

**RICHARD TURNER'S CONTRIBUTION TO A SOCIALIST POLITICAL CULTURE  
IN SOUTH AFRICA  
1968-1978**

**BY**

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## DECLARATION

I declare that (*Richard Turner's Contribution to a Socialist Political Culture: 1968-1978*), is my own work, that has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any university, and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete reference.

Full Name: William Hemingway Keniston

Date: 11 June, 2010

Signed: *William Hemingway Keniston*

## **DEDICATION**

For Tony Morphet, who – amongst all the many people who helped me through the many stages of this work – consistently and compassionately encouraged me to carry on, no matter what. Tony once said that when he met Rick Turner his life was 'narrowing towards cynicism and despair,' and that Rick helped him move back towards a more hopeful politics. For me, the experience of studying Turner's ideas and life has had precisely the same affect. I am grateful to Tony Morphet for seeing that inside me, and respecting it.

## ABSTRACT

Richard Turner, a banned political science lecturer from the University of Natal, was assassinated on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January, 1978. In the ten years preceding, Turner had been actively involved in a wide range of activities radically opposed to apartheid and capitalism. Turner was a remarkable professor, who taught his students more through questioning and dialogue than lecture. Turner had a significant impact on left wing white students. He played an important role in encouraging white activists to understand Black Consciousness as a radical politics to be embraced, rather than shunned. Turner encouraged whites to find a role for themselves within a struggle that he saw as driven by Black demands and programmes. In addition, Turner was involved in the emerging trade union movement, following the wildcat strikes in 1973. He participated in creating the Institute for Industrial Education, which had a curriculum focused on increasing class consciousness amongst workers building democratic trade unions.

In stark contrast to the predominantly reformist politics of the time, Turner's vision for South Africa called for a profound reshaping of the boundaries of possibility for social change. Turner put forward a socialist critique of South Africa, grounded in a moral and strategic aversion to authoritarianism. Central to Turner's politics was his book, *The Eye of the Needle: Toward Participatory Democracy in South Africa*, written in 1972. In this book, Turner called for a utopia in which hierarchy is minimized; a de-centralized polity and economy, which would rely on structures of cooperative decision-making and management.

This thesis evaluates Turner's capacity to encourage a shift in white politics towards New Left radicalism. Despite Turner's influence on many, tensions arose between Turner's politics and more orthodox forms of socialism, embodied in unions and in vanguard parties. The socialist political culture which developed after his death was driven by leaders who were determined to build organizations that could meet tangible, short-term goals. What was lost in abandoning 'the necessity of utopian thinking' as outlined by Turner?

Eclipsed through banning and assassination, and simultaneously marginalized by doctrinaire Marxism, Turner's work has yet to take its proper place in the history of liberation struggle in South Africa. This thesis aims to revive Turner's discourse by re-engaging with the utopian elements of his thought, making them available for our present political climate.

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## INTRODUCTION

*I know it's difficult in this country, but we've got to think more clearly than the State allows...<sup>1</sup>*

—**Richard Turner**

*If a man happened to be 36 years old, as I happen to be, and some truth stands before the door of his life; some great opportunity to stand up for that which is right and that which is just, and he refuses to stand up because he wants to live longer, or he is afraid his home will get bombed, or he is afraid that he will lose his job, or he is afraid that he will get shot, he may go on and live until he is 80... and the cessation of breath is merely the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit. A man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is right. A man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is true. So, we are going to stand up right here... letting the world know that we are determined to be free.*

—**Martin Luther King**

(read at Turner's funeral, by his daughters, Jann and Kim)

### **'A MARKED ABILITY TO INFLUENCE PEOPLE'**

As a form of repressing intelligent dissidents, the South African state used banning orders to neutralize people. Perhaps even more effective than arrests and assassinations — which often have the effect of making martyrs out of rebels — banning sought to isolate and silence people. In February of 1973, Dr. Richard Turner, (known to his friends as Rick) Professor of Political Science at the University of Natal, Durban, was banned. As a banned person, Richard Turner was not allowed to be with more than one person at any one time, other than family members, and he was prohibited from setting foot on any university campus or factory, or to speak with any students or worker, or enter any neighbourhoods designated for African, Indian, or Coloured people. He was forbidden to publish his writing, and everyone else was forbidden to quote anything that he said or wrote. By all accounts, banning worked; banned people did become more isolated and less visible in the public

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<sup>1</sup> This quote by Turner is found in, P. Sacks, 'For Richard Turner Assassinated January 8, 1978,' *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 41, No. 4, (Autumn, 1983), p. 451.

domain.

When Turner received his banning order, he immediately applied for a series of exemptions to the banning. On the prohibition to interact with students, he applied for an exemption only in order to 'perform [his] normal teaching duties'. On the prohibition against publishing, he applied for the right to publish scholarly articles and books. He applied for an exemption in order to be able to enter Coloured and Indian areas of Durban.<sup>2</sup>

Predictably, his application for exemptions was denied totally. The South African Police Department in Durban stated to the Secretary for Justice that they 'considered [it] highly undesirable that Turner be allowed on the premises of or to lecture at any institution... or to publish works in any form.' The reasoning given is telling:

The applicant has a marked ability to influence others and was ardently followed by students and student leaders while he was a lecturer at the University of Natal, Durban... In an era of racial and labour conflicts, conditions are ideal for the applicant with his influence and knowledge of social science and philosophy to promote the idea of a social and economic change in the Republic of South Africa. Turner has a gift to write and to convey his views to his readers.<sup>3</sup>

In short, the police saw Turner as an intelligent man — an unusually capable teacher and writer, who, worst of all, was *liked* by both his students and his peers. People were likely to take his ideas seriously.

The banning was to last five years. On January 8, 1978, about a month before the banning was to expire, Richard Turner answered a knock at his door around midnight. When no one answered to 'who's there?' He went to the bedroom window to see. When he pulled the curtain aside a pistol blast sent him flying to the ground, and he died a few moments later in his thirteen-year-old daughter's arms.<sup>4</sup>

Turner himself had foreseen such an outcome, writing in 1972 that:

A minority cannot rule a majority by consent, therefore they must be prepared to use force to maintain their rule and this in turn requires a cultural climate that sanctions killing... The secret police are the creation... of white supremacy. The spies must inevitably act among the whites as well as the blacks, for dissent anywhere may be contagious, and hence fatal.<sup>5</sup>

## WHO ARE YOU, RICK TURNER?

<sup>2</sup> South African Police file, Ref. S.1/8242, signed Brigadier H.G.V. Cilliers, 8.6.1973, Jann Turner Papers.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> 'My Father, Rick Turner,' Documentary Film for e.tv South Africa, Jann Turner.

<sup>5</sup> R. Turner, *The Eye of the Needle: Toward Participatory Democracy in South Africa*. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1980), p. 99.

I feel as if I ask the same questions as the security police, trying to uncover what the full impact of this one man's life was on social change in South Africa. Just like them, I want to believe — whatever the evidence — that he was a revolutionary and that he dedicated most of his waking hours to this task. And actually, I do not think that either of us are too nearly insane for this belief. Turner was involved in a large number of activities, prolific in his writings and speeches and public dialogues, in his stubborn dedication to live towards a new society.

When speaking before the government commission which decided to ban Turner, Biko, and a number of other activists, Turner was asked:

Commission: In fact, you are politically a very active man, is that correct?

Turner: I would say active, for an academic on an English campus very active.

Commission: Could you explain that please?

Turner: Well, most of the academics are not very active or are completely inactive. So relatively speaking I am very active.<sup>6</sup>

But it is not so useful to constantly interrogate the past and to ask of one man's life again and again, 'What impact did you have?' Eventually I must allow my curiosity to sift down into other levels of wondering, other levels of questioning.

What kind of man were you, Richard Turner?

Richard Turner was born in 1941 in Stellenbosch, the Western Cape, South Africa.<sup>7</sup> He was a student at the University of Cape Town (UCT) from 1959-1963, and there became involved in liberal opposition to Apartheid as a member of Nusas. From 1964-66 Turner lived in France and completed a Ph.D. on the philosophical ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartrean notions of human freedom were central to Turner's politics, the idea that 'Man has no 'nature,' because the structure of consciousness, a continual project into the future, is such that it can never be bound to anything, and can always doubt any value. It is this structure of

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<sup>6</sup> *The Commission of Inquiry into Certain Organisations*, 1974, p. 553. This commission was set up to investigate a number of opposition organisations, including the National Union of South African Students, the Christian Institute, The South African Institute on Race Relations, and the University Christian Movement. Although it was purported to be an investigative commission, many individuals in these organisations faced state action against them based on the findings of the commission, such as Richard Turner's banning order.

<sup>7</sup> The majority of the facts found in this biographical sketch can be found within T. Morphet, 'Introduction,' in *The Eye of the Needle: Toward Participatory Democracy in South Africa*, Johannesburg: Ravan, 1980.



consciousness to which we are referring when we say man is free.<sup>8</sup> Tony Morphet notes Rick Turner's remarkable, 'refusal, or perhaps inability is a better description, to compromise the insights won in the philosophic study when faced with the South African reality.'<sup>9</sup>

In 1966, he returned to South Africa and began a career as a professor,<sup>10</sup> working at UCT, Stellenbosch and Rhodes University before settling at the University of Natal in 1970, where he would remain until his death in 1978.

Andrew Nash writes that, 'It is a curious experience for one who did not know Turner to talk to those who did. Whether they knew him well or only slightly, he made an almost inexplicably powerful impression on them... In speaking of him today, as in speaking at his graveside before, many of them have testified abundantly to the extraordinariness of Richard Turner.'<sup>11</sup>

By all accounts, Turner was an unusually gentle man, often spoken of as 'innocent,' or even 'naïve' in his lack of dogmatism and arrogance. Rather, 'he had that rare humility that allowed him to associate with people of all levels... he always made you feel that you were important to him and nobody's fears or problems were irrelevant.'<sup>12</sup> Despite his lifetime vocation as a thinker, a teacher and a writer, he is remembered fondly and particularly for the way that he shared his ideas and engaged other people's ideas. Turner's close friend and colleague, Raphael De Kadt echoes many others when he writes that, 'perhaps most remarkable of all was his ability to communicate the most complex and abstract idea in the language of everyday life. This he did with patience, always ready to explain at length and with lucidity precisely what he thought and why.'<sup>13</sup>

During his years as a banned person his two daughters, Jann and Kim, (both elementary school aged) lived in Cape Town while he was confined to Durban. To keep in contact with them, he wrote frequent letters and in these letters he often took time to explain things going on in his life. He explained in language comprehensible to a nine year old girl

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<sup>8</sup> From unpublished manuscript on Sartre, quoted within Turner, *The Eye of the Needle*, p. xv

<sup>9</sup> Morphet, 'Introduction', p. xvi.

<sup>10</sup> He returned to South Africa initially at the request of his mother, to take over the management of her farm. But he stayed with this for only about a year, and anyway he was simultaneously working as a professor while he was at the farm. See, Morphet, 'introduction' for a full biographical account.

<sup>11</sup> A. Nash, 'History and Consciousness in South Africa Today: An Essay on the Political Thought of Richard Turner.' Unpublished manuscript, n.d., p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> R. De Kadt, D.Usher, S. Meer, T. Morphet, and J. Noel, 'Why We Needed Rick Turner,' *South African Outlook* Vol. 108, No. 1024, (June 1978), p. 89. Jeannie Noel, Black working class activist and friend of Turner.

<sup>13</sup> De Kadt et. al., 'Why We Need Richard Turner,' p. 89.

everything from how to build a new bookshelf, to what exactly a banning order means, to why workers go on strike and why the young people in Soweto started their uprising in June 1976.<sup>14</sup>

Richard Turner responded to criticisms and attacks on his ideas with a stubborn invitation to engage in dialogue. His repeated response in a debate would be to ask, ‘why?’ On one occasion, while picketing in down-town Durban, Turner was confronted by a group of white racists who were screaming at the protesters, heckling. Turner insisted that they should have a discussion and when the hecklers accused him of being a communist Turner replied, ‘Why do you say that? What does it mean to you to be a communist?’<sup>15</sup> His sense of hope and possibility was not easily shaken.

Richard Turner’s commitment to imagining a free society — and matching his daily practices with his values — was impressive, and rare. De Kadt explains how Turner strove to practice his values in a tangible way. ‘His domestic life was lived in strict accordance with his moral principles; he lived simply, with very little luxury, always welcomed people into his company, and, regardless of their colour, religious persuasions and social standing, was willing to engage in dialogue with them. In truth, he really liked people, and always put them above things.’<sup>16</sup>

Confirming and expanding on De Kadt’s portrayal, Turner wrote,

We must realize that love and truth are more important than possessions. We must do this to be human... We can learn to live differently as individuals, and we can also learn to live differently in small groups by experimenting with types of communal living based on the sharing of property. Only if the new culture is embodied in the process of moving toward the new society will that society work when we get to it.<sup>17</sup>

In specific, his prioritizing of people over things meant that he dressed casually always, had few possessions, abhorred the idea of having a domestic servant and refused to frequent whites-only establishments, strove towards equality in his marriage and always shared his home with a number of friends, loved ones, students and fellow activists.

In addition, for his second marriage, Turner converted to Islam in order to marry Fozzia Fisher.<sup>18</sup> As Fisher was racially classified as ‘Coloured’ the marriage broke three

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<sup>14</sup> Jann and Kim Turner, personal communication with the author, 17 October 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Tony Morphet and Raphael De Kadt, personal communication with the author, 5 and 23 November 2009.

<sup>16</sup> De Kadt et. al., ‘Why We Need Richard Turner,’ p. 89.

<sup>17</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 102.

<sup>18</sup> Turner and Fisher were married in Fatima Meer’s living room. It was a simple ceremony. Interview with Meer, 2 December 2009.

separate apartheid laws regarding sex, marriage and housing. Foszia herself feels that it was important to marry, to have their commitment out in the open because, 'what tended to happen previously was that people who had mixed-race relationships tended to keep it hidden and that added to the thing of being sordid.' Turner and Fisher wanted to assert clearly that just, 'because it was illegal didn't make it sordid.'<sup>19</sup> Tony Morphet responded to criticisms of this marriage in his introduction to *The Eye of the Needle*:

Unsympathetic critics saw the marriage as a provocative political act challenging the state but this was certainly not the case... If he was to be liberal first and white second, then no compromise with irrational constraints, whether customary or legal, was possible at this point. The marriage was a great triumph for both people, yielding to them a personal growth and an emotional richness as well as serving to unify private experiences and public life. The marriage aptly symbolizes the barriers which Turner was prepared to break through in his quest for a life which unified consciousness, values and actions.<sup>20</sup>

Morphet describes how during the banning, 'People came from everywhere to see him, to discuss their projects, to clarify their thinking, to raise troubling issues. He mobilized individuals; directed them towards action, away from despair and cynicism.'<sup>21</sup>

Morphet clarifies that Turner's weakness may have been his inability to recognize that not everyone was able to think and articulate as clearly as him. 'I suspected that he was often puzzled and occasionally exasperated that other people were unable to bring the same clarifying power to their own situations. What was transparent to Rick remained opaque to others.'<sup>22</sup> Morphet insists that Turner's patience was not without limits. 'His hostility was drawn only by those who, in full knowledge, blocked rational thought and undermined potentials for action.'<sup>23</sup>

Understandably, Rick Turner's stubbornly gentle and patient demeanour put him in a position of constant and fierce conflict with the repressive apartheid state. Dan O'Meara, a colleague of Turner's, described him as the 'most fearless person' he had ever met:

He'd invited my wife and I to dinner at his place. You know, he was living openly in a mixed marriage, and illegally. I said to him, 'Rick, why do you do this, I mean Foszia is lovely and I can understand why you're in love with her, but you know you're going to get smashed, you know you're giving a finger to the government and they're not going to leave you alone. Why aren't you more circumspect?' And he said — and I will retain this till the day I die — 'Look Dan, if you live in a Fascist country like we do, you have two options: you can be cowed and

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Turner-Stylianou, 17 October 2009.

<sup>20</sup> T. Morphet, 'Introduction,' p. xix.

<sup>21</sup> Morphet, 'Why We Need Richard Turner,' p. 90.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

you can internalize the rules of fascism and live by them, so you become a fascist to some extent, or you can choose to be free. I've chosen to be free and I accept the consequences'. He was a constant finger to the eye to apartheid.<sup>24</sup>

## NOT QUITE BIOGRAPHY

What is in a life? How can a life be understood, decades later?

Stories. Hints. Scraps.

Little bits of evidence that lead in possible directions.

Richard Turner emphasises that an essential characteristic of human existence is the choices that we make:

Human beings can choose. They can stand back and look at alternatives. Theoretically, they can choose about anything. They can choose whether to live or to die; they can choose celibacy or promiscuity, voluntary poverty or the pursuit of wealth, ice-cream or jelly. Obviously they can't always get what they choose, but that is a different question.<sup>25</sup>

Our lives are made up of all the choices that we make, or do not make. Choices made visible, but not chosen. Choices made, but not understood, or not re-evaluated later, or regretted and carried like a weight.

The work of studying history is — whatever else Historians might claim — quite simply the study of human choices. We learn from other people's life choices so that we can ourselves choose how to live.

According to Rassool, in the modern, conventional conception of biography, 'The presentation of lives was presumed to be objective, truthful and factually correct, with lives as lived able to be told with reference to objective, verifiable dates. The resultant linear biographical product stood as 'the truth' about the 'real' individual's life.'<sup>26</sup> This rational organizing of human experience is based on certain basic premises about the lives of individuals, the individual's relationship to society, as well as the nature and meaning of history. This thesis does not attempt to make such a rational, linear ordering of life, of history.

Our lives are all quite messy, and perhaps even more so if we are living in opposition

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Dan O'Meara, 21 September 2009. O'Meara is currently a Professor at the University of Quebec at Montreal and colleague of Richard Turner, 1972.

<sup>25</sup> Turner, *The Eye of the Needle*, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> C. S. Rassool, 'The Individual, Auto/Biography and History in South Africa' (Ph.D., UWC, 2004) p. 28.

to an established order, against armies and ideas that try and constrain us. We do not really live our lives 'in order,' so the attempt to make a clean chronology from the outside is futile and pointless. We live our lives more in the form of a collage — or multiple collages layered on top of each other — rather than in a simple linear progression from birth to death. We are constantly connected to ideas and people and places and memories and dreams and plans, in an endless web that has a coherent logic only if enough of the connecting threads are visible at once.

In the paradigm of biography, the lives of great men are re-collected and narrated, based on the assumption that these were the only significant shapers of human history — that historical transformation happens through the actions of the exceptional, of the powerful, and not otherwise. Robert Blake, in seeking to defend the traditional practice of biography, writes that, 'the biographer was neither concerned with the 'common man,' nor with the 'statistically average man.' To do this would be a 'dismal project' and 'anything more boring would be hard to conceive.'<sup>27</sup> It is not my intention with this thesis to proclaim Rick Turner a 'great man,' or a man who 'made history.' Neither do I proclaim Turner to be 'statistically average.' Both notions are substantially beside the point.

While this investigation is, in a sense, of a biographical nature, it is not intended to be read as a comprehensive life-story. It is rather, as strictly as possible, a select *political* biography, dealing entirely with the political theory and praxis — and the *legacy* of these politics — of one man's life. In specific, my focus is narrowed in on the time period between 1968 and 1978. Therefore, aside from necessary contextual information, a great deal of personal information about Richard Turner is not dealt with here. The focus is not placed on the particularities of Turner's life, but rather on the broader social transformation of which Turner was a part.<sup>28</sup>

In seeking to frame Turner's work within a viable and productive historical context, I have decided against evaluating him within a generalized narrative of the time period in which he lived. Instead, Turner's work is investigated in relation to three pivotal activist initiatives: the Study Project on being Christian in an Apartheid Society (Spro-cas), the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council (TUACC) and the Black Consciousness

<sup>27</sup> Blake, 'Art of Biography,' p. 81, as quoted in Rassool, 'The Individual, Auto/Biography and History in South Africa,' p. 38.

<sup>28</sup> Inevitably, however, as the thesis is centred on Turner, it falls into one of the pitfalls of biography, at times, in that fellow colleagues do not always get adequate attention, with the spotlight on Turner.

Movement. There are of course other lenses through which to understand Richard Turner. Spro-cas was the research arm of the liberal Christian Institute, formed in 1968. Spro-cas is chosen both because its work is characteristic of the political discourse of the time, because *The Eye of the Needle* was published by it and written for it, and because Turner's work represents such a sharp contrast to the world views forwarded by Spro-cas. TUACC was the emergent shape of a black trade union movement in the early 1970s. It was chosen as a focal point because of Turner's working relationships with key participants, such as Harriet Bolton, David Hemson, Halton Cheadle, and Omar Badsha, and because of their connection (and tension) around the Institute for Industrial Education. No analysis of Spro-cas in particular, or white liberalism broadly, would be complete without an analysis of the Black Consciousness Movement. Furthermore, Turner's radical inputs into the discourse were very closely linked to Black Consciousness, which had a profound effect on the New Left and anti-capitalist organizing, generally.

It is important to note that Turner remains the focal point throughout. This thesis should not be misunderstood as giving a thorough history of South African labour movement, and neither is it an authoritative account of white liberal or black radical politics.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

The life and work of Dr. Richard Turner is an anomaly; his choices are hard to translate across the three decades since his death. He was a white anti-apartheid activist, an atheist who wrote of the 'Christian human model' of 'loving people over things' and married a Muslim woman, a socialist who spoke out against the Soviet Union and its satellite states, a non-pacifist who criticized the use of armed struggle against apartheid, and, most importantly, a man who stressed 'the impracticality of realism' and 'the necessity of Utopian thinking.'<sup>29</sup> How could a man think and act like this in the repressive atmosphere of South Africa during the 1960s and 1970s?

In stark contrast to the predominantly reformist politics of the time, Richard Turner's vision for a desirable future for South Africa called for a profound reshaping of the boundaries of possibility for social change. In specific, Turner was an active supporter of the radical student movement — both the whites in NUSAS and members of the Black

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<sup>29</sup> These are the titles of Chapters 1 and 8 in Turner, *The Eye of the Needle*.

Consciousness movement — as well encouraging organizing initiatives amongst black workers and co-founding an organization focused on radical educational reform. In addition to his activist work, Turner wrote a number of telling political articles, 500 pages of unpublished philosophical writing, and two books. Most well known of Turner's writing is *The Eye of the Needle: Toward Participatory Democracy in South Africa*. In this book, Turner called for a utopia in which hierarchy is eliminated as much as possible; a radically de-centralized polity and economy, which would rely on widespread structures of cooperative decision-making and management.

This thesis starts from the premise that the life and work of Richard Turner represents a significant discursive break within the political climate of his time. Responding to an opposition viewpoint rooted in the reasonableness and paternalism of liberalism, Turner put forward a socialist critique of South Africa, grounded in a moral and strategic aversion to authoritarianism. What was the significance of this provocation? What impact did Turner's politics have on the developing socialist political culture of the 1970s? It is the aim of this thesis to evaluate the weight of Turner's capacity to encourage a shift in white politics towards New Left radicalism, as well as the weight of his absence.<sup>30</sup>

Richard Turner lived a short life. He was murdered brutally at the age of 36, after five years of constant police surveillance and restrictions. In essence, then, Turner had only a few years to fully make his mark on history. Eclipsed through banning and assassination, and simultaneously marginalized by doctrinaire Marxism, Turner's work has yet to take its proper place in the history of liberation struggle in South Africa. Andrew Nash claims that, paradoxically, the socialist culture which developed after Turner's death lacked 'a sense of openness' and, 'produced neither any vision of the future society, which might be given clearer form by struggles to create it, nor a conceptual framework within which the difficult problems of that future could be debated or decided through concrete action.'<sup>31</sup>

The nature of the developing struggle against apartheid — its radicalization within an essentially Stalinist/nationalist ideology and practice — guaranteed that an anti-authoritarian critique of capitalism, such as Turner's, could not be given serious consideration. Further, the

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<sup>30</sup> The term New Left refers to variations of socialism which stress notions such as autonomy, de-centralization, worker's control, and reduction of hierarchy. This is as opposed to the old Left, or Soviet Marxism, which relies on a powerful Party and State apparatus, a hierarchical and heavily mechanistic version of socialism. More on this is discussed in my chapters 2, 3 and conclusion.

<sup>31</sup> Nash, 'History and Consciousness in South Africa Today: An Essay on the Political Thought of Richard Turner'. Unpublished manuscript, n.d., p. 12.

deeply compromised nature of the 'democratic transition' after 1990 (a ruling alliance of the African National Congress, the South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions — all agreed on neoliberal economics) further ensures the marginalization of Turner's thinking and work. Therefore, it is crucial now, within the increasingly stagnated political climate in South Africa (and globally) to dig deeper into the largely forgotten possibility of 'participatory democracy.'

If it is acknowledged that Richard Turner made a significant contribution to the left opposition to apartheid (a provocation, at the least) then it is of course worthwhile to thoroughly investigate the nature and merit of that contribution. In determining the nature of Rick Turner's impact, it has been necessary to draw clear boundaries as to which of his efforts will be prioritized within the thesis, and which to focus less on, or ignore. It is my contention that, at the present historical moment, and in light of the development of scholarly research since his death, *The Eye of the Needle* is the most essential of Turner's works to be critically analysed. While other writings of Turner's are included here, they are not central to my argument in the way that *The Eye of the Needle* is. Further, while it is a tragedy that Turner's philosophical writings were unable to be published due to banning restrictions and family concerns, this is not the thesis that will revive those texts.

*The Eye of the Needle* was written at the height of Turner's career, both as a professor and as an activist. It marks the most compact and coherent explication of his theoretical contribution. It was written at a relatively low point in terms of South African Left theory, and was received immediately with many accolades from its intended audience. As such, the book is also a central focal point for Turner's eventual decline into obscurity. Within eight months of being published Turner was banned (and therefore also the book was censored material) and from that point forward, the central theses of the book moved to the margins of political discourse in this country.

In short, Turner's emphasis on the process of envisioning a 'good society,' as part of re-shaping human consciousness in the direction of human beings having full control over their social, political and economic decision-making, was eclipsed. In place of what could loosely (often pejoratively) be described as the utopian thrust of Turner's *Eye of the Needle*, a new politics arose which was pragmatic; driven by strong leaders who were determined to build organizations that could meet tangible, short-term goals. This development of the liberation struggle had obvious successes, but also many shortcomings. It is my contention



that one of the most glaring shortcomings of the socialist political culture that developed after Turner's death is that it had lost sight of Turner's emphasis on 'the good society.' Cut off from any process of critical engagement with an ideal future, South African society finds itself, at a fundamental level, without a 'moral compass,' without an independent critical intellectual discourse.

It is not the aim of this thesis to prove Turner's heroics, or even to proclaim that Turner 'charted a course' for the South African liberation struggle, or any similar notion. In fact, the more telling reality is that Turner's influence was *cut short*, reduced, undermined, over-taken, etc. by other more pragmatic ideologies. Though contradictory, both statements are simultaneously true. For some tangible time period, Turner's radical inputs into the white liberal discourse of the early 1970s had a profound impact on a number of students and activists. Likewise, his ideas steadily lost prominence in the years that followed, for a number of different reasons.

This thesis aims to revive Turner's discourse by re-engaging with the utopian elements of his thought, making them available for our present political climate.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

For a man as dynamic and active as Richard Turner, there are surprisingly few traces of him in contemporary South Africa. His book *The Eye of the Needle* has been out of print since 1980 and is virtually impossible to find in local bookshops. Despite the fact that the book is often mentioned as influential, there has been little scholarly analysis of the text or of its impact. In addition, *The Durban Strikes: Human Beings with Souls*, which Turner wrote (collaboratively, with a handful of others)<sup>32</sup> is likewise out of print, and all of his philosophical writing, entitled, 'From Rousseau to Sartre' remains unpublished.<sup>33</sup>

While there are a handful of scholars who have consistently returned to Turner's work in their writings over the last decades, there is not a large 'body' of writing, much of it is unpublished, and/or has not been responded to by other scholars. There is no biography, nor any comprehensive academic account of his life's efforts.

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<sup>32</sup> In collaboration with a number of others, including Gerry Mare, Fozzia Fisher, David Hemson, Lawrence Schlemmer, Harriet Bolton, published under the authorship of the Institute for Industrial Education, 1974.

<sup>33</sup> The unpublished manuscripts are held at the Richard Turner archives at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal.

Tony Morphet's 'biographical introduction' to the 1980 Ravan Press edition of *The Eye of the Needle* remains the most widely read and most immediately useful evaluation of Turner's life and ideas. Morphet identifies the 'most startling,' theme of Turner's writing as being the assumption 'that this society, complex and cruel though it is, rests finally on nothing more than men's choices and therefore, for that same reason, it can be changed.'<sup>34</sup> This tone of approaching the difficult task of social change, Morphet claims 'breathes a different spirit'<sup>35</sup> into the political culture of South Africa.

There are a few substantial works dealing with Turner's ideas.

Andrew Nash has repeatedly focused his attention on the philosophical contribution of Richard Turner. Nash has written a number of articles which address Turner from a number of angles, and he attempted to be the editor for a published edition of the philosophical texts Turner wrote while banned. Towards this end, Nash undertook in 1982 to write an analysis of the political thought of Richard Turner, from *The Eye of the Needle* through to his unpublished manuscript. The resulting 41-page text, entitled 'History and Consciousness in South Africa today: an essay on the political thought of Richard Turner,'<sup>36</sup> was never published and essentially ends without any decisive conclusion. Still, Nash's text is perhaps the most extensive investigation into Turner's political thought yet attempted; critical and thorough, and with a marked appreciation of Turner's work.

Another important work by Andrew Nash, entitled 'The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa,'<sup>37</sup> deals with what he calls the 'conspicuous capitulation' of Marxist intellectuals in the late 1980s and 1990s. This analysis relies heavily on engaging with the theoretical contribution of Richard Turner to the Western Marxist tradition in South Africa. It is perhaps the most important text for understanding the resilience of 'Soviet Marxism' following Turner's death, and the marginalization of the less authoritarian strands of Marxist thought which Turner participated in.

Within a larger book on the history of South African philosophical thought, Nash includes a chapter entitled, 'Marxism and Dialectic, from Sharpeville to the Negotiated

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<sup>34</sup> Morphet, 'Introduction', p. xxiii.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

<sup>36</sup> A. Nash, 'History and Consciousness in South Africa Today: An Essay on the Political Thought of Richard Turner.' Unpublished manuscript, n.d.

<sup>37</sup> A. Nash, 'The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa,' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. Vol., XIX, No. 1 (1999).

Settlement,<sup>38</sup> which relates Turner's philosophy to that of other South African dialecticians.

In 1988, Andrew Nash helped organize a philosophical conference at the University of the Western Cape, where the philosophical works of Rick Turner figured prominently. Nash presented a couple of short papers for this conference, as did Johann DeGenaar and Michael Nupen. DeGenaar's is a summary look at *The Eye of the Needle*.<sup>39</sup> Nupen's, entitled 'Turner and Dialectical Reason' deals with the unpublished philosophical writings of Turner and evaluates the validity of applying Sartrean analysis to South African society.<sup>40</sup>

Peter Vale has also taken a repeated interest in the significance of Rick Turner's concept of 'participatory democracy,' attempting to revive independent intellectual discourse and utopian politics. Working with Tony Fluxman, of Rhodes University, together they wrote an article in 2004 calling for 'Re-Reading Rick Turner in the New South Africa.' Seeing that 'ten years after South Africa's transition, the mood of the country is one of resignation rather than celebration,'<sup>41</sup> Fluxman and Vale find inspiration in the 'different spirit' Turner 'breathed' into thinking about social change. Further, Fluxman and Vale read Turner as implicitly critiquing the nature of transition since 1994 for not conceiving of democracy in sufficiently radical, participatory terms, and for failing to address, in any fundamental way, the structures of economic inequality which continue to dominate the shape of South Africa.<sup>42</sup>

Taking this argument further, Vale worked with Kirk Helliker to write, 'Fanon's Curse: Re-imagining Marxism in South Africa's Age of Retreat.' This article again revives Turner's influence as an independent, radical intellectual, contrasting his efforts with the work of present day intellectuals whom Helliker and Vale see as 'infatuated with the state.'<sup>43</sup>

Essentially, this small body of scholarly work, produced by Tony Morphet, Andrew Nash and Peter Vale, represent the 'meat' of the literature that directly engages with Rick Turner's contribution to South African politics. I have leaned quite heavily on these texts. It is notable that all of these texts are written by sympathetic voices; they have not been

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<sup>38</sup> A. Nash, 'Marxism and Dialectical, from Sharpeville to the Negotiated Settlement' (Ph.D., UCT 2002), chapter 7.

<sup>39</sup> J. DeGenaar, 'Untitled,' 15th Congress of the Philosophical Society of Southern Africa, UWC, January, 1988.

<sup>40</sup> M. Nupen, 'Richard Turner on Dialectical Reason,' 15th Congress of the Philosophical Society of Southern Africa, UWC, January, 1988.

<sup>41</sup> T. Fluxman and P. Vale, 'Re-reading Rick Turner in the New South Africa,' *International Relations* Vol., 18, No. 2 (2004), p. 173.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>43</sup> P. Vale and K. Helliker, 'Fanon's Curse: Re-imagining Marxism in South Africa's Age of Retreat,' unpublished, 2009.

responded to by any other scholars.

The fifth volume of *From Protest to Challenge*, by Karis and Gerhart, includes a fairly balanced account of Richard Turner. Describing Turner as a 'particularly influential catalyst,' Karis and Gerhart speak well of Turner's role in the development of a radical student left. They also acknowledge Turner's involvement in worker's struggles. 'At the University of Natal, [Turner] inspired a circle of activists to begin investigating the conditions of black workers, first on the campus and later in the Durban municipality.'<sup>44</sup>

The multi-volume collection of *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, produced by the South African Democratic Education Trust (and funded by Nedbank and MTN) contains over 700 pages per volume, devoted to resistance in both the 1960s and 1970s. However, over two volumes, Turner is mentioned only on five occasions, and almost always briefly. In the first volume, Legassick and Saunders quote from Turner's article on 'Black Consciousness and White Liberals.'<sup>45</sup> His quote is used to stress that 'white opponents to apartheid are not a significant political force.' Turner's suggestion that white radicals ought to collaborate with black consciousness activists – whom Turner stresses are also radicals – is not dealt with by the authors.<sup>46</sup>

A longer and more sympathetic account of Richard Turner's contribution appears in Legassick's chapter on 'Nusas in the 1970s,' in the second volume. Here Turner is presented as 'a major figure in the radicalisation of the student movement', and includes a lengthy account of his 'open style of life and engagement with students', including various public speeches and Turner's role in a number of organisations.<sup>47</sup> Tellingly, two pages later Legassick speaks of Turner's role in encouraging Nusas students to form a Wages Commission, only to immediately rebut this claim by saying that, 'In fact, contemporaries are clear that the Wages Commission were the idea of Dave Hemson and Dudley Horner.'<sup>48</sup> This relegates Turner's work solely to the field of student politics, and removes him from narratives of working class organisation and resistance.

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<sup>44</sup> T. Karis, and G. Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1990, Volume 5: Nadir and Resurgence, 1964-1979* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 70-71.

<sup>45</sup> M. Legassick and C. Saunders, 'Aboveground Activity in the 1960s.' In SADET, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: Vol. 1, 1960-1970*. (Pretoria, University of South Africa Press, 2006), p. 664.

<sup>46</sup> For more on this, see my chapter two.

<sup>47</sup> C. Saunders, M. Legassick, and U. Mesthrie, 'Aboveground Activity in the 1970s.' In SADET, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: Vol. 2, 1970-1980*. (Pretoria, University of South Africa Press, 2006), p 860-861.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 863.

In a 70 page chapter by Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich, in the same volume, entitled ‘White Activists and the Revival of the Workers’ Movement’ Turner is virtually ignored,<sup>49</sup> his name appears but fleetingly. Most notably, although the Wages Commission, the *South African Labour Bulletin* and the Institute for Industrial Education are all spoken of, Turner’s role in founding and/or encouraging these projects is not mentioned. Further, Turner’s extensive writing on the wave of strikes in 1973 are completely ignored.<sup>50</sup> This oversight on the part of Hemson et al therefore does not respond to different sources that specify Turner’s role in these areas. For example, just on the matter of the *South African Labour Bulletin*, a number of sources verify Turner’s role. Morphet writes that Turner ‘established a journal of labour affairs written from the point of view of the workers... in favour of strong, well-organised trade unions.’<sup>51</sup> Fluxman and Vale claim that during his years of banning, ‘Turner clandestinely advised trade unions, while the journal he founded, the influential *South African Labour Bulletin*, continued to appear, as it does to this day.’<sup>52</sup> Eddie Webster speaks at length about Turner’s role in the *Bulletin* in his history of the periodical.<sup>53</sup>

Nicole Ulrich’s Ph.D. thesis *Only Workers Can Free the Workers* focuses on what she calls the ‘worker’s control tradition’ and the building of TUACC. Turner and the IIE show up in her text on a few occasions, but completely from the perspective of the trade unionists. Ulrich correctly describes Turner as, ‘a... lecturer based at the University of Natal who played an instrumental role in encouraging students to become involved in the workers movement.’<sup>54</sup> Ulrich questions whether Turner should be considered a radical, but still says that he had some influence. Ulrich stresses that his influence ‘was more nuanced’ as a result of the banning, and by the fact that his politics did not constitute a ‘coherent school of thought’ for unionists to adopt. Nonetheless in her thesis Ulrich acknowledges Turner’s role in forming

<sup>49</sup> D. Hemson, M. Legassick, and N. Ulrich, ‘White Activists and the Revival of the Workers’ Movement.’ In SADET, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: Vol. 2, 1970-1980*. (Pretoria, University of South Africa Press, 2006), pp. 243-314.

<sup>50</sup> R. Turner, [G. Maré, pseud.] ‘The East London Strikes’. *South African Labour Bulletin* Vol. 1, No. 5, (August 1974) pp. 26-32. The book is called *The Durban Strikes: Human Beings With Souls*. Published as Institute for Industrial Education, 1974.

<sup>51</sup> Morphet, ‘Introduction,’ p. xxv.

<sup>52</sup> T. Fluxman and P. Vale. ‘Re-reading Rick Turner in the New South Africa’. *International Relations* 18, no. 2 (2004), p. 175.

<sup>53</sup> E. Webster ‘A History of the *SALB*’ in J. Maree (ed.) *Ten Years of the South African Labour Bulletin 1974-1984*, Ravan, 1986. For more on Turner’s role in labour, see my chapter three.

<sup>54</sup> N. Ulrich, ‘Only Workers Can Free the Workers: the origin of the workers’ control tradition and the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Committee (TUACC), 1970-1979.’ (Ph.D. diss., University of the Witwatersrand, 2007), p. 119.

the IIE, and in writing *The Durban Strikes*.

Steven Friedman's book about the trade union movement, *Building Tomorrow Today* references Turner on a handful of occasions, again, favourably, but strictly from a unionist perspective. Friedman echoes other scholars in acknowledging that Turner 'prodded students to take an interest in worker issues.'<sup>55</sup> Beyond this acknowledgement, Friedman also points directly to Turner's influence in getting Left student activists into the trade unions. According to Friedman, trade union leader Harriet Bolton, 'contacted Turner, who suggested that she offer Wages Commission students jobs in registered unions, so giving them a base from which to organise Africans.'<sup>56</sup> However, as for the IIE, Friedman claims that, 'The IIE was Harriet Bolton's idea and she saw it, not as a way of turning union recruits into aware union leaders, but of gaining recruits in the first place... "I thought it would be a way of contacting workers, of getting us into the factories," she recalls.'<sup>57</sup> The origins of the IIE clearly need to be revisited.

A notable exception to the general rule regarding Labour History and Richard Turner is Johann Maree's article, 'The IIE and Worker Education.'<sup>58</sup> This ten page text provides an analysis of the Institute for Industrial Education — its inception, vision, and eventual collapse. This text was my starting point for all of the research I did regarding the IIE.

