Another World was Possible: Anti-Apartheid World-Making and the Unfinished Struggle for a New Global Order

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Table of Contents

Abstract

This article reinterprets the South African anti-apartheid struggle through the lens of world-making to foreground its imaginative and internationalist dimensions. It argues that many anti-apartheid activists envisioned true liberation as inseparable from a transformation of the racialised, imperial, and capitalist international order. Drawing on extensive archival sources related to various anti-apartheid organisations, the article traces these imaginaries across multiple sites of solidarity: socialist internationalism with the USSR and Cuba; Pan-Africanism and relations with African states; transnational Black Consciousness and African American activism; and Third World projects represented by the Non-Aligned Movement. It demonstrates that activists across ideological divides shared a conviction that political freedom without global economic justice would be hollow and that South Africa's future role lay in advancing a more equitable international system. Finally, the article contends that the African National Congress government's turn to neoliberalism is a significant impediment to the South-South solidarity and liberation it rhetorically promotes. Moreover, recovering past unfulfilled visions provides a critical lens for understanding the contradictions of post-apartheid South Africa and for rethinking possibilities for progressive internationalism in the present.

Key words and phrases: Anti-apartheid movement, world-making, Third World, Black Consciousness, New International Economic Order

Introduction

A controversial handshake between then President of the United States of America (USA) Barack Obama and the Cuban leader Raúl Castro made headlines in 2013. It is no coincidence that this handshake happened at the memorial service for the famous struggle hero and first president of a democratic South Africa, Nelson Mandela (Roberts and Luscombe, 2013).

Since the 1994 election that brought the African National Congress (ANC) to power, South Africa has positioned itself as a bridge-builder between the Global North and South, thereby aligning itself with other middle powers (Macfallen, 1999, p. 19). The trend can be traced back to the 1960s when a principled stance against apartheid became a bridge between progressive organisations on different sides of the Iron Curtain (Betts et al., 2019, p. 168). However, this apparent continuity obscures a significant shift. While an anti-apartheid position united progressive groups around the world during the Cold War, South Africa's post-apartheid bridge builder persona cannot be explained by an allegiance to progressive causes.

After the ANC came to power, it adopted neoliberal policies, which are often seen as a betrayal of its liberation era promises (Saul, 2004).[1] As the ANC has become unable to give revolutionary meaning to its national policies, the Cyril Ramaphosa administration in particular has attempted to "build its revolutionary credentials on the international stage as a vanguard of anti-imperialism and the struggle against colonialism internationally" (Chipkin, 2025, p. 531). This strategy has not worked and the contradictions between the ANC's pro-South discourse and its neoliberal economic policies are becoming increasingly stark.[2] Although this is a conundrum for contemporary South Africa, this paper will address it by turning to the past.

In the rich literature on apartheid South Africa, there is surprisingly little emphasis on what anti-apartheid organisations were fighting for (Neocosmos, 2018, p. 1108). This lacuna is even starker in relation to their visions of South Africa's future role in Africa and the international order more broadly. There are of course significant exceptions, such as Matthew Graham's comprehensive study of ANC foreign policy since the 1960s

[1]Neoliberalism is, of course, a contested concept. Drawing on Quinn Slobodian's work, it is defined here as an ideological and political project that aims to protect capitalism from democratic demands (Slobodian, 2018). For a more expansive discussion of the definition see my previous work on the topic (Soer, 2025b, 2025a). The notion that South Africa is neoliberal has also been challenged. For example, James Ferguson disputed the claim that the welfare state in South Africa is dead through his thorough examination of direct cash payments to low-income citizens (Ferguson, 2015). While Ferguson's analysis is extremely valuable, he leaves the system that creates the need for direct cash payments underexamined. It is therefore questionable whether cash payments actually disprove the argument that South Africa's economic framework is neoliberal. For a more thorough critique see Alf Gunvald Nilsen's Give James Ferguson a Fish (Nilsen, 2021).

(Graham, 2015), and Ryan Irwin's pertinent analysis of the role of the global struggle against apartheid in (re)forming the so called liberal world order (Irwin, 2012).

This paper aims to build on these studies by discussing the ways in which anti-apartheid activists imagined South Africa's position in the world and the role they anticipated the country would play in a post-apartheid future. In contrast to Graham's study, the paper will not consider the minutiae of ANC foreign policy, as significant as it might be. It will also not examine the positions of various branches of the anti-apartheid movement based in countries around the world, from Britain to Japan (Thörn, 2006; Konieczna and Skinner, 2019). Instead, it will focus on the world-making visions of organisations with direct links to South Africa, particularly organisations affiliated to the United Democratic Front (UDF),[3] arguably the most significant anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s, with a brief consideration of some Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) positions. While the UDF and the BCM might appear to hold conflicting positions at first glance, many BCM activists later become prominent UDF members and the UDF's strategic ambiguity allowed for a diversity of opinions.

The paper relies predominantly on archival sources collected in 2021-2022. These sources include, but are not limited to, the journals and newsletters of the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP), the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and many UDF affiliates.[4] The "Tracing the Unbreakable Thread" project from the South African History Archive (SAHA) provides another valuable source. The project was launched in 2015 and investigates the history of non-racialism in South Africa. The SAHA project made the transcripts of more than 100 semi-structured interviews conducted with anti-apartheid activists in the late 1980s publicly available. Although the interviews do not focus specifically on internationalism, they still provide insight into activists' imaginaries of South Africa's place in the world. Finally, I have access to a range of miscellaneous sources such as books and autobiographies written by anti-apartheid activists, the publications of academics who were involved in the anti-apartheid movement, activists' letters; posters and pamphlets, meeting minutes, and speeches.

[2]For example, South Africa brought an International Court of Justice (ICJ) case against Israel for its genocide of Plastinians in Gaza, but has continued to export coal to Israel (Stubbs, 2026, p. 154).
[3]The UDF was established in 1983 to oppose the apartheid government's oppressive Tricameral Parliament and the apartheid system more broadly. It was a mass-based movement consisting of 400-600 affiliated organisations, including civics, religious, student, and trade union organisations.
[4]I was able to collect the majority of copies published for 20 different journals and newsletters since 1980, which amounts to about 900 copies.

The concept of world-making provides the theoretical anchor of the paper. Accordingly, the paper will proceed by reflecting on the concept before it turns to the anti-apartheid movement's relations with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) – the ANC's most significant ally throughout the struggle (Graham, 2015). The section will also discuss the significance of Cuba as both an ally and an envisioned future. There were considerable variations in the support African states provided to the fight against apartheid, as well as divisions between solidarity with the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) and the ANC. Without glossing over these distinctions, the subsequent section will consider the anticipated place of a post-apartheid South Africa in Africa.

It is no secret that many Global North countries, particularly the USA and Britain, provided assistance to the apartheid regime in the name of fighting communism in southern Africa (Irwin, 2012). The anti-apartheid cause nonetheless garnered significant support from leftist civil society organisations in the USA and across Europe. Accordingly, the paper will assess the anti-apartheid movement's position vis-a-vis a particular subset of these organisations, namely Black American organisations. Thereafter, the paper will reflect on the anti-apartheid stance and activity of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the fight for a New International Economic Order (NIEO). Finally, it is impossible to ignore the significance of the United Nations (UN) as the world's preeminent international organisation. The paper will conclude with a summarising discussion and some possible contemporary implications of these past imagined futures.

A brief genealogy of world-making

The concept of world-making can be traced back to Nelson Goodman's 1978 book *Ways of worldmaking* (Goodman, 1978). Writing in the tradition of analytic philosophy, Goodman challenged conventional views of objectivity and explored the notion of "multiple, constructed worlds shaped by individual perspectives and symbolic systems" (Nelles, 2022). While Goodman originally used the concept to highlight the constructed nature of knowledge and meaning, more recent work has linked it to studies of coloniality, race and gender to investigate, for example, how development projects "make worlds" that reproduce or resist colonial orders (Paulson, 2024). World-making is

thus closely tied to constructivist views, but its usage has changed over time from a focus on representation to an emphasis on enactment. In other words, more recent studies tend to see "world-making as doing" and investigate the practices that make and remake the world or, rather, conceptions of the world.

