Class versus Nation

A History of Richard Turner's Eclipse and Resurgence

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Abstract: This article explores the eclipse and resurgence of the influence and ideas of Richard Turner in South Africa between 1968 and today. The article does this by first exploring Turner's historical context more closely. It provides an overview of the contributing factors to Turner's eclipse, namely: government repression, generational differences and strategic disagreements within the New Left. Andrew Nash's (1999) argument that the eclipse of Turner and the New Left was due in part to their failure to recognise the salience of nationalism is explored, but placed in historical context of these other important factors. The article points, however, to the concurrence of a resurgence of interest in Turner's work with a broader crisis in the nationalist project in contemporary South Africa (Hart 2013), a development which seems to strengthen the view that the New Left's fortunes lie on the convex of the ambiguous project of nationalism in South Africa.

Keywords: 1968, apartheid, nationalism, New Left, South Africa, Turner

As this special journal edition bears witness to, the life and thought of Richard Turner have drawn renewed interest.[1] The publication of his biography by American writer Billy Keniston (2014a) and Keniston's subsequent debate with Eddie Webster in the journal *Transformation* (Keniston 2014b; Webster 2014), are further indications of this resurgence. This article seeks to historicise the reasons for the eclipse of Turner and to contextualise the reasons for Turner's renewed popularity. Andrew Nash (1999) compellingly argued that Turner and the New Left

failed to engage with the salience of nationalism. This article aims to give historical texture to this account, to qualify this criticism by pointing to other factors that led to Turner's eclipse, namely: government repression, a new generation's need for surer intellectual answers, and disagreement within the New Left itself about tactics and organisational forms that weakened the movement, making it more susceptible to eclipse by a populism mobilised around 'the people' (Chipkin 2007), what Nash refers to as nationalism. In so doing the article also seeks to illustrate the value of a contemporary history lens, that part of history within living memory and yet which remains 'a foreign country' (Tosh 2010: 52).

Turner and the World of the 1970s

Born on 25 September 1941 in Cape Town, Turner grew up in Stellenbosch. He registered to study engineering at the University of Cape Town in 1959 but switched to philosophy after a year. After completing his honours in 1963 he travelled to France with Barbara Hubbard, his young wife, to study for his doctorate at the Sorbonne with Professor Jean Wahl (Morphet 1980: xiv). His thesis, on the political implications of the philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre, gained him not only a Ph.D. but also shaped his life's outlook and direction. He returned to South Africa convinced by the conclusions of his thesis, that human society was essentially the product of individual and collective choice. If this was so, it followed that existing society was but one of a multitude of possibilities and that these possibilities included the promise of more egalitarian forms of organisation.

Turner can accurately be situated within the New Left in South Africa, a ripple of a far wider global movement of young adults. As is well-known, in 1968 the world was shaken by student and worker demonstrations as far afield as Mexico, the United States, France,

Czechoslovakia and China (Gassert and Klimke 2009; Marwick 1999; Suri 2005). In Western Europe and the United States the New Left was critical not only of capitalism but also of the communism of the Soviet Union and its doctrinaire interpretations of Marxism. What took form as the New Left in South Africa was shaped by the country's geographical remoteness and the harsh censorship laws ushered in by the apartheid regime with the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950. The Act had a number of unintended consequences, grouping previously disparate political groupings into a broadly defined *rooi gevaar* (the red threat) and creating space for a fresh engagement with alternative currents of socialist and syndicalist thought. As in other parts of the world, two important sit-ins occurred in South Africa in 1968, one at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and one at the University College of Fort Hare, though only the UCT sit-in gained wide publicity. The Fort Hare sit-in contributed to the emergence of Black Consciousness in South Africa, fuelling the disaffection amongst black students that provided the logic for the launch of the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), while the UCT sit-in provided a spark for the New Left, a moment furthermore where Turner came to be defined for the first time as a student leader (Turner 2003).