In conclusion, the general tendency in scholarly writing regarding the movement against apartheid in the 1970s is to acknowledge Turner's role, but in a limited way. Academics are often comfortable speaking of Turner as an 'influential' lecturer, or as a 'catalyst' amongst students, but tend to downplay or obscure his contribution in other domains (principally labour organizing).

In addition to academic works, there are a number of other tributes to Turner. Immediately following Turner's assassination, in February of 1978, *South African Outlook* published a special edition dedicated to Rick Turner, including a number of short articles about him, written by friends and family and colleagues. These essays give some insights into the nature of Turner's personality, and the extent to which he was appreciated by a wide-range of people. Other memorializations, such as Phyllis Naidoo's brief biographical sketch

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<sup>55</sup> S. Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), p. 42.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>58</sup> J. Maree, 'Institute of Industrial Education and Worker Education,' *South African Labour Bulletin* Vol. 9, No. 8, (July 1984), pp. 77-91.

in *Footprints in Grey Street* exist.<sup>59</sup> Turner's daughter Jann produced a documentary movie regarding her father, *My Father, Rick Turner*,<sup>60</sup> which investigates Turner's death, as well as giving a brief biographical sketch, rooted in interviews with key figures.

Between 1986 and 1997, the University of (Kwa Zulu) Natal held yearly memorial lectures on Richard Turner.<sup>61</sup> All of these lectures were presented by students and colleagues of Turner that were sympathetic to his work. All of them attempt to place a particular aspect of Turner's thought into the present tense conditions of the lecturer. The lectures vary widely in the extent to which they grapple in any depth with Turner's ideas. For example, the 1987 lecture, by Duncan Greaves, deals at length with what he calls Turner's 'Politics of Emancipation,' which includes his pedagogical style, his participation in student protests, as well as the *Eye of the Needle*, the IIE and his version of socialism.<sup>62</sup> Some of the lectures were given at particularly important historical moments, and therefore focus heavily on the demands of the day, such as Ari Sitas' lecture, given in 1995 and entitled, 'Reconstruction or Transformation?'<sup>63</sup> Others, such as Elizabeth De Kadt's, look only marginally at Turner's work, using him more as a springboard to address another topic.<sup>64</sup> Despite some shortcomings of the material, certain lectures in particular — as well as the collection as a whole — provide important analytical entry points into understanding Richard Turner.

Beyond texts that deal relatively directly with Richard Turner, I have also consulted a number of materials related to organisations that Turner was involved with. As *The Eye of the Needle* was published by Spro-cas, I have read through all of the other books published by the commission that are related to Turner's book. These include: *Education Beyond Apartheid*,<sup>65</sup> *Power, Privilege and Poverty*,<sup>66</sup> *South Africa's Political Alternatives*,<sup>67</sup> and *Towards Social Change*.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, Spro-cas published a book on their initiatives towards developing a 'white consciousness' politics, and Richard Turner contributed an

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<sup>59</sup> P. Naidoo *Footprints in Grey Street*. (Durban: KwaZulu Natal Press, 2007), pp. 108-110.

<sup>60</sup> *My Father, Rick Turner* is available in streaming format, online at: [http://www.barbara-follett.org.uk/richard\\_turner/part\\_1.html](http://www.barbara-follett.org.uk/richard_turner/part_1.html)

<sup>61</sup> Richard Turner Archive, UKZN.

<sup>62</sup> D. Greaves, 'Richard Turner and the Politics of Emancipation,' *Theoria* Vol., 70 (Aug 1987) pp. 31-40.

<sup>63</sup> A. Sitas, 'Reconstruction or Transformation?,' *Theoria* Vol. 87, (June 1996), pp. 66-78.

<sup>64</sup> E. De Kadt, 'Language, Power and Emancipation: A South African Perspective,' *Theoria* Vol. 78, (Oct 1991), pp. 1-15.

<sup>65</sup> SPRO-CAS, *Education Beyond Apartheid*. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1971)

<sup>66</sup> SPRO-CAS, *Power, Privilege and Poverty: Report of the SPRO-CAS Economics Commission*. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1972)

<sup>67</sup> SPRO-CAS, *South Africa's Political Alternatives*. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1973)

<sup>68</sup> SPRO-CAS, *Towards Social Change*. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1971)

article to this book.<sup>69</sup> The final book published by Spro-cas, entitled *A Taste of Power*, provides a detailed and very useful analysis of the development of the project as a whole, practically and politically.<sup>70</sup> This text, written by Peter Randall, provides significant insight into Turner's impact on the discourse of Spro-cas, and as such was invaluable to my research. Further, for an understanding of the Christian Institute as a whole, and Spro-cas in particular, I relied heavily on Peter Walshe's book, *Church vs State in South Africa*.<sup>71</sup> This text, written from a radical perspective and sympathetic to the Black Consciousness movement, was very useful in understanding the transition within a prominent white organisation from liberalism to radicalism. Furthermore, Christopher Saunder's chapter on 'Aboveground Organisations and Activities' in the second volume of SADET provides a short analysis of the Christian Institute in the context of the 1970s.<sup>72</sup>

I consulted a number of sources to gain an understanding of the Black Consciousness movement. Of course, Steve Biko's book, *I Write What I Like*, is a critical source.<sup>73</sup> I also found an article by him, entitled 'Black Consciousness and the Quest for True Humanity' helpful.<sup>74</sup> Donald Woods' books, *Biko* and *Asking for Trouble*, both give some contextual insight into Biko's life.<sup>75</sup> *Bounds of Possibility*, edited by Barney Pitanya et al, gives a broader analysis of the movement as a whole.<sup>76</sup> The Karis and Gerhart also provide a broad understanding of Black Consciousness. In particular, Karis and Gerhart draw attention to the repression of Black Consciousness activists, and the strategies of various groups to survive this repression.<sup>77</sup>

The literature review points to the need to engage the question of Turner's overall

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<sup>69</sup> SPRO-CAS, *White Liberation*. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1972). Turner's article is entitled, 'Teaching Social Justice.'

<sup>70</sup> SPRO-CAS, *A Taste of Power*. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1973)

<sup>71</sup> P. Walshe, *Church Versus State in South Africa: The Case of the Christian Institute*. (London: C. Hurst, 1983)

<sup>72</sup> C. Saunders, M. Legassick, and U. Mesthrie, 'Aboveground Activity in the 1970s.' In SADET, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: Vol. 2, 1970-1980*. (Pretoria, University of South Africa Press, 2006), pp. 847-899.

<sup>73</sup> S. Biko, *I Write What I Like*. (London: Bowerdean, 1978)

<sup>74</sup> S. Biko, 'Black Consciousness and the Quest for True Humanity.' *SASO Newsletter*, May/June 1972. pp 4-8.

<sup>75</sup> D. Woods, *Asking for Trouble*. (New York: Atheneum, 1981). D. Woods, *Biko*. (New York: Paddington Press, 1978)

<sup>76</sup> N. B. Pitanya, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumwana, and L. Wilson, eds. *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*. (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1991)

<sup>77</sup> Karis, T. and Gerhart G. *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1990, Volume 5: Nadir and Resurgence, 1964-1979*. Chapter three, 'Aboveground Multiracial Opposition', pp. 63-88, Chapter four, 'The Black Consciousness Movement: The Formative Years, 1967-1971,' pp. 89-117 and Chapter five, 'The Black Consciousness Movement: Confronting the State, 1972-1976.' pp. 118-153.



significance, theoretically and practically, on the South African left. This is clearly an area calling for investigation. On the level of discourse, there is a clear need to evaluate Richard Turner's radical politics in relationship to the liberalism that was dominant at the beginning of his career, as well as in relationship to the Black Consciousness viewpoint and Soviet Marxism. On the level of political organisation, there is a clear need to thoroughly investigate Turner's role in opposition organisations, and in labour struggles in particular.

In my thesis, I will study in depth the central premises of Turner's *Eye of the Needle* and will evaluate the impact of these ideas on opposition discourse. I will then make an in-depth evaluation of Turner's participation in the radical struggles of the early 1970s, including his relationship to Black Consciousness and to labour organising. Lastly, I will trace the decline of Turner's influence on the socialist political culture which developed in his later years and further marginalized him after his death.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

My research has consisted of extensive investigation of archival material, (including a great deal of unpublished texts by Richard Turner and organisations he was involved in) scholarly articles and books, and interviews with people that knew Richard Turner well.

Much of the research process has – by necessity – been focused on finding and recovering rare texts to the public domain. Much of the materials related to Richard Turner remain in private collections, neither digitised nor catalogued, and in many cases not even typed. Where possible, I have sought to expand the accessibility of these documents to anyone interested in further research. For example, when I began my research, there were no copies of any of the workbooks of the Institute for Industrial Education available in any public domain. Through my contact with Jann Turner, two of these workbooks have now been scanned, and are in the process of being added to the Richard Turner website.

I began my research at the Richard Turner archives at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal. The collection consists of four boxes, including published texts by Turner and about him, many of his manuscripts, notes, and a few letters, as well as newspaper clippings and documentary videos. I photocopied and read through roughly 1,000 pages from this collection, but quickly realised that the archive is by no means comprehensive and that I would need to consult other sources.

The personal collection of Richard Turner's second wife, Foszia Turner-Stylianou, located in London, is perhaps the most complete collection of Turner materials, including a great number of materials that have yet to be copied and transferred to the Durban archive (including the full set of IIE workbooks and much of the minutes from organisational meetings, all the materials on the Education Reform Association, and a great deal of lecture notes and notes for speeches made by Turner). I spent a number of days looking over this material, and again photocopied and read through a great deal of it. The organisational materials, particularly regarding the Institute for Industrial Education were invaluable to my research.

Following my time in London, I spent a few days in Johannesburg researching the materials in Jann Turner's personal collection regarding her father. This collection includes a great deal of material from the South African police files on Richard Turner, much of the correspondence regarding the publishing of Turner's writing after his death, materials related to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission investigation into the assassination, and personal letters between Turner and his children. This collection contributed greatly to my understanding of Richard Turner as a person (and my understanding of the significance of his death), though little of it was directly relevant to the thesis.

I also consulted the UCT manuscripts collection, as this is where material regarding NUSAS and the Student Wages Commissions can be found. As the Wages Commission was relatively marginal to my thesis, this archive was of minimal assistance.

In a similar vein as my archival research, my principal motivation for conducting interviews has been to recover information which is scantily documented in the literature. In sum, the two main goals of my interviews were to obtain information about Richard Turner's personal qualities, life details and relationships and the Institute for Industrial Education. Where my initial reading of the available literature acknowledged Turner's popularity as a lecturer, for example, I found that it was necessary to give claims such as these more substance through the interview process. The emphasis on the Institute for Industrial Education in my interviews was rooted in the fact that attention to this in the literature is lacking. In order to write in any detail about the Institute, and therefore about Richard Turner's relationship to labour organising in general, my interviews were absolutely essential.

I have conducted a dozen interviews. These were with: In Cape Town - Halton Cheadle, Tony Morphet, Lawrence Schlemmer, Omar Badsha, Alec Erwin and Ari Sitas, in

Johannesburg - Eddie Webster and John Copelyn, in Durban - Gerry Mare and Fatima Meer, in London - Foszia Turner-Stylianou, in Montreal - Dan O'Meara.<sup>78</sup> Some of these interviews were very narrowly focused on one topic (Copelyn spoke principally about the IIE, Sitas about the unions and Inkatha, etc.) and others were much broader in scope, depending on the particular knowledge of the participants. There was not a standard set of questions asked of each interviewee, but rather the interviews were tailored to each person. My interview process also including a fair amount of cross-referencing. That is, many of my questions were attempts to verify, or understand from new angles, information and analysis offered by previous participants. The participants included colleagues, (Morphet, Schlemmer, Webster, Meer and O'Meara) students, (Cheadle and Mare) and trade union activists (Badsha, Copelyn, Erwin, and Sitas). My interview with Foszia Turner-Stylianou was the most extensive, spanning a series of four or five sittings over a full weekend. As Turner-Stylianou is the only person who lived with Richard Turner for the bulk of the years in question in this thesis, and as her involvement spanned a wide range of activities, from the university setting to home life to the work of the Institute for Industrial Education, it was essential to do as thorough as possible an interview with her, on all possible topics.

While a number of participants mentioned that, in their opinion, no one else has ever done such extensive interviews with so many people related to Turner, I am aware that my participant pool is biased in certain ways. It is of course significant that such a high proportion of the interviewees are white, and male. It is also a significant absence that my sources do not include anyone that was heavily involved in the Black Consciousness Movement in Natal at the time, nor of Black rank-and-file trade unionists. These are certainly weaknesses in my approach to the interview process. This weakness developed as a consequence of the fact that my principal concern in the interview process was to speak with people that knew Turner deeply, and most of Turner's closest contacts were with white people or people classified as Indian or Coloured. I hope that the lack of Black voices in the interviews has been remedied by consulting numerous sources on Black Consciousness and Black trade unionists.

As a methodology, and by necessity, I have worked hard through my research to increase the available information regarding Richard Turner. Where the archival material is

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<sup>78</sup> In addition, I have had informal discussions with Raphael De Kadt, Kim Turner, Andrew Nash, David Hemson, Peter Vale and Tony Fluxman.

less complete than necessary, and where contextual material written on the time period provides limited insight into Turner's work, I have leaned heavily on primary sources, both in the form of text and interviews with people that knew Turner well. This is not meant to exclude a careful reading of secondary sources, but rather to supplement and deepen the analysis contained in these writings.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

### *Chapter 1: The Eye of the Needle*

The first chapter places the main concepts of *The Eye of the Needle* within the context of political discourse at the time of publication. I argue that the repressive atmosphere of the 1960s marginalized radical thought and forced the channels of dissent into a narrow, liberal lens. This politics was bogged down in its own white paternalism, fear of the apartheid state, and inability to imagine alternatives to capitalism. Spro-cas, commissioned in 1968 to study various aspects of society and offer alternatives to capitalism, was therefore deeply immersed in this limited political discourse. Turner's utopianism breaks into this discourse explosively, shattering many of the key assumptions of South African liberalism and provoking new values and new thinking. Turner's proposal for a Participatory Democracy in South Africa calls for a re-structuring of every level of society, in order to place decision-making power directly in the hands of workers — and his conception of 'workers' includes everyone. I argue that Participatory Democracy is linked, conceptually and practically, to historical examples of worker's councils and other forms of directly democratic bodies. Further, I argue that Turner theorized about some of the possible negative dynamics that might develop in South Africa after the fall of apartheid, and advocated for Participatory Democracy as a solution to many of these problems. That is to say, it is my contention that *The Eye of the Needle* is a 'living' document, in that the central theses of the book remain relevant despite the passage of time and the tremendous changes in the political and economic system in South Africa.

### *Chapter 2: The New Left*

Chapter 2 interrogates the nature of Turner's impact on the New Left in the early 1970s. I argue that Turner's teaching methods were intimately connected with his broader

radical vision, causing his teaching to be both rooted in diligent study of society, philosophy and history as well as intensely *dialogic*. In other words, Turner's pedagogical methods stressed the integrity of the individual to interrogate their own values and shift their consciousness in relation to the society at large. Further, I argue that these teaching methods made Turner a very popular lecturer, such that he extended significant influence over a number of students. This influence went in two main directions. First, Turner encouraged white liberals — both amongst his students and his peers — to take seriously the challenge presented by Black Consciousness, and to find a role for themselves within the struggle against apartheid. As Spro-cas radicalised, they increasingly sought to integrate this position into their own programmes. Second, Turner encouraged the development of a class analysis of societies and conscious action against the capitalist system. A number of students took this provocation seriously and increasingly involved themselves in the struggles of Black labour.

### *Chapter 3: Worker's Education and Organisation*

This chapter will examine Rick Turner's relationship to black working class organizing following the wildcat strikes in Durban in 1973. Starting from Turner's own analysis of the Durban strikes, and his conception of class consciousness amongst black workers, the chapter will then analyse Turner's initiative to assist black worker's developing consciousness, the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE).

The story of the Institute for Industrial Education is crucial to understanding the practical application of the theoretical concepts put forward in *The Eye of the Needle*. It is my contention that Turner's vision of the IIE was rooted in his overall vision of the goal of a radical transformation of society in the direction of a Participatory Democracy. I argue that Turner's belief in what he called 'the educative value of participation,' caused him to design a worker's education program that was, 'creatively open-ended'<sup>79</sup> and stressed increasing interaction amongst workers and raising their general class consciousness. This radical vision differed sharply from others who got involved in labour struggles at the time. Whereas other people saw their activities as having the principal goal of developing leadership cadres that could steer a trade union movement, Turner's conception was much less one-dimensional. As a result of this tension, the IIE was shut down by the leadership of TUACC. In my

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<sup>79</sup> Interview with Lawrence Schlemmer, 8 December 2009. Schlemmer is a Sociologist, and was a member of the board of directors of IIE, and a friend of Richard Turner.

estimation, TUACC opposed the IIE because it disrupted their conception of the priorities of working class struggle and undermined their authority. Further, education initiatives generally were viewed sceptically in light of the needs to *train* leadership cadre in the form of shop stewards.

*Conclusion: The Weight of Absence*

In sum, my conclusion is that Rick Turner's radical vision has been undermined by the political culture which has developed in the decades since his death. The final chapter traces the process by which this side-lining took place and evaluates the significance of the shift away from Turner's politics. The conclusion considers the following two questions:

What is lost in abandoning 'the necessity of utopian thinking' as outlined by Turner in *The Eye of the Needle*?

What kind of politics emerges in its place?

# Chapter 1

## Toward Participatory Democracy in South Africa

*Let us, for once, stop asking what the whites can be persuaded to do, what concessions, other things being equal, they may make, and instead explore the absolute limits of possibility by sketching an ideally just society.*<sup>80</sup>

—Richard Turner

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter analyses the central theses of Richard Turner's book *The Eye of the Needle: Toward Participatory Democracy in South Africa*. Duncan Greaves, in a memorial lecture about Turner, claims that, 'In academic terms, [*The Eye of the Needle*] is not a particularly good book; it was written in perhaps 36 hours, and under such circumstances it is not surprising that it is ambiguous and even at times contradictory.'<sup>81</sup> Turner, writing to a newspaper in 1972, defending his own book, wrote that, 'whatever its other faults (it is) cheap, short (86 pages in the original), non-academic and free from philosophical name dropping.'<sup>82</sup> Accordingly, *The Eye of the Needle* has received limited academic scholarly analysis. The primary focus of my investigation is on the political context that Turner was writing within, and the impact that he had on that discourse. I take as a guiding influence Tony Morphet's articulation of the way in which the significance of *The Eye of the Needle* must be assessed:

The first [significance] is evidenced by the fact that the South African state authorities clearly identified the book as a work of theory which has exercised strong influence on opposition thinking since its publication. Turner appeared in 1976 as an expert witness called by the defence in the trial of nine leaders of the Black Consciousness movement under the Terrorism Act. The cross-examination led by the state prosecutor sought to establish that the fundamental concepts of the book were shared by the accused leaders and that they had been influenced by it. Any assessment of its influence requires that the book be examined within the general context of opposition thinking.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, 1980, p. 1.

<sup>81</sup> D. Greaves, 'Richard Turner and the Politics of Emancipation.' *Theoria* 70 (1987), pp. 37-38.

<sup>82</sup> Morphet, 'Introduction,' p. vii.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii-viii.

I argue that the limitations of liberal opposition in the 1960s and early 1970s – combined with the severe repression of marxist and nationalist organisations – provided a crucial opening for Turner to present an autonomous radical critique of South African society. *The Eye of the Needle* responded directly to the narrow vision of liberal Christianity that was prominent within the Study Project on Christianity in an Apartheid Society (Spro-cas). His utopian conception of a participatory democratic system in South Africa was grounded in the broader discourse of the New Left globally and helped to instigate white activists (within Spro-cas and beyond it) to take up an anti-capitalist ethic and practice.

## **POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE 1960s AND 1970s**

The 1960s were known as the 'golden age' of apartheid, as the brutal methods of state repression allowed the economy to grow, 'faster than almost any other capitalist country.' White South Africans experienced an excessively high standard of living, a 'collective white consumer orgy... uninterrupted by black resistance to apartheid.'<sup>84</sup>

In 1960, at a place called Sharpeville, hundreds of protesters gathered to defy the law that required black people to carry passbooks at all times because they were not allowed to enter the 'white' cities for more than 72 hours without being employed – with a stamp from both their boss and the police. It was a simple non-violent demonstration, with everyone arriving without their pass and being willing to be arrested. Instead, the police opened fire on the crowd and killed 69 people (and injured 180). After this massacre, the state declared a 'state of emergency,' and banned the major organisations of resistance.<sup>85</sup> From there onwards, the repression intensified.

The state introduced detention without trial and set out to break the back of all forms of resistance. When a scheduled nationwide strike in defiance to the declaration of the white 'Republic of South Africa' was met with more than 10,000 arrests, the nationalist groups and the Communist Party turned towards armed struggle. The early attempts at sabotage bombings on electricity pylons, pass offices and military barracks were met with fierce pressure on the leadership. After 1964, when a white armed group called the African

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<sup>84</sup> D. O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years: the Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1996, p. 116.

<sup>85</sup> African National Congress [ANC], Pan-African Congress [PAC] and the Congress of Democrats. The South African Communist Party had been banned already, since 1950.



Resistance Movement<sup>86</sup> (ARM) bombed the white waiting room of the Johannesburg train station<sup>87</sup> the armed struggle died down significantly, with most of the Congress leadership either in jail or exile. From then forward, the banned groups set up permanent infrastructure in exile, focused on military training and international diplomacy.

Within South Africa, the channels of protest were very narrow. Political opposition was carefully curtailed through legislation and African trade unions were denied legal recognition and denied the right to strike. Accordingly, those groups that coalesced in the 1960s in South Africa to advocate for social change tended towards reformist politics.

A standard position amongst liberals at the time was the view that capitalism would inevitably lead to the end of apartheid as business owners would see that their racial prejudice was getting in the way of their capacity to make money. This position is attributed often as 'the O'Dowd thesis,' which is a reference to 'a young executive at the Anglo American Corporation, Michael O'Dowd, [who] had predicted that just as industrialisation in Britain had led to greater democracy, so South Africa would follow a similar path.'<sup>88</sup> On the contrary, apartheid provided profits that were unparalleled in other parts of the world. Many policies viewed by liberals as focused only on 'race,' had profound economic consequences (and causes).<sup>89</sup> Most notably, the racist pass laws were part of an overall plan at 'influx control.' By this, the apartheid planners meant to control the numbers of blacks entering the cities so as to guarantee a steady supply of cheap labor for mine owners, large farmers, and industrial capitalists, all at once. At the same time, the so-called 'Colour-bar' reserved certain jobs to be only available for white workers, and therefore created a standard of living for the

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<sup>86</sup> It was an off-shoot of the Liberal Party. The Liberal Party was a mixed-race political party, which operated until legislation forbade mixed-race parties in 1968. According to Saunders and Legassick, more than 40 party members suffered bannings, and a number of members became radicalised as a result of the repression. See, M. Legassick and C. Saunders, 'Aboveground Activity in the 1960s.' In SADET, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: Vol. 1, 1960-1970*. (Pretoria, University of South Africa Press, 2006), pp. 666-669 and also Karis and Gerhart, 'Above-Ground Multiracial Opposition,' *From Protest to Challenge*, p. 21-24. Both of these chapters provide, in addition, a more general overview of above-ground opposition politics in the 1960s.

<sup>87</sup> The man responsible for the bombing, John Harris, was hanged. For more on Turner and ARM, see Morphet, 'Introduction,' or R. Turner, 'Should South African Students Riot?' speech, 1971. Richard Turner archive, UKZN, Durban.

<sup>88</sup> C. Saunders, *The Making of the South African Past: Major Historians on Race and Class*. Cape Town: David Phillip, 1988, p. 137.

<sup>89</sup> For an alternative analysis of the South African economy, see, for example Harold Wolpe's texts, which deal extensively on this: H. Wolpe, *Race, Class and the Apartheid State*. London: James Currey, 1988 or H. Wolpe, 'Capitalism and cheap labour-power in South Africa: From segregation to apartheid,' *Economy & Society*, Vol. 1, no. 4, 1972 or H. Wolpe and M. Legassick, 'The Bantustans and capital accumulation in South Africa,' *Review of African Political Economy*, Volume 3, Issue 7 September 1976, pp. 87-107.

average white person that was unfathomably better than their black co-workers. Indeed, the design of the apartheid system was crucially focused on accelerating capitalist 'growth,' and white wealth.

Not only were liberal claims about the economy deeply misguided, but 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 could hardly grasp the courage behind the words.<sup>90</sup> A persistently cautious approach, combined with genuine and deep ignorance, characterized much of the white opposition that Turner entered into in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Michael Nupen summarizes the political climate as follows:

Opposition to the racist ideology of South African domination was conducted at the time Turner wrote either as etiolated<sup>91</sup> liberalism or as a dogmatic mechanistic marxism. Both were philosophically impoverished to the point of incoherence. They were also politically bankrupt having been thoroughly defeated.<sup>92</sup>

For Turner and others who analysed the political situation similarly to Nupen, the 'bankruptcy' of liberalism and the narrow options for radicalism forced a new politics to develop.

Ironically, the repressive measures of the apartheid state created new openings for resistance. During that period, a different kind of politics was able to emerge, unfettered by connections to more doctrinaire and authoritarian structures of opposition, and un beholden to the Soviet Union, or any other patriarchal champion of the oppressed masses. Whereas the ANC and SACP had been forced by circumstances to develop secretive methods of leadership and communication in order to survive, and had embraced military hierarchy as a tactical necessity, the internal resistance in South Africa was – also, by necessity – nonviolent, open to everyone, and with a new ethic around structures of authority. Andrew Nash characterizes these changes as follows:

a flexible approach to leadership emphasized continual recruitment and training of new layers of leadership. This took the place of an entrenchment of leadership, acceptance of hierarchy and dependence on authority, which had characterized the struggle for generations.... These strategic innovations were by no means specifically Marxist in inspiration. Their most frequent source was probably the civil rights Movement in the United States, where the idea of organizing 'at the

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<sup>90</sup> I base this claim principally on a reading of the Spro-cas texts. For a further analysis of Spro-cas, see below, and in Chapter two.

<sup>91</sup> Worn-thin; completely transparent; void.

<sup>92</sup> M. Nupen, 'Richard Turner on Dialectical Reason.' 15th Congress of the Philosophical Society of Southern Africa, UWC, January, 1988, p.15.

grassroots' was popularized by the Student Nonviolent Co-ordinating Committee.<sup>93</sup>

While Nash stresses the influence of SNCC and the fact that the new politics were 'by no means specifically Marxist,' it is not to imply that these developments were not radical.

Richard Turner was part of instigating a resurgence of anti-capitalist politics and organizing, which was, refreshingly, independent and, at a certain level, utopian. Nash explains that, 'The critique of South African capitalism which emerged in the 1970s was radical, in this sense, in a way which had no real precedent here: it had the potential to call into question all structures of authority and identity, and treat them as the outcome of struggles which had no natural stopping point.'<sup>94</sup>

This development of a radical politics that was not only hostile to capitalism and racialism, but also the 'eastern bloc' and rigid Marxist groupings was widespread throughout the world. Described elsewhere in the world as the 'New Left,' this politics was referred to in South Africa as 'Western Marxism.'<sup>95</sup> According to Andrew Nash, 'Western Marxism — in Europe and in South Africa — was premised on a belief that those whom capitalism had exploited and degraded (workers, above all, but not only workers) could learn to see for themselves the need to overthrow its structures, and that human liberation could not take place without this process.'<sup>96</sup> The major difference between the New Left in South Africa and in Western Europe and North America is that in the west this new politics developed in direct contradiction to the established left, which still had a strong presence. SNCC placed a radical emphasis on the grassroots in opposition to Martin Luther King and the adult civil rights organizations. Student radicals in Paris openly attacked communist party leaders and trade unionists, etc. Describing this development internationally, Herbert Marcuse, who was both very much influenced by the developments of the New Left, and also very influential to Turner and others, writes that:

The student opposition is spreading in the old socialist as well as capitalist countries... The radical utopian character of their demands... were developed and formulated in the course of action itself; they are expressions of concrete political practice... The young militants know or sense that what is at stake is simply their

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<sup>93</sup> A. Nash, 'The Moment of Western Marxism,' p. 67. For more on the politics of SNCC, as it relates to developing a new ethics of grassroots organizing, see, C. Payne, *I've got the light of freedom: the organizing tradition and the Mississippi freedom struggle*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>95</sup> By this phrase Nash is referring to a wide variety of interpretations of Marxism, loosely all having their origins in Western Europe, and all of them critical of or totally opposed to the rigid, dogmatic and even murderous practices of Soviet Marxism.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

life, the life of human beings that has become a plaything in the hands of politicians and managers and generals. The rebels want to take it out of these hands and make it worth living...<sup>97</sup>

In South Africa, apartheid repression meant that the New Left was operating essentially in a vacuum:

The philosophical conceptions which would have been familiar to an earlier generation — of the laws of history, the Soviet Union as model and bastion, the vanguard party and its discipline — are entirely absent from their writings. Instead, the arguments of this new generation depend on conceptions of freedom as conscious agency, ideology as psychological adaptation to the realities of capitalism, consciousness as inherently changeable and dynamic.<sup>98</sup>

It is precisely within this void space that Richard Turner's contribution was most fruitful. Dan O'Meara claims that, 'The kinds of people who ended up being influenced by Rick arrived at university at just the moment when there was no organized and no structured left wing influence at all.'<sup>99</sup>

## **CHRISTIAN OPPOSITION TO APARTHEID**

The story of the Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society (Spro-cas) is a story of dramatic transformation. The stated goals at the beginning of the project and the final statements made by its leadership some five years later are drastically different. The changes that Spro-cas went through echo and amplify the larger transformation in the political discourse of the time period. This is because the organization explicitly invited in to their discussions a growing number of Black Consciousness activists and anti-capitalists such as Richard Turner, who inevitably shifted the discourse in increasingly radical directions.

Spro-cas was an initiative of the Christian Institute. The Christian Institute was founded in 1963, principally led by the dissident Afrikaner minister Beyers Naude. Naude was from a prominent Afrikaner family and had risen to a substantial level of power within the Dutch Reformed Church by the time he began to take stands that were critical of apartheid. In fact, he was one of a small handful of men who were members of the Afrikaans Broederbond, a secretive organization which set policy for the Afrikaner Nationalist

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<sup>97</sup> H. Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, pp. viii-x.

<sup>98</sup> Nash, 'Moment of Western Marxism', p. 68.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with O'Meara, 21 September 2009. Halton Cheadle, a student and friend of Turner's for a number of years, agrees. 'I suppose that's where Rick fits in you know – in the milieu in which there was no serious organised underground organisation.' Interview with Halton Cheadle, 9 November 2009.

administration, both politically and culturally. As a result of his resignation from the Broederbond and his dissident religious viewpoints, he was increasingly marginalized and within fifteen years stripped of all authority within the church and banned by the state. But Naude's initial criticisms of apartheid were strikingly mild.<sup>100</sup>

A far right-wing minister described the Christian Institute at its formation as 'nothing else than a church front against apartheid... the Institute tends to use the churches to wreck the policy of separate development.'<sup>101</sup> But he was greatly exaggerating the goals of the organization at the time. Naude's emphasis in the beginning could scarcely be described even as liberal. For example, in 1962 Naude wrote that, 'Churches can no longer operate in isolation... and hope to challenge worldwide movements like communism, Islam, and secularism... and are inadvertently strengthening the forces of evil.'<sup>102</sup> The initial intention of the Christian Institute was merely to build an ecumenical organization that would stand against defending apartheid based on scripture. Naude and others were frustrated by the state's insistence on using Christianity to justify apartheid ideology and policy. That's it. That was the foundational objection. It was not, quite, a condemnation of apartheid *in and of itself*. Furthermore, Naude's starting premise for the Institute was that it would serve as a body that could influence other Afrikaner ministers to change their viewpoint, and these ministers would therefore pass the message down to their congregations. That is, his concept of social change was deeply patriarchal: the powerful men will give instructions down to the rest of the people. So, for the first years of its existence, the Institute was involved mostly in bible study groups and the publishing of a newspaper.

In June of 1968 the Christian Institute helped to draft 'A Message to the People of South Africa.' It was the first statement the group had made with a broad rejection of apartheid. The larger part of the text emphasized the teachings of the gospel and the need for human beings to submit to the authority of Jesus Christ. But at least, for the first time, they wrote also of the hardships brought about by policies of separate development and racialism:

Christians are called to witness to the significance of the Gospel in the particular circumstances of time and place in which they find themselves. We, in this country, and at this time, are in a situation where a policy of racial separation is being deliberately effected with increasing rigidity... this doctrine, together with the hardships which are deriving from its implementation, forms a programme which is

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<sup>100</sup> All biographical information regarding Beyers Naude is taken from, C. Ryan, *Beyers Naude: Pilgrimage of Faith*. Johannesburg: Africa World Press, 1990.

<sup>101</sup> As quoted in Ryan, *Beyers Naude*, p. 82.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

truly hostile to Christianity and can serve only to keep people away from the real knowledge of Christ.<sup>103</sup>

The message was widely distributed and received a good deal of positive feedback. Nonetheless, concerned that they were merely making religious objections without offering any concrete alternatives, Spro-cas was initiated in 1969.

The work of Spro-cas was divided into a number of commissions, which studied the effect of apartheid on the legal system, education, politics, economics, the church and social policy. The commissions were made up of experts in whatever field, and in theory, 'All ethnic groups and a wide range of occupations were to be represented. However, in practice the white professional class and particularly university faculty were predominant, with no more than token black representation on the commissions.<sup>104</sup> Spro-cas apologized for the lack of black participation by placing the blame on the racially divided society. They admitted only to having, 'a weakness which we felt we could not remedy by any belated action on our part but which only too accurately reflects the lack of communication between black and white which characteristic most planning today.'<sup>105</sup>

Comprised of primarily well-educated and well-mannered whites, the commissions put heavy stress on being reasonable. Abhorring violence as a means towards social change and rooted firmly in a gospel of love and brotherhood, Spro-cas proceeded with its work in the persistent hope that powerful people in South Africa could be influenced by clearly articulated and moderate expressions of moral outrage. The stress on being realistic and objective meant that Spro-cas advocated many things which in hindsight hardly seem like beneficial reforms at all: federalism, limited franchise, employer codes of conduct, etc. Further, at least with the early reports, they insisted on sending copies to the relevant departments within the government, (such as the Bantu Affairs Department (BAD) or the Minister of Education) which seems contradictory, both in hindsight and in terms of their own condemnations of the 'totalitarian' system they were up against. For example, in 1971 Spro-cas analysed the role of the church in relation to state power, making explicit reference to Nazism:

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<sup>103</sup> <http://www.sacc.org.za/about/celebrate16.html>

<sup>104</sup> P. Walshe, *Church Versus State in South Africa: The Case of the Christian Institute*. London: C. Hurst, 1983, p. 102. Walshe cites here examples of the ratios. e.g., Black/white ratio of the Politics Commission 1:24 and Economics 1:20.

<sup>105</sup> SPRO-CAS. *Power, Privilege and Poverty: Report of the SPRO-CAS Economics Commission*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1972, p. 7.

The Church may have to intervene if there is a strong move towards further totalitarianism. The lesson to be learned from Nazi Germany is that the Church is the only effective institution for combating a totalitarian regime. The efforts of trade unions, newspapers, universities, opposition parties are of little avail. Hitler succeeded against all of these but never succeeded in “breaking” the Church to his will.<sup>106</sup>

This contradictory awareness of the totalitarian nature of South African government and the simultaneous attempts to appeal to that same government to act reasonably signifies what Peter Walshe describes as the naivety of Spro-cas:

Sprocas... was a somewhat naively conceived venture in that it was hoped that when white South Africans were provided with more information on the injustices wrought by existing policies, they would be prompted to take a vigorous stand against apartheid. Of course nothing like this happened.<sup>107</sup>

Despite their spirit of moderation, Spro-cas did make a useful provocation into imagining social change in South Africa. Morphet argues that, 'The Spro-cas reports amounted to a considerable achievement. They performed a valuable function in drawing together in a common project a wide range of opposition thinkers, but they went further in providing descriptions of the basic institutions and processes of the society.'<sup>108</sup> It was an admirable impulse to begin to catalogue the atrocities of the current system and to make plausible recommendations. Ultimately, however, being reasonable and articulate was simply not enough. The liberalism of Spro-cas eventually came to be a burden to the developing understanding and capacity of the organization.

Having begun by establishing links with independent African churches, the Christian Institute increasingly began to have contact with Steve Biko and other Black Consciousness thinkers. These relationships challenged the white moderates to reconsider the politics which had once felt comfortable and clear to them. Steve Biko accused Spro-cas of 'looking for an 'alternative' acceptable to the white man. Everybody in the commission knows what is right, but they are looking for the most seemly way of dodging the responsibility.'<sup>109</sup> Nonetheless, Spro-cas essentially ignored these criticisms for the better part of its existence. Having committed themselves firmly to opposing policies of racial separation – and paying at times

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<sup>106</sup> SPRO-CAS, *Towards Social Change*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1971, p. 83. Other references to Nazism and Totalitarianism are common.

<sup>107</sup> Walshe, *Church vs State*, p. 92.

<sup>108</sup> Morphet, 'Introduction', pp. xxi-xxii.

<sup>109</sup> As quoted in Ryan, *Beyers Naude*, 1990, pp. 132-133.

some cost amongst their peers for this stance – the willingness of whites in Spro-cas to take Black Consciousness seriously was quite low. They remained skeptical of any attempt to 'polarize' South African society, and stayed committed to the role of sounding the alarm to other whites. As Lawrence Schlemmer explained in one Spro-cas publication, 'One very broad strategy in itself is communicating to white South Africans the imperative need to avoid greater tragedy later by working for ameliorative conditions now.'<sup>110</sup> Indeed, this was a central premise of Spro-cas straight through its existence. It was a politics fused with the religious concept of 'prophetic witness,' a patient realism joined together with unflinching moral condemnation. What role the group accorded to blacks was defined by the Social Commission as, 'constructive pressure on whites and within white-controlled institutions.'<sup>111</sup> There is merit in the group's articulation of Christian ethics, but as a coherent strategy for social change, it was deeply lacking. 'In short, its vision was limited to bleaching racism out of the existing system in the hope that this would release political forces which might then press for gradual changes in the country's economic structures.'<sup>112</sup>

In addition to dragging their heels in response to black demands for an end to paternalistic reforms, and their stubborn pacifism, Spro-cas was probably most stuck around economic questions. Though their interpretation of Christianity drew them towards concepts such as 'serving the poor,' few were willing to go as far in their commitment to 'service,' as clergyman David Russell, who believed that, 'The church must throw in its lot with the needy, the underprivileged, the insulted; it must be poor with the poor, but not in any patronizing or romantic way... struggle for the freedom of all men in all senses of that word, and be prepared to die in the struggle.'<sup>113</sup> Further, Spro-cas members were, 'apparently oblivious of the radical black critique of capitalism, and... only hinted at the need for structural changes in capitalism itself.'<sup>114</sup> Turner's principal criticism of Spro-cas was the failure of vision within the organisation, and particularly the failure to articulate a vision of an alternative social system.<sup>115</sup>

Therefore, Richard Turner's openly anti-capitalist viewpoint, spoken gently and often referencing Christian values, was quite a startling addition to the economics commission. The

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<sup>110</sup> SPRO-CAS, *Taste of Power*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1973, p. 74.

<sup>111</sup> As quoted in Walshe, *Church vs State*, p. 139.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>115</sup> See, Morphet, 'Introduction,' p. xxii.



publication of *The Eye of the Needle* came out of the tension brought about by the fact that Turner's ideas for political and economic change were so far beyond the prevailing discourse that he found himself operating within. As a member of the economics commission of Spro-Cas, Turner was asked to draft a separate book to 'encourage thinking and discussion about... radical alternatives,' which the commission saw the need to think about, but could not include in its report. One member of the commission felt it necessary to include a footnote within the report which states that 'she does not consider that it is an important task... to draw up models for unlikely Utopias.'<sup>116</sup> Nonetheless, *The Eye of the Needle* was indeed completed, and published in 1972, by Spro-cas.

