

WHAT'S WRONG WITH WHITE PEOPLE?

Rick Turner and the Experiment with 'White Consciousness'

If they are true liberals they must realize that they themselves are oppressed, and that they must fight for their own freedom and not that of the nebulous "they" with whom they can hardly claim identification.

—Steve Biko

The refusal of blacks to want to be "like whites" is not racism.

It is good taste.

—Rick Turner

The developing strength of the Black Consciousness viewpoint forced a growing handful of white people to adapt their own politics in response. However, this shift in values amongst whites didn't necessarily come easily, or quickly. Many white liberals and leftists were resentful of or confused by the message of Black Consciousness. Some felt that it was 'racist' to call on blacks to work only amongst themselves, or that it somehow went against the long-term goal of a nonracial society. Furthermore, it was unclear for many whites, particularly students, to understand how to engage in politics in a majority black society but in all-white organizations.

A persistently cautious approach, combined with genuine and deep ignorance, characterized much of the white opposition that Rick Turner entered into in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The liberal position on a number of fundamental topics, most notably race and the economy, was deeply misguided and in addition liberals were so thoroughly intimidated by the state that what passed as proposals for change were frequently so mildly stated that a reader looking back now would hardly grasp the courage behind the words.

Rick Turner described white liberals as being, 'white first, and liberal second.' By this, he meant that their capacity to envision any fundamental change to their way of life or their values was profoundly limited by their daily participation in a racist social, political and economic system. 'They are offended by the barbarities of South African society but not sufficiently outraged to be willing to risk sacrificing their own privileged positions. This is not merely a question of cowardice; it also represents both a lack of imagination and ignorance.' Turner saw the moral concern and commitment to action amongst whites at the time to be so tepid, so ineffective, that he sought to shock them out of what he called 'the impracticality of realism.'

In response to Turner's provocative politics, many white activists turned away from Turner, and threw themselves into political work that allowed them to ignore the challenge of Black Consciousness. However, some small handful of whites did develop a sympathetic stance in relation to Black Consciousness, and began speaking about the need for a "White Consciousness."

Only a brief moment within the "Durban Moment," the White Consciousness experiment fizzled out by 1973. While the White Consciousness initiative is largely regarded as a failure in many ways (even by those who participated in it) in terms of developing concrete action to radicalize whites, it did contribute positively to the debate around white people's relationship to blacks in struggle. Furthermore, the reasons for the failure of White Consciousness – as an ideology and practice – are worth interrogating.

Taylor Sparrow