The Material Culture of Human Rights. Consumer Products, Boycotts and the Transformation of Human Rights Activism in the 1970s and 1980s

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Abstract
During the 1960s and 1970s, human rights NGOs began to use boycotts and other consumer protests to draw attention to their campaigns. The Anti-Apartheid Movement in particular, used consumer products and spaces of consumption for their campaigns against the South African regime. By focussing on the everyday practice of consumption, these campaigns helped to translate human rights discourse from the sphere of international law and politics into the sphere of civil society and everyday life. The entanglement of human rights activism and consumer culture can thus be seen as an important – but so far mostly overlooked – aspect of the so-called ‘breakthrough’ of human rights discourse in the 1970s. The article looks at this development from a material culture studies approach. It argues that everyday objects played an important role in human rights campaigns, particularly in the context of a mediatization and popularization of human rights in the 1970s and 1980s. The article takes the Anti-Apartheid Movement as a case study. By looking at the boycott campaigns as well as the consumer items the movement began to produce itself in the late 1980s, it shows how material objects and social practices became inextricably intertwined in these campaigns.

Keywords: Anti-Apartheid Movement, boycott, civil society, consumer society, human rights, material culture, new social movements, protest.
Introduction

Are oranges, cashew nuts and coffee mugs part of the history of human rights? From the late 1960s onwards, many human rights activists, supporters and ordinary people thought so and began to act accordingly. They stopped buying wine, fruits and tea from South Africa and Chile, checked supermarkets for deceptive labels and declarations and bought clothes, jewellery and everyday items to express their support for human rights campaigns. In this way, consumer products became an important means to translate human rights discourse from the sphere of international law and politics into the sphere of civil society and everyday life. Consumer products can therefore help us to better understand the processes through which human rights issues became intertwined with individual lifestyles.

In this article, I use a material culture studies approach to analyze these phenomena. Yet in contrast to some theoretical approaches, I argue that these consumer products can only be properly analyzed in close relation to the social practices that were connected to them. Since most of the products did not differ significantly from similar products from other countries or companies, it was essential for human rights campaigns to attach a symbolic meaning to the objects and to trigger certain emotions and moral sentiments. My case study thus adds to recent research on the material culture of mass consumer products and everyday commodities.

Consumer products can also shed new light on the transformation of human rights activism in the 1970s and 1980s. During these decades human rights campaigns began to infiltrate everyday life and to influence individual political and moral sentiments and affiliations. While the significance of this development has often been acknowledged, such changes in individual mentalities are difficult to grasp. Recent scholarship has pointed to changes in media structures, communication technologies and visual cultures to explain these phenomena. The widespread use of consumer products in human rights campaigns can add to this explanation. While I will show in the first part of this article that some material objects have already come into the focus of human rights historiography, it is fair to say that the material culture of human rights has not yet been an object of substantial analysis. The aim of this article is not to offer such a comprehensive account. Instead,
I will concentrate on the way in which mass consumer products became means of political protest in Western consumer societies in the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, I will also outline some more general ideas about the prospects of applying a material culture studies approach to human rights history.

The article is divided into three parts: First, I will refer to some material objects that have already come into the focus of human rights historiography and I will outline some theoretical approaches that could be used for a more profound analysis of such objects. In the second part, I will argue that material objects became particularly important in the context of a mediatization of human rights in the 1970s and 1980s. In the third part I will turn to the empirical case study of my argument. This section focuses on the relationship between consumer cultures and human rights campaigns by analysing the use of consumer items and the implementation of boycotts by the British Anti-Apartheid Movement.

Material Culture Studies and Human Rights Historiography

The historiography of human rights has in the last years broadened its focus beyond the fields of political history, diplomatic history and the history of international relations. Instead of exclusively focusing on the negotiation and adoption of human rights declarations and international agreements and their (more often than not absent) procedures of legal implementation, recent scholarship has begun to focus on the question of how and under which circumstances human rights terminology has influenced public discourse and how it gained popular support in different social and political contexts. Scholarship has thus focused for example on the important impact of NGOs and human rights campaigns, on the influence of media and visual cultures, on the links to more general changes in moral sentiments and religious affiliations, or on the attempts to create symbols, rituals and other forms of remembrance for human rights traditions.

Human rights historiography is therefore a good example for the first aim of this special issue to broaden the concept of ‘the political’. As I will argue, it is also a good case study for the second aim, namely
to include the dimension of material culture and materiality in such a reconceptualization.

There is no doubt that material objects have played an important role in the history of human rights. This is true for the letters that members of Amnesty International wrote to prisons and government offices all over the world, for the postage stamps that national governments released to commemorate the annual Human Rights Day, or for the buttons, posters and coffee mugs carrying the portrait of Nelson Mandela that can still be found in thousands of apartments in Europe and North America. As these examples show, the history of human rights is not limited to a history of legal texts and government declarations, but also includes numerous everyday objects that infiltrated the social sphere and the private lives of very different groups of people. Even the Universal Declaration of Human Rights might be seen in a new light if it is not solely interpreted as a text, but also as a material object to be found in different social settings. What does it mean, for example, when a hotel chain puts a printed version of the UN declaration in all of their hotel rooms, symbolically replacing the bible as the moral foundation to be found in a hotel bedside table? 

Other examples could supplement this list. Nevertheless, in order to see in these examples more than just anecdotal evidence it is necessary not only to point to the truism that material objects were part of human rights campaigns, but specifically to ask how social practices were shaped by these objects. Recent approaches in the field of material culture studies have particularly focussed on this social dimension of material culture. In this perspective, material culture is not only a topic for cultural anthropology, archaeology and museum studies, but also for social sciences, economics and history. What these approaches share is a focus on human-object-relations that goes beyond a restricted view on objects as material artifacts alone. In line with other scholars, Ian Woodward for example argues that, ‘objects are the material things people encounter, interact with and use. ... The term “material culture” emphasizes how apparently inanimate things within the environment act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity’. In consequence, Woodward claims, objects should be seen as ‘a crucial link between the social and economic structure, and the individual actor’.
It is in this context that Bruno Latour and the actor-network theory have found particular interest in the field of cultural history and material culture studies. While a majority of scholars remain sceptical about some of the analytical (and political) implications of Latour’s work, the actor-network-theory nonetheless opens new ways for challenging the established boundaries between ‘the material’ and ‘the social’. Instead of constructing a dichotomy between human and non-human ‘actants’, recent scholarship has used this approach to analyze the way social practices are shaped, changed and restricted by material objects, surroundings and infrastructures.