Turner took up his first permanent position in 1970, in the department of political science at the University of Natal in Durban. It was in Durban that Turner began fully to exercise his philosophy, the conceptualisation of his life as 'a total project', as his friend Tony Morphet would later describe it. In Durban, Turner encountered a wide network of activists, dating back to the 1950s, including old South African Congress of Trade Union (SACTU) members, Communist Party and Indian Congress members, and the new activists of the Black Consciousness movement, most prominent among them the young medical student, Stephen Bantu Biko, at that stage the president of SASO (Badsha 2014). Both Turner and Biko were key

intellectuals in the period of creative ferment between 1970 and 1974 that Tony Morphet later described as 'the Durban moment', which signalled a significant shift in the roles of students and academics to more active involvement particularly in trade unions (Friedman 2014, Lunn 2012; Macqueen 2014; Morphet 1990) .

Turner's political outlook was indelibly shaped by his deep immersion in the philosophy of Sartre and his persuasion that the self-reflective quality of human consciousness enabled humans to make choices that could usurp the conditioning effects of their socialisation and thus entailed a limitless potential for future societal forms. Turner even rejected the idea that there was a set human nature; as he expressed it, 'Man has no "nature" […]. He can, through the techniques of reflection, grasp the contingence of his frame of reference and so make a genuine choice for himself' (quoted in Morphet 1980: xv–xvi). Turner recognised the role of society, which conditioned 'these techniques of reflection and thought', even if the power of society was ultimately dependent on the individual's interiorising of its values and version of history. Social values were socially determined, the product of historical contingencies, and as such Turner viewed them as mutable. Turner's personal political and social standpoint was an explicit refutation of the values that shaped mainstream, consumerist society, most extremely expressed by conventional white South African culture under apartheid. In contrast, Turner advocated the need for non-materialist living. Turner and the New Left also distanced themselves from the Old Left, which had embraced 'the capitalist human model of fulfilment through the possession and consumption of material goods'. In contrast, the New Left recognised this as a 'human model imposed by capitalist society' as 'a function of the needs of the capitalist system', which involved 'the destruction of important human potentialities' (Turner 1971: 76).

Written for a public audience under the auspices of the Study Project on Christianity in

Apartheid Society (SPRO-CAS), a remarkable commission funded by the Christian Institute and South African Council of Churches that explored practical alternatives to apartheid, *The Eye of the Needle*, Turner's sole book, represented Turner's most sustained attempt to apply his moral and intellectual standpoint to real-world politics. Using religious language, particularly Christianity, as a guise, Turner discussed the possibility of alternative forms of economic organisation instead of taking the existing economic structures as given. His reading of Jesus' eye of the needle parable was a secular interpretation of the transcendental values of religion, referencing a popular proponent, theologian Paul van Buren's *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (1963). Turner's engagement with theology was cursory, but it served a rhetorical purpose, introducing his readers to what was extraordinary in the form of what was familiar, the argument for political and social alternatives to capitalism on the basis of an appeal to the ethical core values of Christianity.

Most evident in *The Eye of the Needle* was the target of Turner's reasoning, namely the individual who was approached through reason. In this sense Turner shared a strong resemblance to the liberal tradition in South Africa, evoking comparison with the founder of liberal historiography W. M. Macmillan and the missionary John Philip, to name two examples, who had similarly attempted to use reasoned persuasion to compel change in a racist South African society (Saunders 1988). This position evidently failed to account for 'the nation' as a potentially more potent mobiliser of people. Turner's avoidance of nationalism, however, spoke to the cleavage among the new white intellectuals in Durban with the nationalist struggles that had preceded them, an ignorance rather than avoidance of the salience of nationalism as a potent mobilising force.[2] It was further compounded by their commitment to see nationalism as

epiphenomenon of class interests and reluctance to accord veracity to nationalist modes of mobilisation.