## RESPONDING TO LIBERALISM

Richard Turner's life in general, and his book *The Eye of the Needle* in particular, were a profound provocation to white liberal society. Imagining the political climate of the time, the enduring image that comes to mind is of Richard Turner's words striking like lightning into the heart of white liberal thought – leaving liberalism exposed, exploded, surpassed.

Richard Turner wrote that 'a white liberal is white first, liberal second.' That is, their capacity to envision any fundamental change to their way of life or their values is 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.'<sup>117</sup> Turner understood white people to be trapped within a social structure – of their own making – that persistently and severely limited the capacity of human beings to have any kind of genuine interactions with each other:

The stereotypical reaction of white to black is only the most obvious expression of society in which all relationships, from courtship to commuting, become stereotyped. All relations become rituals. The paradigm for human relationships in white South Africa is the tea party in which the white ladies coo properly over the maid's cakes and circulate pre-digested opinions about 'the servant problem'. Not an idea, not a moment of communication, troubles the smooth, empty atmosphere.

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<sup>116</sup> SPRO-CAS, *Power, Privilege and Poverty*, p. 6.

<sup>117</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, pp. 152-3.

The excitement of self-discovery, the excitement of shattered certainties, and the thrill of freedom: these are experiences that are closed to white South Africans. The price of control is conformity.<sup>118</sup>

Turner is not making an abstract or metaphorical point here. Donald Woods, a liberal white journalist, describes a meal at the house of a prominent liberal:

We sat in high-backed chairs and behind each chair, against the wall, stood a Zulu manservant. The manservants, uniformed, did not serve the meal – that was done by a sort of head-man-servant – but only stirred to fill up our water glasses or pick up table napkins that had fallen to the floor. I was later to meet other liberals in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban who lived like this.<sup>119</sup>

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.' Making reference to a quote from *The Bible*, which states that, 'It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God,'<sup>120</sup> Turner's book *Eye of the Needle* is a provocation, jabbing at well-off and well-meaning whites to realize that their way of life was thoroughly unsustainable and could not possibly be protected in the long run. Turner's diagnosis was quite harsh:

Until white South Africans come to understand that present society and their present position is a result not of their own virtues but of their vices; until they come to see world history over the last five hundred years not as the 'triumph of white civilization', but simply as the bloody and ambiguous birth of a new technology, and until they come to see these things not in the past but in hope for the future, they will not be able to communicate with black people, nor, ultimately, with one another.<sup>121</sup>

Richard Turner's rejection of reformist politics was rooted in a deep-seated morality, an unshakable belief that oppressive systems cannot be reasonably 'reformed,' but instead need to be done away altogether to make way for dignified and meaningful human relationships. Turner made a distinction between white liberals and radicals:

Liberals believe that "western civilization" is adequate, and superior to other forms, but also that blacks can, through education, attain the level of western civilization... It is arguable that the main 'contribution' of western civilization to human history was the development of a new and higher level of exploitation of person by person, and of a new and higher level of materialism... Radicals believe that "white" culture itself is at fault, and that both blacks and whites need to go beyond it and create a new culture.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>119</sup> D. Woods, *Asking for Trouble*. New York: Atheneum, 1981, p. 90.

<sup>120</sup> *The Bible*, Matthew, 19:24.

<sup>121</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 101.

<sup>122</sup> Turner, 'Black Consciousness and White Liberals,' p. 429.

In much of the political writing of the 1970s, there was an attempt to make predictions about the course of events in South Africa. Often these were of a prophetic nature, in the sense that they were primarily moral statements, rather than analytically based. For example, Beyers Naude predicted that it would 'only be after the events of liberation that the full picture of the terrible damage which has been inflicted upon the humanity of both black and white by the idolizing of the idea of separateness of people of different cultures, colours and races, will emerge.'<sup>123</sup> While such moral indictments may well have proven accurate, Turner was more interested in theorizing solutions than merely making moral condemnations.

Turner foresaw quite clearly that the white minority government would eventually see it as in their interests to try and make some amount of strategic reforms. He also foresaw, correctly, that these reforms would fail. Writing in 1972, Turner presciently describes the basic shape of the 'adapt or die' politics of the early 1980s:

the attempt to integrate the two minority black communities, that is the Coloured community and the Indian community, into the white group,<sup>124</sup> and at the same time speed up the development of the homelands to make some concessions, short of a sharing in political power, to the African urban middle class.<sup>125</sup>

Outlining other such attempts at reform, Turner concludes:

any one of these strategies would make South Africa a much less harsh and a much more livable society than it is at present... toward the model of other types of unequal societies and would decrease some of the more searing indignities of a racially stratified society... but none of them would radically alter the fact that South Africa is a highly unequal society.<sup>126</sup>

While it could be argued that present day South Africa is most certainly 'a highly unequal society,' in which the 'searing indignities of a racially stratified society' have been, to an extent, lifted, nonetheless, Turner was not interested in this kind of change (whether as a result of a botched 'national democratic revolution,' or of the tinkering of a white minority government). Turner was interested in 'radically altering' the social, political and economic system of South Africa.

Nonetheless, given the political climate at the time, it was necessary to argue against

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<sup>123</sup> As quoted in Walshe, *Church vs State*, p. 180.

<sup>124</sup> These groups were not 'integrated' into the white group, but they were granted their own sections of parliament, and a limited franchise for that parliament. The tactic proved disastrous as few people were willing to go along with a racially divided parliament that still denied the majority any power.

<sup>125</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 149.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.

any possible objections to the minimum demand of universal suffrage as a basic condition for a just society. While he saw it as essential to speak bluntly in favor of universal suffrage – itself a 'radical' demand at the time – Turner was far from content to leave it at that. He stressed:

Universal suffrage is a necessary condition both for political justice and for political stability. *But it is not a sufficient condition.* There are still problems both of justice and of stability even with universal franchise. I have already shown that if other political resources are unequally distributed the equalizing effect of the franchise may be offset. We now need to look at the social preconditions for political stability. There are two basic conditions: (1) there should be no sharp division into social groups with contradictory interests in a number of different spheres. (2) The citizen should be adequately integrated into the political system; they should be capable of operating the political system and should recognize it as the major means of solving social problems.<sup>127</sup>

People cannot vote as equals if they can not live and work as equals. In a society with unequal classes and racial power imbalances, 'democracy' has no real depth. Furthermore, voting itself is an insufficient means to encourage participation in decision-making to be broadly shared amongst all, as voting only once every five years gives the population only a limited knowledge of the decisions being made, much less power over those decisions. Furthermore, the powerful are hard to hold accountable.

Nor am I in any position to prevent various organizational oligarchies from arising. There is a danger that the very political parties established to provide for mass political participation will become such oligarchies. The leadership controls the financial and communications resources and is in a position to use these resources in bidding for personal power, rather than to ensure popular involvement. Once this happens individuals, faced with steamroller political vote collecting-machines over which they have no control become even further alienated from the political process.<sup>128</sup>

This fear of 'oligarchies' forming 'political vote collecting-machines' led Turner to investigate the flaws common to 'revolutionary' governments.<sup>129</sup>

Turner then directed his attention towards a critique of post-colonial societies further north of South Africa.<sup>130</sup> As a general statement, Turner wrote:

Although some of the leaders theorized about post-colonial problems, there was

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>129</sup> Intriguingly, many of the conclusions drawn regarding the pitfalls of post-colonial nations match relatively well with the pitfalls of the so-called 'revolutions' against communism in Eastern Europe.

<sup>130</sup> Turner was uniquely interested in studying African independence movements. He participated in a series of political education courses on Nyerere and African Socialism, (Badsha Interview, 5 November 2009) and went to lengths to learn Portuguese following the declaration of independence in Mozambique and Angola (Morphet Interview 7 November 2009).

rarely any attempt to build a positive mass movement that could not only push the imperialists out but also provide the basis for a society. As a result, most of the political parties fall apart after independence, leaving a leadership that could neither mobilize the people for further change nor is kept in check by the people.<sup>131</sup>

As Turner's repeated emphasis is on the need to articulate alternative visions of society, so here it stands as a warning. If the struggle to end apartheid is as narrow-minded as independence struggles – seeking only to 'end' the old regime, rather than replace it – then the victory will be short-lived. To further emphasize this point, Turner quotes Julius Nyerere, whose critique of his comrades in the Tanzanian independence struggle also serves as a warning:

My leaders of the independence struggle . . . were not against capitalism; they simply wanted its fruits, and saw independence as the means to that end... It was not only selfishness which made the leaders think only in terms of Africanizing the capitalist economy of the colonialists; often they had no knowledge of any alternatives.<sup>132</sup>

In light of the events in South Africa following the unbanning of the ANC in 1990, it is refreshing to realize that two decades prior there was already an awareness that socialist rhetoric (even being a full-on socialist party) does not adequately prevent a liberation organisation from embracing capitalism.

Furthermore, Turner warned of the potential downsides of nationalist efforts to establish unity amongst the oppressed population. While clearly acknowledging the benefits of uniting the majority against the imperialists, Turner saw that national/racial unity has clear shortcomings:

The very stress on blackness helped to obscure certain problems of post-independence society. In particular it implied that the common interest that united all the people against colonialism would continue after independence.<sup>133</sup>

It should be remembered that Turner was writing this at a time when the ANC had a relatively low presence within South Africa. As a result, the ability of the black movement to take on relatively varied forms, creating dozens of independent organisations with widely different politics was quite high. By the time of the Soweto uprising, the pressure to consolidate the black struggle into one unified voice would begin to accelerate. Steve Biko had a strong sympathy for the visions of 'unity' within African struggles for independence.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 96.

<sup>132</sup> Quoting Nyerere in Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 97.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-7.

<sup>134</sup> 'One of the basic tenets of Black Consciousness is totality of involvement. By this we mean that all blacks must sit as one big unit and no fragmentation and distraction from the main stream of events must be

However, Turner remained skeptical of notions of Black unity and Black empowerment:

An assertion of the dignity of blackness is not enough. It must be accompanied by an analysis of the conflicts of interest among the black people and by positive orientation toward a future society. And it is necessary that this should include a specific rejection of the materialist values of capitalist society.<sup>135</sup>

The articulation of a 'positive orientation toward a future society' constitutes the bulk of *The Eye of the Needle*.

## 'AN IDEAL POSSIBLE SOCIETY'

In *The Eye of the Needle* Turner offers the broad outlines of the Participatory Democratic system that he envisions, and the pitfalls he hopes to avoid. Though this is not a very thorough articulation, from the skeleton form the whole body can be implied, especially in light of the fact that Turner's ideas overlap with a number of other proposals for a radical re-structuring of the political and economic system. For example, Turner's politics have been summarized as 'democratic socialism,' or 'market socialism,'<sup>136</sup> and I would add that there are important overlaps with the basic ideas of 'participatory economics,' 'council communism,' and 'anarcho-syndicalism.'<sup>137</sup> I will touch on some of these historical and theoretical connections below, but first it is necessary to outline the basic shape of participatory democracy as Turner conceived of it. Furthermore, as a point of introduction, it is important to note that while participatory democracy was intended as a utopian vision, it was also meant to be understood as very much within the realm of possibility, 'in that there are neither imperatives of organization nor imperatives of human nature which would prevent such a

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allowed.' S. Biko, 'Black Consciousness and the Quest for True Humanity,' *SASO Newsletter*, May/June 1972, p. 8.

<sup>135</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 98.

<sup>136</sup> Ralph Lawrence, a student of Richard Turner, claims in his memorial lecture that Turner taught 'Market Socialism' explicitly in his curriculum: 'One book prescribed for a section of the second-year undergraduate course focusing on political sociology, taught by Rick Turner, was Carole Pateman's newly minted *Participation and Democratic Theory*... Carole Pateman exposed the connections between market socialism and participatory democracy. The key is workers' control. Every enterprise managed by its workforce, in an inclusive and collective style, would supposedly enhance economic performance nationwide, whilst also spreading democratic practices on a much wider scale than occurred in capitalist societies.' R. Lawrence, 'Shaping Democracy in a Future South Africa,' *Theoria*, 76, 1990, pp. 102-103.

<sup>137</sup> The most direct overlaps are with the concept of 'Participatory Economics.' For more on this, see: M. Albert and R. Hahnel. *Political Economy of Participatory Economics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991. For an overview of syndicalism, see: R. Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice*. Oakland: AK Press, 2004. For an overview of different strands of anarchism, from a South African perspective, see: M. Schmidt and L. Van Der Walt, *Black Flame: the Revolutionary class politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism, Counterpower, vol. 1*. Oakland: AK Press, 2009.

society from operating once it came into existence.<sup>138</sup>

The first point to be understood when considering participatory democracy is that it is meant as a holistic proposal for radical change at all levels of society. Turner was interested in ending a situation in South Africa of,

gross social inequalities, and the absence of institutions effectively integrating the individual into the social decision-making process... The effect of participatory democracy is to do away with both these evils. It will do away with the main cause of race conflict<sup>139</sup> by abolishing social inequalities based on race, and it will provide the range of institutions that will integrate the individuals into society and will enable them, through the practical education of participation, to understand in the quickest and most thorough way possible how society works.<sup>140</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, Turner immediately and eloquently dissolved the separation that usually divides thinking about economics and politics, by stressing from the start that any kind of 'democracy' will only be possible through economic equality. That is, everyone must have equal control of their economic lives in order to have full and participatory social and political lives. This reasoning runs exactly counter to the politics which have taken predominance in South Africa in the last decades, which claims that the extension of voting rights to the black population will be a necessary step in the development of economic equality. Turner refutes this by reiterating that political power has little substance without power over the economy:

Because the owners of the factory have power over the factory and over its product, they can control the people who are dependent on these things—the workers. As a worker, I have no power over what I produce, where I produce, how I produce, or why I produce... An economic system is a system of power relationships. And power within the economy gives, as we shall see, power in other spheres of society as well. The first essential for democracy is that the workers should have power at their place of work, that is, that the enterprise should be controlled by those who are working in it.<sup>141</sup>

What exactly is the substance and shape of the notion of worker's control of the economy? There are many levels to this. First, let us consider the broadest outlines of the economy as a whole, and from there move to more specifics. 'To Summarize,' wrote Turner:

South African participatory democracy would involve, first, the replacement of

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<sup>138</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 91.

<sup>139</sup> Turner's thoughts regarding 'prejudice' are instructive, but ultimately insufficient: 'Prejudice can be cured by education. Contradiction of interest cannot. However, if the wealth gap is done away with, there will no longer be any inherent reason for conflict'. Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 87. Race is a power in-and-of-itself, and must be grappled with directly, as well as dealing with the material under-pinnings of racial inequality.

<sup>140</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

private ownership of the means of production by workers control in industry and in agriculture. By 'worker', be it noted, is meant every individual who plays a part in the production process, from manager to cleaner.<sup>142</sup>

Aware that, 'the replacement of private ownership of the means of production' is a powerfully loaded term in many people's minds, Turner went to great lengths to clarify what exactly he was advocating. Turner called for a massive redistribution of resources and channelling public money towards education, housing and public health. Furthermore, Turner felt strongly that, 'In a just society whites cannot hope to retain their present standard of living.'<sup>143</sup> Going even further in this vein, Richard Turner saw it necessary to insist that:

Naturally there would be no compensation paid to the previous owners, since their control of the means of production is, as we have seen, a function either of inheritance or personal skill in exploiting others – neither of which, in terms of the Christian human model<sup>144</sup> are deserving of reward.<sup>145</sup>

Morally, at least, Turner is absolutely correct here. In addition, Turner had the foresight to realize that changing imbalances in standard of living could not be done simply by turning blacks into property owners. He asserts that public intervention is the only sufficient mechanism to redistribute industry such that black ownership might be achieved.<sup>146</sup> Such thinking has far more radical implications than the 'Black Economic Empowerment' program in South Africa, 'Indigenisation' programs in Zimbabwe, or other similar models.

As for clarifying the concept of ending 'private ownership of the means of production,' Turner quotes Roberta Dahl's description of the structure of ownership that would replace private property:

it might be closer to the mark to say that no one owns it. It is not, certainly, owned by the state or shareholders. The workers own it. The point is that property is a bundle of rights. Once the pieces in this bundle have been parceled out, nothing exactly corresponding to the conventional meaning of property remains.<sup>147</sup>

That is to say, in sharing decision-making power collectively, the main function of 'ownership' is spread out amongst the population, rather than resting, precisely in 'anyone's'

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<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83. As an intriguing side-note, Turner anticipated white demands for 'minority rights' and respect of their 'culture' in a new South Africa, and respected it, with one major exception: 'The maintenance of their cultural identity by white South Africans is a reasonable wish, but *it is not dependent on their maintenance of economic privilege, and should not be confused with this.*' p. 87.

<sup>144</sup> 'The Christian Human Model' is a phrase Turner coined to refer to the supposedly 'Christian' values of loving people over things, and rejecting the capitalist mentality which is obsessed with possessing material objects at the expense of human relationships.

<sup>145</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, pp. 90-91.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.



hands. Turner himself explains the concept as follows:

Various different groups - the workers themselves, the local municipality, and the society as a whole - have specific rights over the enterprise and its product. No one of these groups owns the enterprise, in the sense in which the capitalist owns it... our ordinary concept of ownership remains for private goods: umbrellas and wristwatches, radios and books.<sup>148</sup>

While Turner retained the right to protect private property at the level of 'private goods' he did however clarify that some degree of communal use of 'private' property, such as cameras and automobiles, would be useful.<sup>149</sup> From this concept of property in particular it is easy to see that for Richard Turner, 'social justice' in some rigid formulation was not enough. What he was interested in was a set of changes in the material structure of the society in accordance with a set of changes in the value systems that govern our behavior. Rather than mathematical, statistical equality, or the end of private property through state decree, Turner envisioned social and economic equality as rooted in new human relationships.

Unlike most articulations of socialism, participatory democracy seeks to *de*-centralize power and decision-making as much as possible. As opposed to a Central Committee or Presidency having maximum power, within, 'participatory democracy, workers' control of industry and agriculture would occur within the context of a political system based on universal franchise and maximum decentralization, with real powers being given to local and to provincial authorities.<sup>150</sup> The central site of power would be essentially the smallest: the workplace. From there, power would extent outwards in networks and federations of coordinated decision-making. Turner does not go into great detail about this, stating that, 'all I can do with the space available is to make the crucial point that planning does not require that a central authority bureaucratically make all decisions.'<sup>151</sup>

Turner, does however give a few hints as to the structure and benefits of de-centralized decision-making. For example, in response to potential criticisms that the system would be inefficient, Turner explains that, 'even if there were economic arguments in favor of centralization, there might be social arguments in favor of planned decentralization.'<sup>152</sup> Such a de-centralization of power could shift the balance of decision-making away from the

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<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

production and protection of luxury and towards meeting human needs.<sup>153</sup> Structurally, decision-making would move up from the enterprises out to higher and higher levels of decision-making, with workers represented on municipal boards, and municipalities directly involved in planning health, education, and urban development.<sup>154</sup>

If 'socialism' is a category broad enough to include all of the various splits amongst Marxist parties, independent and dissident Marxists, as well as anarchists and other so-called 'left-wing communists', then calling for the reduction of hierarchy is not so unusual amongst socialist theorists. If the category is thought of more traditionally – that is the various Communist Parties that claimed to govern socialist States – then speaking of the negative effects of hierarchy is nothing less than heresy. All things considered, the structure of the 'Left' in South Africa is generally 'traditional' in its adherence to the more doctrinaire versions of Marxist thought. So, while Turner may have found confirmation of his thoughts in 'socialist' and anarchist thought elsewhere,<sup>155</sup> within his own context, he was an utter non-conformist.

Richard Turner did not go as far as to advocate a total leveling of social position and the total destruction of all forms of hierarchy, (as many anarchists aspire towards) but he was nonetheless acutely aware of the need to minimize hierarchy in order to maximize participation.<sup>156</sup> In outlining his proposals for democratic control of the workplace, Turner writes that:

None of these measures is finally going to eliminate all trace of hierarchy and all trace of skill differences. But this is not at issue. We are trying to decrease hierarchy and dependence and increase autonomy, as much is possible, rather than trying to reach an impossible perfection. We are trying to ensure that those hierarchies that exist do not place barriers between people and do not require patterns of authority and deference.<sup>157</sup>

The stress on 'increasing autonomy' and reducing 'patterns of authority and deference' owes a great deal to the anarchist tradition of opposing oppression on an interpersonal level as well

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<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>155</sup> See sources on participatory economics and syndicalism, listed above.

<sup>156</sup> 'Anarchists are people who reject all forms of government or coercive authority, all forms of hierarchy and domination. They are therefore opposed to what the Mexican anarchist Flores Magón called the 'sombre trinity' -- state, capital and the church. Anarchists are thus opposed to both capitalism and to the state, as well as to all forms of religious authority. But anarchists also seek to establish or bring about by varying means, a condition of anarchy, that is, a decentralised society without coercive institutions, a society organised through a federation of voluntary associations.' B. Morris, 'Anthropology and Anarchism,' *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*, no. 45, p. 38.

<sup>157</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 50.

as on a societal level. Contrary to the stereotypical image of 'anarchy,' anarchism is a political philosophy that is very much interested in *effective means of organization* which maximize human autonomy and equality.<sup>158</sup> Turner's ideas on the difference between hierarchical institutions and participatory ones, echo the central tenets of anarchism:

A hierarchical type of institution... is specifically defined in terms of people's roles and people acting out their roles without understanding. On the other hand, if we have institutions which are designed to involve everybody into a process of determining what the institution should do, this is likely to develop the autonomous identity. So I distinguish between hierarchical organisations, in which roles are reinforced, and what I have described as participatory organisations, in which the development of autonomy on the part of the individual is encouraged by the nature of the institutional structures.<sup>159</sup>

It is important to stress that Richard Turner did not conceive of his writing as being a formal 'programme' of any kind. Turner was certain that human beings are not at base – or at least not *only* – selfish.<sup>160</sup> He trusted that human beings are (or can be) motivated by higher goals than material gain, and reiterated often that the goal was to empower people to decide for themselves, rather than to tell them what was necessary:

The object of this scheme is not to tell people what they want, or what they ought to want. It is to give individuals the maximum possible amount of control over what happens to themselves and hence the maximum possible amount of freedom to decide what they want, and then to act to get it.<sup>161</sup>

In the proposal for the construction of 'an ideal possible society,' there is a basic trust that people will teach themselves how to take part in a participatory democratic system, *through the structures of the system itself*.

Central to Richard Turner's vision for a desirable economic and political system was the concept of worker's councils. Turner wrote that, 'The basis of political freedom lies in the workers' control of their enterprise. This gives them their power...Unless individuals have some direct control over some of the society's resources and some organized relationship with other people, they have no power at all to resist.'<sup>162</sup> Simply put, worker's councils are democratically governed organisations of workers within each workplace which have ultimate responsibility for managing the daily affairs at the place of work. Councils replace –

<sup>158</sup> 'Can there be social organisation without authority, without government? The anarchists claim that there can be, and they also claim that it is desirable that there should be.' C. Ward, 'Anarchism as a Theory of Organization' <http://www.panarchy.org/ward/organization.1966.html>. For more, see, for example: E. Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays*, New York: 1969. Or, E. Malatesta, *Anarchy*, London: 1995.

<sup>159</sup> SPRO-CAS, *White Liberation*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1972, p. 72.

<sup>160</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 70.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

or at least greatly reduce – the dependence on management hierarchies by spreading decision-making power out amongst all of the workers. From this simple starting point, the hope is that the democratic control practiced within the councils can be expanded into cooperation between various workplaces, up to the level of decision-making industry-wide, neighborhood-wide, city-wide, etc. In other words, Turner envisioned councils being developed at every level in which people participate socially. Rather than centralized decision-making bodies, Turner saw that, 'we can have a number of different autonomous decision making agencies. This prevents concentration of power and increases the possibility of meaningful participation.'<sup>163</sup>

There are a number of important facets to this connection between work and politics. First, Turner opposes a political climate of passivity, in which many people are unaware of and indifferent to the decisions being made which effect their lives. He sees a situation developing in many societies in which,

“They” do it all for me. When election time comes round again I do not know what has been happening, for there is no incentive in my daily life for me to follow what has been happening. What parliament decides affects my life considerably, but when and how and where it affects me I cannot see, since there is no thread for me to follow from my own situation to the problems facing society as a whole.<sup>164</sup>

In order to break out of this apathetic situation – a situation of dependency on powerful elites that do not consider the needs of the vast majority – Turner speaks repeatedly of what he calls, 'the educative function of participation.'<sup>165</sup>

In Richard Turner's vision of the transition from a capitalist system into a system in which economic resources and political decision-making are shared equally amongst the population, he is confident that the act of taking shared control of the workplace will itself teach people how to run all other aspects of their lives. For Turner, laziness stupidity and indifference amongst workers are all traits forced on them by an economic structure that dominates their lives and exploits their labour:

In capitalist society the workers are not interested in the enterprise itself; why should they be, since it does not belong to them? They have neither opportunity nor stimulus to see it as a whole and to understand how what each individual does is related to the rest. The situation is one in which they are told what to do, given little opportunity for the exercise of their initiative or intelligence, and so do not develop

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<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61

initiative or intelligence. The enterprise is not only a work place; it is also a socialization process. Once the workers have been through this process, it is scarcely surprising that they do not appear to have the competence to run an enterprise. What the capitalist system has made the workers into is then produced as evidence for the impossibility of any other social system.<sup>166</sup>

Contrary to popular reasoning, Turner insists that if workers learn indifference and incompetence through being subjected to an undesirable system, these negative habits can be unlearned by shifting the conditions of work. Turner does not speak of workers learning new skills in a paternalistic way. He is not interested in 'civilizing' the African working class; he is provoking a deeper understanding of the issue of worker passivity. That is, he stresses that people learn new values simply by living them.

Turner explains that, 'the educative function of participation... operates on two levels. It equips individuals with the psychological capacity to take part in decision-making, and it also helps them to get the information required to make good decisions.'<sup>167</sup> Worker's councils put workers in a position to be able to understand the overall workings of the business in a more holistic way and to reorganize their workplace not only to increase wages, but also to spread skills and responsibility out amongst more people, and therefore to give the work more significance and dignity for those involved. Trade unions are often spoken of as providing worker's with increased control over the conditions of their labor. Turner does not totally reject this idea, but he stresses that establishing unions alone is not adequate:

The trade union is a first step in the direction of power for the workers... But by the very nature of the case the trade union places merely a negative check on management, which retains day-to-day control. Furthermore, control over the product—that is, essentially over the profits—remains in the hands of the owner. *As worker I can, with the aid of the trade union, make my work situation more comfortable, but I cannot make it more meaningful... My job remains a means to satisfy personal ends external to it. My interest lies purely in more pay and shorter hours. I have no intrinsic interest in the job, because it is not something in which I can exercise my human autonomy. Only full workers' control can permit this.*<sup>168</sup>

What is the connection between radical change within the workplace and the governing of the society as a whole? Turner is adamant that, 'Workers' control is not only a means whereby I can control a specific area of my life. It is an educational process in which I can learn better to control all areas of my life and can develop both psychological and interpersonal skills in a situation of cooperation with my fellows in a common task.'<sup>169</sup> Much

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<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39. Emphasis added.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

as the classroom must be radically re-structured (indeed, re-imagined) in order to provide people the necessary space to develop as full participants in their society, so too the workplace becomes a type of classroom for developing non-capitalist values and practices. 'It is only if the workers participate in the control of the central part of their lives—their work—that they can develop the personal qualities of autonomy, initiative, and self-confidence necessary for [participatory democracy].'<sup>170</sup>

Therefore, we return full circle to the everyday passive citizen within western democratic societies. How can such a person stop themselves from being controlled by 'them'?

My role as co-participant in the enterprise provides the missing thread. I am obliged to consider both the economic problems of the enterprise as a whole and the social problems of housing, feeding, educating, and healing the workers. On the basis of this, it is possible for the problems of society to begin to make sense to me and so for me to evaluate intelligently what is happening and to participate intelligently at higher levels of government.<sup>171</sup>

## **BROADER CONTEXT**

The central premises of participatory democracy are not merely abstract, as there have been numerous moments, in a number of countries and at a number of different times, during which worker's councils have risen to prominence and either challenged or directly confronted and transformed the structures of economic and political power. Richard Turner was aware of the relationship between his own proposals and experiments in the direction of worker's self-management in other places. Turner went to lengths to clarify, first and foremost, that his vision should not be confused with the type of socialism practiced in the USSR:

When considering the question of an alternative to capitalism we must beware of assuming that the only other possibility is the Soviet model of communism. Soviet society has done away with private ownership of the means of production. But this is not enough. For there are no political institutions in Soviet society that would enable the people to assert their control over the means of production. In a situation where there is no effective communication between leadership and people, the leaders have two alternatives: to withdraw into the pursuit of personal gain, or to use coercion to get the society moving. Both have been tried in the Soviet Union. The result is a large, inefficient, and undemocratic state bureaucracy. The only real alternative is to ensure popular participation, based on workers' control, in a

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<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

context of political freedom.<sup>172</sup>

Ironically, the first widespread case of worker's councils gaining power was in Russia, during the Russian Revolution. There, worker's councils were referred to as 'Soviets,' and the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets!' was central to the revolutionary struggle in 1917.

According to one observer:

In the year 1917-18 Russia was the freest country in the world. Freedom of speech, press, assembly, propaganda, freedom in the field of scientific research, education, individual self-assertion- there was unlimited freedom in almost every domain of life. Spontaneous activity and free initiative took the place of law; local self-government flourished in the form of Soviets, the state as represented by appointed officialdom was vanishing like smoke.<sup>173</sup>

Unfortunately, as Milovan Djilas notes, 'everything happened differently in the U.S.S.R. and other communist countries from what the leaders anticipated. They expected that the state would rapidly wither away, that democracy would be strengthened. The reverse happened.'<sup>174</sup>

As the Communist Party gradually took over more and more control of the post-revolutionary society the demand for broad control of the society through de-centralized councils of workers was increasingly suppressed. The suppression and dismantling of the power of the soviets by the Soviet Union (and similar processes of dismantling worker's control by so-called 'Parties of the Working Class') is central to understanding the split between 'Soviet' Marxism and the 'Western' Marxism that Turner's vision is a part of.<sup>175</sup>

In other words, Participatory Democracy ought to be interpreted not only within the context of South African politics in the 1970s, but also within the broader context of historical attempts to establish worker's self-management in society. For example, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was understood by many as a living example of the possibility of worker's councils exercising widespread control. C.L.R. James described the central lesson of the revolution as follows:

By the total uprising of a people, the Hungarian Revolution has disclosed the political form which not only destroys the bureaucratic state power, but substitutes in its place a socialist democracy, based not on the control of people but on the mastery of things. This political form is the Workers Councils, embracing the whole of the working population from bottom to top, organized at the source of all

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<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>173</sup> Maximov, *Counter-revolution and the Soviet Union*, 1935. <http://libcom.org/library/counter-revolution-soviet-union-gregori-maximov>

<sup>174</sup> M. Djilas, *The New Class*. New York: Praeger, 1957, p. 37.

<sup>175</sup> A central text that deals with this split can be found in: C.L.R. James, *State Capitalism and World Revolution*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1986.

power, the place of work, making all decisions in the shop or in the office.<sup>176</sup>

Such a sentiment clearly echoes the propositions put forward by Turner,<sup>177</sup> and Turner's articulation of a 'possible, ideal society,' would not be possible without historical precedents such as these to draw inspiration from. There is not space here to deal with all of the historical precedents<sup>178</sup> to Turner's politics. Still it is important – at minimum – to acknowledge that Participatory Democracy is not a mere anomaly.

Turner himself clearly saw his notions in relation to other examples in other countries. How much he was aware of is not clear from reading *The Eye of the Needle*, as there is not a great deal of space dedicated to the subject. Nonetheless, he does explicitly mention a few examples of worker's control being practiced elsewhere:

In Eastern Europe the idea of workers' control is deeply embedded in the Marxist ideology, although obscured by Communist Party practice. However, it tends to emerge in moments of crisis, as in Poland in 1956, and again at the end of 1970, with the fall of Gomulka as a result of workers' protests. In Czechoslovakia worker's control was one of the most important developments in the later reforms of 1968, and in some industries it even continued to spread for a while after the Soviet invasion.<sup>179</sup>

However, Turner primarily expresses interest in looking at other situations in order to avoid possible pitfalls, rather than to emulate them:

It will also be useful to look at those societies that have tried non-capitalist ways of life, even if all we learn from them is what not to do. We can thereby discover some of the problems specific to post-capitalist societies and give the theorizing at least some practical reference points<sup>180</sup>... In the following brief survey I can do no more than indicate which of these factors is relevant. I shall make no attempt at complete evaluation. These are examples from whose problems we can learn, rather than models we should imitate.<sup>181</sup>

In this section of the book, Turner analyses a number of socialist states, including the

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<sup>176</sup> C.L.R. James, *Facing Reality*. Detroit: Bewick, 1974, pp. 5-6.

<sup>177</sup> There is not the space here to deal with the Hungarian Revolution in any real depth. However, it is interesting to note that, as far as a key concept of Turner's, 'the educative function of participation', a preliminary reading of the situation in Hungary 1956 seems to show that the workers' councils developed quite rapidly, in the moment of the revolution itself, and without much prior participation in similar structures to prepare them. A. Anderson, *Hungary '56*. Detroit: Black & Red, 1976.

<sup>178</sup> Some possible examples to be explored would be: the Kronstadt rebellion in 1921, the Spanish civil war, 1933-36, the uprising in Czechoslovakia in 1968 (and other rebellions in 1968 with similar ideologies, such as in Yugoslavia, France, Mexico, and the United States), the Solidarity movement in Poland in the early 1980s, as well as smaller attempts to develop, through rebellion or voluntarily, to create worker-run enterprises, such as the ones developed in Argentina after economic crisis there, or the cooperatives of the Basque region of France. These are just some of the topics that could be explored in more depth.

<sup>179</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 42.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.



Soviet Union, Tanzania, China, and Yugoslavia. In hindsight, it could be said that Turner is actually overly sympathetic to developments in these countries, despite his stated goal of finding examples 'from whose problems we can learn.' For example, Turner speaks positively of the Cultural Revolution, of the Ujamaa villages in Tanzania, and even goes so far as to claim that, 'Yugoslavia is the only country in which workers' control (1) is applied in all sectors of society, (2) has been in existence for a considerable period of time, now about twenty years.'<sup>182</sup>

It is not the purpose of this chapter to analyse the faults or successes of socialist states in any depth. It is sufficient to note that Turner's sentiment is quite optimistic, and his position is not borne out by events in Yugoslavia since his death. Perhaps Turner meant merely to point to the tendencies within Yugoslavian socialism that made it noticeably *less* bureaucratic, centralized and oppressive than the Soviet Union. He wrote that, 'The Communist League certainly does not play the same centralizing role as does the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. There are nevertheless limitations on political freedom that must affect the democratic working of the system.'<sup>183</sup> It is a cursory and diplomatic analysis, but certainly true enough.

More substantially, Turner raises fears about the actual substance of 'worker's self-management' in Yugoslavia. While Turner could not conceive of a way to do entirely without hierarchies of knowledge and skill in the workplace, he was nonetheless concerned that,

the greater danger is that the managers, who have direct access to all the information and who draw up plans, will be able to impose their wishes and dominate the elected members. There is considerable evidence of this happening in Yugoslavia... Is the system such that a group of decision-makers can, consciously or unconsciously, use their special positions to acquire material privileges *and so become a new ruling class?*<sup>184</sup>

This was quite a central problem with socialism as practiced so far. Milovan Djilas, who rose through the ranks of the Communist League eventually grew to believe that the Communist system was (and everywhere, not just in Yugoslavia) creating a 'new exploiting and governing class, born from the exploited class'<sup>185</sup> and dangerously divided from the mass of the population. In other words, Djilas saw Turner's two concerns – the strong existence of the party and the hierarchical control of management – as part of *one* phenomenon, in which the

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<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45. Emphasis added.

<sup>185</sup> Djilas, *New Class*, p. 42.

Party bureaucrats and the managerial bureaucrats *are together* in developing new structures of control and exploitation.<sup>186</sup>

Fredy Perlman, a Yugoslavian-trained economist, wrote eloquently about the contradiction between the official message of the Communist authorities and the actual reality of the economy:

The paradox can be stated in more general terms: social relations already known to Marx reappear in a society which has experienced a socialist revolution led by a Marxist party in the name of the working class... According to official histories, Yugoslavia eliminated exploitation in 1945, when the Yugoslav League of Communists won state power. Yet workers whose surplus labor supports a state or commercial bureaucracy, whose unpaid labor turns against them as a force which does not seem to result from their own activity but from some higher power – such workers perform forced labor: they are exploited. According to official histories, Yugoslavia eliminated the bureaucracy as a social group over the working class in 1952, when the system of workers' self-management was introduced. But workers who alienate their living activity in exchange for the means of life do not control themselves; they are controlled by those to whom they alienate their labor and its products, even if these people eliminated themselves in legal documents and proclamations.<sup>187</sup>

Turner saw clearly that both political and economic power must be de-centralized, and placed as fully as possible in the hands of worker themselves, rather than in the hands of a 'party of the working class.' He had read enough Marx to understand that all people must control as much as possible the product of their own labour, or else their labour is turned against them and becomes an activity 'outside of' their lives. Most likely, his defense of the so-called 'self-management' in Yugoslavia was an attempt to find tangible examples that hinted towards the system he really desired. However, when he said that attempts at worker's control were, 'obscured by Communist Party practice' he seemed to be taking the actual problems with the system much too lightly.

## THE USE OF UTOPIA

The first chapter of *The Eye of the Needle* is entitled, 'The Necessity of Utopian Thinking.' The final chapter is entitled, 'The Impracticality of Realism.' Clearly Turner meant to push the discourse beyond the limits of 'realism' and to examine the boundaries of

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<sup>186</sup> As a result of publishing these thoughts, he was stripped of all authority and imprisoned on an island off the coast of what is now Croatia.

<sup>187</sup> F. Perlman, *Revolt in Socialist Yugoslavia, June 1968*. Detroit: Black & Red, 1973, p. 51.

possibility. Nonetheless, there is some debate as to the usefulness of utopianism. Critical writing analysing Participatory Democracy tends to view the utopian aspects to be, at best, a *strategic* choice, rather than an outright preference on Turner's part.

Martin Legassick, in his lengthy book on 'Socialist Democracy,' encapsulates the standard Marxist objection to utopian thought quite succinctly. Noting Turner's contribution to the movement of the early 1970s, Legassick then quotes Turner at length, in defence of a utopian outlook:

We have to see which aspects of our society are the necessary result of the imperatives of human nature and of organization, and which aspects of it are changeable. We then need to make explicit the value principles embodied in our actual behavior, and to criticize these principles in the light of other possible values. Until we realize what other values, and what other social forms, are possible, we cannot judge the morality or otherwise of the existing society.<sup>188</sup>

But this quote is used merely to make a more fundamental point, in defence of Karl Marx. 'Utopian thought is valuable and necessary, for the reasons that Rick Turner outlined. However Marx in the nineteenth century brought utopian socialism back to earth.'<sup>189</sup> Simply and briefly stated, Legassick insists that Marx should not be understood as a utopian thinker, and therefore believes that no living socialist should embrace utopian thought, either. Socialism was 'brought back to earth' over one hundred years ago, and ought to remain firmly rooted in rational thought. In this worldview, materialism is superior to morality, pragmatic concerns are more important than an ideal vision. Why did Richard Turner, whom everyone agrees was a deeply rational man, insist on utopianism, the 'ideal, possible society'?

Richard Turner certainly rooted his politics in an analysis of the material conditions of South African society. He was a shrewd student of the developing economy, political system, and the means of power available to various social groups. Nonetheless, Turner insisted that materialist analysis was, on its own, insufficient:

To understand a society, to understand what it is, where it is going, where it could go, we cannot just describe it. We need also to theorize about it ... Theory is not difficult. What is often difficult is to shift oneself into a theoretical attitude, that is to realize what things in one's experience cannot be taken for granted.<sup>190</sup>

Keeping in mind Turner's main audience – white South African liberals – these sentences are amongst the most important in the whole of *The Eye of the Needle*. Turner sees that there is a

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<sup>188</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 2.