The most convincing historiographical approaches have therefore not taken material culture as an independent field of historical research but have used it to open up new perspectives on established theoretical debates and research questions. For example, Simone Derix, Benno Gammerl, Christiane Reinecke and Nina Verheyen have recently outlined a research agenda that focuses on ‘materialities’ in order to pose new questions in the field of social and economic history. As they argue, a new awareness for material culture can lead to a better and more comprehensive understanding of social and economic structures and practices. On the one hand, such an approach situates material objects in relation to questions of power, hierarchies and social asymmetries, proving that a focus on material culture does not lead to a theory of a ‘flat’ social world that is blind to such phenomena. On the other hand, the authors turn to a key question of economic history by asking how ‘value’ is attached to material objects – be it financially, aesthetically or affectively.

Similar research questions are relevant for a material culture approach towards political history. In a recent article, Frank Trentmann has already argued for an integration of both research fields. For the history of human rights, the focus on social hierarchies and political power asymmetries can be a particularly fruitful vantage point. Human rights historiography has always paid special attention to the visibilities and invisibilities of human rights discourses, showing that power structures and social hierarchies are of central importance for the proclaimed universality of human rights. In this context, a material culture approach can help to shed new light on such asymmetries, for example by reflecting on the question of unequal access to media infrastructures.

From these preliminary considerations, three dimensions can be distinguished in which material culture could be integrated into the history of
human rights. First, material objects can be part of a technological change and provide new practical possibilities and infrastructures for human rights campaigns. Jan Eckel for example has referred to the importance of the telex as an indispensable device that enabled Amnesty International to globally communicate their ‘urgent actions’ as a new campaign model during the 1970s. In a similar way, Daniel Sargent has referred to the importance of television and especially the development of satellite transmission systems for a new attentiveness for global human rights violations. Later developments like the computer, mobile phones or the internet had comparable consequences, as had the emerging infrastructure for cheap air travel. This dimension of technological change was also important for the changing protest strategies that the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) applied during the three decades of its existence. Communication infrastructure were extremely important for the practical implementation of the consumer boycott. While a lot of the communication between the AAM and its supporters as well as between the AAM and the targeted corporations and supermarket chains relied on letters and personal encounters, new information and communication technologies became increasingly important to publicize the boycott, to communicate with supporters and to pressure companies to comply with their promises. Even more importantly, the products itself often became means of communication, for example when activists cut out product wrappings and sent them to the AAM. Sometimes, a part of a beverage can even travelled all the way from Japan to London because the local Japanese Anti-Apartheid Movement wanted to find out whether the product stemmed from South Africa.

Second, material objects have played an important role in the attempts to represent, remember and visualize the human rights movement and its agenda. As Mark Bradley has shown, this happened as early as 1943, when the US Office of War Information organized a large outdoor exhibition at the Rockefeller Center in New York City. Titled ‘This Is Our War’, the exhibition was meant to disseminate the ‘Four Freedoms’ as the central war aims to the American public. In the centre of the exhibition was an altar-like object, in which the Atlantic Charter and the United Nations Declaration were displayed, surrounded by four sculptures that represented the ‘Four Freedoms’ laid out in the Atlantic Charter. Such attempts to use material objects to remember and visualize the basic ideas of human rights have remained an important feature of human rights discourse. In a soberer tone than the US Office of War
Information, but with the same aim of communicating human rights to a general public, the United Nations for example made excessive use of stamps as a materialization of human rights remembrance.\textsuperscript{22} More recently, quilts have been used to combine local artisanship with the global language of human rights.\textsuperscript{23} Within the AAM, consumer products partly fulfilled this function. As I will outline in more detail below, the AAM did not only call for a boycott of South African goods, but also began to sell products themselves during the 1980s. Its mail-order catalogue carried a wide range of items from coffee mugs with the portrait of Nelson Mandela to buttons and T-shirts carrying the AAM logo to arts-and-crafts imported from the Namibia and Mozambique. In part, this was of course a fundraising activity. At the same time, though, these consumer items were important media to spread the political message of the AAM and to create symbols of membership for its supporters.

Third, material objects are important as means of protest and communication in human rights campaigns. This is true for the letters of Amnesty International activists or for the buttons, leaflets, postcards and posters that human rights NGOs and other protest movements have used in order to communicate their political goals. The consumer goods that I will refer to in the second part of this article often had a similar function. Apart from this media dimension, material objects were often also important as protest tools that enabled public demonstrations. Cooking pots, for example, are an established means of articulating protest in Latin America.\textsuperscript{24} In other contexts, megaphones are used in order to voice dissent or to communicate to a protesting crowd. Do-it-yourself gas masks can be important to protect oneself from police attacks with teargas. In all these examples, protesters made things by themselves or thought of unintended uses for everyday items in order to articulate protests – thus creating ‘disobedient objects’ that shaped protest cultures in very different social settings.\textsuperscript{25} Again, this strategy was also used by the AAM. The most obvious approach was to change the South African consumer products that they had set out to boycott. This could happen either directly or symbolically. As I will show, AAM supporters were asked to change the appearance of South African products in British supermarket shelves for example by putting on stickers to mark them as ‘products of Apartheid’. Symbolically, some key products were used regularly on protest flyers and thereby put in a different political context. Finally, consumer products also played an important role in rallies and
demonstrations, for example when activists used giant oranges as means to generate public and media attention. This list could easily be supplemented – in particular because one should not only ask for the objects and infrastructures of human rights activists and NGOs, but also for the tools and weapons of potential human rights violators like government agencies, police departments, and intelligence services. Many of these objects have occasionally surfaced in individual research projects, but so far they have not been thoroughly analyzed within a material culture studies approach. As I have argued, doing this would not mean to follow a strict ‘methodological fetishism’ that claims to go ‘back to the things themselves’. Instead, it requires a much closer attention to the ways in which social practices were shaped by material objects, infrastructures and surroundings. The first telex operator at the Amnesty International headquarter is therefore not interesting in its own right, but because of the social practices it helped to forge or change.