This paper draws strongly on Adom Getachew's employment of the concept in her seminal book, *Worldmaking after empire: The rise and fall of self-determination* (Getachew, 2019). Getachew examined the political projects and institutional efforts pursued by anticolonial intellectuals and statesmen after World War II (WWII) to remake the international order so that formerly colonised peoples would enjoy actual self-determination and equality. These efforts were intended to dismantle racialised hierarchies embedded in the international system, especially in relation to economic structures, to literally make a different world. Accordingly, world-making is defined here as normative visions and collective projects that aim to change the explicit and implicit rules, institutions and material relations that constitute a particular social sphere, in this case the international order.

From Moscow to Matanzas: Imagining liberation through socialist internationalism

The post-WWII order was profoundly shaped by two intertwined phenomena: the Cold War and formal decolonisation. After Joseph Stalin died in 1953 and Nikita Khrushchev came to power, Soviet foreign policy was defined by "Marxist internationalism" (Waters, 2021, p. 163), or what some scholars call "red globalisation" (Sanchez-Sibony, 2014; Mark, Kalinovsky and Marung, 2020).[5] The socialist bloc held a distinct vision of modernity, in opposition to its liberal rival, which spurred a form of anti-capitalist globalisation and was seen by many newly decolonised countries as a pathway to "modernisation" or "development" (Mark and Betts, 2022, pp. 4–16).

As part of this effort, the Soviet regime became the ANC's primary backer in the 1960s and even sustained its entire fighting force for years (Graham, 2015, p. 28). The ANC initially attempted to secure support from Britain and only turned to the Eastern Bloc, including the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Cuba, after the majority of

[5]The USSR only became interested in Latin America and Africa after WWII, but other Eastern European countries had a more global outlook even earlier (Mark and Marung, 2022, p. 47).

Western countries refused to provide assistance and failed to put significant pressure on the apartheid regime (Graham, 2015, p. 9). The ANC's alliance with communist countries can thus be ascribed more to pragmatism than to ideological conviction. However, it certainly helped that the ANC had a formal partnership with the South African Communist Party (SACP) since 1969 and interactions with Eastern Bloc countries shaped the perceptions of many ANC activists.[6]

Although it is important to note that the ANC was (and still is) a broad church encompassing a range of ideological positions, many of its members expressed socialist ideals during the struggle (Graham, 2015, p. 8).

For most of the struggle period, there were existing positive examples of socialism, and the end of the USSR was not yet imaginable. Even though the imaginaries that anti-apartheid activists had of these countries undoubtedly diverged from their lived realities, it was nonetheless crucial to have an alternative to capitalism, which was associated with racial domination. One example of many comes from a resolution passed at the Morogoro Conference in 1969,[7] where the ANC and SACP also established their official partnership. The resolution stated that

> The struggle of the oppressed people of South Africa is taking place within an international context of transition to the Socialist System, of the breakdown of the colonial system as a result of national liberation and socialist revolutions, and the fight for social and economic progress by the people of the whole world.
>
> (ANC, 1969)

The struggle against apartheid was thus

> ... happening in a new kind of world; a world which is no longer monopolised by the imperialist world system; a world in which the existence of the powerful socialist system and a significant sector of newly liberated areas has altered the balance of forces; a world in which the horizons liberated from foreign oppression extend beyond mere formal political control and encompass the element which makes such

[6]In 1964, even before the formal alliance, Nelson Mandela explained his attraction to the Communist Party as follows: "for many decades communists were the only political group in South Africa who were prepared to treat Africans as human beings and their equals; who were prepared to eat with us, talk with us, live with us, and work with us…" (cited in: Konieczna, 2019, p. 80).
[7]The Morogoro Conference was the first consultative conference the ANC held since its banning in 1960. It took place in Morogoro, Tanzania, from 25 April to 1 May 1969.

> control meaningful economic emancipation.
>
> (ANC, 1969)

This statement indicates that the transition to socialism was seen not only as an inevitable phase of history, but as something that was already taking place. Furthermore, it shows that socialism provided a significant horizon of liberation and an alternative to capitalism worth striving for.[8] Finally, it speaks to the world making ambitions of the anti-apartheid struggle since liberation was not seen as the formal independence of one country, but as something that was made meaningful by a change in the international economic order.

It is well established that the ANC had close ties to the USSR (Graham, 2015; England, 2022). The aim here is rather to give further credence to Getachew's argument that anti-imperialists mobilised socialist critiques to

> ...envision a reordering of the world that transcended imperial inequality and anticipated anti-imperial and often antistatist futures. Operating through transnational networks, internationalists experimented with political forms beyond and below the nation-state. They offered visions of a world after empire …
>
> (Getachew, 2019, p. 4)

In the South African case, these visions were not anti-statist and ascribed a central role to the state. However, as Getachew also explains, the self-determination of post-colonial states was seen as dependent on a transformation of international economic, political, and juridical institutions (Stubbs, 2026, p. 40). These visions were not only present in the formal texts of the ANC and SACP, but filtered all the way down to disaffected youth in townships. Ineke van Kessel's research demonstrated that young township leaders in the 1980s idealised the Soviet model as a guiding example for a future South Africa. These leaders often combined a romanticised peasant past with an imagined communist future and saw both types of societies as harmonious and egalitarian social orders (Van Kessel, 2000, p. 138).

[8]The influence was not unidirectional and "the presence of mobile and cosmopolitan people of colour from beyond Europe helped push the Soviet elites themselves towards a less Eurocentric anti-colonial internationalism…" (Mark and Marung, 2022, pp. 40–41).

Activists from the highest echelons of the ANC and SACP to those in grassroots township structures did not only imagine socialism as a desired future, but saw themselves as building this future. One young activist explained to van Kessel that Marxism "teaches us to have confidence in ourselves, in the working class, in people. It teaches us that there are no mysteries beyond our understanding … that we can ourselves understand nature and society, so as to be able to change them" (cited in: Van Kessel, 2000, p. 137). Analogously, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) newsletter affirmed that:[9]

> Now in COSATU, and in many other local organisations of workers and youth, we can see that the capitalist system has nothing to offer us except more poverty and exploitation, more police repression and racist oppression. So many workers and youth are saying that the only alternative to this system is a socialist system- a society controlled by workers and organised to meet all the needs of workers.
>
> (COSATU, 1986, p. 2)

Moreover, the fight for liberation was not limited to South Africa: "The only way to achieve liberation is to unite all workers and fight the ruling class … We must form one federation in South Africa and unite with workers in other countries. Our struggle only ends when workers rule the world" (COSATU, 1989a, p. 3, emphasis added).[10] These activists thus saw the struggle in South Africa as tied to international class struggle.

Not all activists were enamoured with the USSR and some vehemently criticised Soviet communism. However, an anti-Soviet position did not necessarily imply support for capitalism. The UDF patron Allan Boesak showed disdain for both systems, arguing that:

Capitalism came to the world as the new guarantee of progress and development for all people… Yet capitalism turned out to be a system that consistently benefits the privileged few, that cannot survive without constant exploitation of the poor, that thrives on our basest instincts … Marxism promised the world freedom and equality, brotherhood and dignity. Yet how quickly has it become a system that fears freedom and regulates human dignity, and how depressingly oppressive has its main proponent

[9] COSATU is a trade union federation established in 1985 to unite workers against apartheid. It advocated for labour rights, economic justice and social upliftment. It was known for mobilising mass strikes and engaging in policy advocacy. It is still South Africa's largest trade union federation and is in a governing coalition with the ANC and SACP.

[10] Yet another edition of the newsletter stated: "Our class is a truly non-racial class, an international class. The capitalist class all over the world, and especially in SA, uses racism to try and divide the people and strengthen capitalist power" (COSATU, 1989b, p. 8).

proved itself to be in the world!

(Boesak, 1987, pp. 131–132)

Even though Boesak criticised orthodox Marxism, he still saw the international capitalist system as a major obstacle to true freedom and endorsed the "search for a more just, equitable, and sustainable economic order" (Boesak, 1987, p. 67).

The USSR was not the only communist country that inspired South African activists. In fact, Cuba was perhaps the sincerest supporter of liberation movements in southern Africa (Gleijeses, 2014). While the USSR supplied crucial military assistance, Cuba sent about twothirds of its army to fight alongside liberation movements in the region and at least 2000 Cubans died fighting for the cause of African freedom from colonialism (Delmas, 2019, pp. 137-141).[11] Furthermore, the USSR was attempting to expand its influence in Africa and it was primarily motivated by strategic considerations (Waters, 2021, p. 166), although there were also some ideological affinities (England, 2022).[12] In contrast, Cuba seems to have been genuinely motivated by principled anti-imperialism, internationalism and non-racialism (Gleijeses, 2014; Delmas, 2019).