<sup>189</sup> M. Legassick, *Towards Socialist Democracy*. Durban: UKZN Press, 2007, p. 38.

<sup>190</sup> As quoted in Legassick *Towards Socialist Democracy*, p. 38.

lack of imagination within liberalism, that too many aspects of South African society are 'taken for granted.' Quite simply, without these basic assumptions being shaken profoundly, there was no possibility of radical change.

Andrew Nash believes that Turner's utopianism was a necessary response to the political climate, in which concrete options for opposing apartheid were very rare.

Turner developed and presented his argument for democratic socialism at a time when the working class in South Africa was... far from choosing its own future... either attempting to minimize its present losses, or was in total disarray... and liberal opposition to apartheid had become increasingly moderate and reformist. In this context, it is not surprising that Turner's argument was utopian: exploring possibilities for individual ethical commitment rather than examining concrete contemporary developments. Unless one was prepared to fall back on a dogmatic belief in the inevitability of socialism, those contemporary developments did not provide much grounds for socialist political commitment. Thus the point of Turner's argument was precisely to avoid the supposed realism of understanding future possibilities within the limits set by present realities.<sup>191</sup>

Nash acknowledges the benefit of Turner's utopianism, in that he avoids the pitfalls of both liberalism and 'scientific' socialism (which claims that history is marching inevitably in one sure direction). Still, in this analysis there is a hint that utopianism is an unfortunate choice, something to be either overlooked or forgiven. There is a suggestion that, were the working class stronger, utopian politics would be 'unnecessary.'

Framing the issue in a slightly different way, Michael Nupen stresses the tension between Turner's concrete involvement in black politics and his theoretical contribution to white politics:

Richard Turner the political activist was, of course, highly sensitive to the possibilities of re-constituting mass organization, and he played a significant role in assisting the process through workers education movements and the fledgling black trade unions. But this... curiously, does not significantly influence his theorizing.<sup>192</sup> What determines the horizons and form of his theory is the problem of white politics. Turner paid a great deal of attention to white politics and, for this, a theory of radical liberation through heightened consciousness outside of organization was essential.<sup>193</sup>

It is true that *The Eye of the Needle* was directed primarily at white South Africans, and that it sought to provoke solutions to 'the problem of white politics.' However, Turner's analysis of post-colonial African states and his critique of a politics of 'black unity' also calls firmly for the development of a radical vision for society. In other words, Turner indicts both white and

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<sup>191</sup> Nash, 'History and Consciousness,' n.d., p. 5.

<sup>192</sup> The issue of Turner's theory regarding worker's education and organizing is addressed in much greater detail in Chapter 3.

<sup>193</sup> Nupen, 'Richard Turner on Dialectical Reason,' p. 12.

black activists for failing to sufficiently address themselves to the theoretical task of imagining an ideal society. With this in mind, Nupen's dichotomy between Turner's approach to white and black politics seems poorly founded. Furthermore, it is the argument of this thesis that Turner's utopianism most certainly informed his involvement in labour organisation. But Nupen's point does raise another important question. That is, was Turner's way of addressing white politics the most effective that it could be? As for this question, both Nupen and Nash have a number of important contributions.

Nash's harshest critique of *The Eye of the Needle* is his contention that the utopian lens of the book inhibits its ability to advocate for *collective* social action. That is, Nash feels that utopian thinking places too much emphasis on the *individual* and his personal choice.

The argument for the necessity of utopian thinking... introduces a tension between personal morality and collective political action which is never fully resolved in the course of his argument as a whole. Utopian thinking makes possible both the moral evaluation and theoretical understanding of society. But these different kinds of understanding are linked largely through the concrete example of personal relations between individual men and women. It is in part because of the example chosen to demonstrate this link that the argument of the book's first chapter does not make clear how individual moral commitment leads to the collective political action with which the rest of the book is concerned.<sup>194</sup>

Indeed, the majority of the text of *The Eye of the Needle* is written towards 'you', the reader, the individual. This, combined with the repeated references to the capacity of human beings to *choose* freely, does seem to place undue stress on the capacity of individuals to have agency over history and society. Insofar as this over-valuing of the individual marks a structural weakness in *The Eye of the Needle*, Nupen places the blame on Turner's central reliance on the philosophical thinking of Jean-Paul Sartre. Nupen argues that Sartre's ideas have a definite function, but that the ideas take on a new dimension in the context of South Africa in the 1970s:

The usefulness of Sartre's work in the struggle against mechanistic marxism is abundantly clear. What is less clear, but, in my view, not a whit less important, are the consequences of accepting Sartre's rationalism when used in a context that had not fully exhausted the liberal tradition... Sartre's political horizon is entirely post liberal. He need not distance his radical individualism from liberalism because it was no longer a historical force in an advanced industrial country... In Turner's context liberalism was an important enemy as the dominant ideology of opposition.<sup>195</sup>

In other words, there is a danger that Turner's utopianism can be mis-read (in South Africa)

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<sup>194</sup> Nash, 'History and Consciousness,' n.d., p. 7.

<sup>195</sup> Nupen, 'Richard Turner on Dialectical Reason,' pp. 15-16.

as mere liberalism. Rather than succeeding at directing liberals to reconsider their worldview and embrace the possibility of radical social transformation, *The Eye of the Needle* runs dangerously close to reinforcing a central tenet of liberalism: the primacy of the individual. However, Sartre is not the only context for the utopian thinking in *The Eye of the Needle*.

To see utopianism as only a reaction to the desert of available options is to see it as a second-rate choice. Further, to see utopian thought as either a re-casting of liberalism or as a mis-understanding of the science of Marxism is also to fail to address the full scope of the ideas. It is important to analyse Turner's utopian thought in relation to developments in utopian thought that were happening at the time. Many among the New Left (internationally, not just in South Africa) felt strongly that advocating an end to the exploitation and violence of capitalism did not have to mean submitting to the cold scientific reasoning of traditional Marxism. In fact, Marcuse's embrace of utopian thought is rooted in a strong critique of socialism in practice:

We know now that neither the rational use [of technological forces] nor – and this is decisive – their collective control by the “immediate producers” (the workers) would by itself eliminate domination and exploitation: a bureaucratic welfare state would still be a state of repression which would continue even into the “second phase of socialism,” when each is to receive “according to his needs.”<sup>196</sup>

While *The Eye of the Needle* was written for a liberal audience, it was clearly informed by a radical left critique of both capitalism and soviet communism. In light of this critique, Marcuse proposed a re-evaluation of the concept of Utopia:

Up to now, it has been one of the principal tenets of the critical theory of society (and particularly Marxian theory) to refrain from what might be reasonably called utopian speculation... I believe that this restrictive conception must be revised, and that the revision is suggested, and even necessitated, by the actual evolution of contemporary societies... what is denounced as 'utopian' is no longer that which has 'no place' and cannot have any place in the historical universe, but rather that which is blocked from coming about by the power of the established societies.<sup>197</sup>

Marx may have, as Legassick says, brought socialism 'back to earth.' But many of Marx's followers practiced a cold, mechanical version of socialism, and in time socialists such as Richard Turner sought to get away from that kind of mechanical socialist political theory. It may be the case, ironically, that the repressive material conditions of South Africa forced a utopian politics to be taken seriously. Then again, it is not, 'all other things being equal' impossible to consciously embrace a utopian politics, regardless of whether or not it is

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<sup>196</sup> Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, p. 6.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

strategic to do so.

## CONCLUSION

Richard Turner's *The Eye of the Needle* made a significant departure from the boundaries of possibility available in South African oppositional discourse at the time. As a result:

It made an impact that was quite disproportionate to its value as a philosophical and political study. For he did not set out to produce a fully elaborated case for socialist democracy. What Turner was attempting, rather, was to infuse a sense of vision into the narrow and restricted political debate of the time. It was a time of flux and challenge, but also a time of despair.<sup>198</sup>

Aside from the moral clarity of Turner's message, and the clear, simple language of the text, the success of *The Eye of the Needle* was also due to the lack of a traditional Left at the time of publishing. Turner's articulation of the need for a new 'human model', rather than merely reforming racial capitalism deftly avoided the blunt, knee-jerk defenses of socialism that are common. Instead, Turner's vision of Participatory Democracy was expressed in utopian terms, appealing to the capacity of human beings to radically shift their consciousness and to deal rationally with social injustice. While this approach had the shortcoming of being confused with individualist liberalism, it nonetheless, 'breathe[d] a different spirit' into the political discourse. Whereas, as Morphet explains, 'Most South African writing, both in fiction and polemic, assumes a powerful objective dominance in the social structure – men may protest and bewail their fate but little or nothing can be done to effect any change...' Turner's politics were rooted in the conviction that, 'Men have made the society in a way that can be completely comprehended, and in the same way men can change the society.'<sup>199</sup>

Chapter 2 builds on the understanding of the basic theses of *The Eye of the Needle* towards an analysis of Turner's broader impact on the New Left in South Africa. In specific, the following chapter addresses Turner's role in encouraging radical initiatives amongst the white community, (principally Spro-cas and students within Nusas) as well as his relationship to the Black Consciousness politics and activism.

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<sup>198</sup> Greaves, 'Richard Turner and the Politics of Emancipation,' pp. 37-38.

<sup>199</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. xxiii.

## Chapter 2

### Turner and the New Left

*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.*<sup>200</sup>

—Steve Biko

*The refusal of blacks to want to be “like whites” is not racism.  
It is good taste.*<sup>201</sup>

—Richard Turner

#### INTRODUCTION

This chapter will examine Richard Turner’s impact on the New Left in South Africa. As Turner was, first and foremost, a teacher, his teaching methods and pedagogy will be explored in detail, including both his work as a professor and his extra-curricular activities. Here I argue that it is important to remember that Turner’s involvement in politics was intrinsically connected to the theoretical ideas about social change outlined in *The Eye of the Needle*. Further, as the apartheid state highlighted in their decision to ban him, Turner’s influence on students was remarkable, so any account of his political participation must start with an understanding of his teaching.

More generally, I argue that Turner’s approach to politics had a character to it that was distinctly open and autonomous. Fatima Meer describes the way in which Turner’s radicalism was different from others in that

He was very independent thinking, never a member of any party, never doctrinaire, and was always tolerant with people, even if he very much disagreed with them. He would of course study Marx as Marx is an important social thinker, but he was not a ‘Communist’ (in the sense that Communists are always doctrinaire).<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Biko, *I Write What I Like*, London: Bowerdean, 1978, p. 25.

<sup>201</sup> Turner, ‘Black Consciousness and White Liberals,’ within Karis & Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge*, p. 431.

<sup>202</sup> Fatima Meer was a life-long participant in the freedom struggle in South Africa and a colleague of Richard Turner, in the Sociology department at the University of Natal. Interview, 3 December 2009.



This independent approach to politics had a number of specific impacts on the developing New Left of the period. First, Turner helped to persuade a number of white liberals to adopt a more radical politics. Part of this shift from liberalism to radicalism required being more sympathetic towards Black Consciousness, to understand it not so much as a threat but as a *form of radicalism*, and therefore something to be respected and emulated by white radicals. At the same time, Turner encouraged people to adopt a class perspective when analysing social problems, and strongly encouraged young (white) leftists to involve themselves in labour struggles.

While, for a period, Turner was a catalyst that inspired a number of people to embrace new political positions, his period of influence was relatively short-lived. Within a short time after his banning, and, ironically, as a result of the initial attempts to organize labour, many who had been inspired by Turner turned towards traditional, vanguardist Marxism.

## **TEACHING TOWARDS FREEDOM**

Richard Turner was a teacher; it was his profession and his passion. Nonetheless, he had an extremely unconventional attitude about schooling and about the role of teachers. On a fundamental level he was skeptical about the values of schooling in general. Turner believed that, 'There is no body of key facts that have to be learned in some special order. What has to be learned is a particular way of thinking, the ability to analyze, to think critically, and to think creatively. And if there were a body of key facts, children would not learn them in school.'<sup>203</sup> This worldview permeated all of Turner's efforts as a teacher.

Richard Turner was particularly critical of the socializing function of schooling. According to Turner, schooling prepares people for their society.

It prepares individuals not just for social living, but also for living out specific roles in a specific social structure. The social structure may be one of gross inequality, but if the socializing mechanisms are working effectively, independent, kicking children can be turned into passive, accepting adults at the bottom of the pile, who accept their role because they have been deprived of the capacity to conceive of any other way of existing. The effect of the process of socialization is to make a particular social structure and a particular human model seem to be natural, and to hide the fact that it is not natural and could be changed.<sup>204</sup>

In a capitalist society, where the social relationships are all unequal — with some wielding

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<sup>203</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 67.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

arbitrary power and others routinely passive — schooling teaches people passivity, acceptance of hierarchies, toleration and defense of a society that does not meet basic human needs.

This is a general phenomenon, and of course begins at a very young age. Turner argued that, deeper than the curriculum, the structure of schooling, ‘the style of education and, in particular, the form of discipline get me used to certain types of relationships with other people, for example, deference to authority figures, bureaucratic order as a mode of life, etc’<sup>205</sup> In other words, the most essential lessons about the world are conveyed to children subtly and persistently for over a dozen years before they reach the university level.

Furthermore, the university is not an inherently liberatory institution. According to one view, the university fits into a lifelong process of corralling and confining thinking — not setting it loose. For the French student protestors in 1968, (whom Turner would have been sympathetic to) ‘The student is [playing] a provisional role, a rehearsal for his ultimate role as a conservative element in the functioning of the commodity system. Being a student is a form of initiation.’<sup>206</sup>

It is important to clarify that the socialization processes which teach people to accept the basic premises and structures of the unequal society are cloaked in the language of righteousness and high moral standards. Turner explains how, in the modern capitalist states, the dominant ethics taught in schools and in society at large seek,

to rationalize [injustice], to smooth the edges. I shall call this an internal morality: Pay your debts, give to the poor, don’t tell lies, don’t steal (i.e., don’t deprive people of property that is theirs in terms of the given legal-property system in ways that the system does not permit). In a slave society, feed your slaves properly; don’t sell their children until they are eight years old. In war, kill people with bullets, but not with poison gas. These internal moralities make life slightly easier for people within the system, and as such should not be sneered at. But they do not challenge the human model implicit in the system. An ethic which does this I shall refer to as a transcendent morality. It goes beyond the given and asks the fundamental question: “What is human life for, what is the meaning of human life?”<sup>207</sup>

It is particularly at the university level that the student learns these kinds of subtle rationalizations necessary to endure and ‘thrive’ within an unjust system. They may be taught a degree of critical thinking, but within strict boundaries, and certainly the university *as a whole* frowns heavily on the raising of transcendental moral questions.

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<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>206</sup> Situationist International, ‘On the Poverty of Student Life.’ <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/poverty.htm>.

<sup>207</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 19.

Remarkably, socialization is reinforced as much by the Professor as much as the Kindergarten teacher. According to Dan O'Meara, a colleague of Richard Turner at the University of Natal, 'The idea in a South African university at the time was still very patriarchal. The professor would arrive, give a lecture, this would be the absolute truth, the students would take notes and go and learn those notes and reproduce them in an exam, and that was knowledge.'<sup>208</sup> Michael Nupen, the head of the politics department, could be seen as an example of this patriarchal tradition. His lectures were precise, theatrical, grandiose. Foszia Turner-Stylianou offered a metaphor for Nupen's teaching style:

You as a student are sitting at the bottom and there is Michael at the top with all these tomes and sometimes he will chuck a tome down and if you were at a wrong place it will crush you or you'll be in the right place and you will greatly receive it.<sup>209</sup>

Richard Turner was well received as a lecturer in Nupen's department, although their styles of teaching differed tremendously.

Fatima Meer, a lecturer at the university recalls that, 'Rick was an unusually popular lecturer, and would frequently have extra students sitting in on his classes.'<sup>210</sup> Meer emphasized the way in which Turner, 'exposed white students at the University of Natal Durban to the realities of apartheid and particularly encouraged them to begin to understand black resistance to the system. At that time, the university was very isolated from this information.'<sup>211</sup> However, it is important to understand not only what Turner was teaching, but also *how*. Richard Turner was such an influential professor precisely because he refused to play into the standard role of conditioning and force-feeding ideas to his students. O'Meara claims that,

Rick broke with that [patriarchal] model absolutely. He would force people to think. He would walk into his first year classes and start asking questions instead of declaiming. He was absolutely ruthless in terms of not allowing people to just sit in the corner. Everybody had to speak. And this was very unsettling for a first year student, but they loved him. Because he did it in a way which didn't make you feel stupid... which empowered them.<sup>212</sup>

Tony Morphet attributes Turner's ability to take this personal, questioning approach, to his 'special personal gift of entering the world of discourse of his students.' Clarifying further,

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<sup>208</sup> Interview with O'Meara, 21 September 2009.

<sup>209</sup> Foszia Turner-Stylianou, second wife of Richard Turner and director of the Institute for Industrial Education, 1973-1975. Interview, 17 October 2009.

<sup>210</sup> Interview with Meer, 3 December 2009.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> Interview with O'Meara, 21 September 2009.

Morphet claims that,

[Turner's] age and his openly experimental lifestyle placed him at a level very similar to that of his students and his interactions with them were always conducted at their level and through their frames of reference. The complex new conceptual structure and techniques of thought he was introducing were handled with an utmost simplicity and clarity.<sup>213</sup>

Duncan Greaves refers to Richard Turner's teaching style as 'emancipatory,' in that the heavy emphasis on dialogue leads the student, 'through a continual movement from the given to what is not given, an ever more searching interrogation of unspoken assumptions and preconceptions.' In Greaves' view, 'Education, in this manner, is fundamentally self-education; the teacher is present as a facilitator rather than an instructor.'<sup>214</sup> Of course, not everyone reacted positively to this teaching style. According to Turner's second wife, Foszia,

One of his students in his political 3 class said, "Dr. Turner I really resent the fact that you allow the class to be side-tracked. When are we going to go through the syllabus?" And Rick said, "Well, we are." This student wanted to be given notes, but he wasn't being given notes, he was given *discussion*... Rick disappointed those that wanted [the old authoritarian method] and excited those who hadn't realized that there was another way.<sup>215</sup>

A number of students took Dr. Turner's courses quite seriously, developed a relationship with him outside of class, seeking advice on student politics, etc. and a number of students became very active in the struggle against apartheid. O'Meara described these students.

The first class I had to teach was an honours political science, which included Halton Cheadle [and others taught by Turner]. They'd all had two or three years with Rick and they were just *incredibly good*. These people knew how to think, they knew how to pontificate and they knew how to ask the right kinds of questions... His influence was extraordinary as a teacher.<sup>216</sup>

Tony Morphet stresses that Turner's influence on left-leaning students was not done single-handedly, and was not antagonistic to Michael Nupen. Rather, together, 'They drew to them, in the lecture halls, in the non-formal discussion sessions and outside in the variety of alternative learning situations, a group who were ready to issue challenges to the prevailing interpretations of South African reality.'<sup>217</sup> One student of both Nupen and Turner, Halton

<sup>213</sup> Morphet, 'Introduction,' p. xvii.

<sup>214</sup> Greaves, 'Richard Turner and the Politics of Emancipation,' p. 33. Turner's own writing on the ideal role of the teacher echoes Greaves' idea of a facilitator. See below.

<sup>215</sup> Interview with Turner-Stylinau, 17 October 2009.

<sup>216</sup> Interview with O'Meara, 21 September 2009.

<sup>217</sup> Morphet, 'Introduction,' p. xviii.

Cheadle, confirms Morphet's claim. Cheadle describes how Nupen, 'creatively destroyed all the kind of undigested pieces of the stuff that you accumulate at school and from your father. It was a brutal process.'<sup>218</sup> Cheadle says that the combination of Nupen and Turner was 'magnificent in the sense that Nupen broke things down and Rick built them up. Systematically Rick would come in and lay the basis of a worldview.'<sup>219</sup>

For Turner, this approach to teaching was not simply a question of what makes for interesting university courses, but rather a central piece of both imagining and creating a liberated society. Turner's teaching style, centered around patient questioning and pushing students to speak for themselves was, according to Foszia, '*un-training* them, freeing students from the oppression and intellectual constraints that they were brought up in; removing the restrictions that corral their thinking, so they could go explore. And so then if you're saying something, you actually *own* what you're saying.'<sup>220</sup> Halton Cheadle confirms Foszia's point and adds, 'I didn't have to agree with him but the one thing that happened after any kind of engagement with him is that if you held your views you would have a much better basis for holding your views. In other words he really did force you to articulate your position.'<sup>221</sup> Turner saw that in order to live as full participants in a society which allows for maximum freedom, people must first undo their earlier negative socialization and simultaneously they must practice being free.

Turner explicitly linked the struggle for a radically democratic society — democratic in the sense of people participating directly in the decisions that affect their lives — to a shift in the ideology and structure behind schooling. He spoke out fiercely against liberal critiques of the school system, which

fail to analyze and challenge any values implicit in our educational system, with the exception of racism... we never question or even notice the framework itself... And so we do not ask the two vital questions: What role does this structure itself play in the education process, and could there be some other kind of education process?<sup>222</sup>

Turner insisted that the damaging effects of the current school system, 'cannot be remedied by spending more money on education or by changing the syllabus. It is a result not of the

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<sup>218</sup> Interview with Cheadle, 9 November 2009.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>220</sup> Interview with Turner-Stylinau, 17 October 2009.

<sup>221</sup> Interview with Cheadle, 9 November 2009.

<sup>222</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 72-73.

content of the education system but of its structure.<sup>1223</sup>

Richard Turner tried to envision how education could be re-structured in order to serve the needs of a participatory democratic society.

How, then, can we design an educational system... that will rely largely on the child's curiosity and desire to learn, and that will encourage in the child that kind of thinking which makes continuous self-education possible? There are at least two educational prerequisites: The child must go to 'school' voluntarily, and the 'teacher' must no longer be seen as 'the one who knows', but rather as a helpful companion in a common search for truth. The school must be seen as a place which has resources that can be used when needed.<sup>224</sup>

To expand on this, Richard Turner looked to the 'De-schooling Society' model of Ivan Illich.<sup>225</sup>

As Ivan Illich has pointed out, many other places could, if one abandoned strictly economic criteria of efficiency, be turned into 'learning environments.' Workshops and offices could also be places where children go to learn, either as observers or as participants. In a worker-controlled democracy, children could be gradually integrated into the work process in a non-exploitative way at a much earlier age than they are now... But the 'school' would still be an important community center where: (1) children could come together to play, learn, or work; (2) there would be facilities such as books, telescopes, laboratories, and animals, which would stimulate interest and be available for use; and (3) there would be people available for consultation, who could give advice on specific problems and offer courses on certain technical matters.<sup>226</sup>

Turner's thinking around radical re-structuring of education drew heavily from the work of Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire.<sup>227</sup> These ideas came to Turner through a man named David Poynton, who had travelled to South America and met both Illich and Freire. Tony Morphet recalls how Poynton came and introduced Illich, saying, 'here it is, you can imagine in a completely different way. We are locked into the notion of school and it's killing us, etc.' And so to the people who were interested, Turner said, 'here is a moment for the circulation of

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<sup>223</sup> *Ibid*, p. 74.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid*, p. 79.

<sup>225</sup> Ivan Illich was an influential thinker around educational theory, from South America, writing extensive critiques of schooling. Many of Turner's thoughts of socialization and the function of schools can be seen elaborated in Illich's writing. For more of his thinking, see: I. Illich, *Deschooling Society*. London: Marion Boyers, 1999, or I. Illich *Tools for Conviviality*. London: Marion Boyers, 2000.

<sup>226</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>227</sup> Paulo Freire was a radical education theorist, widely acknowledged as influencing South African leftists in a variety of ways. For example, in my interview with Tony Morphet, Freire came up in a number of contexts, from Turner, to biko, to Inkatha, to the new government. Freire is most famous for his ideas regarding teaching methodologies for poor and illiterate people, and the role of education in uplifting oppressed populations. His most famous text is, P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Continuum Press, 2000. For a more accessible, conversational text, see: P. Freire and M. Horton, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990.

ideas, let's have a little association.<sup>228</sup> With others, Turner created the 'Education Reform Association,' which published a journal of educational ideas and held monthly discussion forums on various topics.<sup>229</sup> ERA sought to include both students and teachers, but was particularly interested in influencing the thinking of Black teachers, who were being expected to teach a curriculum of subservience to the apartheid state and had limited access to theorists such as Illich and Freire. Therefore, the lecture topics and magazine articles focused on reconceptualizing teaching techniques, attitudes towards student discipline and authority, and the overall goals of education.

Turner involved himself in a number of other extra-curricular educational structures.<sup>230</sup> From 1971-73 Turner helped run a fortnightly lecture and discussion series called 'Platform.' Speakers would present on a range of social and politic topics, to a racially mixed audience in downtown Durban. Omar Badsha, who helped ensure that the meetings could be in an environment where the broadest mix of people could attend, remembers there being, 'On average 30-40 people in attendance, sometimes bigger crowds depending on the speaker.'<sup>231</sup> Turner himself was a lecturer at 'Platform' on a number of occasions, and also took the opportunity to speak at various protest meetings and other events to which he was invited by different organizations.

During this same time period, Turner also helped to set up a few summer and winter school sessions at the Phoenix Settlement, north of Durban. The Phoenix Settlement was founded originally by Gandhi and was managed at the time by Sushilla Gandhi, Mewa and Ela Ramgobin. Turner developed a close relationship with the latter two and served as a member of the board of the settlement. Turner was interested in bringing people out to the Gandhi family's land, both to have political education courses, but also to engage in the hands-on work of community building, such as the garden and the creche.<sup>232</sup> Turner's involvement with the Phoenix Settlement was a natural extension of his overall desire to fuse together theoretical discussion with practical experiments in living differently. Upon his

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<sup>228</sup> Interview with Tony Morphet, 7 November 2009.

<sup>229</sup> I didn't find any scholarly texts dealing with ERA. All the information I found on it was contained in interviews (with Badsha, Morphet and Turner-Stylianou) and amongst the Turner-Stylianou papers (see bibliography for full list of these). ERA lasted roughly a year, until Turner was banned.

<sup>230</sup> See for example M. Legassick, 'Nusas in the 1970s.' In *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Vol. 2: 1970-1980*, edited by SADET. Johannesburg: Struik Press, 2005. pp. 861-862 deal with Turner explicitly.

<sup>231</sup> Omar Badsha, Organizer for the chemical workers' union and close friend of Richard Turner. Interview with the author, 5 November 2009.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

return to South Africa in 1966 he had taken over stewardship of his mother's farm in Stellenbosch. There, he had often invited students out to the land, and had hoped that the farm could be used as a space for communal living and alternative education. His house in Durban was also as much of a community space as could be created, under the conditions, including a small garden and rabbits in the backyard, and honours seminars held in the living room.<sup>233</sup>

In addition to his structured attempts at broadening education outside of the classroom, Richard on a number of occasions encouraged students to do canvassing within the white community. Turner felt strongly that the privilege of being amongst the section of the population with voting rights meant that whites should engage with their community directly, and attempt to help prepare others for the prospect of social change. Foszia recalls these canvassing attempts as very helpful for the students, at least:

It's like talking to their parents most of the time, but they didn't have the language and they needed to talk without feeling superior. Getting those people who are so frightened of change to realise that they've got more to gain than to lose makes a huge difference... So quite a few white students found themselves hard-pressed to explain why they thought what they thought and why they supported what they supported. And I think being able to do that some came back feeling quite fired up by the ability to have clarity about what it is that they do and why they believe what they believe.<sup>234</sup>

## **BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AND WHITE RADICALS**

In August of 1968, University of Cape Town students staged a sit-in protest and took over the administration building. Hundreds of students lived together in the building for the duration of the protest, which lasted nine days. They declared their space a 'Free University,' and held spontaneously organized 'classes,' with discussions of various political topics often going on well into the night. Richard Turner, who was lecturing at UCT at the time, was heavily involved in the 'Free University.' Turner's attitude regarding this type of protest is encapsulated clearly in a speech he gave entitled, 'Should South African Students Riot?' As an answer to his own question, Turner stated that, 'What white South African students should do is to try a little thinking. But I feel I should warn them to be a little discreet about it.'

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<sup>233</sup> Interview with Turner-Stylinau, 17 October 2009.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.* Gerry Mare does not remember the canvassing so fondly, as he was sent to an Afrikaans-speaking high school, where he was promptly taken to the bathroom by angry students, who threatened to beat him. Interview with Gerry Mare, 4 December 2009.



Thinking, provided that it is done honestly and provided that one does something about one's thoughts, is far more revolutionary and dangerous than mere rioting.<sup>235</sup> After the sit-in was broken by threats of violence by racists and arrests by the police, the 'Free University' concept continued on a few occasions out at Turner's family farm outside Cape Town, in Stellenbosch.<sup>236</sup>

While the sit-in at UCT was an inspiring moment of student protest, the student left was going through an intense transition at the same time. The National Union of South African Students, (Nusas) which had always been (since its founding in 1924) a racially integrated and liberal organisation, faced steady criticism from its black members of being dominated by both white people and white (liberal, western) values. The Nusas national convention in 1967 was held at Rhodes University. There, black students were made to sleep in separate accommodation (in the townships) from the whites (who slept on campus) and they were enraged. The acceptance of apartheid divisions at the Nusas conference was taken as yet another example of what felt like a false commitment to integration on the part of white students. Blacks felt that integration did not mean genuine equality in social relationships (nor were whites likely to take equal risks towards social change, as evidenced by their unwillingness to stand up to the Rhodes University authorities). Steve Biko, a medical student and a charismatic black leader within Nusas, condemned what he termed artificial integration:

the integration they talk about is first of all artificial in that... people have been extracted from various segregated societies with their inbuilt complexes of inferiority and superiority and these continue to assert themselves even in the 'nonracial' set-up of the integrated complex. As a result the integration so achieved is a one-way course, with the whites doing all the talking and the blacks the listening.<sup>237</sup>

Black students, asserting the need to organize amongst themselves and to articulate a

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<sup>235</sup> Turner, 'Should South African students riot?', p. 4.

<sup>236</sup> For a fuller account of the UCT sit-ins, see: "'Conservative Revolutionaries,'" Anti-Apartheid Activism at the University of Cape Town 1963-1973.' Chapter Two: Radicalisation 1968-1970. [http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/organisations/NUSAS/1963\\_1973\\_conservative\\_revolutionaries.htm](http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/organisations/NUSAS/1963_1973_conservative_revolutionaries.htm). This account draws attention to the links between the UCT sit-ins and the student strikes in France, May 1968 and the sit-ins at Columbia University, NYC in the same year. In my interview with Lawrence Schlemmer, 8 December 2009, Schlemmer spoke at length about the perception of the security police that Turner was something of a South African version of the European student radicals from France, Berlin, etc. For the state's perspective on the 1968 sit-ins and Turner's role in it, see: 'Commission of Inquiry into Certain Organisations,' 4th interim report: 12 August 1974.

<sup>237</sup> Biko, *I Write What I Like*, p. 20.

distinct Black politics, (known as 'Black Consciousness')<sup>238</sup> split off from Nusas in 1969 in order to form the South African Students Organisation (SASO). The SASO manifesto explains their decision to form an all-Black organization as follows:

SASO accepts the premise that before the black people should join the open society, they should first close their ranks, to form themselves into a solid group to oppose the definite racism that is meted out by the white society, to work out their direction clearly and bargain from a position of strength. SASO believes that a truly open society can only be achieved by blacks.<sup>239</sup>

This bold assertion of black autonomy forced the white student activists to reconsider their role in the process of social change, and thereby to at least experiment with developing structures of resistance that were supportive to black protest, rather than directing it.

According to Steve Biko, 'the black man has become a shell, a shadow of a man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity.' Biko then used this analysis to example an intriguing paradox. He wrote, 'This is the first truth, bitter as it may seem, that we have to acknowledge before we can start on any program of changing the status quo... The only vehicle for change are these people who have lost their personality.' By naming blacks as the 'only vehicle for change,' Biko therefore names the restoration of dignity to blacks as a necessary precondition for revolutionary change in South Africa. Perhaps most importantly, Biko insisted that the black person himself must 'pump back life into his empty shell.'<sup>240</sup> Dignity is not something that can be granted from above. The simple transfer of state power to a black political party will not (can not, and has not) address the fundamental hollowing and degradation of black people under white power.

Mark Sanders' essay on Black Consciousness<sup>241</sup> draws our attention to the stress Biko and other Black Consciousness thinkers put on acknowledging and confronting the ways in which black people are complicit in their own oppression. Biko seeks to 'remind (the black man) of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting

<sup>238</sup> My account of Black Consciousness is focused on the relationship between Turner and Black Consciousness, and to an extent deals with the broader impact of BC on white activists. For a more thorough account, see: M. V. Mzamane, B. Maaba and N. Biko, 'The Black Consciousness Movement.' in SADET, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Vol. 2: 1970-1980*. Johannesburg: Struik Press, 2005. pp. 123-137. Also, T. Karis and G. Gerhart *From Protest to Challenge, vol. 5* dedicate two chapters to an overview of Black Consciousness, entitled, 'The Black Consciousness Movement: The Formative Years, 1967-1971' pp. 89-117 and 'The Black Consciousness Movement: Confronting the State: 1972-1976.' pp. 120-153.

<sup>239</sup> Turner, 'Black Consciousness and White Liberals,' in Karis and Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge*, p. 429.

<sup>240</sup> Biko, *I Write What I Like*, p. 29.

<sup>241</sup> In M. Sanders, *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002, pp. 159-197.

evil reign supreme in the country of his birth. This is what we mean by an inward-looking process'. According to Sanders, 'assuming responsibility in this way, becoming an agent instead of a victim, is as crucial to Black Consciousness as it was to Karl Marx when, in *Capital*, he "attempted to make the factory workers rethink themselves as agents of production, not as victims of capitalism."<sup>242</sup> But Biko took Marx a step further. He was saying not only that oppressed people are (potentially) agents of their liberation, but also — and necessarily — agents of their own subjugation. It is exactly the acute attention to moments of complicity that gave Black Consciousness its explosive power. Someone that believes they 'deserve better,' may well fight for improvements in their life, but ultimately someone 'else' is responsible for bringing about that improvement. Someone that knows they are being degraded because they allow themselves to be, protects their dignity not with 'rights,' but with resistance, with rage. In Biko's rather prophetic essay 'On Death,' he wrote:

If they want to beat me five times, they can only do so on condition that I allow them to beat me five times. If I react sharply, equally and oppositely, to the first clap, they are not going to systematically count the next four claps, you see. It's a fight... If you allow me to respond, I'm certainly going to respond. And I'm afraid you might have to kill me in the process even if it's not your intention.<sup>243</sup>

Oliver Tambo, president of the African National Congress, claimed that Black Consciousness 'describes the entire white population of our country as "part of the problem."<sup>244</sup> This is not an accurate representation of BC ideas. The ANC never seriously considered the proposals of Black Consciousness, as they viewed SASO and other BC groups as threatening to the power of the ANC in being the 'vanguard' of the liberation struggle. Tambo wrote in the late 1970s that

Already the idea was beginning to emerge among some circles... that the BCM [Black Consciousness Movement] could consolidate itself as, at worst, a political formation to replace the ANC and, at least, a parallel movement enjoying the same legitimacy as the ANC. It was of primary importance that we should deny our opponents any and both of these possibilities.<sup>245</sup>

Looking more closely at the substance of Black Consciousness thought, one sees that it is more an invitation than a threat. Black Consciousness invited whites to reconfigure themselves as neither innocent nor saviors, as neither entitled to their present status nor excluded from human interactions with the black majority of South Africa. In Biko's words

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<sup>242</sup> Sanders is here quoting Gayatri Spivak.

<sup>243</sup> Biko, *I Write What I Like*, p. 153.

<sup>244</sup> Tambo, *Political Report*... <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/or/or85-5.html>.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

the goal was 'to remove (the white man) from our table, strip the table of all trappings put on it by him, decorate it in true African style, settle down and then invite him to join us on our own terms if he liked.'<sup>246</sup> According to Sanders, 'This is eventually what happened. By the mid-1980s NUSAS was taking its direction from the black leadership, which had developed since 1976.'<sup>247</sup>

Nonetheless, there were many struggles amongst liberals and within the white left around how best to respond to the challenge of Black Consciousness. Many people 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.<sup>248</sup> 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.<sup>249</sup>

Legassick and Saunders have drawn attention to Turner's expressed view that, 'white opponents to apartheid are not a significant political force.'<sup>250</sup> Turner's central argument however was regarding the existence of white *radicals* and the potential for white radicals to collaborate with black consciousness activists, whom Turner stresses are also *radicals*.<sup>251</sup>

Richard Turner was one of the few whites to see Black Consciousness as 'a form of radicalism,' and this theoretical contribution, combined with his overall demeanour, explain why, 'Rick becomes enormously important for the first serious attempt to try to respond to black consciousness in a constructive way.'<sup>252</sup>

A number of people regarded Turner as unusually capable of acting humbly and supportively towards black radicals. Foszia first met Turner at a talk he gave on the subject of

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<sup>246</sup> Biko, *I Write What I Like*, p. 69.

<sup>247</sup> Sanders, *Complicities*, p. 166. Furthermore, Legassick claims that by 1973 already Nusas resolved that, SASO is 'the existing body best able to realise the needs and aspirations of black students.' M. Legassick, 'Nusas in the 1970s.' In *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Vol. 2: 1970-1980*, edited by SADET, p. 857.

<sup>248</sup> Perhaps the most famous example is the transformation of Donald Woods from a scathing critic of Black Consciousness to an ardent supporter of Biko. See Woods' autobiography and his biography of Biko: D. Woods, *Asking for Trouble*. New York: Atheneum, 1981 and *Biko*. New York: Paddington Press, 1978. P. Walshe, *Church Versus State in South Africa: The Case of the Christian Institute*. London: C. Hurst, 1983 addresses this topic in some detail, regarding white Christian liberals. This is dealt with more below.

<sup>249</sup> Both Dan O'Meara and Halton Cheadle addressed this point in my interviews with them. Furthermore, Turner's article on 'Black Consciousness and White Liberals' *Reality* (July 1972) pp. 20-22. should be taken as a direct response to the lack of clarity amongst white activists on how to respond.

<sup>250</sup> SADET, *Road to Democracy*, p. 664.

<sup>251</sup> R. Turner, 'Black consciousness and white liberals,' *Reality* (July 1972), pp. 20-22.

<sup>252</sup> Interview with Cheadle, 9 November 2009.

Black Power. She remembers how,

after he finished somebody got up and said “well you are a white person, how can you know? how can you possibly...? how dare you come here and tell us about black folks?” And he said, “Well I would be happy to sit down and listen... I have done some reading, but if somebody has got more information, hey go ahead.”<sup>253</sup>

Omar Badsha claims that this attitude of, 'I would be happy to sit down and listen,' permeated Turner's interactions with blacks.

Rick didn't have all the trappings and arrogance of the white left. That also attracted him to a lot of the black activists. They had a great deal of respect for Rick. And so Biko and others didn't see him as a white person or treat him as a white person. His ideas and his approach was so different from the normal condescending attitudes of whites that we came across; and that makes a huge difference.<sup>254</sup>

On the theoretical level, Turner understood quite clearly just how stuck and confused white people were at the time:

White South Africans do take their rights to exploit blacks for granted, but their psychic and cultural makeup is much more complex than that. They are very ignorant of how their society works; they are ignorant of history and of the nature of social relationships; they are very insecure, and underlying their apparent arrogance is often a deep fear both of blacks and of any pattern of behavior that threatens their perceptions of the naturalness of... their right to exploit. Thus we cannot assume that they will necessarily react rationally to any form of challenge.<sup>255</sup>

Therefore, Turner directed attention towards the philosophical underpinnings of Black Consciousness, and away from the knee-jerk feeling of being personally rejected that many whites were stuck in. He wrote that, 'the major misperception is to see Black Consciousness as essentially an attack on "white liberalism," and nothing more. In fact, the attack is directed essentially against "white racist society."<sup>256</sup> For Turner, the principal concern was to draw attention to the overall oppressive structure of the society, and the way in which all people are warped by that structure:

Black Consciousness is a rejection of the idea that the ideal for human kind is 'to be like the whites'. This should lead to the recognition that it is also bad for whites 'to be like the whites'... For whites who have realised this the desire to change South Africa is not merely the desire "to do something for the blacks." It is the urgent need for personal dignity and the air of freedom and love.<sup>257</sup>

Tony Morphet explicitly links Turner's political thought to that of Steve Biko, and notes their

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<sup>253</sup> Interview with Turner-Stylinau, 17 October 2009.