As a final example, Lynn Hunt’s work on the history of human rights might exemplify this point. In her classical account of the ‘invention of human rights’ in the eighteenth century, Hunt refers amongst others on the dissemination of romantic novels – especially epistolary novels – that taught eighteenth century readers a new sense of personal autonomy and at the same time to empathize with people from different social and geographical backgrounds. But it was not only the texts of Samuel Richardson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau that were important for this process, but also the books themselves and the social practices they initiated – like reading the novels aloud amongst friends or the family or exchanging letters about one’s reading experiences with other readers or even the authors of the novels. If reading books can be interpreted as one of the most important means of social interaction and communication in the eighteenth century, it is not too far-fetched to interpret everyday consumption as a similarly important social practice for the second half of the twentieth century. In the second part of this article I will therefore interpret specific forms of consumption as a social practice through which concepts of human rights could infiltrate the everyday lives of individual people. Similar to Lynn Hunt, I will focus not on the consumer products themselves, but on the social practices that were instructed by them. But before coming to this case study I should give a short outline of the general context of human rights politics in the 1970s and 1980s.
Mediatization and Materialization: Consumer Cultures and Human Rights Movements in the 1970s and 1980

While a lot of research in human rights historiography of the last decade has focused on the 1970s as the ‘breakthrough’ of modern human rights discourse and politics, this has led in the last years to a more nuanced interpretation that acknowledges the importance of this period but at the same time takes into account multiple temporalities that transcend the idea of a single ‘breakthrough’. I therefore take it as a given that human rights discourse was not ‘invented’ in the 1970s, but that campaigns and NGOs went through a significant process of transformation during the 1970s and 1980s. Scholars have pointed to different factors that sparked these changes. On the one hand, they have emphasized the geopolitical changes in this period – for example pointing to the process of decolonization, the Cold War (and its détente period) and the reorientation of US foreign politics in the post-Vietnam period. On the other hand, scholars have also referred to changes within the human rights movement itself: for example to the emergence of new transnational and non-governmental organizations, to changes in the way media reported on global catastrophes and to a new culture of empathy with ‘distant others’ that emerged from a new visibility of human suffering.

My research on human rights history and consumer cultures can be situated in this historical context. Consumption, I argue, is important because it is one factor that helped to transform human rights from a political and legal discourse into a discourse that gained currency in civil society and opened up new possibilities for individual activism. Through consumer practices, human rights discourse was able to infiltrate everyday life and to set individual lifestyle decisions in relation to the moral dilemmas of global politics and economics. My interest in consumption is therefore part of a more general interest in the implementation of new campaign strategies by NGOs like Amnesty International or the AAM. While scholarship has often referred to the letters of local Amnesty International groups in order to exemplify these new strategies of individual activism, I argue that consumer practices followed a similar strategy of everyday mobilization but reached a much larger group of people because it required less time and a much lower degree of personal commitment.
To be sure, the use of consumer goods and everyday items as means of political protest was not unique to the human rights movement. On the contrary, the 1970s were marked by a new attention to the political implications of trade, consumption and global economic interactions within NGOs and the new social movements. Particularly important was the emerging critique of multinational corporations that became a key feature of many social and political movements of the time. At the same time as human rights campaigns began to target corporations like Lipton Tea and Nestlé, the ‘fair trade’ movement began to use similar techniques in order to connect Western consumer patterns to global regimes of production, aiming – as Peter van Dam has put it – at ‘moralizing postcolonial consumer society’. In the same period, the environmental movement also began to focus on the ecological impact of consumption and used consumer products as means of protest. In all three cases, consumption became a low-threshold action model that aimed at articulating protest and winning new supporters for political campaigns and social movements.

The most widely used strategy that used consumption as a means of political protest are consumer boycotts. Such boycotts have a long tradition, leading back to the Abolitionist Movement of the eighteenth century, Irish peasants protesting against exploitive land lease practices by Charles C. Boycott or German factory workers boycotting local pubs because of rising beer prices. For the anti-apartheid struggle, the most obvious reference was the US Civil Rights Movement, in particular the Montgomery Bus Boycott that had successfully ended segregation policies in the local public transportation system only three and a half years before. Another important influence, particularly for the South African activists, was the application of boycotts and other forms of passive resistance by Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian struggle for independence.

From an analytical perspective, consumer boycotts do not necessarily call for a material culture studies approach. In many cases, boycott movements did not put special emphasis on the individual consumer products they referred to, but simply saw the boycott as a means to apply economic pressure on corporations, states, and organizations. This economic rationale was also important for the anti-apartheid boycott. At the same time, though, the AAM’s interpretation of the consumer boycott as a form of political protest led activists to pay close attention to the products themselves. This had three reasons: first of all, it was
necessary to find and define the range of South African consumer goods that could be found on the shelves of British supermarkets. Doing this turned out to be an area of continual attention of activists and supporters. Secondly, it was paramount for the success of the campaign that the AAM was able to moralize and scandalize these products in such a way that supporters perceived the boycott as a moral imperative that was independent from any considerations of its direct economic impact. And finally, the AAM tried to use the boycott in order to mobilize its supporters for other protest practices like joining demonstrations, writing letters to shop managers, or picketing stores and other public places. A material culture approach thus points to two important features of the Anti-Apartheid boycott. First, the focus on consumption picks up the interconnectedness between the material and the media aspect of things and objects. The AAM was successful in turning everyday items like protest buttons, coffee mugs and even groceries into a medium of political protest just like political leaflets, posters or pamphlets. The materiality of these objects and their status as consumer products opened new possibilities for activists to articulate dissent, but also posed restrictions on the ways these objects could be used as protest media. This leads to the second point, which I have already outlined above. Looking at the media dimension of these everyday commodities requires one not only to focus on the products themselves, but on the social practices for which activists used these products. While it is important to look closely at the individual objects that human rights campaigns and protest movements singled out in order to illustrate their political goals, I am mainly interested in the strategies that activists used in order to politicize, moralize or scandalize these objects. This is the question I will concentrate on in the second part of this article that focuses in more detail on the protest strategies of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement and in particular on the way its activists utilized consumer products for their political campaign.