In Turner's day the powerful African nationalism of the 1950s, represented by the mass action of the African National Congress (ANC) and its breakaway, the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), seemed a thing of the past, a defeated giant, crushed by the post-Sharpeville political trials and imprisoning of the ANC and PAC leadership. The armed struggle had symbolic importance but could in no way create the sense that the Republic would be overthrown by force any time soon. The apartheid government attempted to channel decolonisation and nationalism into narrower ethnic boundaries, through the policy of separate development. In this moment the Prime Minister B. J. Vorster could even present apartheid as an expression of an African (Afrikaner) nationalism, repackaging the policy as the self-determination of the Afrikaner as a *volk* (people), as Jamie Miller has so convincingly argued (Miller 2016). Although Black Consciousness certainly had roots in African nationalism, Biko espousing on several occasions his indebtedness to a Pan-Africanist tradition, and Barney Pityana later describing his loyalty to the African National Congress, in the public form of Black Consciousness, its appeal was similarly aimed at the individual consciousness, in this way very different from populist nationalism. This led Turner to view Black Consciousness as a form of radical thought, congruent with New Left sensitivities, while at the same time being critical of their essentialised use of the terms 'white' and 'black' (Turner 1997: 428).

The Eclipse of Turner and the New Left

This section seeks to understand the reasons for Turner's eclipse and its context. In 1973 the

South African government restricted Turner by house arrest on recommendation of the Schlebusch Commission, a probe by the apartheid government into organisations it deemed suspicious. There is no doubt that the government was successful to a degree in limiting his influence in this way. But at the same time a new generation of students had grown dissatisfied with the worldview of Turner and were looking for surer, perhaps even simpler, answers. As the research of Keniston has shown, before Turner's death his students, who would become influential as trade union activists in their own right, were already moving to identify with Marxism in a more complete way that Turner never did.

For Dan O'Meara, another prominent academic based in Durban at the time, the clear teleology of Marxism usurped Turner's more complicated answers. For O'Meara, who set out to demonstrate the materialist basis for Afrikaner nationalism in opposition to the Weberian interpretation of sociologist Dunbar Moodie in *The Rise of Afrikanerdom* (1975), Marxism provided the analytical insight that could explain black oppression and South African societal development. As early as 1972 Turner's honours students at the University of Natal had become dissatisfied with Sartre's complicated and obscure thinking. Halton Cheadle, one of Turner's best students later to become an important trade union organiser and lawyer, reportedly referred to reading Sartre 'like going to a shooting gallery with a bent gun' (O'Meara, quoted in Keniston 2014a: 130).

Thus one reason for Turner's failure lay in the complexity of his philosophical position, which resisted crudification and provided no easy answers. Another reason lay though in a tactical defeat his ideas experienced in the world of union organisation. In May 1973, together with academics, activists and trade unionists Laurie Schlemmer, Omar Badsha, Foszia Fisher and Beksise Nxasana, Turner had set up the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE), a mere few

months after the Durban strikes. Although the first goal of the institute was to explain the Durban Strikes, which they set out to do with the publication of *The Durban Strikes 1973: Human Beings with Souls* (Institute for Industrial Education 1974), the fundamental purpose of the IIE was to provide a broad education for workers by correspondence. This approach later became the focus of disagreements, with a newly assertive leadership of the trade union movement, embodied in the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council (TUACC) that formed in Durban after the strikes (Maree 2010: 51). Members of TUACC such as John Copelyn and Mike Murphy considered the IIE an expensive luxury, which needed to be more firmly placed in the service of the trade union movement. Foszia Fisher, who was chairperson of the IIE, was finally pressured into resigning in October 1975 (Maree 2010: 52). The IIE was eventually allowed to die, as its resources were directed into the worker's movement more directly (Keniston 2014: 183–186). The journal of the IIE, the *South African Labour Bulletin*, survived because it was successful in establishing its autonomy from the IIE, and because of Webster's move to align the journal's editorial board with more mainstream sociology at the liberal English universities (Maree 2010: 52). This move simultaneously enabled the introduction of the new field of labour studies into the mainstream syllabus.