<sup>254</sup> Interview with Badsha, 5 November 2009.

<sup>255</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, pp. 143-144.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Black Consciousness and White Liberals,' in *From Protest to Challenge*, p. 427.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 431.

shared contribution to the development of a new political discourse:

South African liberals, they argued, no matter whether they were Christian, white and rich, or the opposite, and many of them were, had failed to value consciousness properly. Trapped within the false dichotomies of civilization and barbarism they could be neither radical, nor critical, nor reflective enough... Develop a critical and radical consciousness, they said, of the conditions of exploitation and repression. Social change would follow. At this point they began their fierce break with liberalism and opened the way towards new forms of discourse.<sup>258</sup>

Indeed, Turner's framing of 'consciousness' is quite sympathetic to Biko's, though his overall emphasis is slightly different. Both agree on the essential need to counter-act the negative values and behaviors developed during the socialization process. As for the 'shell of a man', that Biko describes regarding the black population, Turner saw that 'at present, white consciousness is cabbage consciousness — a mindless absorption of material from the environment.'<sup>259</sup> However, Turner's philosophy stresses the *potential* of human beings to make a dramatic shift in consciousness and society, rather than their present degraded state.

Based on his study of Sartre, Turner believed strongly that, 'Man has no "nature," because the structure of consciousness, a continual project into the future, is such that it can never be bound to anything, and can always doubt any value. It is this structure of consciousness to which we are referring when we say man is free.'<sup>260</sup> In Turner's summary outline of the process of developing a political program, his starting point is utopia, and from there he works backwards towards tangible strategies:

- a) Give some account of the 'Good Society,' of a society which satisfies human needs and embodies only legitimate power relationships rather than relationships based on force;
- b) Give some account of the nature of the obstacles in the way of the realisation of such a society; and
- c) Suggest political strategies based on the above.<sup>261</sup>

## **WHITE CONSCIOUSNESS VS. CABBAGE CONSCIOUSNESS**

Whether or not people agree with Turner's analysis regarding the role of whites in struggle, it is at this point undeniable that his agitation within white society made a sizable

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<sup>258</sup> Morphet, 'Brushing History Against the Grain,' p. 95.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 432.

<sup>260</sup> From unpublished manuscript on Sartre, quoted in Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. xv.

<sup>261</sup> From an unpublished manuscript, as quoted in Nash, 'History and Consciousness', n.d., p. 28.

contribution to the development of the struggle. Turner's assessment that constructive political action must be taken by whites and within white society (alongside and in supportive collaboration with black action) took on many forms, and the effects rippled out in a number of different directions.

For the second printing of *The Eye of the Needle*, Turner added a post-script, entitled 'The Present As History,' which set out to connect the utopian thought in the body of the book with tangible thinking around strategies towards change. Explaining these intentions, Turner writes that

My essay remains, in one sense, perjoratively utopian... In part, this was intentional. I wished to make a moral statement, to offer a yardstick in terms of which the present in South Africa and elsewhere can be judged. I think that such a moral point can validly be made by itself; but of course, it is made as an invitation to begin the process of trying to change the society in a particular direction.<sup>262</sup>

Turner then proceeds by (a) analysing various groups in society (the government, white students, the black homelands, black workers, etc.) and each groups' probable responses to changing conditions and (b) outlining what openings he sees for concrete action to provoke the above groups in the direction of participatory democracy.

Inevitably, much of 'The Present As History,' centers around the role of white people. Turner's first firm judgement is to refuse to encourage people to turn towards armed revolution. While Turner clarified on a number of occasions that he was *not* a pacifist, he just as consistently spoke out against armed struggle *for strategic reasons*. Turner saw that, 'mentally the white public is kept in a continuous state of war-readiness... The whites are prepared for a fight and would probably fight if they had to. With the balance of forces as it is at present, they would certainly win in any straight black-white civil war.'<sup>263</sup> He felt strongly, therefore, that the intransigence of the white population must be opposed not so much through force, but through organized initiatives of conscious whites and through black pressure in whatever ways available to them. Turner spoke out strongly against any attitude amongst whites that they are irrelevant merely because blacks must take a pro-active role in the struggle:

It is said that change will come from the blacks and therefore any processes of change that happen to be occurring within the white group are essentially irrelevant. It seems to me that this is a very serious mistake to make; I certainly agree that the major factor in bringing about political change in South Africa will be black

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<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

action... [but] political activity directed at and within the white group in an attempt to create at least a group within white society who would be more willing to envisage change is very important.<sup>264</sup>

The developing strength of the Black Consciousness viewpoint forced a growing handful of white people to adapt their own politics in response. During its early years, Black Consciousness flowered rapidly throughout the country, and as its advocates were very articulate and assertive, their influence spread fast.<sup>265</sup> Turner wrote that, 'by now it should be clear to even the most insensitively paternalistic "white liberal" that he or she needs to examine his or her values very carefully indeed.'<sup>266</sup> On the organizational level, Richard Turner was involved in two crucial processes of re-examining values very carefully: the National Union of South African Students (Nusas) and the Study Project on being Christian in Apartheid Society (Spro-cas).

The fact that Spro-cas published *The Eye of the Needle* and yet simultaneously published the much tamer recommendations of the economics report speaks to the transformation the group was undergoing at the time. Pushed forward by the recalcitrance of the ruling elite and the charisma of young black radicals, a shift in focus and beliefs slowly bubbled up amongst members of Spro-cas. In 1971 discussions began within the group of expanding its initial mission in order to take on action, as well as study. What was called Spro-cas II, or the *Special Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society* began to be conceptualized. Walshe argues that, in June, 1971, the Director of Spro-cas, Peter Randall,

thought of Spro-cas II as a predominantly white initiative designed to help blacks — a programme with a white consultative committee and 'specialist action groups', the latter being drawn from the overwhelmingly white Spro-cas I commissions. The projects envisaged at this time were rewriting the social studies textbooks for private schools, starting credit unions, drawing up a code of conduct to guide corporations in their dealings with black labour, and supporting adult education at the practical level of household budgeting, nutrition and improved agricultural techniques for African farmers.<sup>267</sup>

Randall's viewpoint changed rapidly and, 'By October of 1971 this strategy had been

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<sup>264</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, pp. 123-124.

<sup>265</sup> This influence would of course wane with the 1973 bannings of many BC leaders, the SASO trial in 1975/1976 (which subsequently banned even more key leaders) and the murder of Biko in 1977. It is important to recognize the significance of the impact of Black Consciousness within the general context of the harsh way in which the movement was repressed. For more on the role of state repression on the Black Consciousness movement, and their strategic responses to repression, T. Karis and G. Gerhart *From Protest to Challenge*, vol. 5 is very helpful.

<sup>266</sup> Turner, 'Black Consciousness and White Liberals.' in *From Protest to Challenge*, p. 432.

<sup>267</sup> Walshe, *Church vs State in South Africa*, pp. 138-9.



transformed... Disillusioned by the inflexibility of whites, Randall put aside his serious reservations about the black consciousness movement and began to support it.<sup>268</sup>

By 1972, Spro-cas had radicalized quite quickly. Beyers Naude spoke to the shift in policy by saying,

Organisations usually described as 'white liberal' or 'white-controlled' will face a period of temporary estrangement... until the black community feels that it is strong enough to move back as equals or until these organisations adapt rapidly and creatively to black pressures. Reconciliation will become increasingly difficult. To meet black anger with duplicity or delay is dangerous. To try to meet it with brute force is fatal. To talk about goodwill and tolerance without concerted action is futile.<sup>269</sup>

Peter Randall went further, stating that, 'a white control model for change has become an outmoded strategy, an unrealistic hope destroyed by white intransigence.'<sup>270</sup> Therefore, Spro-cas II was comprised of two separate groups, one called the Black Community Programme, and the other focused on what was termed 'White Consciousness'. In time, Spro-cas II would develop into something markedly different from the group's initial conception of itself.

The white consciousness section of Spro-cas II published a book entitled *White Liberation*. In it, Clive Nettleton wrote from the basic premise that black people must increasingly adopt Black Consciousness as a worldview and methodology and he assumed, therefore, that the blossoming of confidence amongst blacks will force whites to confront, as Biko puts it, 'the one problem which they have, which is one of "superiority."<sup>271</sup> Refusing the choices of ignoring or actively suppressing Black Consciousness, Nettleton encouraged whites to

try to create a white consciousness... which will enable them to act, rather than react. This would necessitate a change in the meaning of 'whiteness' to render possible an eventual meeting of blacks with whites. Domination by whites is the essential feature of such meetings as do at present take place. In a changed consciousness on the part of both blacks and whites lies the only possibility for a just and peaceful solution of the conflict inherent in the present situation.<sup>272</sup>

In a foundational statement of the goals of the 'white consciousness' group, they stated that, 'we do not draw back from tactics of confrontation where these seem to be

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<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 139.

<sup>269</sup> 1972 speech in Utrecht, as quoted in Walshe, *Church vs State in South Africa*, pp. 117-118.

<sup>270</sup> SPRO-CAS, *Taste of Power*, pp. 109.

<sup>271</sup> Biko, *I Write What I Like*, p. 20. I have changed the tense of this quote from past tense to present tense.

<sup>272</sup> SPRO-CAS, *White Liberation*, p. 7. Saunders cites a man named Peter Jones, 'of the BC movement' who says that 'assistance from the CI was unconditional and nothing was expected in return.' C. Saunders, 'Aboveground Organisations and Activities.' In *The Road to Democracy*, vol. 2, p. 850.

creative and necessary.<sup>1273</sup> This is a tremendous shift away from the previous strivings for unity at all cost. At a deep level, the willingness to consider a politics of 'confrontation,' meant an acknowledgement, for the first time, that, 'Our society has already polarised between white and black.' From this realization, the repeated prophetic statements to white society took on a whole new tone. They were still looking for avenues towards peaceful change, they were still crying out for an awakening of conscience in whites, but now they were openly *embracing conflict* as a necessary part of the process of transforming society.

Furthermore, in addition to warning whites of the potential for violence in the future, Spro-cas attempted to offer white liberals *salvation from their own paralysis*. 'White Consciousness... means overcoming the paralysing feelings of apology and guilt which tend to make white liberals gloomy and ineffectual protagonists of change.'<sup>1274</sup> Clearly indicting themselves — as well as others — the white consciousness group speaks out against the, 'haphazard, sporadic, guilt-salving gestures of the past.'<sup>1275</sup> In place of their previous ineffectiveness, Spro-cas II now advocated, 'to be radical, i.e. in the sense of going to the roots of the problem — power and wealth; we try to pose really radical alternatives (e.g. *The Eye of the Needle*, and the work which has flowed from this).'<sup>1276</sup> Here they name Richard Turner's contribution directly, and in other ways his influence was frequently felt.

Surely Turner's articulation of participatory democracy was crucial to Peter Randall and others developing the belief that, 'Above all, we recognise the need to be clearer about the society we want: we see that it is essentially socialist in nature, and this gives us a greater stake in working for change, i.e. it is in our own interests to do so.'<sup>1277</sup> In fact, this is quite a good summation of the central points in *The Eye of the Needle*. But there are also more indirect influences, as well. For example, Turner's viewpoint about Black Consciousness likely helped to soften members of the Christian Institute to make more and more room for BC activists. As Turner had stated previously, so Spro-cas also came to realize that there was a, 'need of whites who desire meaningful social change to find a relevant role. Such whites are aware that the major initiative for and implementation of such change will come from blacks. It is in part a response to the challenge posed by black consciousness and black

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<sup>273</sup> SPRO-CAS, *Taste of Power*, p.198.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, p.198.

solidarity.<sup>1278</sup>

Ironically, given the group's history, the decision to split Spro-cas II into one all-Black group and another all-white group *strengthened* relationships between black and white people. Randall insists that the benefit of so dividing Spro-cas was that it allowed more authentic, deep and egalitarian cooperation amongst the staff.<sup>279</sup> That is, racial separation allowed them to co-exist better. That is to say, multi-racialism and paternalism fail at the level of practice — as well as theoretically.

Spro-cas II put black people into positions of power within the Christian Institute that they could have never previously attained.

While the BCP had been co-sponsored... as part of Spro-cas II, it evolved as a genuinely independent black initiative... This did not prevent the BCP's organisers — particularly Khoapa and Biko — from exercising a real influence on the Institute... [towards] support for the black consciousness movement and for black leadership within the churches as well as in politics.<sup>280</sup>

BCP was quite ambitious in its goals, setting out to establish a broad structure for black activists to be able to engage in a wide range of activities, from health clinics and literacy classes to union organizing, church activism and the arts. At first the Black Community Programmes were only given 20% of the Spro-cas operating budget, but that quickly shifted to an even 50% split, and in under two years the decision was made that, 'the Black Community Programmes are both potentially and actually the most important single aspect of Spro-cas, and the white staff have taken a deliberate decision to phase the white programmes out before the end of the project in favor of the black ones.'<sup>281</sup>

The growing willingness of Spro-cas to support Black Consciousness was partly rooted in ideological transformations as a result of radical influences such as Turner, but even more crucially it had to do with the existence of black confidence and pressure. For a 'moment' (roughly, say, 1969-1973 in particular) black self-assertion was relatively high. New forms of political and cultural self-expression amongst black youth were developing quickly and taking up a lot of space in the political landscape. Therefore, whites could much more easily (than during previous time periods of relative calm) believe that *fundamental*<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>280</sup> Walshe, *Church vs State in South Africa*, p. 158.

<sup>281</sup> SPRO-CAS, *Taste of Power*, p. 207.

<sup>282</sup> And this they always stressed, implying that tinkering about and making insignificant changes *could* be initiated by whites alone.

change could only be initiated by blacks. In the absence of such self-assertive action, what could whites do? In years prior many other whites — and Randall in particular — had relied on much more paternalistic and gradual notions of social change. Therefore, it is exactly black self-assertion that allowed whites to perceive their own humility as a realistic option.

The action groups only survived until the end of 1973. They collapsed through a series of bannings of leadership and difficulties within the white group to do anything productive. Peter Walshe feels that the overall tendency was, 'for these small groups to falter on encountering massive white indifference, whereupon they either disintegrated or turned away or turned away from their radical intentions and consoled themselves by undertaking welfare services for blacks... The temptation was still to do things for Africans.'<sup>283</sup>

Intriguingly, Randall understood the impermanence of Spro-cas as a clear strength, strategically speaking, and recommended the strategy to others. In fact, Randall claims that they saw the goal of phasing out the white consciousness efforts *from the start*. 'It has been temporary and short-term, with its own death envisaged from the start... Its structure has been made very simple and flexible, and its work has not been hampered by a hierarchy of committees... It has been able to take risks and to risk failure.'<sup>284</sup>

While the White Consciousness initiative is largely regarded as a failure in many ways (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. Further, Walshe argues that Spro-cas II, 'did encourage a small minority of whites to countenance passive resistance and to reject the capitalist underpinnings of apartheid.'<sup>285</sup>

## THE STATE RESPONDS

The radicalization of Spro-cas and the Christian Institute led to increasing pressure against it from the state. Leadership of the institute began to face frequent harassment by police, were refused passports, and the Schlebusch Commission which recommended banning Richard Turner in 1973 swept in with him, Biko and Bennie Khoapa of the BCP<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Walshe, *Church vs State in South Africa*, p. 142.

<sup>284</sup> SPRO-CAS, *Taste of Power*, p. 82.

<sup>285</sup> Walshe, *Church vs State in South Africa*, p. 134.

<sup>286</sup> Schlebusch attacked a number of left groups, virtually all discussed to some extent in this writing, including numerous SASO activists, NUSAS, Turner and the Christian Institute.

and attempted to investigate the Christian Institute, as well. The Christian Institute refused to testify before the commission<sup>287</sup> — having seen the horrible results Nusas achieved by cooperating with the process — and were therefore spared any immediate repercussions. Nonetheless, 1973 marked an important shift in the organisation's relationship with the apartheid state.

Peter Randall's book *A Taste of Power* was the last book published by Spro-cas, and it was after the wave of bannings earlier in the year. The book is saturated with the mood of impending doom. Randall writes that, 'This report is being written in great haste, for a number of reasons, the most immediate being the threat posed to the work of Spro-cas by... the Schlegelbusch Commission. I am anxious that the draft should be completed as soon as possible, and must thus omit much that I had planned to include.'<sup>288</sup> Randall stresses the impact of bannings many times. He often mentions the necessary contribution of various people's thinking, which cannot be shared in any real depth as a result of banning. Turner's name is raised in this way on more than one occasion in the book. The reader is left aching for more exposition of exactly how Turner's thought influenced Randall and others in Spro-cas. However, the law at the time permitted him only to make comments such as, 'Dr Rick Turner has dealt challengingly with the concept of education for freedom and has suggested ways in which education should be structured, other than according to the traditional Western model. As Dr Turner has been banned I regretfully cannot quote his views here.'<sup>289</sup> Or, referring to the director of the Black Community Programmes: 'Mr Khoapa was both an eloquent and moderate exponent of black views and demands. His words should have been seriously listened to or carefully read by every white. Now his views can no longer be known by either black or white... In 1973 alone almost 50 black leaders have been banned.'<sup>290</sup> Peter Randall was the director of Ravan Press, the printing arm of the Christian Institute. As such, the banning regulations affected his work quite severely, as every copy of books written by banned people became illegal material that had to be destroyed, and every instance in which they were quoted had to be blacked out or removed in fresh re-prints. Sadly, as for Randall's own development as a thinker and activist, as a result of the banning of his dear friends and

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<sup>287</sup> In retrospect this seems to have been a very wise choice, though Randall was fined and Naude had to serve a brief spell in jail. According to Morphet, 'Introduction,' Turner participated because he believed he had nothing to hide, but the commission's interactions with Turner proved to be far from benign.

<sup>288</sup> SPRO-CAS, *Taste of Power*, p. 83.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

colleagues, there remains a great silence during the exact period when he would otherwise have been prolific.

All things considered, the Christian Institute weathered the repression surprisingly well. Spro-cas was officially finished by the end of 1974, but the political transformation they had been through stayed with the Institute. In 1973, they published *Principles for Which the Christian Institute Stands in Southern Africa*, which attacked, 'the South African system [which] perpetuates poverty, exploitation, rejection and deprivation.' Christian commitment meant 'immediate care for those in need, and a radical change in the structures of society which cause it.'<sup>291</sup> Liberalism had been cast aside for good and Christian paternalism had been replaced by Christian radicalism.<sup>292</sup>

In correspondence with their shift in ideology, the Christian Institute made structural changes which were increasingly radical. In response to the new rhetoric being produced, and the new level of risk for being involved, white membership in the CI sharply dropped off, but this came with a simultaneous (and unprecedented) rise in black membership. In response to the May, 1975 state ruling that the Christian Institute was an 'affected organization',<sup>293</sup> the institute de-centralized and drafted a new constitution that put more stress on smaller groups throughout the country.

It was the outcome of a prolonged period of radicalization and the associated search for a simpler life-style. It was also an effort to move away from the provision of capital-intensive office facilities to a more communal approach, an effort to relate more closely to black organizations and to live in a way that would not be an obstacle to meeting with and serving the poor.<sup>294</sup>

By 1976, the Christian Institute had moved fully and openly towards a rejection of capitalism, calling for economic sanctions against the South African regime and direct support to Southern African liberation organizations. As Beyers Naude declared:

The vast majority of our African, Coloured and Indian community will never voluntarily accept the present economic system of distribution of wealth and land which the capitalist system, buttressed by a myriad of apartheid laws and regulations, has imposed on them... I believe that it would be correct to state that a

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<sup>291</sup> Walshe, *Church vs State in South Africa*, p. 191.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177. Perhaps the Schlebusch Commission was not so far off the mark when they accused the CI of, 'propagating in disguised form the basic principles, ideas and objectives of Marxism and Neo-Marxism, not only by attacking apartheid, but also by constantly stressing the necessity for Marxist-oriented structural change.' If so, it was a point that couldn't possibly have been said five — or even two — years earlier.

<sup>293</sup> Being an 'affected organisation' meant that it could not receive any funding from overseas. As much of the previous funding had come from sympathetic Europeans and Americans, this was a big blow to the ability of the institute to survive.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

substantial number of blacks would, if they obtain the power to do so, reject the present capitalist system in favor of a form of socialism which is much closer to the African concept of communal rights, communal freedoms and communal responsibilities.<sup>295</sup>

Having once been relatively reluctant collaborators with radicals such as Biko and Turner, the Institute had come quite a long way, to the point of virtually echoing them on many fundamental points. And then, having achieved a common viewpoint, the Christian Institute suffered a common fate with Biko and Turner.

Steve Biko was murdered in detention on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September, 1977. 'Within a few weeks of Biko's death, on 19 October 1977, the security police were out in force with their dogs, pounding and kicking down front doors in pre-dawn raids across the country. Seventeen black consciousness organizations were banned as well as the Christian Institute. Seventy key black leaders were detained,<sup>296</sup> and Donald Woods, editor of the *Daily Dispatch* and friend of Biko, was also banned. Three months later Woods fled the country, on new year's eve. One week after that, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January, 1978, Richard Turner was murdered in his home.

## **CLASS STRUGGLE: A CONCRETE ALTERNATIVE**

Turner may well have agreed with the general sentiment of 'White Consciousness,' but he was critical of both white and black consciousness for their inability to concretely develop alternative structures. 'For the proponents of black consciousness the best way to convince black people that salvation will not come from "white liberals" is by simply getting on with the work of community organisation... and the organisational work of developing community organisations seem for the moment not to have progressed very far.'<sup>297</sup> Of course, it is neither accurate nor useful to act as if Black Consciousness activists were simply not 'progressed very far' in developing community projects. Self-help projects, clinics, and political education were certainly an important part of the BC project. Karis and Gerhart speak at length about these efforts, and about the difficulties the movement faced in terms of state repression. The Black People's Convention, founded in 1972 as an umbrella for

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<sup>295</sup> Speaking at the University of Natal, Durban. As quoted in Walshe, *Church vs State*, pp. 191-2.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>297</sup> Turner, 'Black Consciousness and White Liberals.' in *From Protest to Challenge*, p. 432 and *Eye of the Needle*, p. 138.

numerous black initiatives, quickly took on a community focus under Biko's leadership. 'BCP eventually became associated in the public mind with black initiatives like the Zanempilo clinic outside King William's town and a number of home industry projects.'<sup>298</sup> Another example of this kind of BC efforts at community upliftment were the political education courses, known as 'formation schools.'

Attendance at a typical session might range from a dozen to more than 60 participants. Not since the Communist Party had developed worker night schools as a way to teach, recruit and motivate party cadres had such an effective method of politicization been applied among black South Africans.<sup>299</sup>

Clearly, wherever they were able, BC activists set about building community upliftment infrastructure.<sup>300</sup> The biggest barrier to this work being successful was state repression. The leadership of all of the various BC organisations (SASO, BCP, and BPC) all faced severe state pressure, arrests and bannings, in successive waves. To survive this level of decapitation of their movement, the BC activists developed an approach to leadership that allowed them to constantly replace people lost to repression.<sup>301</sup> Nonetheless, by 1976 a great deal of the activists had been lost to repression and exile, and the community initiatives did not fare well as a result.

It is also too simple to attribute the shortcomings of BC community projects solely to state repression. There were also tensions around the involvement of white activists in BC projects – with black activists frustrated by white attempts to be helpful, seeing this as undermining *self-help* initiatives – and Turner was not exempt from causing this tension. On one occasion, BC activists had worked hard to organize community members living near the Phoenix Settlement such that they would all work together to provide clean running water to the community. This initiative was undermined, according to Ramphele, when, 'a group of mainly young white activists, under the leadership of Richard Turner... entered the same

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<sup>298</sup> Karis and Gerhart, 'The Black Consciousness Movement: Confronting the State.' in *From Protest to Challenge*, p. 123. Zanempilo was a medical clinic, staffed by Biko and Ramphele, and others. The mere fact that Zanempilo was located outside King William's Town, rather than Durban, is attributable to Biko's banning and banishment to 'his' homeland.

<sup>299</sup> Karis and Gerhart, 'The Black Consciousness Movement: The Formative Years.' in *From Protest to Challenge*, p. 112. They claim that 'hundreds' of young blacks went through the formation schools before 1976.

<sup>300</sup> 'These were visible symbols of the self-reliance message of black consciousness... making BCP independent of the Christian Institute and Spro-cas by mid-1973.' Karis and Gerhart, 'The Black Consciousness Movement: Confronting the State.' In *From Protest to Challenge*, p. 123.

<sup>301</sup> 'Each year's election tallies were used to appoint off-the-record shadow leaders ready to step in should there be a sudden vacancy in the executive committee.' Karis and Gerhart, 'The Black Consciousness Movement: The Formative Years.' In *From Protest to Challenge*, p. 112.



community at about the same time<sup>302</sup> and offered to simply pay for the improvements themselves. This insensitive act, taken as paternalism, weakened Turner's reputation as 'one of the few white radicals who understood [BC] views about white racism and economic domination.'<sup>303</sup> BC activists saw tangible self-help initiatives as critically linked to the work of developing a broader, positive Black Consciousness. As Mzamane, Maaba and Biko put it, 'BC was striving, in fact, to develop a unique organisational philosophy and set of strategies not only on how to stand on one's own feet but also how to work with other people without being used by them.'<sup>304</sup>

Beyond the successes and failures of the community projects of Black Consciousness, Turner felt also that their position failed to adequately address the oppressive capitalist economy. Stated a bit vaguely, Turner critiqued the 'middle-class' tendencies of Black Consciousness:

...because they fail to realize that people in different class situations suffer the effects of oppression in different ways, they have not been able to develop an ideology that adequately links those different perspectives in a model that both interprets present reality and projects a coherent alternative reality.<sup>305</sup>

The point is not, of course, that Black Consciousness is made up of middle-class people, but rather that they, according to him, failed to address class in any significant way. In specific, Turner saw a major weakness of Black Consciousness in their lack of engagement in the growing movement of the black working class.

Black Consciousness activists were not totally oblivious to issues of class, but what involvement they made in worker's struggles were rare and generally not as effective as others:

If the Black Community Programme<sup>306</sup> had some success with its church and youth projects, it achieved very little with its imaginative but over-ambitious attempt to form a Black Worker's Council... The Council was envisaged as a resource and educational centre that would foster black consciousness while serving the fledgling trade union movement... These hopes were not fulfilled. The Black Worker's Project sponsored several 'motivation circles' and a faltering start was made to the literacy programme; but overall the project was a failure.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> M. Ramphela, 'Empowerment and Symbols of Hope: Black Consciousness and Community Development', in B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (eds.), *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1991) p. 158.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>304</sup> M. V. Mzamane, B. Maaba and N. Biko, 'The Black Consciousness Movement' in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Volume 2*, p. 100.

<sup>305</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 139.

<sup>306</sup> The black 'action group' of Spro-cas.

<sup>307</sup> Walshe, *Church vs State in South Africa*, p. 157. Karis and Gerhart echo this assessment, characterising the

This limited involvement of black consciousness people in worker's struggles ironically provided a new opening for white leftists to involve themselves once again in black resistance.

The apartheid state's official reasoning for banning Richard Turner had to do with his influence on Nusas.<sup>308</sup> In a letter to his wife (which was read as evidence in court) Turner complains of his involvement with Nusas that, 'The only problem is that I now find myself compelled into a leadership role on campus. My advice and consent has to be got for everything, etc. Both embarrassing and undesirable that they should need a leader.'<sup>309</sup> Despite his frustration with the students' embarrassing tendency to 'need a leader,' Turner was a strong influence on a number of young white students who were against apartheid. For many students, he played a crucial role in helping them develop an understanding of capitalist society and a commitment to involve themselves in opposing the economy, as well as racialism.<sup>310</sup>

Dan O'Meara describes how, in response to the challenge of SASO forming,

The white radicals sort of decided to resign from NUSAS for about a year and a half. We couldn't resign from it because you were a member by default, but we were no longer involved in it. So we were looking for 'a role', and along comes Rick with this idea that it is only by working with black workers that whites can effect change. That was a hugely radical idea. It meant that we could get out of the whole liberal establishment [which was] hugely concerned not to go beyond the bounds of the law.<sup>311</sup>

Turner's emphasis on the black working class was based on analysing the growing importance of black industrial workers to the South African economy. He saw that while in the 1950s (when apartheid was beginning to be entrenched) the percentage of blacks working in industry was relatively low, (compared to agriculture and mining) capitalist 'development' was making the wealthy more reliant on black workers — and therefore black workers had more power than ever before. Turner was convinced that the economy was the 'only sphere'

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Black Worker's Council as 'too ambitious.' Karis and Gerhart, 'The Black Consciousness Movement: Confronting the State.' In *From Protest to Challenge*, p. 123. For a more thorough account of BC and workers, see: M. V. Mzamane, B. Maaba and N. Biko, 'The Black Consciousness Movement' in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Volume 2*, pp. 136-137.

<sup>308</sup> They were interested principally in his activities as a faculty advisor, in his positions at UCT (1968 and 1969) and UND (1970-1973) and not so much interested in his involvement as a member of Nusas, 1963-1966. 'Commission of Inquiry into Certain Organisations,' 4th interim report: 12 August 1974.

<sup>309</sup> 'Commission of Inquiry into Certain Organisations,' 4th interim report: 12 August 1974, p. 558.

<sup>310</sup> For more on Turner and Nusas, see: M. Legassick, 'Aboveground Organisations and Activities, Part 2: NUSAS in the 1970s.' in *The Road to Democracy, Vol. 2*, pp. 860-862.

<sup>311</sup> O'Meara, interview with the author, 21 September 2009.

in which the power of Africans was growing, and could potentially be even greater through trade unions and other forms of organised working class action.<sup>312</sup>

Inspired by this analysis, a group of students at the University of Natal formed the Wages Commission, in 1971. According to Martin Legassick, “[C]ontemporaries are clear that the Wages Commission were the idea of Dave Hemson and Dudley Horner<sup>313</sup> and *not* Richard Turner, as Friedman<sup>314</sup> and Karis and Gerhart<sup>315</sup> claim. Legassick cites the Schlebusch commission report as his source, but his working relationship and friendship with David Hemson seems also to be an influencing factor in this contentious claim.<sup>316</sup> Grace Davie tends to agree with Legassick to a considerable extent, but also acknowledges Turner's strong role, as Friedman and Karis and Gerhart insist:

It is not clear whose idea it was to start a group focused on wages. David Hemson, Halton Cheadle, Charles Nupen and other students all spent hours in discussion with Rick Turner, probably leading to collective thinking on the matter. However, David Hemson seems to have played the key role in conceptualizing of the project.<sup>317</sup>

While Turner's involvement in the Wages Commission is disputed, essentially no one disagrees that he was *at least* a sympathetic outsider, and it is clear that many of the key participants in the Wages Commission were students of Turner, and influenced heavily by him.<sup>318</sup> Tony Morphet remembers one occasion when Turner explicitly spoke to a group of his students that had completed their honours degrees and encouraged them to get involved in working class struggles:

Turner called them to a meeting after they had written their final paper to say, “Your course is now finished, you are going to graduate and you face a choice. You got an important certificate and you are qualified to do all kinds of things and the

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<sup>312</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 132.

<sup>313</sup> M. Legassick, 'Aboveground Organisations and Activities, Part 2: NUSAS in the 1970s.' In *The Road to Democracy, Vol. 2*, p. 863.

<sup>314</sup> 'It was Turner who first prodded students to take in interest in worker issues: they formed a Wages and Economics Commission to stimulate student involvement in labour.' S. Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987, p. 42.

<sup>315</sup> Turner, 'inspired a circle of activists to begin investigating the conditions of black workers, first on the campus and later in the Durban municipality.' Karis & Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>316</sup> See, for example, the collaboration on the article regarding white activists and the trade unions of the 1970s, D. Hemson, M. Legassick, and N. Ulrich, 'White Activists and the Revival of the Workers' Movement'. In *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Vol. 1: 1960-1970*, edited by SADET. Johannesburg: Struik Press, 2005.

<sup>317</sup> G. Davie, 'Strength in Numbers: The Durban Student Wages Commission, Dockworkers & the Poverty Datum Line, 1971-1973,' *The Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol 33, 2, June 2007, p. 413.

<sup>318</sup> In my interviews I was unable to end this dispute once and for all, but Cheadle, Badsha, Morphet, Schlemmer, Turner-Stylianou, O'Meara and Webster all spoke of Turner's involvement with the Wages Commission, stressing Turner's importance in the process to varying degrees.

corporate world is waiting for you, and so is the law. All kinds of things, professional activities. But there is a different choice also, which is labour". And of course they just all said, "of course we will do that..". that's the only time I have ever heard him apply direct pressure. He put it in terms of a choice but it was very, very clear that he was saying "you don't have a choice," actually.<sup>319</sup>

Legassick stresses that white activists turned to working class politics out of 'contempt' for the role Black Consciousness encouraged whites to play. 'Radical white students regarded with contempt and as a waste of time the idea of trying to engage with racist whites in door-to-door campaigns or in other forms of activity, they turned to the black working class as an alternative.'<sup>320</sup> This may be an accurate interpretation of the position of some of the Wages Commission members. Halton Cheadle, whose study with Turner deeply shaped his commitment to working class organisation, nonetheless felt that getting involved with labour was, in a sense, breaking away from Turner's emphasis on white people preparing whites for change, while blacks must make change. To over-simplify, the issue in Cheadle's mind was, if this theory is correct, "Why aren't black students organising black workers?" They weren't.<sup>321</sup> Therefore, 'A group of us decided that our role was to organise black workers. So, we moved away from the issue of black or white. The issue simply was that the workers should run the union.'<sup>322</sup> It seems clear that Turner did not envision involvement in working class organisation as strictly antagonistic to cooperation with BC activists, or as an invalidation of the basic positions of Black Consciousness. Turner's encouragement of white students to involve themselves with labour was simultaneous with his encouragement to embrace Black Consciousness as a type of radicalism and to do exactly the kinds of activities that Legassick claims the students found contemptible, such as canvassing in white communities. The attitude that BC and trade unionism could be mutually compatible may have been a weakness of Turner's understanding of the political situation of the time, or it may have been an expression of the tenacity of his utopian perspective that he sought all possible openings, rather than holding any one position in contempt.

The Wages Commission was a rather sideways entrance into 'organizing the working

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<sup>319</sup> Interview with Morphet, 7 November 2009.

<sup>320</sup> M. Legassick, 'Aboveground Organisations and Activities, Part 2: NUSAS in the 1970s.' In *The Road to Democracy, Vol. 2*, p. 862.

<sup>321</sup> Turner-Stylinau replies to this rhetorical argument by saying, 'You know, the fact that you are black doesn't make you understand black trade unions or the issues of the factory worker anymore than if you were a white student, even though your parents might be workers at the factory. It's still not your reality.' Interview with Turner-Stylinau, 17 October 2009.

<sup>322</sup> Interview with Cheadle, 9 November 2009.

class.' The purpose of the group was to study the wages being paid to black workers in relation to the 'Living Wage'<sup>323</sup> and then to take steps to help workers advocate for wages that would allow them basic dignity. The students began by interviewing the staff at the University of Natal, and then called a meeting of workers, which was very well attended. In Cheadle's estimation, the student's timing was simply perfect; this is why the response from workers was so positive. From this humble, but encouraging start, the Wages Commission began to get involved in larger questions of black wages, outside of the campus. As African workers were legally defined outside of the category of 'employees' under apartheid law, the only legal mechanism for making reforms in black wages was through something called the wages board. Cheadle describes how, normally,

The wage board would meet — like five or six people, officials appointed by the ministers — and they would have public hearings on wages for a particular industry. No one ever comes; normally these wage board hearings are just employers. There was a so-called workers side, where they would have indunas, which is a term for headman. It's disgusting.<sup>324</sup>

Despite the grave limitations of the forum, the Wages Commission used the wage board hearings as a way to mobilise workers. They worked with workers to formulate demands and then,

we attended the wage board meeting with like you know hundreds of workers and we filled the room up. They got up and spoke, and then we came in and spoke and we had the committee, and the committee put forward a petition which was signed by thousands of dock workers. So, we used this as a mobilising tool.<sup>325</sup>

Although the Wages Commission had no formal role in the Durban strikes of 1973 — they certainly did not 'lead' the workers — some of the initial strikes *did* happen in factories that the Wages Commission had interacted with, and often the wage increase demands made by strikers were similar to the numbers that the Commission published for a 'living wage.' The Wages Commission were relatively effective due to the relative privilege of the student activists, which gave them greater capacity (than their black counterparts) to engage with workers without negative repercussions:

So here comes this group of privileged people who are not going to be smashed by the police immediately, because the police don't quite know what to do. So for about two years — it was a brief little moment — the people who came out of the Wages Commission could start organising and they were left alone by the police.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> 'Poverty Datum Line' was the terminology used at the time, to convey the same meaning.

<sup>324</sup> Interview with Cheadle, 9 November 2009.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>326</sup> Interview with O'Meara, 21 September 2009.

A few of the students involved in the Wages Commission grew steadily more involved in worker's struggle, either by taking full time jobs with the trade unions,<sup>327</sup> or by assisting in the nascent attempts at organisation, such as the General Workers Benefit Fund (which pooled money of members so that burial expenses would be covered for the family). Inspired by a class analysis of society — but without a clear programme — student activists reached out to workers, in the hopes that their initiatives would lead towards an increase in worker's organisation. Gerry Mare speaks to the unpredictability of such a process:

You might think, “the working class want change, they want power, they want this”... but asking what people want, you don't always get what you expect them to say. So the first meeting down at Bolton hall when there was a group of people and the idea of some kind of organisation came up and the workers who were there were asked, “What would you want this organisation to give you?” they said, “Funeral benefits,” they were all asking for that because it's such an enormous burden on any family if some member dies...<sup>328</sup>

While, in hindsight, people might view the General Workers Benefit Fund as a clear precursor to the black trade union movement, it did not start out with a such a clear line of progress in mind.

These young radicals were extremely dedicated, and energetic. Some, like David Hemson, did quite a serious amount of research into the working conditions of dock workers, and workers in the textile plants.<sup>329</sup> This work quickly spread into active recruitment activities outside the factory gates at 6am, and in a period of a couple of years, according to Halton Cheadle, roughly 100,000 workers were organized into trade unions.<sup>330</sup>

Black militancy and working class organization developed rapidly after the Durban strikes of 1973. So, then, ‘In the following five years,<sup>331</sup> the conditions in which the utopianism of *The Eye of the Needle* had been necessary were being brought to an end by this continued upsurge of militancy among workers, which was to change the nature of our political life.’<sup>332</sup> The efforts of the young student radicals paid off, relatively quickly and explosively. Having once gotten involved as catalysts, they quickly saw themselves as

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<sup>327</sup> Halton Cheadle, for example, became the general secretary of the Textile Worker's Union, starting in 1973.

<sup>328</sup> Gerry Mare, student at the University of Natal, friend of Richard Turner. Interview conducted, 4 December 2009.

<sup>329</sup> Most notably, see: D. Hemson, 'Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: The *Dock Workers* of Durban,' (unpublished *Ph.D.* thesis, University of Warwick, 1979). Hemson wrote many articles on the subject, as well, before his banning in 1974.

<sup>330</sup> Interview with Cheadle, 9 November 2009.

<sup>331</sup> During which time Turner was, also, banned.