Consumer Products and Human Rights Campaigns: The Case of the Anti-Apartheid Movement

The origins of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement are directly linked to the idea of a boycott of South Africa goods. In 1959, the African
National Congress and the South African Indian Congress had launched a boycott campaign in South Africa. In the same year, a group of exiled South Africans developed plans for a similar boycott in Britain in order to support this movement. The campaign was taken up by several British NGOs and protest movements as well as the Labour Party, and in March 1960, it led to a month of action in support of the South African anti-apartheid struggle. Originally envisaged as a short-term campaign, it coincided with the ‘Sharpeville Massacre’ of 21 March, in which sixty-nine protestors in the Sharpeville Township were shot by the police. The massacre was a turning point in South African internal politics, leading to the declaration of a state of emergency and the banning of the African National Congress and the Pan-Africanist Congress. Equally important, it evoked new global attention towards South African Apartheid politics, leading for example to the UN resolution 134 of April 1960 that called upon the South African government to ‘initiate measures aimed at bringing about racial harmony based on equality’ and to ‘abandon its policies of apartheid and racial discrimination’. In Britain, the political and media attention on South Africa was paramount for the transformation of the short-term boycott campaign into a long-term protest movement. From 1960 onwards, the Anti-Apartheid Movement was active until 1994.

This long-term existence of the AAM and its public support and media exposure are exceptional and call for an explanation. Part of the explanation is the fact that the AAM could rely on the consumer boycott as a core practice that connected the Anti-Apartheid protests with everyday activities and routines. While other protest movements of the time remained abstract or far away, the permanent presence of South African consumer products on the shelves of European supermarket shelves helped to connect the topic to individual moral choices and to thereby infiltrate the everyday lives of individuals. While this infiltration of the everyday life can look like a process that more or less happened automatically once the political cause of Anti-Apartheid was established in the political discourse, the material culture studies approach I outlined above highlights the challenges of ‘moralizing’ – i.e. attaching a moral meaning to – these consumer items. On the one hand, this task already began with the challenge of finding out about the products and companies from South Africa that could be found in British supermarkets. Secondly, these firms and items had to be put into
a moral narrative that could be communicated to potential supporters of the Anti-Apartheid cause.

The first task of AAM activists was therefore to gather information and to inform supporters about the variety of South African products. Because of that, the first flyers and pamphlets were particularly concerned with explicitly naming the firms and products that had to be avoided as well as the types of products – like fresh fruit, canned fruit or wine – about which consumers were told to be particularly careful. Providing such information was not a straightforward or easy task because most South African firms were not very well-known in 1950s and 1960s Britain and regulations concerning the declaration of countries of origin were still quite loose at the time. Until 1968, these declarations were still regulated by the Merchandise Mark Act from 1887 that left a lot of room for interpretation. The boycott flyers from the early 1960s therefore explicitly told supporters to watch out for a diverse range of declarations since South African products were also sold with the label ‘empire’ or ‘foreign’. It was only with the Trade Descriptions Act of 1968 (revised in 1972) that companies were required to mark the country of origin on their products. But even then, producers and supermarkets regularly tried to work around this regulation, for example by using the abbreviation ‘R.S.A.’ for ‘Republic of South Africa’ – or even by simply changing the country of origin from ‘South Africa’ to ‘France’. Because of this uncertainty, some Anti-Apartheid groups even tried to teach consumers how to recognize South African products without the help of official labels by their appearance or materiality, referring for example to the thicker skin of South African oranges than those from Latin America that were on sale at the same time of the season.

Parallel to the individual consumer boycott, activists also started very early to pressure shops and supermarkets to stop stocking South African goods. In this attempt, the boycott at first partly backfired. In their replies to the AAM, shop managers themselves often referred to the consumer boycott, claiming that as a store they did not have the responsibility or even the right to take any political decisions. Instead, they argued, their only responsibility was to provide consumers with the broadest variety of products. It was the consumers’ decision, they claimed, to buy or not to buy these products. If a considerable number of consumers would stop buying South African products they would
soon disappear from shops through simple market mechanisms. This position was taken almost unanimously by all company managements that responded to the enquiries of the AAM – and this position was often itself stated as a moral imperative of its own that referred to the free choice of the consumer as the most important virtue of free market societies. Even the responding manager of the Co-operative food shop emphasized this position quite fiercely: While he claimed to ‘abhor the system of apartheid’, he argued that ‘it is a matter for the individuals’ own conscience as to whether they purchase South African products’. In even more general terms he concluded: ‘There must be no interference with the free choice of the consumer. Censorship should not be applied which would interfere or aggravate the freedom of choice’. Similar arguments were applied when individual customers wrote to their local shop managers. In October 1988, for example, Margaret H. wrote to her local Tesco store in Oxford. She began her letter by emphasizing ‘how much I appreciate having such a good quality Tesco store so close to us’. Nevertheless, she was ‘a little concerned’ about the sale of South Africa products in the shop. ‘Sometimes’, she argued, ‘shops can think that all the campaign against apartheid products comes from small pressure groups. That is why I felt it was important to write as a regular customer and tell you how I feel’. Two weeks later she received a response by the Tesco Customer Service Officer. The response resembled the one of the Co-Op management. Again, the shop management argued that it was only the consumer that was entitled to take political consideration into account:

As you will appreciate there are an enormous number of pressures, environmental, political, etc., brought to bear on a company such as ours … That is why our unique relationship with our customers is most influential in formulating our Company policy … The basis of this relationship is our integrity to buy quality products which represent value for money. If other factors are taken into consideration by our customers and they decide not to purchase products, for whatever reason, we are unlikely to continue to stock them. This relationship works well for both parties.