Another reason for Turner's subsequent obscurity was the tensions produced by the rise to prominence of the New Left in South Africa in the 1970s. Like the rise of Black Consciousness, this new development created tensions with older, more established political traditions. The South African Communist Party (SACP), in particular, discerned in the New Left a direct threat to its position as the leader of the Left in South Africa. Exiled members proceeded to launch a strong attack on the premises and legitimacy of the new tradition. Particularly offensive was the perception created by the Federation of South African Trade Unions

(FOSATU), launched in 1979 by the trade unionists influenced by the New Left as will be discussed shortly, that they were operating on a blank slate with the workers, that no socialist history had preceded it (Nash 1999).

Lastly, the 1980s were shaped indelibly by the Soweto Uprising of 1976. The Uprising, which for a number of reasons can be interpreted as the crowning achievement of Black Consciousness, paradoxically led to a new lease of life for the African National Congress, as thousands of young black South Africans went into exile and joined the organisation. By the early 1980s even Durban, the centre of South Africa's New Left between 1970 and 1974, had become a very different space. Sociologist Ari Sitas describes visiting Durban as early as 1977 where he met Turner and others, hearing of the history of the Durban moment. But by 1982, he recalled 'things were quite different' (Sitas 2014). The launch of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983 was a reflection of the resuscitation of politics on a more national level, based on appeals to 'the community' and 'the people' (Chipkin 2007). It created a new player that the New Left generation was immediately uncomfortable with, though their influence was nonetheless felt within the community-based movement.

With the resurgence of this wider populism in the 1980s, those who sought to prioritise the interests of class and the workers, distanced from the nationalist struggle, were dismissed as 'workerist' (Chipkin 2007: 88). Looking into the future from the 1970s, Turner had anticipated the achievement of a progressive South Africa through the agency of the workers in the unions. What he did not anticipate was the way in which workers interests would be subsumed beneath the wider resurgence of populism, represented by the cross-class appeals to 'the community' by the UDF. The end of FOSATU in 1985, which had resisted close links with the African National Congress, and the establishment of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, with openly

close links with the ANC, in the same year signalled another aspect of this wider nationalist resurgence. Buoyed by the support of the international Anti-Apartheid Movement, the ANC stepped in to assume the leadership of the South African struggle, whilst its underground structures enabled the organisation to claim leadership of the quickening civil unrest that engulfed the country in the 1980s.

On a different front, the SACP moved to reassume leadership of the Left in South Africa. In Nash's account, Jeremy Cronin comes full circle from an impressionable student, shaped by the 1968 UCT sit-in, to become the SACP intellectual who, through a number of interventions, modified the theoretical content of the SACP to fit the insights of the New Left, in order to reassert an ideological dominance of the SACP. By 1990, it seemed, the SACP had successfully retaken ownership of the Left. As Mike Morris observed, after 1990 there was a 'rapid movement into the SACP of a large grouping of leftists who traditionally were its strongest left wing critics' (cited in Nash 1999: 77). Furthermore, by the end of the 1980s, as black workers took firmer control of the unions, these white unionists retreated into 'specific policy-related areas' (Buhlungu 2006a: 442).

The Resurgence of the Ideas of the 1970s

Perhaps the most consistent theoretical engager with Turner's work, Nash noted the curious difficulty that Turner's memory presents, 'an inspiring, yet strangely ill-defined, legacy', so out of step with the comfortable classification and political traditions that came to shape South Africa in the 1980s, noting that efforts to publish a collection of his writings have floundered to date (Nash 1999: 68). But the influence of the man abided. Cheadle would later wistfully remark that Turner could have influenced the nature of the debate of the 1980s, not necessarily by

fundamentally altering the politics of the moment but by ensuring a more rational discussion that valued clarity of thought and goals (interviewed in Turner 2003). For a minority, the memory of Turner continued to provide an anchor in confusing and fast-changing times. From 1986 Turner's contribution was kept alive by friends in Durban who organised the Rick Turner Memorial Lectures. The lecture series lasted eleven years with some gaps, spanning the years of the transition to democracy. But the title was instructive in that the lectures remained a memorial, which could not continue indefinitely. The institutional remnants of the work of the activists in the New Left in the trade union movement have remained, but their legacy has been contradictory, as subsequent debate has made clear (Buhlungu 2006a, 2006b; Maree 2006).