Cuba played a decisive role in securing Angolan independence, particularly at the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale in 1988, which paved the way for the withdrawal of South African forces from Angola and for Namibian independence. In 1989, Oliver Tambo announced:[13]

> We have reached a victorious phase in the struggle of the peoples of southern Africa. The defeat of the bellicose South African army in Angola has turned the tide irreversibly against the Pretoria fascists. FAPLA, the Cuban internationalist forces and SWAPO of Namibia have done Africa very proud indeed. To paraphrase Comrade Fidel Castro: After Cuito Cuanavale, the history of Africa will have to be written anew.
>
> (Tambo, 1989).

Furthermore, Nelson Mandela chose Cuba for his first foreign visit following his release from prison in February 1990. Mandela addressed a large crowd at Matanzas in July

[11] Cuba also educated about 35 000 students from 37 Third World countries and received students from practically all sub-Saharan African countries (Alamgir, 2022, p. 317).
[12] While commenting on the differences between Western imperialism and the USSR, Vijay Prashad noted that "the Soviets did not see the rest of the planet as a storehouse of resources, but neither did they see it as filled with people who had fought a strong anticolonial struggle and wanted to lead their own movements, craft their own history" (Prashad, 2007, p. 10).
[13] Oliver Tambo was the President of the ANC from 1967 to 1991.

1991, declaring that "The decisive defeat of the apartheid aggressors broke the myth of the invincibility of the white oppressors! The defeat of the apartheid army was an inspiration to the struggling people inside South Africa!" (Delmas, 2019, pp. 136–137). Cuban internationalism and solidarity with African peoples were truly exceptional. Piero Gleijeses even argued that there has not been another country in modern history whose foreign policy has been as idealistic as Castro's Cuba (Gleijeses, 2014; Delmas, 2019, p. 139).

Many UDF activists portrayed Cuba as fulfilling the promises of the Freedom Charter.[14] Cuba was imagined as a worker's paradise where workers controlled the factories and unemployment was a thing of the past (Van Kessel, 2000, p. 243). An article in Isizwe, the journal of the UDF, claimed that in Cuba

> The fields and factories belong to the whole Cuban working people. Everyone who is old enough and healthy enough is expected to work, to build up the wealth shared by all Cuban working people. Work is guaranteed to all citizens in socialist countries. Work is not seen as an unpleasant duty, it is not slave labour for a boss. In a socialist country, work is a way of developing yourself as a full human being, learning skills and working together with others.
>
> (UDF, 1985, p. 32)

Cuba was seen not only as a place where workers were free from capitalist exploitation, but also as a vanguard of women's emancipation. For example, an opinion piece in the African Communist, the journal of the SACP, argued that the "true emancipation of women will come with the liberation of the working class, and that process will take a long time", but there was hope to be found in the socialist countries: "If we follow the road of our sisters in Cuba, Vietnam, Angola, Nicaragua and many other countries, the triple oppression of South African women can also be ended" (Mwandla, 1987, p. 107).[15]

The USSR and Cuba were arguably the staunchest allies of the anti-apartheid movement. They provided not only material aid, but also an imagined future of an

[14] The Freedom Charter was adopted in 1955 at the Congress of the People in Kliptown, Soweto, as the core principles of the South African Congress Alliance, which consisted of the ANC, the South African Indian Congress, the South African Congress of Democrats and the Coloured People's Congress.
[15] The "triple oppression" of women refers to race, class and gender oppression and is an antecedent of the term intersectionality, which was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989.

alternative to capitalist imperialism, even if the lived reality in these societies diverged from the perceptions of activists in southern Africa. Many activists saw socialist internationalism as the road to liberation. This led to a rather rude awakening when the Cold War ended and the USSR collapsed (Van Kessel, 2000, pp. 276–277). The end of the Cold War decisively altered the balance of forces in South Africa and paved the way for a negotiated end to apartheid, but it also limited the scope of possible imagined futures.

Ambivalent allies: Pan-Africanism and the anti-apartheid struggle

In popular accounts and political rhetoric, African states are praised for their unequivocal support for the anti-apartheid struggle. The "family of African states" is said to have played a pivotal role in bringing apartheid to an end (Pitamber, 2015). There is some truth to this claim since many African governments hosted exiled ANC and PAC members, provided material assistance, and raised the cause in transnational forums. However, support was often uneven, conditional and uncertain and many African states maintained clandestine economic relations with the apartheid regime as they attempted to maintain much needed economic stability (Graham, 2015). Moreover, while the ANC might appear to have been the predestined leader of the anti-apartheid struggle in a teleological narrative of liberation, the historical record tells a much more contingent tale.

The PAC launched the anti-pass campaign to protest oppressive apartheid pass laws, which culminated in the Sharpeville massacre on 21 March 1960 when the police opened fire on peaceful protestors outside Sharpeville police station. In response, the Nationalist Party banned the PAC and ANC in April 1960, motivating both the PAC and the ANC to turn to armed struggle and pushing their members into exile. In the same year, 17 countries in sub-Saharan Africa won their independence (France 24, 2020), setting in motion a process of decolonisation that did not merely aim to achieve national independence, but to confront an international racialised hierarchy. In other words, anti-apartheid activists went into exile as newly independent African states launched their world-making projects (Getachew, 2019).

Given the centrality of Pan-Africanism in the belief systems of leaders such as Kwame

Nkrumah, it is somewhat unsurprising that many African governments sympathised more with the PAC and were suspicious of the ANC's ties to white activists and its more multiracial stance (Graham, 2015, p. 14).[16] In fact, when Nelson Mandela traveled to Accra, Ghana, to secure support for the armed struggle in 1962, Nkrumah refused to meet with him. As Mandela wrote in *Long Walk to Freedom*,

> ...one African leader after another had questioned our relations with white and Indian communists, sometimes suggesting that they controlled the ANC… In the rest of Africa, most African leaders could understand the views of the PAC better.
>
> (Mandela, 1995, p. 361)

Nkrumah is well known for his Pan-Africanist views, but Julius Nyerere held a similar position. Nyerere supported the anti-apartheid cause and allowed the ANC to establish its headquarters in Dar es Salaam. However, the ANC was forced to relocate to the provincial town of Morogoro in 1964, only one year after it had settled in Dar es Salaam, "because Nyerere decreed that only four representatives from each liberation movement could reside in the capital" (Graham, 2015, p. 17). Like many African leaders in the 1960s, Nyerere identified more with the ideals of the PAC than the ANC.

The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was founded in May 1963 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, with the aim of uniting African states and resolving problems throughout the continent. The OAU expressed its unequivocal support for the fight against apartheid (ANC, 1971, p. 5). It provided formal recognition, funding channels, and a rhetorical platform that helped anti-apartheid organisations, particularly the ANC, to internationalise the struggle and delegitimise the apartheid regime. This recognition mattered politically since it converted the ANC from a banned domestic movement into an actor with continental standing and access to multilateral fora. It is nonetheless important to note that the OAU followed a "chain theory of liberation", meaning that its Liberation Committee prioritised the independence of Angola and Mozambique, followed by Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), then South West Africa (now Namibia) "and finally South Africa, with the level of support provided to each liberation movement corresponding to its position in this chain" (Graham, 2015, p. 15).

[16] These developments intersected with the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950s and early 1960s. China wanted to outmanoeuvre the USSR in Africa, but could not challenge the ANC's close ties to Eastern Europe (Betts, 2022, p. 208). China thus supported the PAC and rhetorically condemned apartheid on the international stage. Overall, China did not play a major role in the anti-apartheid struggle, but it was more active in the liberation struggles in Angola and Zimbabwe (Taylor, 2000)

Irrespective of one's opinion of the chain theory of liberation, the independence of Angola and Mozambique undoubtedly strengthened anti-apartheid forces. After the Portuguese withdrawal from Angola and Mozambique in 1975, the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) governments immediately allowed the ANC to establish military and diplomatic bases closer to South Africa (Graham, 2015, p. 21). It was also a boon to the ANC specifically, which had consolidated its position as the main representative of the South African liberation movement by the 1970s (Suttner, 2012).

The Cold War context greatly influenced MPLA and FRELIMO assistance to the ANC since these organisations were USSR allies. While the ideologically pan-Africanist countries that gained independence in the 1960s were sceptical of the ANC's ties to Eastern Bloc countries, the MPLA and FRELIMO shared the kinship.[17] Furthermore, the fact that these countries were geographically closer to South Africa facilitated cross-border movements for the ANC, but also made them vulnerable to attacks from apartheid security forces.