<sup>332</sup> Nash, 'History and Consciousness', n.d., p. 6.

traditional organizers, taking up leadership roles amongst workers. As a result, Cheadle, Hemson, and others 'shifted' more towards Marxism (Leninism) and out of alignment with Richard Turner's politics. It was, 'a shift that happened very quickly in fact, partly because we were so successful.'<sup>333</sup> Dan O'Meara speaks eloquently regarding the 'irony' of this political shift:

This is the irony or the tragedy of Rick: just at the moment when this first generation of his students move into organizing, they abandon Rick's way of thinking, and they move to Marxism. So there's not, as it were, a real second generation that follows... The positions that he was advocating, say between 1970-1974, were just passed by. He was a catalyst, but his ideas ended up not informing the analysis of South Africa... Everybody remained loyal to him while they moved beyond him.<sup>334</sup>

In the new political life after 1973, the Old Left would steadily re-emerge, and Turner's more anti-authoritarian and Utopian radicalism would be seen as less viable.

## CONCLUSION

During the harsh years of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Turner's provocations towards a more radical outlook and approach to politics influenced a number of different initiatives in new directions. Ironically, the repressive measures of the state provided a political climate — from roughly 1968 until about 1978 — where a number of independent and anti-capitalist perspectives could develop, without being controlled by any Party or Central Committee. Utilizing his dialogic approach towards education, and through the analytical lens of *The Eye of the Needle*, Turner was able to embrace two positions which might have otherwise appeared antagonistic: Black Consciousness and Class Consciousness. These theoretical contributions helped the white left avoid paralysis and expanded the range of possibilities for radical thought and practice.

Nonetheless, even during this period of relative open-ness, a number of activists moved back in the direction of comfortable, hierarchical forms of political organizing, adopting a vanguardist approach to understanding revolutionary struggle. Furthermore, by the time of Turner's death, this window of independent political opposition was again closed, and the momentum shifted again towards centralized leadership in the hands of elites in

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<sup>333</sup> Interview with Cheadle, 9 November 2009.

<sup>334</sup> Interview with O'Meara, 21 September 2009.

Zambia, Moscow, London and the newly formed trade unions.

The third chapter will continue to analyse Turner's role in organising against apartheid and capitalism. In specific, chapter three focuses on Turner's involvement in the trade union struggles which emerged after the 1973 wildcat strikes in Durban. Particular emphasis is placed on an articulation of the worker's education project that Turner was involved in, the Institute for Industrial Education. Further, the tensions that arose between his conception of how to educate workers towards organising in their own interests and the positions taken by organisers within the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Committee (TUACC) are dealt with in detail. These conflicts are central to understanding the process by which, in O'Meara's words, Turner was 'passed by.'



## Chapter 3

### Turner and the Black Working Class

This chapter will examine Richard Turner's relationship to black working class organizing following the wildcat strikes in Durban in 1973. Starting from Turner's own analysis of the Durban strikes, and his conception of class consciousness amongst black workers,<sup>335</sup> the chapter will then analyze Turner's initiative to assist black worker's developing consciousness, the Institute for Industrial Education. The Institute for Industrial Education had rather modest aims, and could not claim to accomplish a number of them. The project was cut short much sooner than anyone involved would have liked, and left very few traces; a precious few copies of the workbooks remain. There is only one full-length article examining the project, and a few brief references in articles and books.<sup>336</sup> Nonetheless, the vision behind the Institute, and the tensions that arose with the unions because of it both remain crucial lessons to be grappled with. The story of the Institute for Industrial Education gets to the heart of many important questions around how struggles against oppression are waged generally and in specific around the role of South African unions in the struggle against apartheid.

In order to understand Richard Turner's relationship to unionism, I investigate the following:

Why did Richard Turner feel it was important to get involved in building trade unions?

What was his concept of what he could do to help black working class organisation?

In specific, what was the vision and structure of the Institute for Industrial Education?

Why did this project lead to so much tension with union leadership?

What was the reasoning behind shutting down the IIE? Who benefits?

#### **MAKING SENSE OF WILDCATS**

<sup>335</sup> As found in, F. Fisher, [Turner] 'Class Consciousness Among Colonised Workers in South Africa.' in L. Schlemmer and E. Webster, ed. *Change, Reform and Economic Growth in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1978, pp. 197-223. Note, according to Turner-Stylianou (who was Foszia Fisher at the time of original publishing [1974]) Turner was the author of this article. Interview with Turner-Stylianou, 17 October 2009.

<sup>336</sup> The most significant article is, J. Maree, 'Institute of Industrial Education and Worker Education.' *South African Labour Bulletin* 9:8 (July 1984): 77-91. I was also able to locate a number of the original workbooks of the IIE curriculum, *The Worker's Handbook No. 1 A History of Worker's Organisations*, *The Worker's Handbook No. 2 The Worker's Organisation*, *The Worker in Society*, *Lesson 4* were the main ones used for my research. I located these as part of the Foszia Turner-Stylianou Papers.

There was no formal beginning. Sometimes the decision to strike was taken in informal meetings outside the gates. In other instances, workers simply stopped work in one part of the factory, and others joined in... They rarely elected a negotiating committee and often did not even make any formal demands. When addressed by management they would take up en masse a particular demand. The mood at these meetings with management seems often to have been euphoric, with much good-humoured insult being flung at managers.<sup>337</sup>

In January of 1973 a wildcat strike at Coronation Brick & Tile just outside Durban set off a wave of strikes throughout the Durban area, involving more than 150 companies and 100,000 workers.<sup>338</sup> The strikes spread rapidly from factory to factory, and even the municipal workers joined in. '16,000 employees of the Durban Corporation closed down the city's essential services: rubbish quickly piled up, a backlog of corpses built up as graves went un-dug, and perishable food decayed in the city's markets.<sup>339</sup> As one strike ended, another would begin, or workers would be inspired by the sight of striking workers marching and would join in. Halton Cheadle, a union organizer at the time, recalls the atmosphere of workers marching through the streets, carrying sticks and flags and singing in Zulu, when, 'Suddenly what was happening... I witnessed this on several occasions... you would have a strike and you would march down the road and then you would literally see workers in different factories look out the windows and join the bloody thing.'<sup>340</sup>

The strikes were spontaneous, without coordination from any political party or trade union, and the demands were frequently for wage increases of 100% or more. 'Most workers named a figure approximately double their current wage. Those on R10 suggested R20; those on R20 suggested R40. The evidence suggests, therefore, that there is no wage level, within the range which is "possible" given the present dispensation, which is likely to satisfy the aspirations of workers... the initial demand is significant. It does seem to express, in veiled

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<sup>337</sup> In Fisher [Turner], 'Class Consciousness,' p. 212.

<sup>338</sup> D. Hemson, M. Legassick, and N. Ulrich, 'White Activists and the Revival of the Workers' Movement.' in SADET, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Vol. 2: 1970-1980*. Pretoria, University of South Africa Press, 2006, p. 256. Hemson et. al count the numbers based on the amount of workers on strike at any one time, citing that some days there were 20,000, and at the peak, 50,000 in one day. As there were dozens of strikes, and many of them short-lived, the number of 100,000 is an estimate of the total numbers of strikers. This corresponds with J. Sithole, and S. Ndlovu, S. 'The Revival of the Labour Movement, 1970- 1980.' in SADET, *Road to Democracy in South Africa, Volume 2, 1970- 1980*. Pretoria, University of South Africa Press, 2006, p. 187. 100,000 is also the number cited in IIE, *The Durban Strikes: Human Beings With Souls*. Durban: Ravan. 1974.

<sup>339</sup> Walshe, *Church vs State*, p. 91.

<sup>340</sup> Interview with Cheadle, 9 November 2009.

terms, a rejection of the whole system.<sup>1341</sup>

The workers were often flagrantly opposed to creating any formal leadership structure, choosing instead to gather en masse outside the factory gates, talking together and heckling management. “We don't need a committee. We need R30 per week,” a coronation worker had insisted.<sup>1342</sup> Explaining the reluctance to form a negotiating committee, Turner writes that, ‘workers were aware that this could be a ploy to discover the leaders, who would then risk dismissal; they were also apparently aware that a work stoppage only becomes a strike when it is associated with formal demands.’<sup>1343</sup> Employers were obviously frustrated by the refusal of workers to appoint leaders, but were powerless to force them to do so. The workers were often threatened with punishment if they were seen as responsible for the strikes, so clearly few workers wanted to volunteer for such a fate. Therefore, ‘Employers complained that they were being forced to negotiate with a “mob.”’<sup>1344</sup> John Copelyn, a labour organizer at the time, describes the situation before the strikes:

In Durban the natives were like a dark unknown force. Just to give you an example, the Frame group<sup>345</sup> employed 8000 people in five different mills. They had one guy who was in charge of it all, sort of an ex-policeman type of a guy, and he spoke Zulu, a white guy. Of course he learned Zulu on a farm or some mine, but he was a terror; any trouble and he will be there and he will kick you out like that. You had a 120% chance of being fired in your first year of service. Until you buckled down, you understood to keep quiet, just do what you are told, don't ask a lot of crap, just keep your nose to the grindstone, don't look up, don't look around, don't think, just do... When you've got an environment of 8000 people like that the chances of a spark in that thing is overwhelming.<sup>346</sup>

The Durban strikes were remarkable not only for their tremendous size and their spontaneity, but also because they were – all things considered – astonishingly successful. In the harsh climate of repression at the time, one would have expected such strikes to be met with massive firings and/or police brutality, but neither occurred and most workers gained at least a small wage increase. Turner argued that, ‘The fact that the strikes were not organized by some central body also accounts for the relative measure of success which they achieved. It was quite impossible for the state to take action against more than 150 autonomous groups

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<sup>341</sup> Fisher [Turner], ‘Class Consciousness,’ p. 213, p. 216.

<sup>342</sup> Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p. 55. Wages at the time were around R12-R18 per week.

<sup>343</sup> Fisher [Turner], ‘Class Consciousness,’ p. 212.

<sup>344</sup> Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p. 55.

<sup>345</sup> A group of textile factories under the same owner, with notoriously low wages for African workers, was the site of many of the strikes in 1973.

<sup>346</sup> Interview with John Copelyn, 19 November 2009. Copelyn was a TUACC organizer and member of the board of directors of the Institute for Industrial Education.

of strikers. Short of putting nearly 100,000 workers in jail, there was nothing that they could do.<sup>347</sup> Furthermore, as Turner had noted previously in *The Eye of the Needle*, the black workers on strike in Durban were of a higher skill level than African workers in South Africa had been in the past, and therefore more powerful.<sup>348</sup>

Turner, working in collaboration with a handful of other researchers and trade unionists, wrote the only detailed account of the series of wildcat strikes that spread through the Durban area at the beginning of 1973, entitled *The Durban Strikes: Human Beings With Souls*.<sup>349</sup> Much of the book is simply a careful account of the events which transpired. Using extensive interviews with workers – both Africans and Indians<sup>350</sup> – the book attempts to understand why the workers struck, how they organised and made decisions and whether there was any substance to the repeated claim made by government officials that the strikes were the result of 'agitators'.<sup>351</sup> Turner was particularly intrigued by the fact that the strikes were responded to with goodwill. Employers frequently granted many of the worker's demands, (or at least made some amount of concessions in the form of wage improvements, etc.) very few workers were fired, and the police showed considerable restraint. Interviews were done with a couple of dozen employers to try and understand this reaction. Furthermore, a number of white citizens wrote sympathetic letters to local newspapers during the strikes, calling for improved working conditions for Africans. Interviews were done with a random sampling of white citizens<sup>352</sup> to try and understand whether this reaction was widespread or merely that of a few outspoken white people.

The conclusion of *The Durban Strikes* was that the strikes pointed towards the urgent

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<sup>347</sup> Fisher [Turner], 'Class Consciousness,' pp. 214-215.

<sup>348</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 132. See also an analysis on 'political economy' in *The Durban Strikes*.

<sup>349</sup> IIE, *The Durban Strikes: Human Beings With Souls*. Durban: Ravan. 1974. The book *The Durban Strikes* was a collaborative effort, with a number of people (including Foszia Fisher, Lawrence Schlemmer, Harriet Bolton, Gerry Mare and David Hemson) crucially involved in the work. Primarily, assistance was needed during the research phase, although others helped with some of the writing and editing. Nonetheless, Turner was a central instigator for the project, and would have been listed as an author if his banning had not prevented this. My information on the collective authorship of *The Durban Strikes* is based on interviews with Mare, Turner-Stylinau and Morphet.

<sup>350</sup> Workers were contacted with the help of Harriet Bolton, an organizer for TUCSA that was unusually sympathetic to organizing black workers. Part of the question being investigated was whether the strikes were simply 'a black thing,' or whether Indian workers were sympathetic to them.

<sup>351</sup> Though Turner acknowledges the presence of wages commission activists and their contributions regarding a living wage, the overall finding is that agitators *were not* responsible. This is a position that Halton Cheadle, one of the people who could have been seen as 'agitating,' for his work with the Wages Commission confirms. Interview with Cheadle, 9 November 2009.

<sup>352</sup> A random sample, as close to equal numbers of English and Afrikaans speakers as possible, were asked a series of questions by telephone.

need – and feasibility – of legally recognizing African trade unions.<sup>353</sup> While this argumentation was rationally based and clearly articulated it is nonetheless somewhat jarring to read, as the tone is so strikingly different from Turner's other writing.<sup>354</sup> Whereas, in *The Eye of the Needle* the tone is one of inspiring the reader to imagine social change in the direction of utopia, here Turner joins others in stressing reasonable demands that would suit employers, the government, and white society.

Put succinctly, Turner *et al* reconciled themselves to the fact that white people wanted 'stability' more than 'justice,' and offered them trade unions as a means towards stability – not justice. He wrote:

It is also necessary to make it clear that the degree of change which whites seem willing to envisage is not towards a just society, but rather towards a less unjust and more stable society, with the emphasis on stability, rather than justice... Since there is at present little likelihood of a change occurring on the level of formal political rights, it is necessary to analyse the part which could be played by trade unions in institutionalizing conflict...<sup>355</sup>

In other words, *The Durban Strikes* argued at length for trade unions to be seen as a means of reducing the chaos and unpredictability of wildcat strikes. The argument put forward was that unions do not increase worker unrest, they decrease it. Union leaders 'render considerable assistance,' when it comes to 'advising against and restraining their members.'<sup>356</sup> Why did Turner and others make this argument?

Rather than appealing to and supporting the sense of power and self-assertion within the working class, *The Durban Strikes* instead directed attention towards the ruling class – who are constantly afraid of the potential power of the black working class. Turner and others spoke directly to that fear, and told the rulers that they could be less afraid if only they would channel the rage produced by an unjust economic system into clear and simple legal channels – namely, the union.

Trade unions... are the precondition for stable industrial peace in South Africa... a disgruntled and alienated work force, disinterested in their jobs and only able to express their grievances through wildcat strikes and in bloodier forms of protest, such as the tragedy at Carletonville,<sup>357</sup> which occurred as we were completing this

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<sup>353</sup> Further, this section of the book was re-printed as 'The Case for African Trade Unions.' *South African Labour Bulletin*, Vol. 1 No. 1, April 1974.

<sup>354</sup> Of course, it is worth repeating that this text was collaboratively written, which may have effected the tone considerably.

<sup>355</sup> IIE, *Durban Strikes*, p. 155.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 176-7. 'Trade Union officials always dread strikes... Thus in societies where strikes are legal they are relatively rare occurrences, and in all societies workers and trade unionists dislike striking.'

<sup>357</sup> According to David Lewis, the tragedy at Carletonville was not one of 'bloodier forms of protest,' but rather

manuscript, is in any body's interest. The only alternative is trade unions.<sup>358</sup>

The chapter entitled, 'The Case for African Trade Unions' was written just after the state had reformed its labour laws in regards to Africans because of the 1973 strikes. Legislation put in place during the previous decades had greatly weakened the capacity of African workers to organize.<sup>359</sup> The 1973 reforms modified the ways in which Africans could 'communicate' with management, and even allowed for an extremely curtailed right to strike. Nonetheless, Minister of Labour Marais Viljoen described the 1973 reform as intended to 'deprive Bantu trade unions of their life's blood and any necessity for existence.' Steve Friedman explains that the new law, 'sought to do this by introducing a new factory committee, the liaison committee, which offered workers even less power than the works committees the 1953 law set up.'<sup>360</sup> In light of these repressive and short-sighted reforms, one can understand 'The Case for African Trade Unions,' line of reasoning as essentially saying, it is not enough; you'll have to do more than that if you want any kind of success quieting the working class.

Pragmatic reasoning aside, the more fundamental question remains: Why did Turner and others come to the conclusion that wildcat strikes are dangerous, unstable, or undesirable?

A case could easily have been made that the wildcat nature of the Durban strikes were a crucial component of their relative success. In fact, Turner himself made exactly this point, in another piece of writing.<sup>361</sup> Starting with this analysis, it wouldn't be too much of a stretch to conclude that spontaneous and de-centralized methods of working class struggle should be encouraged and broadened. But *The Durban Strikes* analysed spontaneous acts of rebellion as expressions of powerlessness, as opposed to organized forms – such as unions.<sup>362</sup> Turner and others thus implied that such strikes should be 'prevented via orderly trade unionism' and

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of the state massacring innocents: 'In September 1973, police shot dead 11 black miners during a wage dispute at Western Deep Levels mine in Carletonville, west of Johannesburg.' As quoted in D. Lewis, 'Black Workers and Trade Unions,' in SADET, *Road to Democracy in South Africa, Volume 2, 1970- 1980*. Pretoria, University of South Africa Press, 2006, p. 205.

<sup>358</sup> IIE, *Durban Strikes*, p. 180.

<sup>359</sup> For more context, see: Hemson et. al, 'White Activists and the Revival of the Worker's Movement' pp. 246-247.

<sup>360</sup> Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p. 53.

<sup>361</sup> As quoted above, Fisher [Turner], 'Class Consciousness,' pp. 214-215.

<sup>362</sup> IIE, *Durban Strikes*, pp. 159-160.

'orderly negotiations.'<sup>363</sup>

Perhaps one can be persuaded by the persistent references to the 'restraint' and 'peace' brought about by unions, but why? Why did Richard Turner want to focus our attention on that?

'The Case for African Trade Unions' points to a weak link between Turner's theoretical writing on workers' self-management and his strategic thinking in the present-tense. Having studied the Durban strikes so thoroughly, he still remained blind to their real strength, opting instead to call for 'rationalizing' worker-management relations. It is not the role of radical opponents of an economic system to tell the rulers of that system how they could more rationally or peacefully exploit and oppress the population. Nonetheless, in making the case for legal recognition of African unions, Turner repeatedly did just that.

## **A CLASS ANALYSIS STARTS**

From reading *The Durban Strikes* alone, one might get the impression that a liberal reform of labour policy was all that Richard Turner desired. Turner's thoughts on trade union organizing must be placed within the overall context of his ideas. His repeated stress on the desirability of trade unions to 'stabilize' the society are certainly contradictory when placed against his more provocative, utopian statements. Nonetheless, it is my contention that the basic vision of an 'ideal, possible society' contained in *The Eye of the Needle* informed Turner's analysis of and involvement in trade union struggles.

In a 1974 article published after *The Durban Strikes*, Turner's analysis of the strikes took on a whole new tone. This piece, entitled, 'Class Consciousness amongst Colonised Workers in South Africa,' focused principally on what the strikes 'mean' in terms of the consciousness of the workers involved.<sup>364</sup> Whereas the government insisted that the workers were stirred up by 'agitators,' Turner took worker action at face value. Turner asked us to interrogate, 'if people say that they are satisfied with a particular situation, are they saying that it is ideal, or are they telling us that they have very low aspirations, or are they realistically assessing it as the best possible situation given the existing and unchangeable balance of power?'<sup>365</sup> Given that the strikes came at a time of relative labour 'calm,' how can

<sup>363</sup> Quoting Helen Suzman in IIE, *The Durban Strikes*. p. 111.

<sup>364</sup> F. Fisher, [R. Turner]. 'Class Consciousness,' pp. 197-223.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

we determine the extent to which worker frustration was deep-seated and unresolved?

That is to say, while it is obvious that the wages for African workers were appallingly low, and while it is obvious that the workers were ready to take risks to improve their wages, what else about their oppression were they aware of? The first question is, how much frustration and desire for change is embodied in these spontaneous strikes? Were their grievances temporary, or systematic?

Turner cautions us against over-simplifying: 'sometimes theorists write as though class consciousness were something which you either have or do not have, but this is very misleading.'<sup>366</sup> Instead of a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer, Turner sees the development of class consciousness as the process by which personal anger becomes translated into an awareness of an unjust social system:

A class analysis starts from the recognition of the existence within a society of *structurally imposed* inequalities, and the problem then becomes one of explaining how those inequalities are maintained and how they are perceived by those who either do or do not benefit from them.<sup>367</sup>

Can it be said that the 100,000 workers that went on strike in 1973 were defying *a system of inequality*? To this Turner answered,

There may well be a highly dissatisfied consciousness present, repressed by the apparent total absence of channels of action, and unable to verbalize itself. This is illustrated particularly in the case of wildcat strikes, where some incident suddenly permits this consciousness to crystallise, often in very radical forms.<sup>368</sup>

So, having been denied any normal channels of discontent, the workers in Durban nonetheless found a way to 'verbalise' themselves quite clearly. It is possible to be aware that you are being exploited, and even that exploitation is systematic, without taking action – if no course of action seems possible. However, 'the very success of the strikes indicates how rapidly a sense of power can be acquired when some event reveals the possibility of effective action.'<sup>369</sup>

Having spoken at length in *The Durban Strikes* about the need to give legal recognition to trade unions, Turner again touched on this theme in the 'Class Consciousness' article, but with a much different emphasis. For example, Turner wrote again about the risk of 'de-stabilizing' society without unions, but was more sympathetic to instability:

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>367</sup> Fisher [Turner], 'Class Consciousness,' p. 197.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.



To the extent that employers refuse recognition of strongly organized trade unions, they may encourage the development of more revolutionary class consciousness... Unless employers can provide a better form of integration, a changing political climate... could lead to a quite rapid development of class consciousness beyond economist demands.<sup>370</sup>

Here Turner was not pleading for industrial peace. Instead, he was simply pointing out that workers' values are changing quickly as a result of their increased sense of power, and given the predictable way in which the regime will react, workers may well push past 'economist demands' – namely, industrial peace. Furthermore, as he did in *The Eye of the Needle*, Turner warned against limiting the demands to one of constantly negotiating with management, and pushed for broader control of the workplace and more meaningful labour. Turner then pointed out that, potentially at least, all workplace struggles in South Africa could be struggles around control.<sup>371</sup>

Perhaps most remarkably, given the space dedicated in *The Durban Strikes* in praise of unions, Turner spoke quite sympathetically towards working class skepticism regarding unionizing. He explained how resistance to forming unions also comes, also, from,

those who have seen many forms of trade union and political organisation be effectively repressed. These workers may feel that the unions are not viable. They may feel that given the present balance of forces it is easier for workers to make gains by using methods of informal control in the factories, and through leaderless wildcat strikes. *They may also be right here.*<sup>372</sup>

Overall, Turner's tone in 'Class Consciousness' was hopeful. He was inspired by their bold wage demands, 'but the fact that this could only be expressed by making “impossible” money demands also tells us something about the level of class consciousness of these workers.<sup>373</sup> In addition, though he saw racialism as a ‘crude type of theory’ and not likely to be the dominant factor in the coming struggle, he was not confident about workers moving in a clearly anti-capitalist direction, or developing a vision of 'an alternative form of society.'<sup>374</sup> But certainly Turner was not trying to say that workers are static, ignorant, or content. On the contrary, he was clearly impressed by the speed of the developing class consciousness

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<sup>370</sup> Fisher [Turner], 'Class Consciousness,' p. 216.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215-216. 'It is worth stressing that in South Africa, managerial prerogative over African workers has traditionally been virtually absolute. Under these circumstances, all issues are issues of control, whether they concern the right of workers to negotiate for higher wages, or to have recognized trade unions, or to take away the managerial right to hire and fire at will. Because they are perceived by management as issues of control, they may at least come to be perceived in the same way by workers.'

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220. Emphasis added.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

amongst black workers, and predicted it moving rapidly.

In conclusion, while Turner did seem to feel strongly that fighting for trade union legalization was a necessary strategic step, his persistent interest was on the broadening of class consciousness and expanding the possibilities of social change towards radical transformation.

## WHITE INTELLECTUALS AND TRADE UNIONS

The role of white intellectuals in South African trade unions is deeply contested. Within the trade unions which emerged after 1973, conflicts of vision arose around the overall usefulness of 'outside,'<sup>375</sup> intellectual leadership. These conflicts persist in the debates within the literature on the time period, with a number of different positions present, and some of the debate growing quite heated.<sup>376</sup> There is some broad agreement that in the early stages, as Hemson *et al* note, white university-trained leaders predominated, '...the strategic and administrative field having the confidence to squeeze concessions from management, gain knowledge of the details of statutes and agreements often crucial to solving a grievance, letter writing and meeting skills.'<sup>377</sup> The debate grows harsher when evaluating the impact of this 'dominance.' Sakhela Buhlungu implies that white intellectuals were 'Rebels without a cause of their own.'<sup>378</sup> Johann Maree responds to this by arguing that white intellectuals played an important role in fostering notions of worker's control and democracy within the trade unions.<sup>379</sup> Nicole Ulrich stresses that, 'the power of white intellectuals should not be overstated,'<sup>380</sup> and therefore places her emphasis on the role of African and coloured worker-

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<sup>375</sup> Whether or not white intellectuals should be thought of as 'outside' or 'inside' the union is itself contested. People like Cheadle and Copelyn, who took leadership roles, clearly saw themselves as 'inside' the union. Turner's position is less clear. S. Buhlungu, 'Rebels Without a Cause of their Own? The contradictory class location of white officials in black unions in South Africa, 1973-1994.' *Current Sociology*, 54 (3): May 2006, p. 14, characterises him as one of the 'freelance intellectuals,' influential to an extent, but not really involved.

<sup>376</sup> See Legassick, M. 'Debating the revival of the workers' movement in the 1970s: The South African Democracy Education Trust and post-apartheid history,' *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, Vol. 34, (Nov. 2008), pp. 240-266. Also, J. Sithole, 'Contestations over knowledge production or ideological bullying? A response to Legassick on the workers' movement.' *Kronos*, Vol. 35, (2009), pp. 222-241.

<sup>377</sup> Hemson *et al*, 'White Activists,' p. 259

<sup>378</sup> Buhlungu, 'Rebels Without a Cause of their Own?,' pp. 427-453.

<sup>379</sup> J. Maree, 'Rebels with Causes: white officials in black unions in South Africa, 1973-94: a response to Sakhela Buhlungu.' *Current Sociology*, Vol. 54, No. 3, (May 2006), pp. 453-469.

<sup>380</sup> N. Ulrich, 'Only Workers Can Free the Workers: the origin of the workers' control tradition and the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Committee (TUACC), 1970-1979.' PhD diss., University of the Witwatersrand, 2007, p. 169.

leaders building democratic unions. Sithole and Ndlovu, who advocate strongly in defence of the ANC-affiliated 'political unions,' argue that white-supported initiatives were 'far outshone' by other unionization projects.<sup>381</sup> Richard Turner's involvement must be understood within these debates.

At the heart of all of these debates is the thorny question of how to maximize the power of the workers within their unions. Given engrained disparities of power and education, the notion of a trade union being democratically controlled by its members is difficult to make tangible in practice. Turner was aware of this problematic dynamic, and wrote about it at some length:

Educated members of the middle class are much more likely to have the skills which are needed to run a big organization... there is a danger that the few middle class people who want to co-operate with the workers might take over the leadership of the workers' movement. This is dangerous for three reasons. The first reason is that these people may in fact be more concerned with their own class interests. There are many examples in history of middle class and even owning class leaders who have used worker organizations to improve the position of their own class. The second reason is that middle class leaders may in fact not really understand the problems of the workers. The third reason is that, if they do things for the workers, this will prevent the workers from learning how to do these things themselves.<sup>382</sup>

Still, Turner clearly thought that educated, middle class people should find a role for themselves within the union. His analysis was that, 'co-operation between workers and people from other classes can be difficult. But it is not impossible. Workers should be patient with such people.'<sup>383</sup> Furthermore, Turner stressed that, 'the difficulties resulting from middle class leadership can be the same whether the middle class people are black or white.'<sup>384</sup> This general analysis was relatively common within the democratic and 'non-racial' trade unions formed in the 1970s. Much effort was put on de-racializing the potential conflicts between middle-class leaders and rank-and-file union members. Heavy emphasis was placed on developing a democratic infrastructure within the union, which would gradually offset some of the initial imbalance, as workers took greater prominence of their unions.<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> Sithole & Ndlovu, 'The Revival of the Labour Movement,' p. 241. As for the 'other unionization projects,' Sithole and Ndlovu name four different groups of union activists. Within this schema, they characterise Turner as within the group of 'Nusas-aligned white union activists.' p. 194. To be clear, this chapter only addresses that group of 'nusas-aligned white union activists,' which includes both Turner and the Institute for Industrial Education and the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Committee (TUACC).

<sup>382</sup> IIE workbook, 'Worker in Society,' lesson 4, p. 21.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>385</sup> Buhlungu, 'Rebels Without a Cause of Their Own?,' pp. 439-440. He argues that, by the 1980s a number of

Despite broad agreement between Turner and the emerging democratic unions, there were still important conceptual and practical differences. At the conceptual level, Tony Morphet characterises the difference as follows: 'For Turner the working class is going to discover itself for itself. It's going to discover its capacities once it has information. But those guys [union organizers] know the working class is going to be formed by them.'<sup>386</sup> True to his overall character, Richard Turner did not get involved with the working class in order to 'recruit' or 'train' workers. In Lawrence Schlemmer's estimation, Turner felt that,

Our task is not to decide for them how they must play this game. Our task is to give them the tools to grow. We've got to start where they are at... Give them the tools to occupy whatever power base they're going to create *meaningfully*.<sup>387</sup>

Turner's constant focus was on the question of consciousness. He saw that the working class has tremendous power if it is conscious of that fact. Therefore, to the extent that he saw himself playing a useful role in working class struggle, he saw himself as providing the necessary information (and asking important fundamental questions) for workers to be able to develop solutions *for themselves*. This approach is very different to the 'vanguard' party approach that has a clear programme that it simply needs the working class to carry out.

Some union organizers believe that unions are of no use without a vanguard party to steer the unions towards revolution. Others – and some of Turner's detractors – claim that their sole intention was only ever to 'build a strong labour movement – and that's all.'<sup>388</sup> John Copelyn, a lifetime union organizer and now one of the wealthiest men in South Africa, agrees with this position:

There is a mentality that says the trade union movement is a nursery school. This organisation can't overthrow the state, so what type of organisation could overthrow the state? That would then lead you to more underground activity or military activity or with the ANC or it could lead you in different circumstances to say, 'look we must actually take control of the state.' I'm not sure if Rick saw the trade union movement as a very important institution in itself you know. It was just more of a part of the broader struggle and it's a base part of it rather than a senior part of it. I think that these notions of the Communist Party leading the proletariat are so embedded in the tradition of left-wing thinkers. Even if they don't like the

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black leaders had risen to prominent positions in the unions and pushed out the white intellectuals to a large degree.

<sup>386</sup> Interview with Morphet, 7 November 2009.

<sup>387</sup> Interview with Schlemmer, 8 December 2009. Schlemmer was a Sociologist, on the board of directors of the Institute for Industrial Education, and close friend of Richard Turner.

<sup>388</sup> Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p. 184. This is a quote from Alec Erwin.

South African Communist Party particularly...<sup>389</sup>

Ironically, both 'sides' of the argument – mostly happening between white college-educated and middle-class activists – could claim (and with some clear justification) that the other side was imposing themselves on the workers, inhibiting their intelligence and capacity to self-organize. Adding further difficulty to the dynamic was the fact that the 'movement' was, relatively speaking, rather small, and many of the relationships that grew tense politically were first of all – and afterwards – also between close friends. A number of the people that later took prominent positions within the burgeoning black trade union movement knew Turner quite well and were influenced by his ideas to get involved. The subtle differences and conflicts arose around the question of how exactly to encourage working class organisation. Looking back, Foszia stresses that one of the biggest difficulties with the situation was that, 'we weren't clear enough to know that we were disagreeing on process. So, I don't know to what extent people are aware when they have differences whether it's one of process or one of vision. And I think often we get confused between the two. And I do know we spent a lot of time just stonewalling each other.'<sup>390</sup> The principal distinction between Richard Turner's politics and others was that he saw the process of struggle in a very different way.

## THE CURRICULUM

Immediately following the Durban strikes, Richard Turner was banned. Nonetheless, he simultaneously initiated three projects: the *South African Labour Bulletin*, the Institute for Industrial Education and a labour research group. Of these initiatives, the IIE quickly became the project that Turner was most prominently involved in. The constraints placed on him by the banning made it impossible to do much more than contribute the occasional article (under a pen-name) for the *Bulletin*, and the research arm quickly collapsed. The Institute for

<sup>389</sup> Copelyn, interview with the author, 19 November 2009. Tangentially, on the concept of 'what the trade union could do,' Copelyn describes the business which he runs with pension money from union members (and the source of his own wealth), 'For our own union I figured we've built up a huge capital base now. I mean it's billions, billions of rands. We probably could pay each member now close to a hundred thousand rand a member if we were to distribute the money. I would say that's probably a six year salary with interest. These are now bigger than their pension funds. I feel that the whole trade union could have done that if they had grabbed the opportunity... I never really got to the end of what the trade union movement could do.' Interview with Copelyn, 19 November 2009.

<sup>390</sup> Interview with Turner-Stylinau, 17 October 2009.

Industrial Education lasted until the middle of 1976, and Turner's writing provided the bulk of the curriculum, while his wife, Foszia Fisher, served as director for most of the life of the organization.

The curriculum of the Institute for Industrial Education had two main components. The first was to study the structure of capitalism, and the role of workers within that structure. The second component dealt with working class organisation. There was a constant interplay within the curriculum between the position of the individual worker within the economy and their position within the society as a whole.

The broad outline of the lessons were as follows:

People only work for other people when they have no alternative: that is, when they have no direct access to the means of production, and so cannot work for themselves. This means that those who control the means of production have power over those who do not.<sup>391</sup>

When you are forced out of a subsistence economy, stripped of your access to land and traditional culture, you enter into a new economy, known as capitalism. A new set of values are forced on you. You have no control over your own labor and are dependent on others to pay you in order to survive.

In this system,

There is much INEQUALITY in the distribution of income. This inequality is connected with: (a) property ownership (b) education and training. We can therefore divide society up into three CLASSES: OWNING CLASS, MIDDLE CLASS, AND WORKING CLASS. Although there is some movement between classes, most people stay in the class in which they were born.<sup>392</sup>

Furthermore, different social classes have different interests:

The interests of the working class are in conflict with those of the other classes in two ways... It is in the interests of the working class for there to be greater equality. It is in the interest of both the middle and the owning class to keep society unequal. There is also conflict over discipline and control... Workers would like to have more control over their lives and their jobs. They would like to make decisions instead of just obeying orders... On the other hand managers try to keep control over anything if they can.<sup>393</sup>

So therefore, you must organize in your own interests. There is a history, in South Africa and globally, of workers organizing in their own interests. There are some basic

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<sup>391</sup> IIE, *Durban Strikes*, p. 175.

<sup>392</sup> IIE, 'The Worker in Society,' lesson 4, p. 1.

<sup>393</sup> IIE workbook, 'Worker in Society,' lesson 4, p. 15.

organizational skills necessary to build a worker's organization. There are some problems you might come across in the process, which could be better avoided if you are aware of them.

The IIE curriculum was deeply rooted in analysing the class nature of capitalist society, and encouraging workers to struggle in the interests of the working class. According to Alec Erwin, who was involved in the developing of the IIE curriculum, 'essentially what we were attempting was to create a Marxist based theoretical framework for action, as opposed to a very powerful liberal tradition... and against what all of us perceived as a far too nationalist perspective of the ANC.'<sup>394</sup> However explicitly this may have been the goal of Turner and others who worked on the curriculum, the workbooks were written in very simple language and avoided all forms of rhetoric that are common in Marxist writing; the workbooks very rarely name 'capitalism' explicitly.

The curriculum was divided into a series of workbooks (roughly 20 in all) that would be sent out to members, along with questions that they were asked to answer about the material and mail back. The workbooks were further divided into three different categories: the worker in the factory, the worker's organisation and the worker in society. Within each category, a series of lessons (about 5) would constitute one 'course.' However, it should be clarified that whatever the lesson, all of the workbooks included a roughly equal mix of conceptual material and practical material. The workbooks were printed in English and Zulu and written using language that was meant to be easily understandable by all.

There were a number of reasons behind adopting this format. First, there were a number of practical concerns. Turner was banned from engaging in any kind of educational setting whatsoever, and was furthermore banned from writing anything. A correspondence course allowed him to write educational materials anonymously, and without ever stepping foot inside a school.<sup>395</sup> Furthermore, state restrictions on education institutes were more lax than those placed on political organizations or unions. Therefore, with a modicum of legal credibility, the Institute hoped to survive longer than other initiatives, as well as to raise

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<sup>394</sup> Interview with Erwin, 3 May 2010. Alec Erwin was a union organizer for TUACC and involved closely with the IIE, and stayed involved in labour organizing and education long after the IIE, before joining the cabinet of Mandela and then Mbeki. Interestingly, Erwin continued by bluntly stating that their goal was to build a 'working class movement that would be more powerful than the ANC alliance.'

<sup>395</sup> Again, it is important to point out that even as Turner was clearly the writer of the IIE workbooks, they should nonetheless be understood as collaborative documents, as Foszia Fisher was crucial for doing a great deal of work to get the books laid out and printed, and Nxasana was essential for translating into Zulu. Further, Alec Erwin speaks of his involvement in the writing process: 'Turner and I had long discussions. He would often write and I would read (as would others). We would sit there for hours, and argue and debate. For me, it was a tremendous learning experience.' Interview with Erwin, 3 May 2010.

funds abroad. In addition, as an approved organization, the IIE could expect to attract more workers to take part in the study than if the project was viewed with suspicion by the authorities.

Conceptually, the hope was that such a structure would encourage workers to share the materials, and therefore to share their developing understanding with each other. As the ultimate usefulness of the curriculum depended on workers applying their knowledge to their own circumstances, it was crucial that workers shared their studies with each other. The foundational document of the IIE states this goal as follows:

We hope to encourage each student who enrolls in the course to recruit a few more workers in the firm so that they will be able to work as a group, helping each other with problematical concepts, discussing problems during their lunch breaks and travel time and working together on practical projects... the questions will be designed as to make it necessary for the student to use the concepts acquired in the course to think about his or her own work situation.<sup>396</sup>

According to John Copelyn, the IIE was, in this way, loosely modeled off the London Corresponding Society, which existed in the early days of industrial capitalism in Britain:

The London Corresponding Society was basically a society of working men that had learned to read, that wrote to each other and communicated with each other and shared stories of their own oppression and problems and so on. There were different working class leaders who were in contact with each other through this London Corresponding Society and they wrote about all their various struggles and their achievements and ideas... which ultimately led to the trade union movement. Rick was very inspired by that...<sup>397</sup>

While the Institute did intend to hold a series of quarterly meetings with both students and teachers, actual conversation was rare. Given the time constraints in workers' lives, which made frequent meetings difficult, Foszia remembers that, 'we thought we would have, not quite summer camps, but these weekends that we would do quarterly or monthly where people come together and work together and discuss things in a Socratic way, rather than debating.'<sup>398</sup> However, in actuality,

We only had... I think maybe two of the weekend seminars between 74 and 75, before everything happened... So it was wanting to have space where people could come in and talk and discuss and realizing that the more we did that the more we jeopardize the project and the individuals involved. So giving it to as many people as possible and hoping that somehow within the way they lived they would manage to share it without making it become obvious. There was something about trusting

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<sup>396</sup> IIE Memorandum, signed Foszia Fisher (co-ordinator) 1974, p. 6. Foszia Turner-Stylianou Papers.

<sup>397</sup> Interview with Copelyn, 19 November 2009.