As can be seen from these two examples, referring to the political influence of the ‘citizen consumer’ could easily turn into an argument for shop management to decline any political or moral obligations other
than supplying customers with the best ‘value for money’. Especially in the second half of the 1980s, though, when the pressure from the AAM and individual consumers gradually increased, most supermarket chains were forced to negotiate with the AAM and promised to reconsider their policies. Sainsbury’s for example promised to stop selling canned fruit and to buy South African fresh fruit only in times when other products were not on the market, and Tesco agreed to stop using any South African produce for their own-label products. These concessions were a significant success for the AAM, but it also made the task of supervising the boycott even more complicated, because local stores often seem to have ignored or tried to work around such agreements.

It was in this context that the AAM explicitly asked its supporters to help monitor local stores and to inform the AAM about South African products and the places they were still on sale. In practice, this helped to connect the political campaign against apartheid to everyday shopping routines. The AAM drafted a printed form that supporters could use to report apartheid products they had spotted during their daily shopping. The form emphasized the importance of this assistance and even called on supporters to become specialists on certain product lines: ‘The Consumer Boycott Unit needs a small army of people who will report apartheid produce! The Unit needs regular up-to-date information about sightings of apartheid produce in order to keep track of companies. Especially in the shifting world of fruit, but also in other apartheid goods. Don’t think you are wasting time by reporting stuff we know already. If you only have a quarter of an hour, check out in particular canned, dried and fresh fruit. But if you really want to give us specialist help, take an area e.g. wines, canned meat of fish, DIY, holidays and travel’.

From the archival records, it is difficult to estimate how many people responded to these appeals and sent in completed forms, but some supporters went to great lengths to inform the AAM about apartheid products. A schoolgirl from Wales for example checked all five stores of her small town in Glamorgan County and drew a map and made a list of the products she had spotted in every single store. Others wrote long letters to store managers to inform them that they would stop doing their purchases at the store as long as it continued to sell apartheid products. Several other people cut out product labels in order to inform the AAM about new products they had come across – sometimes showing
remarkable in-depth knowledge, for example when they spotted products that had for a long time been sold under the label ‘South Africa’ but reappeared with the label ‘Made in the USA’ with the space of the original label blackened.55

The boycott therefore required a constant monitoring of South African companies and products and especially of local supermarkets. On the one hand, this turned the boycott into an extremely labour-intensive campaign that generated a lot of administrative work. On the other hand, it embedded the boycott into a wide range of other social practices and learning processes, both for the AAM activists and for their supporters from a wider public. Boycotting South African products did not simply mean refraining from buying certain products but involved a close interaction with these products and led to social practices that went beyond mere consumer choices.

This is also true for the second point I want to highlight here. While it had already proven difficult to identify all South African products, it was even more important to attach a moral significance to these products and to communicate this to supporters and a general public alike. This moral discourse was crucial for the campaign because most South African products were from their material appearance not easily distinguishable from similar products from other countries. The most important task was therefore to directly connect these products to a moral iconography of South African apartheid. A good example for this strategy of emphasizing the connection between everyday shopping in Britain and the politics of apartheid in South Africa was a flyer from the early 1960s that used on its cover one of the most well-known pictures of the ‘Sharpeville Massacre’ and the headline ‘Are we guilty?’ [Figure 1] Inside, the authors of the leaflet first asked rhetorically: ‘How can we be guilty? The people shown on the cover are the victims of Verwoerd’s apartheid policy’, before arguing that it was not possible for the British public to claim such a position of secure distance to the incidents: ‘But ... the Saracen armoured cars, the guns, the Buccaneer aircraft, the frigates, even the tear-gas, are “made in Britain” – and paid for by South Africa’s large exports of Cape Fruit and other products to Britain’. Britain bought ‘nearly one-third of South Africa’s total exports’, the authors explained and argued that this meant that ‘we in Britain help Verwoerd every time we buy an Outspan orange’. Because the British government refused to act it would now be up to the
Figure 1: ‘Are we guilty?’, protest leaflet, front cover, ca. 1960. University of Oxford – Bodleian Library.
This rhetoric of guilt was a recurring feature of the AAM leaflets. It was used in order to symbolically overcome the geographical and social distance between Britain and South Africa by claiming a direct relationship between everyday consumer decisions here and the violent apartheid politics there. Another leaflet used a similar rhetoric and asked the reader ‘Are You a collaborator?’, before confronting them with more detailed questions concerning their lifestyle and consumer decisions: ‘Do you buy South African fruit, wines, canned food? Do you hold shares in companies which profit from apartheid? Have you connections with firms investing in South Africa? Does your Co-op sell South African goods? Does your trade union hold funds in South Africa?’

The leaflets and other AAM publications could be analyzed in a much more in-depth way, for example by looking at its visual strategies, the religious framing and semantics or the gender politics inscribed into...
What the AAM tried was to interpret South Africa’s apartheid politics as a matter of personal ethics that infiltrated the everyday life of every British citizen and consumer.

Returning to the material culture approach, though, it is even more interesting not only to look for the ways in which this moral agenda was presented in these protest documents, but to explicitly take into account how the consumer products themselves were used as protest media. The AAM for example used paste-on stickers that activists and supporters could stick on South African products they found in their local stores. They showed a skull as if to mark a toxic product and stated: ‘Danger! Contaminated with apartheid’. These paste-on stickers were presumably adopted from the Dutch ‘Boykot Outspan Aktie’ (BOA) that had used a similar technique in the early 1970s. The BOA had

Figure 3: ‘Danger! Contaminated with apartheid’, paste-on stickers, 1980s. University of Oxford – Bodleian Library.
for a long time been very creative in using South African consumer products as protest media. One action outside a local world shop for example asked local customers to take an Outspan orange and throw it at a giant map of South Africa in order to receive a ‘clean’ orange in return. Such campaigns not only boycotted certain products, but used them as protest media, thereby reversing, as Hugh Crosfield has argued, ‘the socio-material processes which turn things into food’. 