African states were a source of diplomatic support, sanctuary, and operational capacity for both the ANC and the PAC and their sacrifices, especially the sacrifices of the "frontline states",[18] should be recognised. However, in practice, assistance was often pragmatic, negotiated, and contingent. As noted, several African states such as Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) under Mobutu were unwilling to jeopardise economic ties with South Africa and therefore turned a blind eye to apartheid (Lehulere, 1997). Mobutu was also a US ally during the Cold War, but some African states such as Botswana rhetorically condemned apartheid while maintaining economic ties to South Africa (Sechele, 2023). This speaks to a recurring dilemma in African foreign policy, including post-apartheid South African foreign policy: a normative stance against an exploitative system is compromised by economic dependence on the guarantors of the system. In other words, the ability of African states to challenge an unjust international economic order is curtailed by their dependent position in that order.

In spite of the constraints many African states faced in opposing apartheid, there is no

[17] Angola and Mozambique were also seen as examples for South Africa. An article in Isizwe, the journal of the UDF, stated that "What is it that the apartheid regime fears so much about Angola and Mozambique? PW Botha is terrified of the shining example of unity, democracy, non-racialism, peace, prosperity and progress that these countries with a socialist orientation can provide to the peoples of South Africa. The apartheid regime is determined by all means to destabilise these countries, so as to be able to say 'national liberation does not work, socialism does not work'" (UDF, 1987, p. 46).
[18] Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

doubt that anti-apartheid activists in the ANC, PAC and UDF envisioned themselves as part of a broader anti-colonial wave in Africa. Mongane Wally Serote, in a round table discussion organised under the auspices of Inkululeko Publications, recounted that "the victory of Frelimo through armed struggle over Portuguese colonialism was, to the South African masses, a great promise for the future" (SACP, 1988, p. 41).[19] UDF activists repeatedly emphasised that they were not fighting a "civil rights struggle", but a "national liberation struggle" like other African countries (Irwin, 2012, p. 176). Peter Mokaba, President of the South African Youth Congress , explicitly stated "We realise that our struggle is not an isolated one. We link it up with the struggling people of Africa and the rest of the world. It is clear that Africa cannot be free until we achieve our freedom in South Africa" (Grassroots, 1987, p. 7).

The Colonialism of a Special Type (CST) theory advanced by the SACP recognised the distinctiveness of settler colonialism in South Africa, but also emphasised that colonialism and capitalism were the overarching and intertwined socio-economic problems that oppressed South Africans had to contend with, just like other African countries (ANC, 1992, p. 33).[20] Indeed, CST theory suggested that "white South Africa" resembled an industrialised capitalist society, with Black South Africa acting as its colony (Chipkin, 2007, p. 51).

Anti-apartheid activists scrutinised the African countries that had gained independence earlier and warned that the same pitfalls might emerge in a post-apartheid South Africa. They repeatedly stressed that political independence would be meaningless if neo-colonial relations continued and if there was insufficient socio-economic restructuring:

> In the new South Africa, it is hoped that people will not only 'hear' their freedom but 'feel' it as well. We have lessons to learn from many an independent country of our continent where people have only 'heard' their independence from colonial rule, but never 'felt' it. This should not be allowed to occur in our land. The liberation of South Africa, for which our people have fought for centuries will not be complete if it is not accompanied by the obliteration of the atrocities of inequity which the forces of oppression have perpetuated on the people.

[19] Serote is a South African poet and writer who was an anti-apartheid activist and ANC member.
[20] In the post-apartheid period, Pallo Jordan argued that South African foreign policy should have "as its central plank the creating of space for Africa and its people to define their own future by exploring and offering viable, indigenously-evolved, alternative agendas to those imposed on our continent by former colonial powers and their allies" (Jordan, 2004, p. 211).

(ANC, 1990b, p. 27)

Activists were especially critical of the neoliberal Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) that were imposed on many African countries in the 1980s and explicitly stated that they did not offer a viable path for South Africa (Minty, 1994, p. 7).

While criticisms of SAPs continued after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and some SACP members still rhetorically supported socialism (Slovo, 1989; Jordan, 1991), the international balance of forces had shifted drastically. Not only was the power of the ANC's main financial and military backer greatly diminished, but socialism was also increasingly dismissed as outdated and accused of being an anachronistic remainder of revolutionary idealism (Padayachee, 1997, p. 41; Freund, 2013, pp. 438–439). Moreover, throughout the 1980s, global governance, particularly in the economic realm, shifted from the UN, where newly decolonised states held a majority of votes despite the veto power of permanent Security Council members, to "International Financial Institutions, notably the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, where voting rights were linked directly to economic power" (Stubbs, 2023, p. 29). These factors, amongst others, contributed to the fact that once the ANC came into power, it adopted an economic policy that one of its drafters described as "a home-grown structural adjustment programme".[21]

The ANC in government has continued to profess its African solidarity, particularly under Thabo Mbeki's leadership. Mbeki is well known for advocating for an African Renaissance and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) was central to his foreign policy vision. The shift in international power relations or, rather, the solidification of a predominantly neoliberal USA-led world order after a momentary opening (Stubbs, 2026, p. 11), at least partially explains why the NEPAD was very much in line with the status quo, emphasising market liberalisation, and liberal democracy (Saul, 2004; Graham, 2015, p. 195). While it purportedly aimed to decrease African dependency, it proposed economic policies aligned with the order that (re)produces that dependency. Again, this speaks to the fact that African countries' position in the international economic order impedes their capacity to challenge that order. It must nonetheless be noted that anti-apartheid activists firmly believed that they could

[21] This quote is from an unpublished interview I conducted with Alan Hirsch in 2022.

overcome these constraints, and they asserted that it was necessary to do so in order to be truly free from colonialism. In this regard, they were part of an anti-colonial world-making project.

Freedom dreams beyond the colour line: The transnational life of Black Consciousness

Although Western governments, specifically in the USA, Britain, and West Germany, assisted the apartheid regime in multiple ways, powerful civil society movements in these countries strongly opposed apartheid. Håkan Thörn has extensively researched these movements and highlighted the significance of the transnational anti-apartheid movement (Thörn, 2006, 2009). Indeed, Thörn sees the anti-apartheid movement as a "movement of movements" consisting of an "imagined community of solidarity activists" (Konieczna and Skinner, 2019, p. 12). His research focused on Western countries, but the anti-apartheid cause brought together organisations on different sides of the Iron Curtain (Betts et al., 2019, p. 168).

This paper established that the Eastern Bloc had an early influence on the views of many South African anti-apartheid activists, but the uprisings of 1968 in the Western World, especially France, also informed anti-apartheid thought (Irwin, 2012, p. 179; Konieczna and Skinner, 2019, p. 14).[22] It is crucial to note the significance of civil society organisations across the world in the broader anti-apartheid movement, but this section will focus on the African diaspora in the USA because there was a shared imaginary of international Black freedom, dignity, and self-determination.

In Robin D.G. Kelley's formulation, intellectuals and artists of the African diaspora created "freedom dreams": cultural, moral and political visions of a world beyond racial capitalism, colonialism, and global white supremacy (Kelley, 2002). Significantly, these dreams had a global dimension and when activists attempted to bring them to fruition they were participating in worldmaking projects. As Martha Biondi recently demonstrated through an exploration of Prexy Nesbitt's life,[23] American anti-racist activists were participating in an internationalist project and worked closely with opponents of colonialism and white minority rule in Angola, Mozambique, and South

[22] Anti-apartheid campaigns benefited from the 1968 student protests and the mobilisation against the Vietnam War since people, especially young people, became more willing to take their views to the street and the "radical left" or new left brought new tactics and communication techniques to anti-apartheid movements across Europe and the USA (Konieczna, 2019, p. 87)
[23] Prexy Nesbitt is an American anti-racist educator and activist.

Africa. They injected notions of self-determination they learned from African anti-colonial leaders into US policy debates, even as they attempted to advance the cause in southern Africa. In summary, they were participating in transformative Black solidarity projects (Biondi, 2025).