<sup>398</sup> Interview with Turner-Stylianou, 17 October 2009.



in people's natural ways of connecting with each other.<sup>399</sup>

'Trusting in people's natural ways of connecting' was a central piece of the vision behind the Institute for Industrial Education. In their own words, the IIE conceived of their educational programme as 'not oriented towards examinations and achievement of social status, but rather towards exploration and the development of skills in action, and social cooperation.'<sup>400</sup> Tony Morphet says that the main thrust of the IIE was the theory that, 'if you can get these ideas out in ways in which people are drawn into them, they are not threatened, they are freed to think in a new way; they get excited. And they did.'<sup>401</sup>

In the words of Lawrence Schlemmer, a long-time friend of Turner, the project was, 'creatively open-ended. The last thing Rick would have done was to start something with a pre-planned outcome.'<sup>402</sup>

## **EDUCATING WHO? FOR WHAT?**

In the initial conception of the Institute for Industrial Education, the goal was to have a mutually collaborative relationship between academics, workers and trade unions. As the majority-white registered trade union federation, TUCSA, was not sympathetic to organising African workers, the IIE's principal contact with unions was through the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating committee (TUACC). TUACC had been formed in 1973 to develop an infrastructure for building 'open' trade unions amongst African workers.<sup>403</sup> However, the IIE's friendly relations with unions proved to be one-sided, with the unions continually seeking to manipulate and control the situation, seeking resources and seeking to direct the work of the organization away from widespread education and towards a narrower vision of training leadership for the developing union structures. This narrowing process eventually accelerated, and reached the point at which unions leaders decided that, essentially, 'as far as the union is concerned, learning is a luxury.' After claiming for two years that the Institute ought to be controlled by the unions, TUACC shut down the IIE

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<sup>399</sup> Interview with Turner-Stylianou, 17 October 2009.

<sup>400</sup> IIE Memorandum, signed Foszia Fisher (co-ordinator) 1974, p. 2. Foszia Turner-Stylianou Papers.

<sup>401</sup> Interview with Morphet, 7 November 2009.

<sup>402</sup> Interview with Lawrence Schlemmer, 8 December 2009.

<sup>403</sup> For more on the history of TUACC in specific, see: N. Ulrich, 'Only Workers Can Free the Workers: the origin of the workers' control tradition and the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Committee (TUACC), 1970-1979.' 2007.

within six months of taking control.

There were many arguments given as to why the union leadership came into such a high level of conflict with Richard Turner, Fozzia Fisher, and the Institute for Industrial Education. Many of the reasons stated had to do with conflicts over the intent of the education being provided, and who should be entitled to receive it.

At the root of the union critique of the IIE lies the claim that the education was being squandered on the wrong people, and therefore undermining the ability of the unions to educate their members. Steven Friedman, in his book *Building Tomorrow Today* claims that, 'The IIE was Harriet Bolton's<sup>404</sup> idea and she saw it, not as a way of turning union recruits into aware union leaders, but of gaining recruits in the first place... "I thought it would be a way of contacting workers, of getting us into the factories," she recalls.<sup>405</sup> However, it is simply wrong to speak of the IIE as something which Bolton, or the trade unions 'had created,' as the initial impetus for the project involved both established trade unionists such as Bolton, Naxsana, Hemson and Cheadle *and* intellectuals such as Richard Turner, Fozzia Fisher, Eddie Webster and Lawrence Schlemmer.<sup>406</sup> It would be best to understand the IIE as a collaborative process. Nonetheless, Friedman is right to highlight Bolton's vision of the function of the organization, which would have been different from Turner's. Tony Morphet, speaking of Turner's concept of the IIE, says:

What he wanted was access to give people ideas. So in a way he was anti-organisation, I think. He wanted to be able to reach into the union with ideas. That's what he wanted to do. Or the unions were the place where he could reach workers. He wanted to reach working people and talk to them about themselves as he always did. *Talking to you about you, not telling them what he wanted.*<sup>407</sup>

Nonetheless, the IIE did strongly encourage unions to have its members take the courses, but at the same time they also advertised their courses broadly in newspapers. This decision alone sparked a good deal of resentment on the part of union leaders.

Acknowledging that the theory of the institute was that the education would directly serve

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<sup>404</sup> Harriet Bolton was an organizer for TUCSA, the majority-white registered trade union federation, but she was unusually sympathetic to organizing black workers, and had a close relationship with Turner and with young student radicals. Bolton helped with the research for *The Durban Strikes*, with the Wages Commission and with getting union jobs for people like Cheadle and Hemson.

<sup>405</sup> Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p. 97.

<sup>406</sup> Other participants included A.T. Cope, Alec Erwin, Fatima Meer, Harriet Sibisi, and Karel Tip. IIE Memorandum, signed Fozzia Fisher, 1974. Turner-Stylianou Papers.

<sup>407</sup> Interview with Morphet, 7 November 2009.

workers attempts to collaborate and organize, John Copelyn claims that this just simply was not the case:

I wasn't involved with the theory of the thing, but I didn't see the practice of it working that way. The practice of it, as I saw it, was that you got basically an entirely different kind of person who is applying to become a student. A more educated, more entrepreneurial kind of a black person who is trying to get a diploma that he could get maybe a personnel or manager type of a job.<sup>408</sup>

This opinion was shared by Harold Nxasana,<sup>409</sup> who was doing the translation work for the IIE course workbooks. In the only article written about the IIE, Johan Maree quotes Nxasana as saying that, 'We only got workers who thought the course would get them white-collar jobs.'<sup>410</sup> An IIE memo to TUACC, in 1975, clarifies that they were interested in increasing union participation, but from their side it sounds as if the unions under-utilized the courses available to them. 'We have decided to give priority in admission to the course to union members and are at the moment waiting on the unions to enroll their members to the course... None of the unions has yet taken up its full quota.'<sup>411</sup> The claim that the unions failed to fully utilize the IIE courses runs into another set of complaints from union leadership regarding the Institute: that union resources and time were scarce and that the IIE courses were not relevant.

Copelyn describes the shortage of union resources largely in terms of the severe climate of repression, which had left a number of key union organizers banned at the beginning of 1974<sup>412</sup> and put constant pressure on those remaining:

We had so few resources. I mean every resource we had had been house arrested and whatever. Probably there were ten university students or undergraduates that were involved in the movement as a whole, and the idea of having one's activities

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<sup>408</sup> Interview with Copelyn, 19 November 2009.

<sup>409</sup> According to John Copelyn, Nxasana 'was a guy who was involved in the Sactu union in the '50s and had gone to jail for a year and came out. And the intention was to have him a secretary of the textile union. So he had been brought in by Halton along those lines. As they were about to form the union, the security branch got hold of him and said, "listen here you have to understand that if you had been convicted for a political crime, then you are not allowed to be involved in any organisation that's listed or scheduled"... and trade unions were listed or scheduled. So at the last minute they couldn't have him as a secretary of the union... By the time I got there he was already converted into a translator in the Institute for Industrial Education working with Foszia translating all the material. And translating by hand, typing in Zulu basically letter by letter and he would have to scrutinise all that to see if it was correctly typed. There were no computers, so you couldn't just change the "x" into a "w," you had to retype the page in order. So, the translation was unbearably slow...' For a less sympathetic account of Nxasana, see: Sithole, J. and Ndlovu, S. 'The Revival of the Labour Movement, 1970- 1980.' SADET, *Road to Democracy in South Africa, Volume 2, 1970- 1980*. Pretoria, University of South Africa Press, 2006.

<sup>410</sup> Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today*, p. 97.

<sup>411</sup> IIE Report to TUACC, signed Foszia Fisher, 1975. Found in Turner-Stylianou Papers.

<sup>412</sup> Including key IIE participants, Halton Cheadle, Karel Tip, etc.

dissipated in this way just seemed to me a waste of time. And so I was very keen to transform the institute into a shop steward programme that would only teach shop stewards; it would graft itself onto the actual trade unions themselves. It could teach the same content. The content wasn't particularly problematic from my point of view. But it had to be kind of more grounded in their actual struggles and their activities.<sup>413</sup>

On a more basic, daily level, Omar Badsha (who was an organizer for the Chemical Workers' Union) speaks to the intense time commitment of organizers and the consequent difficulty in involving workers in something like the Institute:

We were building a union, we were having meetings every night of the week, seven days a week. We would finish about 8 or 8:30, put people into the bloody combis and drive those combis in the hills of Durban, Umlazi, and all the different townships. You got whole day's work, when you finish about midnight. You are tired and you have to get up at that 5am again. You do that seven days a week for years. Now, you've got an education institute there and it's not relating to this programme. The IIE is conceptualized as a distance education and workshops once in a while with those who are part of the correspondence school. What do you say then? You understand? You got workers hungry.<sup>414</sup>

Certainly the strains on the black trade unions in the mid-70s were quite serious. No doubt organizers were intensely committed and working in very trying circumstances, with few successes. But the leadership were not objecting to the IIE merely because they saw it as a 'waste of time.' After all, it was not their time being spent developing the workbooks, advertising courses, raising funds, marking completed work and running weekend-long seminars. From a strictly time-management perspective, an independent educational initiative for workers that was sympathetic to the unions could have been a blessing. On a more fundamental level, unionists raised objections about the whole purpose of the education being offered.

Union leaders were not just saying they did not have time for the IIE, 'they were saying, we don't have the time to go into this expanded educational procedure with a limited number of people and then to expect them to talk with other working people and let it spread and let it germinate and grow and fulfill itself.'<sup>415</sup> The whole idea of education as a 'creatively open-ended' process troubled trade unionists. Copelyn expresses this frustration by stating that, 'The question is: who are you teaching? What's the purpose of the teaching? If the people you choose to teach are basically your cadres for your movement, that is different from saying, "we just want a general contribution into the black world" to teach people about

<sup>413</sup> Interview with Copelyn, 19 November 2009.

<sup>414</sup> Interview with Badsha, 5 November 2009.

<sup>415</sup> Interview with Morphet, 7 November 2009.

labour matters.<sup>416</sup> Copelyn's questions are clearly rhetorical; his bias is clear. Halton Cheadle, speaking for the union position, answers the rhetorical question:

of course there are different types of education. Clearly what I was concerned about was leadership. That union leaders get a proper grasp and proper understanding of both the society, the economy and the workplace.<sup>417</sup>

Conceptually speaking, it is doubtful that Turner or Fisher would have disagreed with Cheadle's description of what would make for good union leadership. In fact, the connection between workplace, economy and society was one of the main themes of the IIE curriculum. Copelyn acknowledges this by saying that, 'Rick was very subtle. I mean, not very subtle in the sense that he describes the world as a class conflicted world. Just understanding the world around you in those terms is very enlightening.' However, he continues by stressing that, 'But I was just against having that as our contribution to the world when we were trying to build a trade union movement.'<sup>418</sup> Build the union. Period. The end. The one and only goal. Do workers *really* need to understand their society and the capitalist economy in order to be good shop stewards? No, not really. It might help if they saw the world as 'class conflicted,' but it's not essential. As far as men like Copelyn and Alec Erwin were concerned, worker education needed to be focused solely on the pressing need of building a dedicated core of activists in the factories. When it comes to education, this means that the notions of education popular amongst unionists would be better described as training in many circumstances.<sup>419</sup>

Copelyn explains his vision of a successful union 'education department' as follows:

Now if you got a campaign, an activity in the trade union movement... Now obviously then you want to develop material in the Institute for Industrial Education or in the education section that would fit in with that campaign. It will go more into what's happening in other countries, what are people's rights everywhere, you know all those kinds of issues... But the structure of what the IIE was doing wasn't connected particularly to whatever campaigns individual trade unions were engaged in or whatever struggles they were engaged in.<sup>420</sup>

This is very bluntly a description of training. Shop stewards need to have their message clear about whatever campaign the union is involved in so that they can have clarity and unity of message when speaking to workers. Fair enough, but no, it is simply not 'education,' in the

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<sup>416</sup> Interview with Copelyn, 19 November 2009.

<sup>417</sup> Interview with Cheadle, 9 November 2009.

<sup>418</sup> Interview with Copelyn, 19 November 2009.

<sup>419</sup> Interview with Erwin, 3 May 2010. Erwin disputes the notion that there was a difference in the content of the education offered by the IIE and afterwards. He insists that the differences were merely practical and, 'had nothing to do with the content of the curriculum.'

<sup>420</sup> Interview with Copelyn, 19 November 2009.

broadest and most trans-formative sense of that word. The IIE saw the need to find ways to directly link their curriculum to the daily problems of union members:

One of the insights that have resulted from the course so far has been the realization that to run a course for shop stewards is to put the emphasis on the wrong foot. What was needed was regular meetings of shop stewards from specific factories to discuss the state of the union and of the factory... In this way the education would not be something apart from what the workers were experiencing, it would be something that came through the necessity of having to attempt to work out solutions to problems that were being experienced at the time.<sup>421</sup>

At the same time, the IIE was interested in engaging workers on a deeper and broader level and to encourage thinking about society and social change. It seems that there was a fairly high level of doubt as to whether this would be appropriate or possible for the workers in question.

There was a general sense that Turner's style of teaching was inappropriate for the level of education of the workers.<sup>422</sup> Copelyn explains this position clearly:

In a trade union movement lots of people don't read or they don't read very well, and secondly they don't like reading. They don't come from a literate tradition... Now either you start with where they are actually as a group and say, 'what are the things that have made you come together, what do you want to do together, how can we uplift your understanding of what it is that we are doing?' Or you can say I don't want to start there, I want to start with the theory of civilization and let me try and plug it in very simply so that most of you can understand, that's my concern, let me try and use simple words so you don't get lost in linguistics.<sup>423</sup>

Again, there is a complicated irony to the conflicts around the nature of education that should be offered. Both sides can rightfully claim that the other side is talking down to or speaking for workers, rather than legitimately empowering them. Copelyn is correct to point out the limitations of IIE workbooks which, 'use[d] simple words,' and were nonetheless presented to workers through the mail, written by a banned person who never could come into actual contact with any of the people reading his writing. As much as Turner may have been inspired by the London Corresponding Society, he was confronting very different social conditions in South Africa, 1973 than London during the industrial revolution. Whereas the members of the Corresponding society were all literate and could interact comfortably in the written word, a much lower percentage of the Durban workforce was similarly eligible to study the IIE courses. Furthermore, the simple fact that the IIE was an initiative brought to

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<sup>421</sup> IIE Report to TUACC, signed Foszia Fisher, 1975.

<sup>422</sup> Interview with O'Meara, 21 September 2009. 'Rick's kind of notions were not accessible to workers... You had to interact with workers around bread & butter issues.'

<sup>423</sup> Interview with Copelyn, 19 November 2009.

the workers rather than originating organically from themselves, limits the amount to which it can be an empowering educational process. Copelyn is right to provoke us to think about, 'Is education best structured in an independent institute with more academic people being prominent in positions of control to set its programmes and agenda, and the role of the workers is one of the recipients?'<sup>424</sup>

In essence, Copelyn is implying that the IIE was less worthwhile because it was inorganic, brought to the workers by academics. This raises a question about the basis of trade union leaders' authority. However accurate their critique of the curriculum or structure of the IIE, to limit the reach of an education institute because the topics in the curriculum are too broad or too far removed from what is perceived to be the worker's best interests hints at paternalism. Why should Copelyn or anyone else in the top of the union hierarchy decide on the workers' behalf that an IIE education is a 'luxury' or that it is being wasted if it is made available to a worker that does not want to be a shop steward?

The trade unions that developed after the 1973 strikes made much of claiming to be 'democratic' unions. Surely this was not all just rhetoric. In terms of financing, election of and salaries for leadership, as well as the concept of 'nonracialism,' and the development of black leadership, there were conscious steps taken to increase the amount of democracy within the unions (as compared to previous incarnations of South African unions). This commitment to democracy is often lauded by labour historians, and rightfully so.

In Copelyn's opinion, trade union democracy is a curriculum in-and-of-itself and is quite simply superior to the IIE curriculum:

I would say democratic control of the union was of no interest to Rick. It's not like he would have been dismissive of the efforts we were making organizationally, he would have lauded that. But he would have not thought of that as educative. So, I suppose, what is training and what is education? If I free your mind and make you class conscious, it's education? If I give you skills that allow you to run your organisation well and to control it well, that's not education? My own head doesn't work like that.<sup>425</sup>

Of course, Copelyn is just wrong that Turner wasn't interested in workers developing 'skills that allow you to run your organization well and to control it well.' In fact, Turner wrote at length about the need for workers to develop these skills. Even a cursory reading of the

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<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*

workbooks clearly demonstrates an overwhelming majority of the material is focused on workplace struggles. At least half of every workbook was focused on 'nuts & bolts' issues, such as how to negotiate with management, how to gain union recognition from management and how to build democratic structures within the union. However, as Alec Erwin describes, in response to the low levels of literacy amongst union members, worker education programmes in the unions increasingly saw the need to 'work from the specific to the general, whereas the correspondence course worked from the general to the specific.'<sup>426</sup>

Furthermore, exactly as Copelyn implies, Turner was not content to merely 'train' people to build a union and negotiate for better working conditions. Instead, he saw it as essential that people are able to develop a broader social consciousness, to be able to imagine and to fight for a radically different social system. Trade union democracy is of little value if it is not part of a broader process of transforming a system of exploitation into a system of participatory democracy at all levels of society.

### **A SIDE ISSUE THAT LOOKED LIKE A CENTRAL ISSUE**

Whether well-founded or not, the claim that the IIE was directing worker's attention away from the concerns of the factory floor gathered a lot of momentum, and helped to accelerate tensions between TUACC and IIE. A particularly intense dispute was around an attempt to add a 'community education' course to the list of courses offered by the IIE. While this was not the most fundamental of the conflicts between TUACC and the IIE, it did raise a number of important issues.

Schlemmer and Fisher, 'placed great emphasis on the need for African workers to engage in black community struggles'<sup>427</sup> and, in 1975, proposed a Diploma in Community studies. According to Johan Maree, 'Copelyn opposed the proposal on the grounds that it was not related to the needs of the trade unions and that priority should be given to establishing trade union structures in the factories.'<sup>428</sup>

Omar Badsha feels that the most problematic aspect of the community education

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<sup>426</sup> Interview with Erwin, 3 May 2010. Furthermore, Erwin stresses that the foundation of all education seminars needed to be discussion based, and the workbooks would be offered as 'back-up' for those workers who expressed interest and had high enough levels of literacy.

<sup>427</sup> Maree, 'IIE and Worker Education,' p. 82.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.



course was not the curriculum, but the fact that the course was linked to Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi and the newly emerging Inkatha movement that he was heading.<sup>429</sup> Badsha insists that the IIE course, 'was directed at building Inkatha, not community – there is no getting away from that.'<sup>430</sup> The relationship between the IIE and Buthelezi (and the Kwa-Zulu government more broadly) is more complicated than the community education course, and it is not surprising that it led to conflict.

From the start Turner and Fisher tried to establish mutually beneficial ties with Buthelezi, and he was nominally the 'chancellor' of the Institute for the bulk of its existence. Though this was a controversial decision at the time – and although Buthelezi proved to be a much deadlier and reactionary 'ally' than anyone in 1973 foresaw – most people, including those ardently opposed to him, tend to defend the decision, given the context of 1973. Badsha, who took a strong stand against any affiliation with Inkatha, said, 'When you got your back against the wall, then Buthelezi is a progressive. Do you understand?'<sup>431</sup> This sums up the sentiment of many people. Further justifications are similar to Foszia's, who says, 'Was Buthelezi the kind of person he is now? No, he grew into that person. He wasn't that at first. He was somebody you could talk to, he was shy, he was not sure about many things.'<sup>432</sup>

In short, there was a sense that, in the political desert of the early 1970s, it was a sound tactical choice to establish links with Buthelezi. The fact of his sanctioned status with the government seemed to insulate the IIE against possible reprisal, and further Turner and Foszia saw it as a good thing that many workers seemed to trust Buthelezi as 'their leader.' Foszia describes one of the perceived benefits of making Buthelezi the IIE chancellor:

The first round of certificates that we gave, he handed them out. It was great, the workers loved it, it was in a sense, 'My chief gave me this,' you know it meant something.<sup>433</sup>

But the decision to work with Buthelezi ran deeper than the surface issues, such as what it

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<sup>429</sup> Buthelezi was the Chief Minister of the Kwa-Zulu government. While this was a position created by the apartheid state, and meant to forward the apartheid programme of setting up independent 'homelands' for the African population, Buthelezi played an ambiguous or conflicted role in relationship to apartheid, by refusing to accept 'independence' for Kwa-Zulu and at times speaking in defence of the ANC and at other times speaking and acting out against the ANC and the trade unions. Inkatha was begun as a cultural organization but developed into the Inkatha Freedom Party by the 1980s and as such became associated with a large amount of politically motivated violence in the country, particularly after 1990. For more on Buthelezi, see, G. Mare, and G. Hamilton, *An Appetite for Power: Buthelezi's Inkatha and the Politics of 'Loyal Resistance'*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987.

<sup>430</sup> Interview with Badsha, 5 November 2009.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>432</sup> Interview with Turner-Stylinau, 17 October 2009.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*

would look like for Zulu workers if the head of the Zulu nation was in charge of handing out the diplomas. Turner's analysis of the possible benefits (as far as radical social change is concerned) of the homeland system generally and Buthelezi in particular was overly optimistic at best and a tragic error of judgment at worst.<sup>434</sup> One example of Turner's mistaken judgment was the fact that he essentially under-estimated the potential risk involved with assisting a government-sanctioned tribal leader, and therefore the risk of Zulu nationalism more generally. In his piece on *Class Consciousness*, Turner wrote that, 'tribal affiliations may be manipulated as a weapon to be used in conflict within worker organizations, but they are not likely to form the basis for alternative types of organisation.'<sup>435</sup> The horrific 'civil-war' period of the late 1980s and early 1990s, with Inkatha at the centre of it, proves him wrong.

Turner's attention was focused elsewhere when thinking about Kwa-Zulu. One side consequence of the Durban strikes was that the Kwa-Zulu government was put into a unique position, forced to make some comment about the exploitation of (Zulu) workers. As many of the workers either had permanent homes within the boundaries of the homeland or were daily commuters from one of the suburbs of Durban that counted as Kwa-Zulu, the strikes were partially within the Kwa-Zulu 'jurisdiction.' The first group of workers that went on strike were encouraged to return to work after hearing a speech from the Zulu king. After this, the King did not make any further interventions in the strikes, and a dynamic young man named Barney Dladla, who was the 'Minister of Labour' for Kwa-Zulu stepped forward. He took stands that few Ministers of Labour ever do.

Dladla encouraged workers to withdraw their labour and even to go to jail if they need to, with the full backing of the Kwa Zulu homeland government.<sup>436</sup> Actions such as these ignited Turner's imagination as to the possibilities of using the power vested in the homelands to assist more militant struggles developing in urban areas. In addition, Dladla firmly presented himself as sympathetic to Halton Cheadle and others getting involved in the early stages of building black trade unions. Initially, Dladla's pro-union stance came with Buthelezi's backing, and therefore the full backing of the Kwa-Zulu government, but this was

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<sup>434</sup> There are many ways to substantiate this claim. In particular, there is a great deal of discussion of the matter within 'The Present As History' post-script to *Eye of the Needle*. There isn't space to fully address the matter here, particularly not in light of other sources on the nature of Buthelezi, Inkatha, and the homeland system. This investigation would be quite helpful, however, at some point.

<sup>435</sup> Fisher [Turner], 'Class Consciousness,' p. 210.

<sup>436</sup> IIE, *The Durban Strikes*, p. 120.

short-lived. Within a year or two, Dladla was forced out of power by Buthelezi, and the relationship between the unions and Kwa-Zulu quickly deteriorated.

When Dladla and Buthelezi had a falling out, the IIE was put in an uncomfortable position. Still, the IIE chose not to make any kind of formal break from Buthelezi. Further, Lawrence Schlemmer, a liberal sociologist and good friend of Turner, began to develop a steady working relationship with Buthelezi, in a directly supportive role. It was Schlemmer's involvement in the 'Community Education' curriculum<sup>437</sup> that led to the feeling that the purpose of the course was more about aiding Inkatha than anything else. Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich argue that the IIE was therefore, 'seen to be moving in the direction of support for Inkatha, launched on 22 March 1975, and Buthelezi, who was opposed by trade unionists. They argued that, despite his verbal opposition to apartheid, Buthelezi would in the end turn against the unions to crush them..'<sup>438</sup> The 'community studies' diploma was swiftly defeated before it even slightly got off the ground. Omar Badsha remembers that the whole process ended in one extremely unpleasant meeting:

We had a fall-out on this one. It culminated in a big, big difference. Unfortunately it became personalized to my great regret. The debate in the IIE was eventually about using the IIE to set up educational programmes for Inkatha and we said no. It became so sharp that at one meeting we asked Laurie to step down from the board of IIE, as the chairman. And then it soured my relationship with Rick. He must have just felt that we were pig-headed and difficult, which we were – I was. Because it was just dragging on this tension, this contestation. It had to come to a head and it came to a head there.<sup>439</sup>

In retrospect, Badsha and others in TUACC were right to distance themselves from homeland politics, and from Buthelezi's politics in particular. In time, Buthelezi did prove to be vehemently anti-union and helped create a political machine that murdered and harassed trade unionists to an appalling degree.<sup>440</sup> Nonetheless, no matter how bitter the struggle within the IIE in 1975, around Buthelezi, it was not really the most fundamental problem at hand.

## **CONTROL FOR CONTROL'S SAKE**

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<sup>437</sup> According to Schlemmer, 'There was nothing formal about the community education curriculum. It was a method. This curriculum was never written down.' Interview with Schlemmer, 8 December 2009.

<sup>438</sup> Hemson, Legassick, and Ulrich, 'White Activists,' p. 271.

<sup>439</sup> Interview with Badsha, 5 November 2009.

<sup>440</sup> See Mare, *An Appetite for Power*, 1987.

*It wouldn't just be control for control's sake.*<sup>441</sup>

—**Halton Cheadle**

*I would say whatever the issue was, was not the issue.*

*The issue was to take trade union control of the Institute, and control of its finances.*<sup>442</sup>

—**John Copelyn**

At a certain level, the conflict between the unions and the IIE had nothing to do with the subtleties of what makes for a good education. The union leaders were simply offended that the IIE refused to follow their commands. While Copelyn and others did make valid critiques of the IIE, a big part of their problem with the institute was simply that it was not theirs. Attempts to take more control of the IIE began very early on and ultimately led to the project being totally obliterated.

John Copelyn bluntly explained why the IIE should have been 'subordinate' to the trade unions:

You get issues like academic freedom. I feel that in class struggle there isn't a place for that kind of concept you know. Basically all your academics are middle class people, they are associated with middle class institutions as universities tend to be. Their so-called classlessness – it's a lot of shit. The question is, 'are you prepared to serve the trade union movement or working class movement?' 'Are you prepared to subordinate yourself to it?' If the trade union movement says what we really want is stuff around this type of this topic, do you drop everything and do material around that kind of a topic or do you say, 'no, they think they want that, but we academics we know better'? Whether that's a Stalinist tendency or whatever I wouldn't know. I believe in organisation and I believe in education being subordinate to organisation and being part of the organisation particularly in struggle like that.<sup>443</sup>

Eddie Webster, himself an academic and a close friend of Turner's, nonetheless agreed with Copelyn, stating, 'the mistake of the IIE was that ideas were formulated by intellectuals isolated from the workers and the trade unions... As a service body the IIE had to satisfy the needs of the trade unions. TUACC should provide direction and the IIE implement it.'<sup>444</sup>

Seeing themselves as the rightful and obvious people to direct the worker's struggle, TUACC made an attempt to formally turn the IIE into a subcommittee of TUACC.

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<sup>441</sup> Cheadle, interview with the author, 9 November 2009.

<sup>442</sup> Interview with Copelyn, 19 November 2009.

<sup>443</sup> Interview with Copelyn, 19 November 2009.

<sup>444</sup> J. Maree, 'IIE and Worker Education,' p. 82.

According to Johann Maree, the reason the IIE should be denied independence is quite basic: ‘They objected to the independence of the IIE as this enabled it “to take its own decisions and formulate its own direction.”’<sup>445</sup>

At a secretariat meeting of TUACC, in June 1975, Omar Badsha presented a formal proposal regarding IIE independence:

- I.I.E. Should be a TUACC subcommittee in practice.
- Research work should be done by TUACC rather than the I.I.E...
- The I.I.E. place less emphasis and allocate fewer financial resources to the correspondence course than at present and employ someone specialized in education techniques etc to devise audio-visual aids etc to make the material already written more usable in shop-steward meetings...
- An ethic of work be devised for the I.I.E. as the first step in cultivating a more appropriate attitude to work in a movement among some staff members.
- A subcommittee be established to investigate ways and means of tying the I.I.E. closer to TUACC constitutionally.<sup>446</sup>

Outside of formal proposals for greater control, a climate was established in which Foszia's authority was undermined, and the programme was de-legitimized. John Copelyn admits that, 'I've got to accept responsibility that I put an enormous amount of pressure on them to stop doing the correspondence course aimed outside the trade union movement.'<sup>447</sup> Furthermore, Copelyn insists that this pressure was brought about collectively, that TUACC made it very difficult for Foszia:

Foszia was the most dedicated person sitting in that office. Now when suddenly you come into the council meeting, and we had mobilised 51% of the people and we start saying we are not happy with this... It was terribly frustrating for her.<sup>448</sup>

On a personal level, Foszia was treated by many as an inferior stand-in for her husband, Richard Turner. Eddie Webster explains that, 'It was quite difficult, very difficult for Foszia. She was a beautiful young girl working with chauvinistic men. And I think I gave her a hard time. I didn't take her seriously. And she had a difficult task of carrying Rick's ideas.'<sup>449</sup> Foszia's own intelligence was, in a way, obscured by the shadow of Turner's prominence, both within the IIE and as a result of his previous efforts. Johan Maree, who interviewed

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<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>446</sup> Minutes of TUACC Secretariat Meeting, 14 July 1975. Turner-Stylianou Papers.

<sup>447</sup> Interview with Copelyn, 19 November 2009.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>449</sup> Interview with Webster, 21 November 2009. Eddie Webster was a colleague and friend of Richard Turner, and collaborated with him on the IIE and *South African Labour Bulletin*.

Foszia Fisher in 1979, tried in his analysis of the IIE to dispel any myth that Foszia was not a full participant in her own right, despite her close relationship with Turner:

Foszia received considerable support from her husband, Richard Turner... although she acted autonomously and was in no way dominated by Turner, they discussed IIE matters together to the point where Fisher became protective of... 'our idea and wanting to protect something that I thought was Rick's and mine.'<sup>450</sup>

In addition to personal conflicts, a repeated source of conflict between Foszia/IIE and Copelyn/TUACC was finances. The trade unions were resentful of the amount of money that Foszia was able to raise for the Institute, distrustful of their methods of governing financial matters, and jealously wanted the money for their own work. Copelyn said of the conflicts around money:

I despised a supposed independence from the trade union movement... Which would give the freedom to raise money in the name of workers. People give you money and then you pick which workers, you pick what to teach and you pick everything and they get no say in it... The notion that they would have money and the trade union movement would not... it just drove me off the bloody twist you know. And I wanted to basically channel the money they had to the trade union movement.<sup>451</sup>

It is important to clarify that, as far as fund-raising was concerned, the unions were in a far more compromised position than the IIE. Since TUACC was organizing African workers at a point when unions for Africans were not allowed to legally register with the state, their potential funding streams were greatly limited. The restrictions against union registration made it much harder to get dues from every worker – as unions in other industrialized nations do – and forced shop-stewards to spend a great deal of effort personally collecting money every month from their members. Furthermore, whereas TUACC might have expected to receive support from trade unions abroad, none was forthcoming, due to a decision on the part of many anti-apartheid activists in Europe to refuse to support any initiative other than the ANC and their affiliated (but essentially defunct) trade union federation, SACTU. In contrast, the IIE, registered as a legal education institute, had no barriers to raising funds abroad, even, ironically, from foreign trade unions. In addition, Richard Turner's time in Europe meant that he had a number of contacts that were sympathetic to the project, and Foszia was able to travel abroad on fund-raising trips. The success of these trips, however, infuriated TUACC.

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<sup>450</sup> J. Maree, 'IIE and Worker Education,' p. 79.

<sup>451</sup> Interview with Copelyn, 19 November 2009.

In part, TUACC criticized what they saw as the un-democratic nature of Foszia both raising all of the funds and also controlling them:

She knew where she got the money, she knew how much she had, she did the books, she did everything, and nobody knew anything. Now I thought this is really no good.<sup>452</sup>

Copelyn saw this method of handling finances as counter to the spirit of shared responsibility and accountability within democratic trade unions:

In the trade union movement people pay from their pockets, and that is the source of money. In fact, it's also part of its ethos: the reason why a full-time employer of the union is accepted by the workers is they are paying his salary and his salary has to be a number that they are prepared to pay.<sup>453</sup>

Whether motivated by this sense of a commitment to democratic financing, or simply for pure reasons of jealousy, Foszia was formally reprimanded for fund-raising independently and without offering the unions a chance to do so as well. Minutes of a 1975 TUACC meeting include a 'Motion of Censure' which reads as follows: 'Members mentioned the contact with Foszia [and the British Labour attache] and it was agreed to pass a motion of censure on Foszia for her extraordinary behavior.'<sup>454</sup>

Ironically, the IIE did not, at the beginning, intend to raise so much of its funds from overseas sources. In fact, it saw the ideal situation as being one in which the workers and trade unions would put forward much of the money needed to keep the project afloat. Workers who signed up for courses were charged a nominal fee, and in their foundational document, the IIE stated that, 'We hope that as the Institute grows, more and more trade unions will be willing to pay affiliation fees on a per member basis, and that this should ultimately cover running costs.'<sup>455</sup> Given the financial climate already described, this was an impossible vision. The 1975 IIE report stated that, 'Last year MAWU was the only TUACC union which paid its affiliation fees.'<sup>456</sup> Clearly the unions were in no position to and had no interest in paying any money to keep the IIE going. Quite the opposite, TUACC hoped to gain greater control of the Institute in large part because it would give them greater financial stability. The IIE had established a substantial budget during its short existence, all of which

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<sup>452</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>454</sup> Minutes of TUACC Secretariat Meeting, 14 July 1975. Turner-Stylianou Papers.

<sup>455</sup> From IIE Memorandum, Signed Foszia Fisher (co-ordinator), 1974. Turner-Stylianou Papers.

<sup>456</sup> IIE Report to TUACC, Signed Foszia Fisher, 1975. Turner-Stylianou Papers.

was absorbed into the TUACC budget once the IIE became a 'subcommittee' of the unions.<sup>457</sup> According to Alec Erwin, the IIE had functioned as 'the main channel' for union funds donated by the British Trades Unions Congress (TUC) to TUACC and he and others in leadership positions wanted these funds to directly 'fund the unions' rather than the IIE.<sup>458</sup>

Eventually, the 'enormous amount of pressure,' and 'terribly frustrating' atmosphere gave way to pushing Foszia out of a leadership position within the IIE. Foszia officially resigned in October of 1975.<sup>459</sup> For all intents and purposes, with the removal of Foszia, the IIE ceased to exist. Officially, Alec Erwin became the chairperson of the Working Committee of the IIE and Copelyn was made a full-time education officer for TUACC. In this way, the project limped along for another half year or so, but the commitment to carrying on with educational programmes was gone. In response to leadership being detained,<sup>460</sup> and other union problems which appeared dire, Copelyn came to the conclusion that, 'to be involved with the IIE was a luxury. There was just too much organizational work to be able to sit back and design programmes.'<sup>461</sup> Having sworn for years that they knew better how to educate workers, once the education was in their hands, they simply declared education a 'luxury' and stopped teaching altogether. Such a tragic conclusion to an initiative that began with every intention of working in unison with the trade union movement.

According to Tony Morphet, TUACC's decision to shut down the IIE after finally gaining full control of it is in keeping with their overall political viewpoint:

Shutting it down is the best form of control. From their perspective the IIE was a potential threat. The threat was that conceptually it looked as though it might diffuse the attempt to bring people together under a hierarchical organisation. IIE was aimed against hierarchical organisation by a small group of leaders.<sup>462</sup>

The destruction of the Institute for Industrial Education was described by those responsible as a necessary step in order to move forward with the trade union movement. In a way this is just a convenient way to absolve oneself of any moral responsibility for choices made: say it was 'necessary.' So, what was gained by abandoning the methods of the IIE and

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<sup>457</sup> J. Maree, 'IIE and Worker Education,' p. 89. 'The IIE had been highly successful in fund-raising overseas. In the first half of 1975 it raised R9335 and in 1976 no less than R30693.'

<sup>458</sup> Interview with Erwin, 3 May 2010.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>460</sup> D. Hemson, M. Legassick, and N. Ulrich, 'White Activists,' p. 271. 'Soon thereafter [Fisher's resignation] the IIE was targeted by the police, who arrested Eddie Webster in December 1975 on charges under the Suppression of Communism Act and Bheki Nxasana under Section 6 of the Terrorism Act.'

<sup>461</sup> J. Maree, 'IIE and Worker Education,' p. 88.

<sup>462</sup> Interview with Morphet, 7 November 2009.



'building a strong labour movement' instead?

The successes of the unions are clear enough; they make the kind of social changes that you can touch, taste, kick. However, as Eddie Webster points out,

Trade unions are not revolutionary institutions; they are not socialist institutions. They may point in the directions of socialism, but point is all they do. What they really point to is the contradictions within capitalism. And you are preoccupied with those, striking deals and making compromises... the visionary side of it recedes.<sup>463</sup>

In contrast, the successes of a project like the Institute for Industrial Education are far harder to get a grip on. The IIE was potentially a safe-guard against any kind of 'dumbing down' of people in the name of liberation. Foszia Fisher's position was that, 'The more informed workers were, the better the decisions they would make and the less the vanguard manipulates them.'<sup>464</sup>

Richard Turner believed that, 'The process of political change through the development of organizational solidarity must itself be a participatory experience if people are to become conscious of the possibilities of freedom.'<sup>465</sup> Furthermore, he opposed over-emphasizing efficiency, discipline, and loyalty within organisations, emphasizing instead,

On the organizational level we must ensure that all organizations we work in pre-figure the future. Organizations must be participatory rather than authoritarian. They must be areas in which people experience human solidarity and learn to work with one another in harmony and in love.<sup>466</sup>

While Turner may not have established a clear 'school of thought' to be carried out by followers, he *was* concerned that his notions of an ideal society be consistent with his ideas about how to act against the current, unjust system. In this way, he hoped to make an intervention not only on an abstract level, but also on the shape of the struggle unfolding within his lifetime.

There is no way to prove that South African workers would have been better off with the kind of education Turner's workbooks provided, instead of the shop-steward trainings offered by the unions. The difference is qualitative, rather than quantitative; it can not be counted, but it can be felt. According to Eddie Webster,

the educational arm (that is, as I understand education – which has to do with developing the capabilities of individuals, to be able to make choices, to think for

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<sup>463</sup> Interview with Webster, 21 November 2009.

<sup>464</sup> Interview with Turner-Stylinau, 17 October 2009.

<sup>465</sup> Turner, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 85.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

yourself, to draw your potential...) is never really brought back into the workers movement, that's the loss...  
'Worker in Society,' 'Worker in the Economy,' 'Worker in the Organisation' – they are brilliant books I think. But they inevitably involve a sort of long-term engagement with ideas, an element of imagination and thinking that are possibly not appropriate in a trade union...<sup>467</sup>

Perhaps the pragmatists were more efficient than Turner ever could have been, more shrewd at negotiating, more conscious of the dynamics of Power – how to slowly build organizations with hundreds of thousands of members and usher in changes that affect tens of millions. Alec Erwin speaks confidently of the successes gained by shifting away from the IIE and focusing on building the unions. 'I think we were right, because we built unions against all odds, and those unions have played an absolutely decisive role in the political liberation struggle.'<sup>468</sup>

Indeed, the people who dedicated themselves to building the trade unions in South Africa were certainly heroes, but, in Lawrence Schlemmer's words, they were 'one-dimensional heroes.' Schlemmer, having been kicked out of the IIE, and in light of the fact that he is generally regarded skeptically by the union movement, shares his own skepticism for their style of leadership:

Rick Turner wasn't marginalized, Rick Turner was overtaken by the one-dimensional heroes. I'm not saying that they were not heroes; but they *were* one-dimensional! And it's this one-dimensionality that can produce a Stalin... and in South Africa has led to the most remarkable process of elite enrichment in the world; where billionaires have been created within two weeks – literally two weeks. If political purity created that, then it's shit!<sup>469</sup>

The Organization, in-and-of-itself – and conceived and driven by its leaders – demands to be protected and expanded, at all times. As a result the future that is 'pre-figured' in the methods of the Parties and Unions is much more like the past than anyone might have hoped.

