which negatively impacted the students' ability to influence school officials in the same way as other institutions.

The Brown Free Southern Africa Coalition soon found leadership in former President Carter's daughter, Amy Carter, who had already participated in anti-apartheid activism prior to her enrollment at Brown. On April 9, 1985, the *New York Times* published an article that stated the 17-year-old Amy Carter, "acting with her father's permission," had been arrested in a protest outside the South African Embassy in Washington, D.C. (*New York Times*, 1985, B2). According to David Goodman, getting arrested at the embassy during this time served as a "rite of passage for public figures and celebrities who wanted street credibility with progressives" (Goodman, 2008, 160). Carter's participation in active protests carried over into the BFSAC and captured the attention of major news outlets. On March 19, 1986, 14 students, including Carter, organized a sit-in at the local IBM office in Providence. The Providence police department quickly arrested all 14 students, as the *New York Times* and *Boston Globe* soon reported. IBM decided to not press charges for fear of retaliatory public backlash as the protest received positive attention from groups such as the American Committee on Africa. In February 1987, Providence police arrested 20 students including Amy Carter after they disrupted a Brown Corporation meeting. In response to the disruption, university officials conducted a 12-hour hearing and threatened the students with expulsion. Other students as well as members of the community, including a Rhode Island Senator, backed the students and thought the university's response too extreme (*The Harvard Crimson*, 1987, 3). Brown University's harsh responses and swift actions to shut down

protests throughout 1986 and 1987 displayed an unwillingness to take the concerns of students as seriously as other comparative institutions.

Achievements and Limits of Brown Student Activism

By 1987 the anti-apartheid and divestment movements subsided on most college campuses across the United States as many celebrated the victory of the Comprehensive Anti Apartheid Act of 1986. Students, including those at Brown University, felt that their participation in anti-apartheid activism generated positive results even though the apartheid minority government continued in South Africa. Paul Zimmerman, who participated in the 10-day long fast admitted,

“We were not successful in the short-term, immediate goal of getting Brown to divest, but I think in the benefit of hindsight, we were absolutely successful – the student movement, the general anti-apartheid movement – in changing public opinion. Within a year, congress passed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act, which had a huge impact. And then within a number of years thereafter, Nelson Mandela was released. The country was completely transformed. Now, did my fast do all that? Of course not. But were people like me doing their part all around the country and, frankly, all around the world? Did that contribute to international pressure? I really believe that the answer to that question is, yes, it did” (Zimmerman in Choi, Lowckwood, And Defusto, 2018).

Just two years after the committee promised to partially divest from South Africa, the Brown University Corporation issued a statement in February 1988, “We believe that a decision by Brown to completely divest would have no impact on South Africa and that whatever value it may have as a symbolic expression is decisively outweighed by additional financial costs, reflected in less financial aid, smaller salary increases and less support for educational programs” (*Los Angeles Times*, 1988). The results proved that the student activism at the university was unsuccessful and they never influenced school officials in the same way many other comparative schools had.

Ultimately, the Brown University Corporation never fully divested in companies operating in South Africa, as student activism only accomplished minor symbolic successes. The unsuccessful campaign of student groups on the Brown University campus could be attributed to several issues that they faced. To begin with, student groups failed to garner support from the city of Providence and the Rhode Island community in the same ways students from Massachusetts gained support in their communities. Evidence suggested that internal pressure from student groups and engagement reflected other comparative universities, but little pressure came from outside groups. Along with the lack of external pressure, school officials and Brown University board members, including university president Howard Swearer, never embraced the divestment effort from the start. In 1978 the Brown SASC released a statement from Swearer that confirmed his understanding of the situation in South Africa, but his lack of support for divestiture: “I think South Africa is a flagrant violation of human rights. But where do you draw the line? You have to take (the morality of investments) on a case-by-case basis” (Southern Africa Solidarity Committee, 1978, 6). This statement, along with the earlier mentioned statement from a Brown board member, indicated that from the early calls for divestment, the Brown University Corporation expressed no sympathy and refused to work with activists. Later, the harsh responses from officials indicated their sentiments remained unchanged. A further explanation for the lack of success comes from an inability to organize early activism between the Brown SASC and SAGE under a unified approach, as well as in later years conflict between the BFSAC to compete with student activism in regards to “demanding increased minority admission, financial aid, and a more Third World-oriented curriculum” (Altbach and Cohen, 1990, 42). These protests in particular, mostly from minority students, appeared to take

precedent over divestment as this movement captured the attention of school officials as Brown University made immense changes as a result.

Like other students around the United States, students at Brown University strongly opposed their university's investments in companies that operated in South Africa and benefited the white minority party. During the initial years of activism, students attempted more passive ways of protest with pamphlets, education, and visiting lectures. The passive nature failed to pressure the Brown Corporation, however the disclosed information educated and influenced the community and later activists on the universities investments. In 1986 and 1987, students organized public protests, which pressured the institution to make changes as well as brought Brown University into the national debate. The Brown Southern Africa Solidarity Committee, Southern Africa Group for Education, and Brown Free Southern Africa Coalition all pressured Brown University to divest from companies operating within South Africa, and though these groups garnered little tangible success, they felt they contributed to the national movement.

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