Even if not all African American activists were as internationally involved as Nesbitt, from at least the 1950s, many saw the struggle in South Africa as intimately connected to their own. African Americans were inspired by the Defiance Campaign (1950-1952) in South Africa,[24] which in turn fostered an "African lobby" in the US civil rights movement that pressured the US government to take action on apartheid (Meriwether, 2002).[25] For instance, in the 1970s, the African Liberation Support Committee (ALSC) mobilised support for liberation movements in southern Africa among African Americans and fostered "pragmatic Pan-Africanism," combining a vision of liberation with concrete financial and organisational support (Erhagbe, 2011, p. 26). The prominent sociologist and activist W.E.B. du Bois left no doubt that he saw South Africa, the USA, and the Caribbean as engaged in the same struggle for Black liberation (Houser, 1992).

Black churches played a particularly striking role and fundamentally shaped ideologies of radical pacifism and Black Power. According to Phyllis E. Slade, Black American churches turned the anti-apartheid struggle into a global moral imperative (Slade, 2015). Black churches amplified opposition to apartheid and the Black Theology that emerged in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s inspired the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in South Africa. It is not difficult to understand why a theology that argued that God was on the side of the oppressed and that the message of Christianity must confront racism, injustice, and structural violence would resonate in the South African context.

After the ANC, SACP, and PAC went into exile in the 1960s, the BCM arose as the primary challenge to apartheid. It redefined Blackness to include all oppressed South Africans and cultivated psychological liberation and Black Pride. The BCM foregrounded the insidious effects of internalised inferiority and promoted Black dignity as a crucial component of political struggle. Yet, as Ian Macqueen demonstrated, the BCM

[24] The Defiance Campaign was the first large-scale and multi-racial political campaign against apartheid
[25] For example, when President Ronald Reagan vetoed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act in 1986, African American communities and civil rights activists in the USA engaged in widespread protest. After overwhelming civil society opposition, Congress overrode Reagan's veto in October 1986 and passed the Comprehensive AntiApartheid Act (Manulak, 2024).

developed alongside other political doctrines and resistance movements such as radical Christianity and ecumenism, trade unionism, and feminism. These different strands contributed to the BCM's visions of freedom (Macqueen, 2018).

In addition to the South African currents identified by Macqueen, the BCM was informed by Black radicalism from the USA (including Black Theology), liberationist traditions from the Caribbean and South America, and the Pan-Africanism that was popular across the African continent at the time.[26] United by a history of white exploitation, Black South Africans, Afro-Caribbeans and Black Americans "were exchanging ideas— the ideas of freedom, the experiences of black masses in action, and their aspirations for a new world" (Turner & Alan, cited in: Burki, 2019, p. 106).

The BCM did not only situate the liberation of South African people in the context of African history (Lekgantshi, 2024, p. 1), but also in an imagined global Black polity, united by common struggle, solidarity, and hope. The icon of Black Consciousness in South Africa, Steve Biko, clearly expressed this sentiment when he wrote that "The surge towards Black Consciousness is a phenomenon that has manifested itself throughout the so-called Third World. There is no doubt that discrimination against the black man the world over fetches its origin from the exploitative attitude of the white man" (Biko, 1978, p. 28). Biko also articulated his understanding of the importance of Black Theology, which he saw as

> ... committed to eradicating all cause for suffering as represented in the death of children from starvation, outbreaks of epidemics in poor areas, or the existence of thuggery and vandalism in townships. In other words, it shifts the emphasis from petty sins to major sins in a society, thereby ceasing to teach the people to 'suffer peacefully'.
>
> (cited in: Lekgantshi, 2024, p. 5)

In summary, the BCM "cannot be divorced from global influence" (Mgwebi, 2009, p.51).

[26] These were only three of the many ideological strands that influenced the BCM. For example, Richard Turner, who significantly influenced Steve Biko's thinking (Macqueen, 2018), brought the ideas of the French May 1968 movements into the BCM (Burki, 2019, pp. 112–117).
[27] Holtzman was a student activist in the late 1970s and participated in worker solidarity campaigns. In the early 1980s, she helped to form the first non-racial women's organisation, the United Women's Organisation (UWO) and was elected to its executive. She was active in the underground structures of the ANC and SACP and worked as a trade union volunteer in MWASA (Media Workers Association of South Africa). She was also part of civic, youth and women's organisations in Mitchells Plain where she participated in building the UDF.

The BCM fed into the UDF and many prominent UDF activists had their political awakening in the BCM. For example, Cyril Ramaphosa became involved in the BCM when he was a student at the University of the North (then Turfloop) in the early 1970s. He was detained in 1974, then for a second time in June 1976 following the Soweto Uprising and was released six months later. He explained that "when I got out of my detention, I then had to start trying to weigh up, looking at the whole South African society, seeing what the future could be. And at that stage began being more and more exposed to other philosophies, like say non-racialism and the involvement of the ANC…" (Ramaphosa, 1985, p. 4, emphasis added). He later helped to organise the conference that led to the formation of COSATU, which was affiliated with the UDF. Ramaphosa was far from an isolated case; Zelda Holtzman and Trevor Manuel recounted similar tales,[27] with Manuel explaining that the Black identity the BCM had given him as someone who was officially classified as Coloured "found a place" in the UDF, which gave him "a sense of purpose" (Holtzman, 1985, p. 4).[28]

Although the emphasis the BCM and Black theology placed on individual emancipation and the psychological dimensions of freedom was sometimes in tension with the structuralist political culture of the ANC and SACP, many activists moved from the BCM to ANC affiliated organisations. In Ramaphosa's account, we saw that he moved from a BC position to being involved in the labour union movement. The shift was facilitated by the fact that class dynamics had entered BC theorising after the Durban Strikes of 1973 and the subsequent formation of the radical trade union movement (Nassen Smith and Lester, 2022).

Julian Brown showed how the student and labour protests that happened between 1972 and 1974 presented a "shift away from momentary explosions of protest … towards radical experiments in outreach" (Brown, 2016, p. 110). Activists experimented with new models of representation and solidarity that expanded "the spaces of possibility" by bridging the divide between workers and students. This burgeoning alliance between students and workers certainly carried over into UDF organising. Furthermore, when these predominantly Black students returned to their home communities they participated in building networks of support that brought together workers, clergymen, teachers and so on "into a web of social and political relationships"

[28] This information is from an unpublished interview I conducted with Trevor Manuel in 2022.

(Brown, 2016, p. 184). These different forms of organisation and emerging networks "opened up the possibility of new protests, new politics and new hopes" (Brown, 2016, p. 184). Here we can also see the seeds of the UDF, which united students, workers, churches, women's organisations and, crucially, civics.

The aforementioned patron of the UDF, Allan Boesak, was a Dutch Reformed Church cleric who directly referenced Black Consciousness and Biko as an inspiration:

> Black Consciousness understood that the affirmation of black human dignity had personal, psychological, theological and political consequences. The new-found pride in their cognizance of 'the deliberateness of God's plan in creating black people black', to continue Biko's argument, meant that 'liberation, therefore, is of paramount importance in the concept of Black Consciousness'.
>
> (Boesak, 1976, p. 9)

Boesak further wrote that "*Black Power dreams of a new world, a new world order*, 'an open society in which all men share and find their contribution acceptable and accepted'" (Boesak, 1976, p. 75, emphasis added). As we have seen, Black Theology influenced BC and, in turn, Boesak's theology drew on BC, Back Power, and Latin American liberation theology.[29] The lawyer and activist Albie Sachs captured this bricolage of liberatory imaginaries when he wrote that South African resistance consisted of a "rich mix", including "African tradition, church tradition, Gandhian tradition, revolutionary socialist tradition, liberal tradition… we have black consciousness, and elements of red consciousness (some would say pink consciousness these days), even green consciousness" (Sachs, 1991, p. 189).

It is not simply the case that anti-apartheid activists were inspired by the ideas of African Americans, Pan-Africanists and Liberation Theologists, they also saw themselves as participating in the same struggle. Some activists referred to this as a struggle against the global colour line (Vinson, 2018), while others framed it as a fight against international imperialism.[30] For example, Pallo Jordan praised the ANC for embracing "a

[29] Boesak was particularly heartened by Oscar Romero (Boesak, 1984, p. 75), the Archbishop of El Salvador who spoke out against violence and social injustice when the conflict between the military and left-wing insurgents escalated and eventually led to the Salvadoran Civil War. American trained and armed security forces assassinated Romero in 1980 while he was celebrating Mass.