It is not a coincidence that the resurgence of the ideas that inspired the 1970s in South Africa, the work of Turner and the ideas of Black Consciousness being the most apparent to this author, have occurred at exactly the same time as a deepening crisis in South Africa's democracy and a growing disillusionment with the 'rainbow nation' ideal that has lasted for twenty years (Hart 2013). It is also apparent that it was the very targets of these movements, gross social inequality and black alienation, that have most powerfully eroded the 'rainbow nation' ideal. It is in this sense of malaise that there is renewed interest in the ideas of Turner, as well as of Steve Biko (Macqueen 2015; Maserumule 2015).

The uses of Turner's ideas have also been multidimensional. In 2004 political scientists Tony Fluxman and Peter Vale used Turner's work as an ethical lens through which to judge the content of South African democracy. It was precisely the ideologies against which the New Left defined itself – capitalism and communism – which Fluxman and Vale (2004) saw as responsible for the eclipse of the ideas of the New Left in contemporary South Africa and they pose Turner's model of a democratic socialism as a viable answer to the plethora of South African problems.

More recently, the political scientist Laurence Piper turned his focus to the transformative potential of religious institutions for South Africa, explicitly evoking Turner's work, to point to their potential role in moving past confrontational politics and populism, so characteristic of post-colonial politics, and in 'returning such acrimonious public debate to more democratic and visionary grounds' (2010: 77). In an article published in the same year, the sociologist Rob Lambert, a former student of Turner's, noted the influence of Turner much more broadly in the 'evolution of a New Labour Internationalism (NLI) in the Global South' (2010: 27). In a 2011 book, the sociologist Karl von Holdt described South African society as being in a 'Johannesburg moment'; in contrast to the clear narratives of Black Consciousness and the New Left that he saw as undergirding the Durban moment, he described the present as being 'distinguished by a fractious and turbulent set of social contestations' involving 'a social fragmentation, a rupturing of order, a profound disordering of society' (Von Holdt 2001: n.p.).

It is in the midst of this rupturing and fragmenting process that Von Holdt described that some have found solace in a return to the ideas of the New Left. In a newspaper article in the *Mail and* Guardian, Mark Heywood (2014), the Executive Director of Section 27, a prominent public-interest law centre and pressure group, and Executive member of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), emphasised the continued salience of Turner's ideas at the terminus point of the clear narratives of post-apartheid South Africa and now regards his youthful dismissal of Turner to have been a serious mistake.

Conclusion

The coincidence of Turner's resurgence with the crisis in the nationalist project indicates that Nash was correct to lay the blame of the eclipse of the New Left at the door of populist

nationalism. This article has supported this view, while also raising other factors that weakened Turner's influence. The article has also shown that it is precisely the unique nature of Turner's work and its resistance to easy accommodation within set labels that have made his ideas so valuable. He has, however, never fully been forgotten, and has increasingly become seen as a guide in the fractious present that Von Holdt describes as 'the Johannesburg moment'.

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Notes

1 This research was made possible by an Innovation Postdoctoral Fellowship from the National Research Foundation and was commissioned as part of the project of the Chris Hani Institute, 'The National Question under Apartheid: Hidden Voices'. My thanks to Eddie Webster for comments on an earlier draft and to the participants of the second Chris Hani Institute workshop on the National Question 11 June 2014.

[2] My thanks to Eddie Webster for this point.