

THE ETHICS OF BOYCOTT

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ONE could not help remarking, during the last few months, that certain Nationalist spokesmen have shown an admirable concern for their non-white subjects. Referring to the action of the Jamaican government in refusing to buy S.A. goods, Mr. Eric Louw roundly condemned the boycott as an unethical means of coercion which all decent people must regard with distaste. He, and many another pious Minister, warned that such monstrous action, which constitutes in any case interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state, would react upon the very people whose cause the Jamaican government is concerned to espouse.

All up and down the country admonishing fingers have wagged like twigs in the breeze, warning of economic hardship that must follow; and though one normally reacts only with suspicion when Nationalists champion human causes, the second part of the argument at least is so plausible as to require some examination.

To begin with, is the boycott unethical? Here one should correct a misconception. It is a fallacy to regard the technique of boycott as a rare or extreme form of economic sanction or political protest. It is, on the contrary, one of the most widespread and inescapable features of our economic life. Consider the following hypothetical case: I have been planning a tour of Europe and I am concerned to limit its cost. I elect, after due consideration, to include England, France and Italy in my itinerary. Shall I include Switzerland? I investigate the rate of exchange and find that it operates heavily in my disfavour. I decide that, despite its many attractions, I shall not visit the country until its rate of exchange becomes more favourable.

In every sense of the word, I have decided to boycott the tourist industry of Switzerland. My reason for doing so is no less precise for being implicit; it is to induce the Swiss government to reduce the high price of tourism in its country. If the external revenue from tourism is an appreciable proportion of total revenue and if the tendency to shun Switzerland is sufficiently widespread, the Swiss government will in due course be compelled to devalue the Swiss franc or take other steps to compensate the bad rate of exchange, and the object of the

boycott will have been achieved.

It does not make any difference to the principle involved that there has been no formal call to boycott. The agreement to do so may be tacit; the boycott remains a fact.

And this form of boycott occurs daily; it is an approved means of exerting economic pressure to a given end. No one would question the ethics of such action, nor ever has.

But let the matter not rest there. Suppose that I learn that YOU are planning a trip overseas and I say to you: "Whatever you do, avoid Switzerland like the plague. The exchange rate is prohibitive, and it will cost you the earth!"

Now I have not stopped at the mere act of boycott—I am now inciting you to boycott too. I have asked or induced you to join me in protest, and although the end at which I aim is still purely economic, the means I employ have become quasi-political. My opposition has become explicit; the means I employ have invoked elementary organisation; I have wittingly or unwittingly taken the first step towards a 'Boycott Switzerland' movement.

Once again this sort of action is a common everyday occurrence; people repeatedly embark upon such rudimentary campaigns, and no one would dream of questioning the ethic of even this extended action. Yet it has been the repeated thesis of government and business spokesmen alike that the boycott as such is bad in principle, is ethically reprehensible, and so on.

This point of view seems to rest then not upon the act of boycott, but upon the end towards which it is directed. There have in recent years been frequent and organised calls to boycott in South Africa—for example, the National Council of Women's call to women to boycott nylon stockings—which have not upset the delicately balanced ethical sense of the powers that be, presumably because the object of the boycott has been purely economic, i.e. a protest directed against unsatisfactory quality or price.

Perhaps then, a boycott is 'bad' only when the end as well as the means is political? But is it always possible to distinguish between these two ends? Returning to the example of Switzerland, suppose that the boycott, whether individual or organised, whether implicit or explicit, is designed not as a protest against the unfair rate of exchange, but as a protest against inadequate wages paid to workers in the Swiss cheese industry.

The object of the boycott is again clearly defined—to induce the Swiss manufacturers to pay their workers a higher wage. Suppose that here in South Africa the boycott is organised on two fronts:—

- (a) by the trade union movement, which is concerned with the plight of workers everywhere, and
- (b) by the Union government!

Yes, indeed, by the Union government, for the Union government does frequently indulge in boycott! Of course they do not call their action “boycott”, what they say is something like this:

“In view of the fact that the Swiss manufacturers, by maintaining a level of wages lower than the norm, are able to compete unfairly with the local industry, an *ad valorem* tariff of 150% shall henceforth be levied against Swiss cheese”. And Dr. Dönges, Minister of Finance, will smile nicely at the cameramen and preen himself on having done his patriotic duty.

Of course, apart from the difference in the technique employed, the objects of the two groups are not identical: the government is primarily concerned with the price of cheese; the trade union with the wages of workers. But in fact, the difference is not as great as would appear superficially, for both are really concerned with price, the one with the price of cheese, the other with the price of labour, and if the one motive is ‘economic’ then the other is ‘economic’ too.

At this stage, the Swiss authorities would hit upon a nice point. On the one hand, they say to the government of the Union, “How foolish is your action! By raising a high tariff, you are compelling me to reduce my price still further; and I will then not only be able to compete with you again on your domestic market, but in the export field I will be enabled to knock your cheese off the market entirely!” And to the trade union they might well say: “By refusing to buy our cheese, you are causing a recession in the industry which will force us to reduce wages still further and even to shut down our factories, thus creating unemployment.”

This argument of course is not altogether groundless. The boycott of German goods in pre-war years may, if it had been at all effective, have inflicted hardship on good and bad Germans alike. Similarly, should the Congress boycott directed at certain firms cause their financial collapse, Africans employed by them will suffer hardship. The broader the terms of the

boycott, too, the broader the ranks of those who might suffer as a consequence. Suppose the hypothetical boycott to be directed not only against Swiss cheese, but against all Swiss products; then, if those groups conducting the boycott represent a large proportion of the export market, the Swiss people—those workers whose low wages touched off the campaign—might suffer real poverty.

This is so, but consider three points. Firstly, it is universally accepted that sacrifice towards the achievement of some good in the future is proper in a virtuous community. For example, Mr. de Klerk, in reserving the work of liftmen exclusively for Europeans, might calm the Africans who are about to lose their jobs, with the words, "Be patient now, it is for your own good. You will be doubly rewarded in the future by attending your own skyscrapers in Bantustan!"

Secondly, implicit in a decision to boycott, or to take any sort of political action, is the choosing of an acute hardship of comparatively short duration in preference to chronic hardship with little prospect of alleviation. Those boycotters who chose to walk between Alexandra Township and Johannesburg morning and evening during the bus boycott had clearly shown just such a preference and were suitably rewarded in their choice.

Thirdly, inseparable from an act of opposition is an element of risk; the more determined the opposition, the greater the risk involved. The crux of the matter is that the risks involved are calculated. If by the agency of the boycott, both domestic and foreign, the people of South Africa are made to suffer acutely, the blame lies with the Nationalists whose policies have been and will be, for as long as they continue, the cause of the chronic hardship which burdens the bulk of the population of the country. The people of South Africa know very well that only when the Nationalists are finally removed from office, will an end to hardship be in sight. In the meanwhile, once again faced with the choice of acute hardship of measurable duration or chronic hardship induced by the policies of those who profess to be so concerned with the effects of protest, the non-whites are unlikely to hesitate long in choosing the temporary rigours of the boycott.