[30] For example, in a direct critique of the Reagan and Thatcher regimes, who were seen as reproducing global imperialism, Boesak stated that: "... the powerlessness of the poor is the precondition for the continued dominance of the rich. We must expose the relationship between poverty and wealth. The poor are so poor because the rich are so rich. The process of accumulation of surplus, augmentation of wealth and the law of the market prevailing in many countries including our own, create and sustain wealth for the wealthy and poverty for the poor. There is a direct relationship between the poverty of the masses of people and the value system upon which our modern society is built" (Boesak, 1984, p. 7).

pan-African vision that linked us in South Africa, not only to the rest of the continent, but also to people of African descent around the world" (Jordan, 2017). The point is that many activists imagined Black freedom as a global horizon. While universities, churches, and trade unions were local institutions, they were also nodes of global solidarity connected by the ideas of Black and liberation theology and international class struggle. Even in the heart of empire, these civil society organisations were significant in shifting the policy domain in favour of anti-apartheid movements (Grisinger, 2020).

Third World world-making: Non-Alignment, anti-apartheid solidarity, and the dream of a new order

Similar to the way that the global colour line traversed state borders, the Third World was not a geographical area, but a political project. It can also be seen as an imagined community of anti-colonial nationalists and newly independent governments that shared a vision of emancipation and economic transformation. As Vijay Prashad explained, "during the seemingly interminable battles against colonialism, the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America dreamed of a new world" (Prashad, 2007, p. xv).

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) occupied a central place in the Third World's world making project, functioning as both a diplomatic bloc and an institutional expression of postcolonial sovereignty. The NAM states were united by a sense of solidarity based on common colonial history and socioeconomic conditions as well as the intention of securing genuine political autonomy and economic justice for formerly colonised peoples. The NAM offered newly independent states a platform from which to challenge the hierarchies embedded in the UN, press for norms of self-determination, and coordinate strategies for reorganising global political and economic structures. In this regard, the NAM, the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), and the G-77 were the most instrumental advocates of the NIEO (Stubbs, 2026, p. 56), which was an important counter-hegemonic world-making project and arguably the clearest articulation of "the Third World Project" (Stubbs, 2026, pp. 5–27)

Although South Africa was only allowed to formally join the NAM in 1994, Oliver Tambo, the aforementioned leader of the ANC in exile, attended the inaugural meeting

of the NAM as observer in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in 1961 (Saunders, 2021, p. 334). For the first 30 years of the NAM's existence, the liberation movements of Southern Africa, including the anti-apartheid movement, loomed large on its agenda (Saunders, 2021, p. 333). Freeing South Africa from apartheid and minority rule was a mainstay of the NAM's ideological orientation and was seen as central to attainment of equality, freedom and justice (Keethaponcalan, 2016, p. 4). Merthold Macfallen even argued that, from the Havana summit in 1979 until the Harare summit in 1986, "NAM had the question of the struggle against apartheid as the only unifying issue" (Macfallen, 1999, p. 36). Even if this is an exaggeration, there is no doubt that the struggle against apartheid became an emblem of the broader struggle for the liberation of the Third World.

The South African anti-apartheid movement also saw itself as participating in the broader project of Third World liberation. Although apartheid was the immediate problem, it was tied to global imperialism or, in the words of Pallo Jordan, "during the last forty-five years the imperialist powers appear to have composed their differences and by mutual consent have intensified the economic exploitation of the third world to sustain relative prosperity in their own countries" (Jordan, 1990). Since the problem was global imperialism, the solution was "strengthening of the bonds between all the anti-imperialist forces everywhere" (SACP, 1984, p. 14).

When South Africa hosted the NAM Summit in September 1998, it rhetorically reiterated its commitment to anti-colonialism and connected its liberation history to NAM principles, stating that "Our Movement embodies the aspirations, the hopes and the combined yearnings of the peoples of the South to live in peace and security" (NAM, 1998, p. 4). It is questionable whether the ANC government upheld these lofty principles, but anti-apartheid activists' identification with the aspirations of the NAM and the Third World more broadly nonetheless speaks to their participation in a world-making project that aimed to institutionalise new norms of sovereignty and racial equality.

The NAM also presented a platform for South African liberation organisations to garner support from Third World countries, who raised the issue of apartheid in the UN

General Assembly (Macfallen, 1999, p. 25). The NAM is often accused of being nothing but a talk shop where Third World countries could rant about the First World in long speeches and documents followed by minimal action (Keethaponcalan, 2016, p. 9). While there is some validity to these claims, the NAM contributed to the fact that the ANC acquired diplomatic experience as a liberation movement in exile and established 28 diplomatic offices working towards the isolation of the apartheid regime (Macfallen, 1999, p. 32). As Chris Saunders explained, "the NAM was a cog in the wheel of international solidarity against apartheid" that inspired those engaged in "struggles to keep going when the odds against their success seemed remote. The moral backing it provided was more important than its modest financial aid" (Saunders, 2021, p. 342).

Many of the countries in the NAM provided South African activists with a horizon to aspire to. As with the Cuban example in the first section, the reality in these countries was far removed from the romanticised imaginary of them, but the motivating power of the liberatory vision they represented should not be underestimated. For instance, Nicaragua was described as a place "where the people rule", where communities owned the land collectively and factories were under the control of workers. The Sandinista government was praised for building houses for everyone, educating the youth and involving ordinary people in decision making structures: "Community organisations, women's organisations, youth and student organisations, and trade unions all take part in the government of the new Nicaragua. In Nicaragua it is the people that govern!" (Grassroots, 1984, p. 7). Nicaragua was thus seen as a place where the socio-economic promises of the anti-apartheid movement had been fulfilled.

In 1984, *Grassroots*, a community newspaper associated with the UDF, proclaimed "Women of the World Unite" (Grassroots, 1984, p. 13). The gender dimensions of the anti-apartheid movement's internationalism would necessitate another paper, but it should nonetheless be noted that there was a sense of solidarity with women from other Third World countries. As we have seen, some of these countries, particularly Cuba, Vietnam, Angola and Nicaragua also served as sources of hope (Mwandla, 1987, p. 107). Moreover, the struggle for women's emancipation was seen as connected to the struggle for a new world order: "The struggle that we are waging is not just a

women's struggle- it is a social struggle; a religious struggle; a political struggle; an economic struggle- for a new order… The hands that rock the cradle can rule the world!" (ANC, 1990a, p. 13).

However, as Shireen Hassim demonstrated so well, in practice this ideology often meant that women's organisations had to reform their goals and strategies away from their "primary constituency of women to being auxiliaries of the United Democratic Front with the responsibility of mobilizing a 'sector' of the masses into the larger organization" (Hassim, 2006, pp. 12–13). Women's emancipation was also indefinitely postponed until some point in the future after liberation had been achieved.

The countries that were seen as aspirational were not only part of the Third World, but also aligned with the USSR, again foregrounding the fact that decolonisation and the Cold War were inseparable processes. Significantly, the USSR did not support the demands for a NIEO and Soviet experts were very critical of the notion that wealth should be redistributed on a global scale (Burton, Mark and Marung, 2022, p. 101). The ANC walked a tightrope between these positions and described itself as "non-aligned but committed".

At NAM meetings, specifically in 1978 and 1979, the ANC defended Cuba's pro-Soviet and anti-Western posture against Yugoslavia's view that the NAM should be neutral (Saunders, 2021, p. 340).[31] Yugoslavia's split from the USSR in 1948 and its refusal to become a Soviet satellite undoubtedly informed its position. Particularly during the Informbiro period (1948-1955), Yugoslavia faced extreme pressure, including an economic embargo and threats of military invasion.

In addition to the tension created by the ANC's committed position, it became increasingly exasperated with the NAM's apparent impotence. The NAM continued to condemn apartheid, but it seemed to hold little real power. By the end of the 1980s, it did little more than endorse the Harare Declaration in August 1989, which set out the conditions for a negotiated settlement in South Africa (Saunders, 2021, p. 340). Many NAM states stood accused of authoritarianism and human rights abuses (Betts, 2022, p. 217). It also faced criticism from some on the left, with Samir Amin designating it as "a

[31] Oliver Tambo defended Castro again at the New Delhi Summit in 1983 and denounced the USA's policy of "constructive engagement" with the apartheid regime (Saunders, 2021, p. 340).

bourgeois national construct" that acted as a token of reformist developmentalism, seeking accommodations from the North to make globalised capitalism more bearable (Stubbs, 2026, p. 189). While the NAM certainly had its shortcomings, it nonetheless provided a promise of a more equal world and acted as a symbol of South-South solidarity, which is still necessary, as the economic problems the NAM identified remain unresolved (Prashad, 2012).