There is a second story that can be told in order to highlight the importance of everyday items for the protest against South African apartheid, which I can only touch upon here. In addition to the boycott, consumer products acquired another crucial dimension for the AAM in the second half of the 1980s. While the boycott had focussed on South African goods as symbols of apartheid, the AAM now also began to produce and import consumer goods and everyday items itself in order to give people the opportunity to actively buy products to support the struggle against apartheid. This step from ‘boycott’ to ‘buycott’ was not surprising. It was taken during a time in which many NGOs like Amnesty International, Greenpeace or War on Want began to sell products to their supporters. In July 1986, members of the AAM registered ‘Anti-Apartheid Enterprises’ (AAE) as an independent co-operative. The foundation of the AAE marked an important step in the process of professionalizing these commercial activities. It included for example a detailed business plan and market research to define the target group of their products. In a synopsis of the future co-operative, the founding members stated three goals of the new business:

1. To contribute to the financial security, and hence the campaigning effectiveness of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement, through serving as a marketing company and sales outlet of AAM goods and gifts; 2. To promote and popularize the anti-apartheid boycott of products from South Africa and Namibia, by marketing alternatives to those products from the front line and neighbouring states, and from liberation movements; 3. Through such marketing activities, to contribute to public awareness on anti-apartheid issues and policies, and to solidarity with the front line and neighbouring states and the liberations movements in the struggle for freedom in Southern Africa.

In the autumn of 1986, the AAE published its first mail-order catalogue which then appeared twice a year until 1991. It contained books and
other publications on South African politics, T-Shirts, pullovers and coffee mugs with the portrait of Nelson Mandela or the AAM symbol, but also products that were directly imported from the so-called ‘Frontline States’, like cashew nuts from Mozambique or watercolour paintings from Zimbabwe. In the following years, the AAE regularly incorporated new products. They began to sell ‘Café Vitoria’, which was made from coffee beans from Angola and Zimbabwe, red and white wines, and even a local lager from Zimbabwe. In 1989, the AAE even founded its own music label – ‘AAE Records’ – to record and publish music from the ‘Frontline states’. Similar to the boycott, this sale of anti-apartheid merchandise had a twofold motive: on the one hand, it was meant to generate financial funds for the AAM and the protest movements in the ‘Frontline States’. On the other hand, Anti-Apartheid Enterprises was as much about raising awareness as it was about raising money. The products they sold were meant to create new links to followers who could now express their support for the anti-apartheid struggle simply by wearing a T-shirt or cap or by using a coffee mug or a tea towel with the image of Nelson Mandela or the AAM symbol.

As these examples show, a material culture studies approach alone cannot fully explain how these items were loaded with moral values and meaning. Instead it seems evident that it has the most explanatory power when combined with other theoretical approaches. One obvious connection is the field of body history and the history of subjectivities. It is striking that many of the items that were used in human rights campaigns were in some way connected to the human body and to body expressions and experiences. This helps to explain for example why food was an area in which the boycott was particularly successful. Other items, like clothes and jewellery, were also intimately connected to the human body – both physically and as means to express one’s own subjectivity in the public sphere. References to the human body were also important in the protest flyers and other publications of the AAM, which regularly referred to the violation of the physical integrity of black people by Apartheid politics, as for example in one of the most famous images of the AAM which showed the head of a black child being squeezed into a lemon squeezer.

Secondly, the history of emotions is essential to understanding the moral significance of these everyday items. While this article has primarily focussed on the cognitive dimension of the consumer boycott
– for example on the way activists tried to gain accurate information about the products, companies and global terms of trade – these items should also evoke feelings of empathy, solidarity and personal responsibility. When protest flyers of the consumer boycott like the one shown above used terms like ‘guilt’ and ‘obligation’, this clearly aimed at an emotional reaction or even religious sentiments and affiliations. In addition, the consumer products were also meant to create personal relationships and emotional bonds to their producers – be it in a negative way, such as when buying South African products was interpreted as a direct act of violence against the oppressed black population of South Africa, or in a positive way, such as when the boycott was portrayed as an act of individual solidarity. Not least, the boycott also created feelings of unity and comradeship inside the protest movement itself: Wearing a T-shirt with the portrait of Nelson Mandela was therefore not only a way of articulating a political opinion, but also an act of joining a specific social and emotional community of like-minded people.

These references to body history and the history of emotions again support the argument that both the boycott and the ‘alternative’ consumer practices did not follow an economic rationale alone. While an economic history would primarily focus on the direct pecuniary impact of the boycott and ask whether the AAM was able to put considerable pressure on companies to change their policies, my approach here has been to look more closely for the social practices the boycott movement generated and for the ways in which it succeeded to morally scandalize specific consumer products. From this perspective, one can point to a whole range of protest practices that were connected to these consumer products and to the sphere of consumption more generally. As I have argued, a material culture approach proves particularly fruitful when it not only asks about the material objects themselves but also about the social practices connected to these objects. As I have shown, supporters of the Anti-Apartheid Movement not only stopped buying South African products but in doing so they integrated themselves into a wide range of everyday protest practices: they monitored local supermarkets and reported information about apartheid products to the AAM headquarter, they debated with store managers and wrote letters stating their disappointment about the store’s policy towards apartheid, and they joined demonstrations and pickets in front of supermarkets, gas stations and company headquarters.
Directly referring to the example of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, Stuart Hall has pointed to this politicizing effect of the consumer boycott as a ‘pervasiveness of a political issue in everyday life’ which he interpreted as ‘one of the most enormous transformations which took place in terms of political consciousness’. As Hall argued,

[B]oycotts are something done by ordinary people. … [T]he fact that you could construct a political conversation with the greengrocer was one of the most pertinent objects of political discourse throughout this whole period. Have you ever tried to construct a political conversation with most greengrocers? It’s a very difficult task. But you could say ‘Are those Outspan oranges?’ and stand back and watch the politics develop.