Since the end of the Cold War, the NAM has been lambasted for being irrelevant, anachronistic and redundant (Keethaponcalan, 2016, p. 5). Yet the structural problems the NAM aimed to confront still remain and have even intensified in some respects. The international economic system is profoundly unequal and the "essence of colonialism" continues in myriad ways (Keethaponcalan, 2016, p. 6). Erstwhile President Thabo Mbeki expressed this sentiment when he stated that the NAM could only be a relevant multilateral body if it acted as the "conscience and the voice of the weak and the powerless in the face of the dominant hegemony of the strong and the powerful" (Mbeki, 1999). Yet Mbeki's own neoliberal economic policies epitomised by the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macroeconomic strategy contradicted the stated intention of acting on behalf of the poor. This again highlights the tension between the ANC's rhetoric of liberation and anti-imperialist solidarity and its policies of liberalisation and austerity.

Anti-apartheid world-making in the United Nations: The global majority vs the great powers

The creators of the UN envisioned an international organisation that would protect imperial interests (Mazower, 2009). However, the composition of the UN would soon change drastically: between 1956 and 1966, 46 new members were admitted of which 34 were African and six were Asian (Campbell, 1986, p. 74). Moreover, these newly independent states used the UN as a platform to express their own demands for international political and economic equality. Indeed, the UN became the primary institution through which the Third World voiced its concerns (Prashad, 2007).

Although they did not have permanent seats on the security council, "the new states

took advantage of the UN General Assembly to put forward their demands" (Prashad, 2007, p. xvi-xvii).[32] Third World states rehearsed their major arguments in separate meetings such as the conference in Belgrade where the NAM was created in 1961 and the Tricontinental Conference in Havana in 1966 so they could present a united front in the UN.[33] They also pushed the UN to create institutional platforms such as the UNCTAD to advance their agenda. In summary, newly independent states reshaped the UN, particularly the General Assembly, and the UN subsequently became an institutional platform to advance decolonisation.[34]

In 1962, the UN established a Special Committee Against Apartheid, with its supporting Centre Against Apartheid to follow in 1976. A comprehensive discussion of the Committee is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is necessary to reflect on the significance of the UN in the world-making project of the anti-apartheid movement. Moreover, some of the challenges the Committee faced are still impediments to a more just order today. The primary role of the Committee was to support anti-apartheid forces in South Africa, to isolate the apartheid regime, and to create international conditions that would facilitate a peaceful transition (Reddy, 1986, p. 18). The Committee also acted as a crucial communication channel between the UN and anti-apartheid groups around the world (Asmal and Asmal, 1992), establishing a network of civil society activists, liberation movements, and NAM members (Konieczna, 2019, p. 74).

Enuga Reddy, the leader of the Committee, often reflected on the world-making potential of the anti-apartheid movement. In his statement on the Anti-Apartheid Year in 1978-1979, he noted that the struggle against apartheid "is not just to fight a repressive regime or system but to take a crucial step in building the basis for a new world order" (Reddy, 1986, p. 37). Furthermore, Reddy situated the anti-apartheid movement in a broader struggle for the emancipation of Africa and Black people around the world, stating that

> The historic time has come at last for victory in the struggle to destroy racist domination in South Africa and Namibia, to complete the emancipation of Africa, to

[32] The push from newly independent states for stronger anti-colonial norms and policies in the General Assembly culminated in the 1960 Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, which declared colonial rule a violation of fundamental rights and called for its rapid end (United Nations, 2026).
[33] An Afro-Asian caucusing group was formed even earlier, in the 1950s, to strengthen their bargaining position and exert influence on UN resolutions (Willetts, 2023, p. 63).
[34] The history of self-determination is complex and somewhat contradictory. The notion of "sovereignty" was used to legitimise colonial domination in international legal jurisprudence by distinguishing between sovereign "civilised" states and "uncivilised" states supposedly incapable of ruling themselves. However, after 1945,

> break the colour line and build a common humanity. The last stage of a struggle is never easy—but what was a distant vision of Dr. DuBois in 1900 is today a realistic goal and an imperative duty … a revolution to end racism, oppression and exploitation, and to build a new international economic and social order.
>
> (Reddy, 1986, p. 70, emphasis added).[35]

Again, we can see that W.E.B. du Bois and oppressed South Africans were seen as fighting to change the same international order.

The fight against racism more broadly was seen as necessitating a new world order, with Reddy noting that "we are far from uniting humanity in determined action to wipe out racism and build a new world order", but finding hope in the fact that "the African people and their leaders have always upheld the vision of a future in which all the people of the world will be free and equal" (Reddy, 1986, p. 89).[36] In the previous paragraph, we saw that the anti-apartheid movement was seen as part of a global struggle against racism and for Black liberation. It was also seen as part of a Third World movement against colonial exploitation, with Reddy commenting on South Africa's central position in "the struggles for liberation from colonial and racist oppression in Asia and Africa," with "a vision of an international order of justice and equality" (Reddy, 1986, p. 81).

There was a battle within the UN between the imperialists and anti-imperialists or, as Anna Konieczna phrased it, between an "imperial vision of international relations" and "a cosmopolitan vision of global relations" (Konieczna, 2019, p. 67).[37] Anti-imperialists, predominantly the Non-Aligned states, made up the vast majority of the General Assembly, but imperialists, most prominently the USA, held a veto in the Security Council. Independent African states, socialist states and the rest of the NAM states pushed for sanctions against the apartheid regime, but some of the powerful states in the Security Council were South Africa's main trading partners and they were not only unwilling to impose sanctions, but increased their trade with South Africa, even in the aftermath of the horrendous Sharpeville massacre in 1960 (Na'eem, 2021).[38]

it also "animated the political dreams and struggles of Third World movements opposing colonialism and Imperialism" (Chipkin, 2018, p. 120).

[35] In a reflection on the significance of the anti-apartheid struggle, Reddy further noted that "the struggle for freedom in South Africa has assumed a historic significance… We believed that in fighting for our freedom, we were also fighting for the freedom of other colonial peoples. The struggle in South Africa is the last stage of the struggle for the emancipation of the continent of Africa from five centuries of slavery, humiliation and inhumanity. It is the last stage of the struggle against imperialism and colonialism — at least in their formal aspects — and a vital battle in the effort to rid the world of the scourge of racism. The oppressed people of South Africa, in fighting for their own rights, are today also fighting for humanity, for ending a shameful chapter of human history and for facilitating a new world order" (Reddy, 1986, p. 130, emphasis added).

The North-South divide intersected with the East-West divide and the USSR was a vocal critic of apartheid, especially under Nikita Khrushchev's leadership. The USSR's condemnation of apartheid was part of a broader strategy of aligning itself with newly independent African states and liberation movements, thereby positioning itself as a champion of anti-colonialism and racial equality. As Kurt Campbell noted, apartheid South Africa became "an important determinant in the formulation of Soviet policy in the Third World" (Campbell, 1986, p. 70).

In this regard, USSR representatives attempted to exploit disputes between the West and newly independent countries by taking anti-colonial positions. It also played an active role in committees dealing with South Africa and became associated with the anti-apartheid movement in the UN. Admittedly, the USSR did not contribute much to the United Nations Trust Fund for South Africa or the UN Educational and Training Programme for South Africa, but, as discussed earlier, it was a generous supporter of the ANC.

The USSR utilised the UN as a forum to criticise the West and expose the military links between NATO and South Africa. This position bolstered the USSR's position in sub-Saharan Africa and boosted its legitimacy with many NAM countries (Campbell, 1986, p. 87). Yet, it has to be noted that Moscow maintained some economic ties to apartheid South Africa, particularly by processing diamonds from De Beers (Burton, Mark and Marung, 2022, p. 108).

In spite of the inequality within the UN system and accusations that the UN failed to bring an end to racism in South Africa (Reddy, 1986, pp. 16–17), the UN played a crucial role in internationalising the anti-apartheid movement. It connected various branches of the movement and helped to isolate South Africa normatively and culturally, if not economically.[39] It also acted as a mediator between Eastern Europe and the Third World (Betts, 2022, p. 216). By allowing observer status for African liberation movements, the UN gave them the opportunity to act as governments-in-waiting in the international sphere. Most significantly for the purposes of this paper, the Special Committee Against Apartheid amplified the notion that the anti-apartheid movement was a world-making project aiming to create a more just international order.