Stuart Hall had himself been a long-time member of the British AAM. His statement might therefore be tainted with a bit of romanticization. It is surely open to debate whether this politicization of everyday life really happened so regularly and so successfully. Nevertheless, it is fascinating to see his long-time academic interest for the interconnectedness of politics and everyday life in such close connection to his active participation in the AAM. It is surely no coincidence that he put such emphasis on the AAM as an example for the kind of politicization of everyday life that he has also analyzed in other areas of society. Not surprisingly, his work and his theoretical approaches have also encompassed the links between political history and material culture. More importantly, though, his statement shows once more that looking at the material culture of the AAM and the human rights movement more generally should not mean looking only at the material objects themselves and losing sight of the social practices associated with them. On the contrary: Focusing on the objects the AAM used to communicate its political goals gives new insight into the social practices of protest, the emotions associated with human rights activism and the subjectivities that were construed through such campaigns. The question, then, is not whether oranges, coffee mugs and cashew nuts are part of political history. Instead we should ask how the AAM and other human rights organizations succeeded or failed in politicizing such objects and what consumer practices were connected to them.
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Dr. Benjamin Möckel is Assistant Professor at the Historical Institute of the University of Cologne and currently a research fellow at the Oxford Centre for European History. He received his PhD at the University of Göttingen in 2013 with a book on the post-war youth generations in East and West Germany from the 1940s to the 1960s. This article stems from his second book project, titled The Invention of the Ethical Consumer: Global Products and Civil Society in Great Britain and West Germany since the 1960s. The project analyses how NGOs in the field of Human Rights, Global Justice and Environmentalism began to use the consumer society as a realm for political protest, for example through boycotts, alternative businesses and ethically traded consumer products. The project asks why it became so popular and prevalent in these decades to express one’s political opinions through individual acts of consumption.

Notes

1 The author would like to thank Jan Eckel, Habbo Knoch and Detlef Siegfried as well as the editors and the anonymous reviewers of the special issue for their helpful comments on earlier versions of the text.
2 The references to recent human rights historiography in this article must remain cursory. For a comprehensive account of the history of human rights in the twentieth century, see Jan Eckel, Die Ambivalenz des Guten: Menschenrechte in der internationalen Politik seit den 1940ern (Göttingen, 2014); Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (ed.), Human Rights in the Twentieth Century (Cambridge, 2010); Samuel Moyn, The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History (Cambridge, 2010).
3 Eckel, Die Ambivalenz des Guten, 207–59, 343–434; Tom Buchanan, “‘The Truth Will Set You Free‘: The Making of Amnesty International’, Journal of Contemporary History 37:4 (2002) 575–97; Sarah B. Snyder, Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network (New York, 2011).
4 Heerten, Lasse, Spectacles of Suffering: The Biafran War of Secession and International Rights in a Postcolonial World, 1967–1970 (New York, forthcoming); Kristin Sorensen, Media, Memory, and Human Rights in Chile (New York, 2009); Andrea Noble, ‘Travelling Theories of Family
Photography and the Material Culture of Human Rights in Latin America’, *Journal of Romance Studies* 8:1 (2008) 43–59.

5 Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights. A History* (London, 2007); Hans Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights* (Washington, 2013).

6 Roland Burke, ‘Human Rights Day after the “breakthrough”: Celebrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at the United Nations in 1978 and 1988’, *Journal of Global History* 10:1 (2015) 147–70.

7 See ‘Rights Declaration is new bedtime story in Room Mate Hotel chain’, www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/RightsDeclarationisnewbedtimestoryMatehotelchain.aspx, accessed 22 May 2018.

8 Ian Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture* (Los Angeles, 2007) 3.

9 Ibid., 4.

10 For an introduction to Latour and the actor-network-theory, see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, 2005).

11 Patrick Joyce, ‘What Is the Social in Social History?’, *Past and Present* 206:1 (2010) 213–48.

12 See for example the references to Latour and the actor-network theory in: Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture*, 12–13; Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce (eds), *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn*, Culture, Economy and the Social (London, 2010), 4–7; Simone Derix et al., ‘Der Wert der Dinge. Zur Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte der Materialitäten’, *Zeit­historische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 13:3 (2016), URL: http://www.zeit­historische­forschungen.de/3-2016/id=5389.

13 Derix et al., ‘Der Wert der Dinge’.

14 Ibid., 396.

15 Ibid., 398–402.

16 Frank Trentmann, ‘Political History Matters: Everyday Life, Things, and Practices’, in Willibald Steinmetz, Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (eds), *Writing Political History Today* (Frankfurt, 2013), 397–408.

17 For example, this is a recurring theme in one of the most recent edited volumes on humanitarian politics in the twentieth century, see Johannes Paulmann (ed.), *Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2016). See for example the contributions by Caroline Reeves and Young-Sun Hong.
18 Jan Eckel, ‘Neugeburt der Politik aus dem Geist der Moral’, in Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (eds), Moral für die Welt? Menschenrechtspolitik in den 1970er Jahren (Göttingen, 2012), 48.
19 Daniel J. Sargent, ‘Eine Oase in der Wüste? Amerikas Wiederentdeckung der Menschenrechte’, in Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (eds), Moral für die Welt? Menschenrechtspolitik in den 1970er Jahren (Göttingen, 2012), 267–69.
20 Oxford, Bodleian Library, Archive of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, 1956–1998, MSS AAM 1585.
21 Mark Philip Bradley, ‘American Vernaculars: The United States and the Global Human Rights Imagination’, Diplomatic History 38:1 (2014): 6–7.
22 Roland Burke, ‘Premature Memorials to the United Nations Human Rights Program: International Postage Stamps and the Commemoration of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights’, History & Memory 28:2 (2016): 152–81.
23 Marsha MacDowell, Quilts and Human Rights (Lincoln, 2016).
24 See, for example, http://edition.cnn.com/2012/11/08/world/americas/argentina-protests/. As a protest practice, the so-called cacerolazo can be traced back to protests against food shortages during the government of Salvador Allende in early 1970s Chile but have later also been used in left-wing protests for human rights or social entitlements.
25 Catherine Flood, Gavin Grindon, and Victoria and Albert Museum (eds), Disobedient Objects (London, 2014).
26 Arjun Appadurai, ‘Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value’, in Arjun Appadurai (ed), The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective (Cambridge, 1986), 5.
27 Hunt, Inventing Human Rights, 35–69.
28 The initial reference for this argument is: Moyn, The Last Utopia. See also: Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn(eds.), The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s (Philadelphia, 2014). On the seminal importance of the 1970s for the human rights discourse in the United States: Barbara J. Keys, Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s (Cambridge, 2014). More nuanced and avoiding a rivalry between different times of origin: Eckel, Die Ambivalenz des Guten.
29 See, for example, Bradley, American Vernaculars; Robert Brier, ‘Beyond the Quest for a ‘Breakthrough’: Reflections on the Recent Historiography on Human Rights’, Jahrbuch für Europäische Geschichte 16 (2015): 155–73.
30 Roland Burke, *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia, 2010); Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War*; Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue*.