[36] In 1984, Reddy explained yet again that "when you confront racism, you confront all the forces which are opposing progress and you open the way for progress all over the world… It is to build a new world in which everyone will enjoy freedom and human dignity" (Reddy, 1986, p. 117, emphasis added).
[37] In this regard, Reddy insisted that "the United Nations is our organisation, not the organisation of the imperialists, colonialists or racists who are at best a small minority in the world. If it does not function in the interests of freedom, we should not leave and hand it over to those who have little attachment to its purposes and principles. We must struggle with all our energy and resources to make it an effective instrument for freedom, peace and justice" (Reddy, 1986, p. 81).
[38] The tension between the Global Majority in the General Assembly and the power of Security Council states to veto resolutions remains a prominent challenge today. Many suggestions on UN reform focus on the dimension (Arrocha-Olabuenaga and Gómez-Robledo, 2023; Parvanova, 2023; Özkan, 2024), yet meaningful

Furthermore, it reinforced apartheid's symbolic position as the last frontier of Black liberation and Third World emancipation.

Concluding discussion: Liberation meets liberalisation

The South African anti-apartheid movement was clearly a struggle against apartheid, but it was also an internationalist project with world-making ambitions. The ANC, SACP, PAC, BCM and UDF had many disputes, but activists across these organisations nonetheless imagined liberation as inseparable from remaking the international order. Whether articulated through socialist internationalism, Pan-Africanism, Black Power, or Third Worldism these visions converged around the shared conviction that political rights without economic justice and structural transformation at the global level would be hollow.

The lens of world-making foregrounds two dimensions that are often marginalised in histories of the struggle, namely the internationalist dimension and the emancipatory horizons anti-apartheid activists were fighting for. Activists did not merely seek inclusion within an existing international order; they sought to transform its racialised, imperial, and capitalist foundations. They saw themselves as struggling alongside the USSR, Cuba, newly independent African states, diasporic Black communities and the Third World for a more just international system. Many of these countries, particularly Cuba, were also idealised as offering a glimpse into a free future without exploitation and hierarchies.

Crucially, activists' world-making ambitions traversed state boundaries and progressive civil society organisations in the imperialist core provided significant support to the anti-apartheid cause (Thörn, 2006; Konieczna and Skinner, 2019). Black churches, trade unions, student movements, artists, and radical intellectuals functioned as indispensable nodes in a transnational web of solidarity that linked struggles against apartheid to analogous fights against racism and capitalism. These connections blur the boundary between "domestic" and "foreign" politics and underscores the fact that imperial domination could not be challenged solely from the periphery, but required alliances with oppositional forces in the heart of empire.

reform remains a distant prospect.

[39] When the UN General Assembly recommended decisive steps to implement collective sanctions against South Africa in 1962, not a single western European government supported the resolution. By 1965, several western European governments supported the resolution, with only two voting against it. The Committee was significant in facilitating this shift, not least by disseminating information to civil society organisations in western Europe (Asmal and Asmal, 1992).

Activists understood that states in the Global North were generally complicit in sustaining apartheid, but that popular movements within those states could exert countervailing pressure. The success of Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions campaigns and mass mobilisation in the USA and Europe reinforced the belief that ordinary people could act as agents of global transformation. These solidarities thus formed part of a broader world-making vision in which liberation was conceived as a collective, transnational process rather than a nationally bounded achievement.

At the same time, this article has attempted to show that anti-apartheid world-making was shaped by contradictions and contingencies. Solidarities were uneven and alliances were shaped by pragmatism, as demonstrated by the fact that some African states rhetorically condemned apartheid, but were economically dependent on South Africa. In other words, the actions of African states were limited by the hierarchical order they aimed to challenge. Furthermore, the USSR provided support out of strategic interests as much as principled commitments, although it must be noted that Cuban assistance seems to have been motivated by a uniquely revolutionary idealism (Gleijeses, 2014; Delmas, 2019).[40] This was not only the case for external allies – within the UDF, women's emancipation was discursively celebrated, but undermined and endlessly deferred in practice (Hassim, 2006). These tensions do not diminish the significance of the movement's global visions, but simply reinforce the obvious point that world-making projects are forged within and limited by unequal power structures.

Not coincidentally, South Africa's negotiated transition unfolded at precisely the moment neoliberalism became hegemonic (Taylor and Vale, 2000; Magubane, 2004; Allen, 2006).[41] The "red globalisation" of the Soviet-bloc and Third World solidarity was overshadowed by a new imaginary of globalisation that emphasised "free-markets" and technocratic management (Cameron and Palan, 2004). While Third World solidarity had already started to wane in the 1970s, the end of the Cold War in 1991 made any form of socialism seem unrealistic, if not downright dangerous. This change lent an air of inevitability to the ANC's embrace of austerity and liberalisation, which entrenched South Africa's integration into a global capitalist order that activists had long identified as a source of oppression. The ANC government nonetheless continued to use the rhetoric of liberation, meaning that it walked right and talked left, as Patrick Bond put it

[40] Interestingly, Soviet urban youth who wanted to distance themselves from Stalinism were inspired by Cuba and perceived it to be a genuinely equal and humanist socialism achievable through "global anti-imperialist solidarity" (Apor and Mark, 2022, p. 325).
[41] The end of the Cold War had a decisive influence on the end of apartheid in South Africa. The apartheid regime had long secured support from the USA and UK in the name of fighting communism in southern Africa. After 1989, that excuse lost all credibility, strengthening the legitimacy of demands for majority rule and increasing international pressure on the regime. The ANC also lost its key financial and military backer and was pressured to negotiate.

(Bond, 2004). This tension was perhaps most pronounced in Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance vision, which combined the language of Pan-Africanism with "the 'common-sense' of a neo-liberalizing, structural-adjusting global capitalism" (Saul, 2004). Although the ANC's shift to neoliberalism was undoubtedly conditioned by national and international power relations (Habib and Padayachee, 2000; Terreblanche, 2012; Van Niekerk and Padayachee, 2019), the contrast is stark. The transition from apartheid was evidently a massive achievement for the anti-apartheid movement, but it also marked a shift away from a world-making project to an attempt to secure a position in the international order it had once aimed to transform.

This paper aimed to look beyond the ANC to the world-making visions of other segments of the anti-apartheid movement, which foregrounded the fact that civil society movements across the world were vital partners in the struggle against apartheid. Social movements have the same potential to be allies in the fight for a more just international order today. As the Marxist sociologist Michael Löwy (cited by Bond in The African Communist) said:

> It is from the fusion between the international socialist, democratic and anti-imperialist tradition of the labour movement… and the new universalist culture of social movements like ecology, feminism, anti-racism and the Third World-solidarity that the internationalism of tomorrow will rise. This tendency may be a minority now, but it is nevertheless the seed of a different future and the ultimate guarantee against barbarism.
>
> (cited in: Bond, 1994, p. 23)

"Foreign policy" cannot be separated from "domestic policy". This was demonstrated by the ways in which civil society movements could influence their government's support of the apartheid regime in the USA. However, it might be even more crucial when we consider the disjuncture between the ANC's continued rhetorical commitments to Africa, the Global South, and anti-imperialism, and its implementation of neoliberal economic policies that deepen inequality and dependence.[42]

[42] In his history of the Third World, Vijay Prashad analogously discussed the political situation within NAM states as an impediment to the international struggle for justice, noting that "a major consequence of the lack of a social revolution was the persistence of various forms of hierarchy within the new nations… The class character of the Third World leadership constrained its horizon, even as it inflamed the possibilities in its societies" (Prashad, 2007, p. 14).

Recovering the world-making ambitions of the anti-apartheid movement could thus provide a critical lens through which to interrogate the limits of the post-apartheid settlement and the contradictions of contemporary South African politics. Anti-apartheid activists were acutely aware that true liberation would require economic restructuring and insisted that freedom must be materially felt, not merely formally declared. Moreover, the experience of other African states after independence taught them that ambitious plans could be thwarted by neo-colonial relations, highlighting the significance of reshaping the international order.

Past imagined futures of a more just world have remained unrealised and have been foreclosed or endlessly deferred. The Third World project emerged in the 1960s when the international order was in flux. The alternative imagined futures this project presented were definitely foreclosed by the time the Cold War ended in 1991. However, the international order now seems to be in flux again and the call for a NIEO is even more urgent in the face of the climate crisis. Accordingly, the anti-apartheid movement presents a rich history that invites renewed reflection on what world-making might mean today.

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