31 Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley, 2002); Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media, and Politics*, Cambridge Cultural Social Studies (Cambridge, 1999).

32 Thomas N. Gladwin and Ingo Walter, *Multinationals under Fire: Lessons in the Management of Conflict* (New York, 1980).

33 Matthias Kuhnert, ‘Die Moral von Tee und Babymilch. Unternehmenskritik und Konzepte für Ethisches Wirtschaften bei Britischen Entwicklungsfriedlichtiven’, in Jens Ivo Engels et al. (eds), *Krumme Touren in der Wirtschaft. Zur Geschichte ethischen Fehlverhaltens und seiner Bekämpfung* (Köln, 2015). 43–59; Tehila Sasson, ‘Milking the Third World? Humanitarianism, Capitalism, and the Moral Economy of the Nestlé’ Boycott’, *The American Historical Review* 121:4 (2016): 1196–1224.

34 Peter van Dam, ‘The Limits of a Success Story: Fair Trade and the History of Postcolonial Globalization’, *Comparativ: Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* 25:1 (2015): 62–77; Peter van Dam, ‘Moralizing Postcolonial Consumer Society: Fair Trade in the Netherlands, 1964–1997’, *International Review of Social History* 61:2 (2016): 223–50. On the history of fair trade see also: Matthew Anderson, *A History of Fair Trade in Contemporary Britain from Civil Society Campaigns to Corporate Compliance.* (Basingstoke, 2015); Ruben Quaas, *Fair Trade: Eine global-lokale Geschichte am Beispiel des Kaffees* (Köln, 2015).

35 See, for example, the campaigns and boycotts Greenpeace initiated from the 1970s through the 1990s: Frank S. Zelko, *Make It a Green Peace!: The Rise of Countercultural Environmentalism* (New York, 2013).

36 For a comprehensive history of boycotts as a form of consumer activism, see Monroe Friedman, *Consumer Boycotts: Effecting Change through the Marketplace and the Media* (New York, 1999). For the case of the abolitionist movement: Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, 2006); Michael P. Young, *Bearing Witness against Sin: The Evangelical Birth of the American Social Movement* (Chicago, 2006).

37 Cf. Friedman, *Consumer Boycotts*, 89–129.
Gurney, “‘A Great Cause”: The Origins of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, June 1959–March 1960”, Journal of Southern African Studies 26:1 (2000), 124–25.

This has already been highlighted by Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff in their seminal articles on ‘the social live of things’: Appadurai, ‘Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value’; Igor Kopytoff, ‘The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process’, in The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, 1986), 64–91.

On the history of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, see Roger Fieldhouse, Anti-Apartheid: A History of the Movement in Britain: A Study in Pressure Group Politics (London, 2005); Håkan Thörn, Anti-Apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society (Basingstoke, 2006); Rob Skinner, ‘The Anti-Apartheid-Movement: Pressure Group Politics, International Solidarity and Transnational Activism’, in James McKay, Matthew Hilton, and N. J. Crowson (eds.), NGOs in Contemporary Britain. Non-State Actors in Society and Politics since 1945 (Basingstoke, 2009), 129–46; Elizabeth Williams, The Politics of Race in Britain and South Africa: Black British Solidarity and the Anti-Apartheid Struggle (London, 2015).

On the origins of the movement and the process of institutionalization, see Christabel Gurney, “‘A Great Cause’”.

Tom Lodge, Sharpeville: An Apartheid Massacre and Its Consequences (Oxford, 2011).

For the text of the declaration, see http://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f1893c.html.

See, for example, ‘Campaign Material’ (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Archive of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, 1956–1998, MSS AAM 2227–2233, in all following citations: MSS AAM 2227–2233).

For this context, see ‘Country of origin labelling, 1971–1989’ (MSS AAM 1586). For the Trade Descriptions Act see https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1968/29.

MSS AAM 1585.

Hugh Crofield, ‘Commodity Boycotts, Activist Bodywork and Race A Study of the Anti-Apartheid Campaigns of Boycott Outspan Action (1970–1992) and the Anti-Trafficking Campaigns of Stop The Traffik (2006–2013)’, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of London, 2013, 113.

See the identical argumentation in the replies from different retailers: MSS AAM 1556.
See, for example, the analysis of the leaflets and posters of the West German Anti-Apartheid Movement: Mara Brede, ‘”Apartheid tötet – Boykottiert Südafrika!” Plakate der westdeutschen Anti-Apartheid-Bewegung’, Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History 13:2 (2016): 348–59.

The ‘Frontline States’ consisted of those countries in the southern part of Africa that were committed to fight for the end of Apartheid in nearby South Africa. They first consisted of Botswana, Tanzania and Zambia and were later complemented by Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe after these countries gained independence.

This parallels the history of the ‘fair trade’ movement where food products like coffee, chocolate and sugar were also the most successful items.

He discusses this relationship, albeit implicitly, in some length in: Stuart Hall, The Meaning of New Times’, in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds), Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies (London, 1996), 232–33.