## CONCLUSION

After the wave of wildcat strikes in Durban, at the beginning of 1973, Richard

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<sup>467</sup> Interview with Webster, 21 November 2009. Alec Erwin cannot remember the exact date that the books ran out, but insists that they were re-printed even after the IIE correspondence course was shut down. Further, he stresses that 'The IIE workbooks form a very strong basis for FOSATU and even COSATU workers education.' Interview with Erwin, 3 May 2010.

<sup>468</sup> Interview with Erwin, 3 May 2010.

<sup>469</sup> Interview with Schlemmer, 8 December 2009.

Turner got involved in the emerging trade union movement. In cooperation with others, Turner analysed the significance of the strikes, and wrote at length of the need for the formation of trade unions for Black workers in South Africa. Beyond the short-term goal of trade union rights for blacks, Turner saw the strikes as marking a shift in the consciousness of workers. In response to this shifting consciousness, Richard Turner sought avenues to influence and encourage class consciousness amongst workers, in the direction of radical social and economic change.

Given Turner's general approach to pedagogy and to politics – and his vision of an ideal society – Turner's efforts amongst labour organization took a different form from that of an organizer. His principal contribution in this field, the Institute for Industrial Education, was built on the premise that workers would develop their own structures and means of organising if they were given the means to understand the dynamics within the factory and the society. While this approach had certain strengths, pedagogically and politically, it was deemed counter-productive to the needs of the fledgling unions, and shut down by leaders with the union movement.

The Institute for Industrial Education marked the clearest tangible example of an organisation premised on the ideals of Participatory Democracy. With the closing of the IIE, the utopian aspiration of a de-centralized, non-hierarchical, and worker-controlled society became effectively marginalized within the labour movement and the struggle against apartheid.

## CONCLUSION

### *the weight of absence*

*“The fact that there aren’t many Ricks, does it make him a failure or success?  
Well, neither.”<sup>470</sup>*

– Fozzia Turner-Stylinau

### 'SCREAM FROM THE ROOFTOPS'

The man with the gun walks free away  
soft across the wet grass  
between the policemen who smiled  
and turned to cover you with their blanket.  
“He's dead” I said  
but they said nothing...

we are not alone in our hurting, our incomprehension  
we are not alone in our anger  
we are bound, we burn together with strength  
with our wild fury  
and so I, scarred with my father's blood,  
I know what I must fight.<sup>471</sup>

Richard Turner was murdered in his home on the night of January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1978. According to his daughter Jann, who was home at the time, and thirteen years old, the assassin knocked on the door around midnight, and then shot Turner through the window of his bedroom, as he peeked out to see who was there. Jann describes the shot as sounding as loud as an explosion, and says that her father ran through the house bleeding, then passed out on the floor. For some moments afterwards, the telephone did not get any dial tone, and by the time she got through to the police, her father was already dead. When the police arrived, they were gruff and cold, forcing Jann to sit alone in a room, and they would not allow her to contact her mother.<sup>472</sup>

It appears that the timing of the assassination was linked to a trip that Turner's wife, Fozzia Fisher, took to Botswana. When Fozzia reached the Botswana border, she was subjected to extensive questioning, including what she considered to be harassment and invasive searches. She was held at the border for five hours. At the end of the interaction, the

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<sup>470</sup> Interview with Turner-Stylinau, 17 October 2009.

<sup>471</sup> J. Turner, 'Now in the Cold Dawn,' 2 pp. Jann Turner Papers.

<sup>472</sup> Jann Turner's personal papers. Notes written in preparation to speak before the TRC.

border patrol called the police office in Durban. After this call, Foszia was handled cordially and encouraged to proceed. Across the border, Fisher called home to Richard Turner. Just a few hours after he received this phone call, he was murdered.<sup>473</sup>

Turner's assassination happened within a broader context of escalating state repression. Just a few months before Turner's death, Steve Biko was murdered in custody and a series of Black Consciousness activists and sympathetic whites were banned. One of these whites, journalist Donald Woods, managed to flee the country with his family just one week before Turner's death, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, 1978. At the same time, an attempt was made to murder Fatima Meer. Meer explicitly links the attack on her home to Turner's assassination:

One week before Rick was murdered, an assassination attempt was made at my house. The house was firebombed, causing damage to both my garage and gardener. I believe the description of the automobile which drove away from my house matched the description given of the car that left Rick Turner's.<sup>474</sup>

When asked to speak about whether the family was aware of the growing risk to Turner's life, Foszia replied:

On Boxing Day [less than two weeks before the murder] Kim<sup>475</sup> had a dream and woke up screaming. She had dreamt that the house was on fire... There were so many different ways that we were being alerted to something changing in our lives, but there's no way you know what to do with that information. But it's in you, and it sits like undigested food...<sup>476</sup>

The initial police investigation into Richard Turner's murder was superficial and claimed that there was no connection between Turner's murder and his politics. None of the further investigations, which were carried out by a private investigator,<sup>477</sup> as well as personally undertaken by Richard's mother, Jane, and daughter, Jann were able to reach any conclusion as to who murdered Richard Turner. Furthermore, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report was inconclusive, as well.<sup>478</sup> Nonetheless, those closest to Turner have felt strongly, since 1978, that the death of Richard Turner was politically motivated and have placed the responsibility on the apartheid state's police forces.<sup>479</sup> Meer recounts Jane Turner's

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<sup>473</sup> Interview with Turner-Stylinau, 17 October 2009. A truncated account, which verifies this telling, can be found in Morphet's introduction to *The Eye of the Needle*, 1980.

<sup>474</sup> Interview with Meer, 2 December 2009.

<sup>475</sup> Turner's second daughter.

<sup>476</sup> Interview with Turner-Stylinau, 17 October 2009.

<sup>477</sup> Hired by friends, Lawrence Schlemmer and Tony Morphet. Interview with Morphet, 5 November 2009.

<sup>478</sup> Interview with Morphet, 5 November 2009.

<sup>479</sup> Both of Jann Turner's short films on the subject stress this point, citing the opinion of a wide range of perspectives, from her sister Kim all the way through the surviving members of the Hani family and Nelson Mandela. See, 'Who Shot My Dad?' and 'My Father, Rick Turner.' Again, Morphet's introduction to *The Eye of the Needle*, 1980, also touches on this point.

insistence on this point:

When Rick died, Islam would call for a quick burial, but his mother, Jane, insisted that the funeral must be attended by as many people as possible. Further, Jane picked the headstone 'Rick Turner: Assassinated January, 8<sup>th</sup> 1978... He fought for Justice for All' as she wanted us to scream from the rooftops that he was assassinated; you couldn't say 'killed' or 'murdered.' Nonetheless, as far as we were concerned he was a Muslim, so he was buried in a Muslim cemetery [Brooks St, downtown Durban] according to Muslim rites.<sup>480</sup>

It seems reasonable to conjecture that Richard Turner was assassinated. All the bits of evidence that have been gathered point clearly towards a murder that could only have been carried out by the state. Still, the motives behind the assassination are open to debate, as well as the significance of Turner's death to all of us left behind.

Of course, there are some logical reasons why Richard Turner was killed. The simple fact is that his banning order was set to expire, and this had a number of possibly negative consequences, from the state's perspective. First, he could return to his teaching, and therefore return also to his broader domain of influence: giving speeches, publishing, interacting with student and labour leaders, and so forth. Second, he could decide, as Woods and others had done, to leave the country, and this had the potential to amplify his influence, as well. Nonetheless, on a deeper level, there is some amount of agreement amongst various accounts that the security police acted so violently against Richard Turner because they were incapable of genuinely understanding him or his ideas.<sup>481</sup>

Though security police do employ some social scientists in order to analyse the work of men like Richard Turner, in general their lens is relatively narrow; they have a rather simplistic concept of politics, and in particular of the sorts of politics that should be considered a threat to the security of the state. In the case of a man like Turner, it seems that this lens forced the security police to translate what they saw and heard of Turner into their imagined persona of a Communist, a Subversive, etc. According to Morphet, this image was 'grotesquely wrong':

Obviously, without police records it is impossible to state their view accurately, but it seems... likely that they saw Turner, if not as the leader, than as a strong contender for the position. In this they were grotesquely wrong. Charisma and organising capacity he most certainly did have but he was entirely opposed, as every detail of his life makes clear, to the concept of a small vanguard group. He

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<sup>480</sup> Interview with Meer, 2 December 2009.

<sup>481</sup> Bluntly, Lawrence Schlemmer stated that the police, 'were just shit-scared of his capacity to influence students, and they didn't know where it would stop, because they didn't understand him or the situation sufficiently well.' Interview with Schlemmer, 8 December 2009.

was constitutionally incapable of following an orthodox Leninist or Stalinist line.<sup>482</sup>

Despite the fact that Turner's socialist politics were always expressed openly, gently, and in an attempt to encourage dialogue, the police seemed incapable of taking him at face value. Fozia Turner-Stylinau believes that it was actually Richard Turner's *open-ness* that was so frustrating to the authorities:

If you come out and actually say things, they don't know what to do with you. They kept thinking, 'he must be doing something else, we just haven't found it yet.' There's this assumption that the security police know, but they don't know; they are trying to make sense of very little information and desperately looking for how they can hold their fabrications up. And it helps them when people are covert because they can carry on building their fabrications without interruptions. But when people are not covert it's very confusing for them.<sup>483</sup>

Lawrence Schlemmer echoes this point, and further elaborates that Turner's non-aggressive, non-dogmatic, and open approach to radical politics was seen as threatening because it had no parallel:

Despite the restrictions of the security police, Rick never once lifted a finger in anger. He just questioned. And his mode of questioning, his interrogation of the system – which was always cool and laidback – had given him an entourage, a following of devoted students that admired him. This was the thing that terrified the police. There was nothing that he did that they could have taken as a categorical reason to take action against him.<sup>484</sup>

Remarkably - beautifully, in fact - Richard Turner was assassinated not for his brilliance, nor even for the weight of his impact, but rather as a result of the fact that he was 'constitutionally incapable' of playing the stereotypical role of revolutionary leader. Morphet explains further:

What is lost to South Africa, but in the same moment affirmed, is a meaning of a life lived in freedom. Turner revealed to a society caught in the defeating logic of oppression the shape and substance of life conceived in freedom and lived out through the enactment of rational choices... The value of Turner's life lies in its triumphant demonstration of autonomous value-creating thought and action.<sup>485</sup>

No one who would speak of him would go so far as to outright insult Richard Turner. No matter how strongly they disagree, people 'remain loyal,' by making an attempt to give him credit for his contribution in one form or another. Nonetheless, the liberation struggle in

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<sup>482</sup> Morphet, 'Introduction,' p. xxxii.

<sup>483</sup> Interview with Turner-Stylinau, 17 October 2009.

<sup>484</sup> Interview with Schlemmer, 8 December 2009. In addition, according to Schlemmer, it is not just the police that are 'confused' by Turner's 'non-covert' approach to politics. In Schlemmer's words, 'the simpler left,' also failed to understand Richard Turner 'sufficiently well.'

<sup>485</sup> Morphet, 'Introduction,' p. xxxiii.

South Africa moved 'beyond him,' into more orthodox forms of organization and leadership, as well as more orthodox and rigid ideas of socialism and of revolution. In other words, the so-called New Left that Turner is widely acknowledged as being a catalyst for, eventually gave way to the Old Left that had been shoved to the side by the bannings of the apartheid state.

But why? Why would a man who many acknowledge as an inspiring voice for a more radical politics lose his prominence so quickly? Dan O'Meara feels that the shift, 'happened because he lost his platform. Rick was a public person. He was a formidable person, an astonishing teacher. Suddenly he didn't have access to his audience anymore.'<sup>486</sup> Of course this is a logical explanation. Not only could Turner not interact easily with people after the banning, but it was also quite difficult for him to get his writing out to the public. Indeed, the answer appears obvious: he lost his prominence because he was banned. Having bluntly admitted that he was influential as both a teacher and a writer, the state did everything they could to reduce his influence. Furthermore, after the banning, he was assassinated. State repression obviously had an effect on Turner's ability to influence people. But this answer is deceptively simple; it does not really explain why activists, people who opposed the state, and were similarly repressed by it, would 'move beyond' Richard Turner.

There is an element of *conscious choice* that gets overlooked when all of the emphasis is placed on state repression. People within the South African Left stopped following Richard Turner's ideas because they did not want to, because they did not believe in them, because they did not think his ideas would help. If people had found Turner's politics useful, they would have stayed committed to them, regardless of the state's decisions to ban and assassinate him. It is easy enough to point fingers at apartheid for taking Turner's life. Even someone who wholly disagrees with Turner's politics can profess compassion and regret about the tragedy of his assassination. Tyrannical states make tragic and horrifying choices, which rob humanity of beautiful and brilliant people. Placing the blame on the State is not dis-honest, but it is irresponsible to make these kinds of statements without also interrogating the choices made within the liberation struggle.

Many people claim that Marxism is a scientific ideology.<sup>487</sup> That is to say, there is a sense that Marxism is a coherent and comprehensive politics, which not only critiques the

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<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>487</sup> See, for example, M. Legassick, *Towards Socialist Democracy*. Durban: UKZN Press, 2007. For more on this, see my chapter 1.



current system, but also provides relatively concrete instructions for how to intervene towards revolutionary change. Of course, these claims to a coherent 'science' at the core of Marxist politics can be debated, but for our purposes it is enough to realize that people *believe* that Marxism is scientific and all-compassing (and that this belief provides them some comfort). Richard Turner's politics, on the other hand, was often interpreted as far less 'scientific' or 'coherent' than Marxism. Nicole Ulrich, in writing the history of TUACC, acknowledges some influence of Turner, but stresses that, 'Rather than establishing a coherent school of thought that was simply adopted by a generation of unionists, Turner was instrumental in providing various forums and opening up spaces for radical debate.'<sup>488</sup> In fact, it is not surprising that Turner was unable to 'establish' for trade unionists (or anyone else) 'a coherent school of thought.' Quite simply, he did not want to. Tony Morphet captures Turner's attitude towards politics in an anecdote about (ironically) Karl Marx:

I said to him, "What's in the middle of Marx?" "Oh," he said, "A man is a product of his own product." I thought for weeks to get any kind of grip on it. I ended up going back to him and saying, "Tell me about the product of the product." We'd get into history, we'd get into sociology, we'd get into socialisation, but all at the very simple, very quiet level, not wanting to recruit me. That was I think the mystery of it, he didn't want to recruit anybody to anything.<sup>489</sup>

But the 1970s in South Africa were brutal, and many people wanted action, wanted something clear that they could grab ahold of, instead of careful, thoughtful debates. Gerry Mare, a close friend of Turner's, describes a moment when he shared his own frustration with Richard:

I was frustrated beyond belief, either I was going to try or I had tried leaving South Africa, and I asked Rick, "how do I join MK<sup>490</sup>?" ...and Rick just looked at me and he said to me, "If you want to talk about this thing, just go away, speak to someone else, I'm not interested." So I thought but how else? ...What he wanted people to do was to convince people, and find a platform from which you can do it...<sup>491</sup>

So, stubbornly, frustratingly to some, Richard Turner would not help anyone go to war against apartheid, and would not recruit them to join any party or union; he would simply encourage discussion, and thoughtful action. Turner would repeat often statements like, 'we've got to be able to think more than the state allows,' and 'students should try to do more thinking,' etc. In response, in the years after his banning, and even more so after his death,

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<sup>488</sup> Ulrich, 'Only Workers,' p. 120. Furthermore, Ulrich emphasizes that 'Turner's influence, curtailed by his banning in 1973 and cut short by his assassination in 1978' etc.

<sup>489</sup> Interview with Morphet, 7 November 2009.

<sup>490</sup> Umkhonto WeSizwe, translates roughly as 'Spear of the Nation,' was the armed wing of the African National Congress.

<sup>491</sup> Interview with Mare, 4 December 2009.

Turner was 'just passed by.'

## **TURNER'S LEGACY**

The Richard Turner Memorial Lecture series, held at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal from 1986 until 1997 represents a body of work that begins to outline the shape of Turner's legacy and the ways in which his thinking has been used to analyse contemporary social and political problems. I will not attempt a thorough analysis of all of the lectures here. Rather, I believe that there are a number of important themes contained within the lectures and echoed by a number of authors. In particular, the memorial lectures raise important questions regarding:

- The nature of South African democracy, and the prospects of influencing both the State and civil society in the direction of Participatory Democracy.
- The nature of the trade unions and the Left wing as it developed through the 1980s and into the period of democratic transition in South Africa.
- The relationship of the intellectual to the State and to political parties, and the difficulties involved in maintaining an independent and critical political discourse.

### *The Shape of Democracy*

Not surprisingly, a number of the memorial lectures touch on the question of democracy, and on the capacity of the State to play a useful role in forging democracy in the new South Africa. Perhaps surprisingly, a number of lecturers emphasise the role of a strong State apparatus, rather than the de-centralized polity outlined in *The Eye of the Needle*.

Raphael De Kadt's 1989 lecture, 'Modernity and the Future of Democracy,' looks at the development of modern politics, from the Enlightenment through Marx, and connects Turner's political philosophy to this tradition. From this perspective, he analyses the shape of democracy within the modern state. His analysis is far from utopian:

I should like to suggest, in a spirit of realism, that in the contemporary world the prospects are poor for a form of radical or direct democracy in which relations between people are transparent, popular will is formed through practices of open, unconstrained dialogue and the autonomy of the individual is fully reconciled with

the authority of the state.<sup>492</sup>

Ralph Lawrence's 1990 lecture, 'Shaping Democracy in a Future South Africa,' compares the proposals put forward for a Participatory Democracy against the notions of democracy forwarded by the ANC and by the nationalist government. Lawrence envisions and advocates for a strong state to be responsible for the transition:

Take heart, too, in the significant role the state plays in Democracy in a Future South Africa... a strong and well-articulated state... really is indispensable. Without a resilient institutional framework, South African society will not be able to withstand the rigours of a concerted period of social transition. Without a state apparatus directing resources, and without considerable state capacity, democracy and development cannot advance hand in hand.<sup>493</sup>

It is questionable whether these claims regarding the role of the state could be substantiated, now that South Africa has undergone the 'social transition' Lawrence referred to some twenty odd years ago. Speaking in 1996, Ari Sitas' lecture, 'Reconstruction or Transformation,' rests heavily on a critique of the role of the state and the party after 1994. He paints a grim picture, just two years into the transition:

In a more popular vein, the South African National Congress in Government is being described in three ways: as a "prisoner" of the settlement, as a "sell-out" to dominant interests, or simply as incompetent and inexperienced. At best, it can be argued that it involves various gradations of the three.<sup>494</sup>

Nonetheless, Sitas retained hope for the State to play a useful role in transforming society and undoing the legacy of apartheid. He stressed, though, that the State itself must be transformed in order to fulfill this transformative role:

The first precondition for delivery was the transformation of a kind of state that emerged through apartheid's last decade: that centralised, opaque Moloch, with its satellite wings in the homelands. The new paradigm shift from a bureaucracy designed to exclude and control to a "facilitating" state working in tandem with civil society presupposed an organisational revolution.<sup>495</sup>

More than a decade has passed since the last memorial lecture was given. The end of the memorial lecture series coincided with a decline in vigorous intellectual debate regarding the future of the country. It is unfortunate that the lectures have ended at exactly the point at which notions of radical democracy – such as Richard Turner's – would be most fruitful to the political discourse. If, as Lawrence claims, the State must play a critical role in South

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<sup>492</sup> R. De Kadt, 'Modernity and the Future of Democracy,' *Theoria* Vol. 74, (August 1989), p. 53.

<sup>493</sup> R. Lawrence, 'Shaping Democracy in a Future South Africa.' *Theoria*, Vol. 76, (Oct 1990), p. 113.

<sup>494</sup> A. Sitas, 'Reconstruction or Transformation?' *Theoria* Vol. 87, (June 1996), p. 72.

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Africa at this point, how can the function of the State integrate Turner's participatory spirit of de-centralized decision-making? If, instead, as De Kadt claims, 'Democracy will come, increasingly, to be a decentralised practice within civil society rather than simply a form of state organisation,'<sup>496</sup> *The Eye of the Needle* will be a critical text to be examined by social scientists.

### *The Contemporary Socialist Political Culture*

Many of the intellectuals who gave memorial lectures on Richard Turner expressed a level of dismay at the state of Left politics at this point in time. Contrasted against the approach to politics which Richard Turner demonstrated, the lecturers perceive the present culture to be falling short, in terms of the substance of critique and the breadth of vision. In sum, they echo Nash's assertion that,

Any attempt to build a South African left which is both militant and rational — capable both of engaging with the struggles of the oppressed majority and developing analyses and arguments which depend on argument and evidence rather than faith — had better be aware that history is against it. We build on an activist culture pervaded by sectarianism and dogma...<sup>497</sup>

Ari Sitas' lecture examines the political and moral substance of the politics of 'reconstruction' taking place at the time, and finds them to be insufficient. Sitas calls instead for a transformative politics, capable of engaging the various problems of society in a radical way, as Turner outlined in *The Eye of the Needle*. However, Sitas sees little hope in the South African Left to bring about such a transformation. He proclaims, '...the radical democratic core of the movement is caught, cornered and neutralized. Without a movement rooted in everyday life, the future will be identified by internal jacqueries, intrigues, cheque-books and expense accounts, within the state apparatus.'<sup>498</sup> What is the substance behind the concept of a 'radical democratic core of the movement'? Where does Turner fit within that trajectory?

Duncan Greaves' 1987 lecture investigates what, precisely, makes Richard Turner's politics unique from others. Greaves defines Turner's politics as, 'A Politics of Emancipation.' Greaves further clarifies:

At the centre of a politics of emancipation, therefore, there must stand a commitment to a redemptive discourse, to a process of Socratic dialogue that aims to lead out what is already within rather than to replace one dogma with another. A politics of didacticism, by contrast, aims to inject a political consciousness from

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<sup>496</sup> De Kadt, 'Modernity and the future of Democracy,' p. 57.

<sup>497</sup> Nash, 'Moment of Western Marxism,' p. 66.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

without through the repetitious preaching of keywords and slogans.<sup>499</sup>

Greaves speaks at length about Turner's commitment to a 'redemptive discourse' in his teaching, but also within his political activities. As evidence for this claim, Greaves quotes Turner as saying:

I am a socialist. I believe that there is no justification for the claim that some individuals have an exclusive right to own the land and the means of production which have been produced and formed by the common ingenuity of a whole society. I accept these principles because I believe that there are good rational reasons in favour of them. If I can be presented with better reasons against, then I will happily change my mind... But I believe that it is important that there should be rational debate about these questions.<sup>500</sup>

This is an excellent example of Turner's general dialogic approach to radical politics. As I have demonstrated in the chapter on the Institute for Industrial Education, such an approach was eschewed in favour of the more 'didactic' approach of building union leadership. Greaves readily admits that the 'politics of emancipation... is a politics which has never flourished in South Africa — it has rarely enough flourished anywhere...'<sup>501</sup> Still, a vital question remains unanswered: how did the socialist political culture drift towards didacticism and lose its radical democratic core, its emphasis on emancipation?

Tony Morphet, in his 1990 lecture, 'Brushing History Against the Grain,' speaks to the development of Left politics after the 'Durban Moment' that Turner was a part of in the early 1970s. Morphet describes the political culture of the 1980s as one in which,

The direction, duration, leadership and end point of the struggle between them, could all, in a manner, be taken for granted - the end of apartheid would be freedom, the triumph of reason and the fulfilment of history. South African history gained its own teleology. The freedom of black South Africans from white rule was conflated with the classless Utopia.<sup>502</sup>

This is, of course, a bold and contentious claim. Whether or not it has legitimate substance will require much more research. Furthermore, even if it is established that the politics 'gained its own teleology' and abandoned more rigorous critical thought, there is still the thorny question of *how* this came to be. The specific relationship between the trade union movement and the Left wing needs to be explored in greater detail. A coherent body of research must be done which carries on from the story of the Institute for Industrial

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<sup>499</sup> D. Greaves, 'Richard Turner and the Politics of Emancipation,' *Theoria*, Vol. 70, (Aug 1987), p. 33.

<sup>500</sup> As quoted in, Greaves, 'Richard Turner and the Politics of Emancipation,' p. 35.

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>502</sup> T. Morphet, 'Brushing history against the grain: Oppositional Discourse in South Africa,' *Theoria*, Vol. 76 (Oct 1990), p. 97.

Education straight through to the present. In addition, the relationship (in discourse and structure) between the New Left politics of the 1970s and the mass struggle that took place in the 1980s needs to be explored.

The memorial lectures do not engage with these topics in nearly enough depth to draw any conclusions on this point. Further, as explicit memorializations of Richard Turner, there is a risk that they romanticize Turner's contribution and do not sufficiently engage with counter viewpoints, nor critically and thoroughly examine Turner's own politics.

### *The Role of the Intellectual*

Implied in many of the topics addressed in the memorial lectures is the role of the intellectual in developing critical, autonomous thought. Operating under a state of severe repression, Richard Turner spoke out in defence of 'thinking more than the State allows.' It is important to stress that this commitment to autonomous thought meant that Turner remained throughout his lifetime steadfastly independent from both the dominant party line *and* any oppositional party line (such as the Communist Party or the ANC).

The relationship of the intellectual to the State has changed dramatically since Turner's death. At this point, many Left intellectuals see themselves as sympathetic to the new democratic State and to the African National Congress, which currently holds power. But this should not imply that Turner's attitude towards critical engagement must be discarded, or ignored. On the contrary, extensive research should be done which can effectively interrogate the barriers to an autonomous intellectual culture in South Africa, and can identify what openings there are for 'thinking more than the state allows.'

Both Tony Morphet and Ari Sitas expressed grave concern regarding the position of the intellectual in contemporary South Africa. Morphet bemoaned a situation in which, 'Yesterday's critique became tomorrow's policy. Policy is the dominant word in the current discourse of opposition intellectuals. It is the word which has replaced struggle.'<sup>503</sup> Elaborating further, Sitas proclaimed that, 'Last year's radical is this year's professional consultant or human resource manager. If the 'left' constituted all those who in thought or deed fought for and alongside the “powerless” - the exploited, the oppressed, the damaged - ...then the left in South Africa has more or less vanished.'<sup>504</sup>

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<sup>503</sup> Morphet, 'Brushing History Against the Grain,' p. 98.

<sup>504</sup> Sitas, 'Reconstruction or Transformation,' p. 74.

Towards an explanation of the shift from 'struggle' to 'policy,' Morphet quotes Muller and Cloete at length, describing the intellectual atmosphere of the 1980s:

There was literally no social space that could have been occupied outside the camps of the “people” or the “state.” The question of being “with the people” was further sharpened in terms of whether intellectuals were “aligned” to the movement or not, which meant, at least for whites, whether intellectuals belonged to small frequently vanguardist organizations, ideologically committed to the movement, or not. The question of intellectual contribution could be raised only after the question of political membership had been settled. Many of the best progressive intellectuals, refusing this implicit blackmail, were rendered socially invisible during this time.<sup>505</sup>

The developing role of the Left intellectual in South Africa must be engaged with from many angles. What possibility is there of provocative texts such as *The Eye of the Needle* being produced in the current political context? What are the weaknesses and benefits of Richard Turner's particular style of autonomous intellectual discourse? Is this ethos still relevant in South Africa?

In the years since Turner's death, there have been some attempts to create a legacy for him which positively connects his efforts to realities unfolding in the present tense. Perhaps it is inevitable, when grappling with the meaning of a man who is no longer with us to try to associate him with our own values, goals, aspirations; the dead can hardly defend themselves against such claims. These associations, though meant to be honouring, actually obscure the significance of Richard Turner's life, and of the developments which have unfolded in the last three decades. The complexities, the unique qualities are shorn away in an effort to be complimentary. This process of false-positive acclaim must be dealt with in some detail, in order to understand the task facing research into Richard Turner's contribution.

Perhaps the most striking example of someone giving a false account of the enduring legacy of Richard Turner is Eddie Webster, in his memorial lecture, entitled, 'Moral Decay and Reconstruction.' Webster was a friend and colleague of Richard Turner, and clearly valued Turner a great deal. Furthermore, Webster stayed dedicated to the *South African Labour Bulletin*, which he founded in collaboration with Turner, for decades. His commitment to and appreciation of Turner are not to be doubted. Nonetheless, his conclusions are questionable. Andrew Nash summarizes the error in Webster's memorialization quite harshly. 'Where Turner argued for individuals to make ethical choices

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<sup>505</sup> Morphet, 'Brushing History Against the Grain,' p. 97. Quoting, J. Muller and N. Cloete, 'To Outwit Modernity,' paper presented at the international sociology conference, Madrid, July 1990, p. 7

unconstrained by prevailing relations of power, Webster's concern is to locate him — and through Turner, Webster himself — as far as possible on the winning side.<sup>506</sup> What is the substance of this claim?

Eddie Webster is aware that there is some evidence to suggest that Turner's ideas were marginalized after his death, but he rejects that analysis wholeheartedly. 'It would be tempting to conclude that state repression on the one hand and the insurrectionist politics of the post-Soweto generation on the other, had marginalized Turner and his project of radical reform. This would be a serious error.'<sup>507</sup> The phrase, 'radical reform,' which Webster has coined is central to his thesis regarding the significance of Richard Turner. Webster claims that 'radical reform' encapsulates Turner's thinking and his contribution to the South African left:

Turner's combination of a radical vision with a strategy of reform was to have a profound impact on the intense debates in the early seventies on economic growth and its relationship to social and political change... the creation of democratic trade unions, he believed, would lead to a change in the balance of power that would not lead to a revolutionary rupture, but to compromise and radical reform.<sup>508</sup>

In this way, Webster presents a version of history in which there was no rupture, no marginalization of Turner's politics, just a straight-line of influence between Turner's efforts in 1973, and Webster's lecture 20 years later, in 1993.

Webster analyses the development of South African trade unions as progressing in precisely the direction envisioned by Turner's 'radical reform' politics. For Webster, the legalisation of Black trade unions in 1979 was an explicit victory: 'the decision to register trade unions in 1979 under the Labour Relations Act... led not to co-option but to a legitimization of the union as an institution and the rapid growth of shop floor based unions in the eighties.'<sup>509</sup> Not only does Webster cast the union movement of the 1980s as an explicit affirmation of Richard Turner, but he extends that affirmation into the developing politics of COSATU in the early 1990s. After elaborating at some length on COSATU's politics, Webster summarizes that, 'These are the core values of Turner's vision of participatory democracy. This is the contribution of the life and writings of Richard Turner to the process of transition in the nineties.'<sup>510</sup> Such a glowing account of the connection between the politics

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<sup>506</sup> Nash, 'Moment of Western Marxism,' p. 78.

<sup>507</sup> E. Webster, 'Moral Decay and Social Reconstruction: Richard Turner and Radical Reform,' *Theoria*, Vol. 80, (1993), p. 9.

<sup>508</sup> Webster, 'Moral Decay and Social Reconstruction,' p. 5.

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>510</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.



of the 1980s and 1990s and Richard Turner appears grossly over-simplified and disingenuous. Tony Morphet succinctly refutes Webster's notions regarding Turner and union legalisation: 'In arguing for the establishment of black unions it had not been Turner's purpose to aid the regulation of the labour-capital conflict in the long term interest of capital, but to help create a truly rational system of production, in which labour controlled capital.'<sup>511</sup> In Webster's account, the radical content of Turner's politics – that is to say, the elements which demanded deep transformation of the economic, political and social system – are much watered-down through the repeated stress on the strategic necessity of making reforms.

Eddie Webster is not the only one to make these sorts of claims regarding the way in which our present political situation confirms Richard Turner's influence. Peter Vale, who also has a clear and persistent interest in critically engaging with Turner's political thought, nonetheless also occasionally leans on false acclaim in order to establish the relevance of Turner to present problems. For example, Vale's association of the rhetorical goals of the ANC with Richard Turner is meant to speak critically of the ANC, but in the process weakens Turner's politics: 'While the ANC is rhetorically committed to alleviating poverty and equalizing wealth – indeed, to pursuing the ideals set out by Turner – it has palpably failed to implement the macroeconomic policies that would realize them.'<sup>512</sup> In another instance, Vale attempts to positively link Participatory Democracy with the type of socialism practiced in Venezuela. 'Much of what is taking place in Venezuela parallels what the slain Rick Turner imagined as a future democratic socialist South African society...'<sup>513</sup> Again, there is merit in attempting to draw tangible connections to Turner's radical vision and contemporary problems, but there is a danger of over-simplifying and diluting the critical edge of Turner's radical thought.

## CONCLUSIONS

My objective in researching Richard Turner has been to evaluate his overall influence on a socialist political culture in South Africa, on the level of both theory and action. My thesis is that *The Eye of the Needle* marks the most significant contribution Turner made to the political discourse of the time. *The Eye of the Needle* was particularly significant because

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<sup>511</sup> Morphet, 'Introduction,' p. xxvi.

<sup>512</sup> T. Fluxman and P. Vale, 'Re-reading Rick Turner in the New South Africa,' *International Relations*, Vol. 18, No. 2, (2004), p. 184.

<sup>513</sup> Helliker and Vale, 'Fanon's Curse,' p. 14.

it expanded the horizons of white opposition politics and made strides toward outlining an 'ideal, possible society.' Further, my research demonstrates that the key concepts within *The Eye of the Needle* are mirrored within Turner's political activities, and therefore illustrate a practical provocation, as well as a theoretical one.

As I established in the literature review, Turner's contribution has not been dealt with in enough depth within the currently available literature. In specific, a general weakness in the material regarding Turner is that it often fails to address Turner's efforts comprehensively. For example, while some sources address Turner's impact as a lecturer, or on the student movement, for example, no previous source addressed all of his roles within the same text. This thesis seeks to remedy that deficit and has built progressively on the initial analysis of *The Eye of the Needle* (in Chapter 1), broadening to include an analysis of Turner's participation in a range of oppositional political activities during his life-time, from his interactions with the white left and Black Consciousness (in Chapter 2) to his work with the emerging trade unions (in Chapter 3).

In the first chapter, the central tenets of *The Eye of the Needle* are presented and analysed. At base, *The Eye of the Needle* is a skeletal outline of a utopian future for South Africa. The ideal society described is one in which political and economic power is moved out of the hands of the wealthy and placed under the direct control of working people. Economic decision-making would be carried out by democratic councils within each enterprise, and these organs of democracy would be expanded to take on the political tasks of governing neighbourhoods, towns, and the country as a whole. Throughout, the system would heavily stress the importance of all members of the society participating actively in their own lives, and would discourage social hierarchies to the maximum possible extent. This idealistic vision was presented in 1972 as an intentional provocation to shake white liberals out of the stuck places within their politics. *The Eye of the Needle* represented a clear break from the general stagnation in opposition discourse which had come about as a result of the repressive measures of the apartheid state during the 1960s. Turner's notions of a Participatory Democracy fit within the utopian and anti-authoritarian tendencies of the New Left, which developed (in South Africa and globally) in response to the stifling and oppressive aspects of Soviet Marxism.

Chapter 2 deals with Turner's impact on the development of a New Left politics in South Africa. Inevitably, Turner's influence began within, and expanded out from his

classroom at the University of Natal. Turner saw education as a critical part of socializing people to accept the structure of society and thereby function within it. That is, he understood clearly the role of education in reproducing a capitalist system with a great deal of social inequality. At the same time, in line with his vision of a participatory democratic society, Turner saw in education the potential for liberation. Many of his colleagues and students remember Turner as a remarkable lecturer and as someone who taught his students in a much more equal setting, focused more on questioning and dialogue than lecture. As a result of this teaching style, and of a number of extra-curricular educational activities that Turner was involved in, Turner had a significant impact on white students who were opposed to the status quo. In particular, Richard Turner played an important role in encouraging white activists to understand Black Consciousness as a radical politics to be embraced, rather than shunned. In keeping with this analysis, Turner encouraged whites to find a role for themselves within a struggle that he saw as being crucially driven by Black demands and programmes. In addition to students, many whites working within the Study Project on being Christian in an Apartheid Society (Spro-cas) were impacted by Turner's politics. Written in response to the Spro-cas economics commission, *The Eye of the Needle* played an important role in the growing radicalisation of whites in the group. By the time the Spro-cas project came to a close, many key participants had embraced the basic premises of both Black Consciousness and socialism. Ironically, the bulk of the students who were influenced by Turner saw Black Consciousness and class politics as antagonistic. These students grew increasingly to involve themselves with the struggles of black workers in Durban. This tendency began with the Wages Commission, initiated at the University of Natal in 1971, and continued with the General Workers Benefit Fund and then the emerging trade unions. Many white leftists, including Turner, found a place for themselves within the emerging trade union movement.

Chapter 3 examined Turner's engagement with labour education and organising. In response to the wave of wildcat strikes at the beginning of 1973, Turner began to involve himself in working class politics. In collaboration with a handful of other activists, he conducted research into the strikes and wrote a book, called *The Durban Strikes*, which presented facts about the strikes and analysed their significance. The final chapter of the book spoke at length about the need to legally recognise African trade unions. From Turner's other writings, (*The Eye of the Needle* and 'Class Consciousness Among Colonised Workers') it is

clear that Turner saw trade union legalisation as strategically important, but not the overall goal of worker's struggles. Turner's efforts around labour were principally focused on worker education, embodied in the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE). Rooted in pedagogic principles similar to Turner's approach at the University of Natal, the IIE was centrally concerned with giving workers the tools necessary to develop their class consciousness and organise amongst themselves. The curriculum of the IIE, which was written by Turner, was focused on building a broad analysis of capitalism amongst workers, but also dedicated significant space to practical questions of building democratic trade unions. This approach met with resistance from the leadership of the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Committee (TUACC), who were interested solely in the development of a viable trade union infrastructure, and wanted worker education to serve the needs of the union. TUACC felt that the IIE approach made the education available to too many workers, and therefore drew attention away from the urgent needs of unions, which had limited resources and were operating under extremely trying circumstances. The tensions between TUACC and the IIE represented a broader disconnect between Turner's politics and the more orthodox forms of socialism, embodied in the union and in concepts of a vanguard party.

In conclusion, I have established with my research that *The Eye of the Needle* is central to understanding the contribution of Richard Turner to South African politics. I have further established that the potential influence of *The Eye of the Needle* was curtailed, and that Turner's career was cut short by state repression and the developing politics of the South African Left. Turner's overall influence slowly declined after his banning, and the socialist political culture that he had helped to develop took on a markedly different character than the participatory and democratic ethos contained in *The Eye of the Needle*.

The most telling passage in Webster's memorial lecture is the one in which his glowing account falls away for a moment, and he admits to something being lost since Turner's death:

Turner provided a generation disillusioned by the repression of the sixties and the challenge of Black Consciousness, with a vision – a moral vision – of what a new South Africa could become, and he provided a strategy of how we could begin to reach it. Paradoxically, the strategy of the democratic movement is increasingly beginning to look like radical reform *but the vision has been lost* – the world view that drove activists forward and made them willing to make enormous personal sacrifices, has collapsed... Between the politics of resistance and the politics of reconstruction has come a void, leaving the lives of individuals without meaning.<sup>514</sup>

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<sup>514</sup> Webster, 'Moral Decay and Social Reconstruction,' p. 11. emphasis added.

Webster's account of the loss of vision and meaning within South African Left politics echoes precisely a driving motivation behind this thesis. In a historical moment in which socialist political thought has lost its provocative, idealistic and autonomous edge, it has been necessary to return to and reinvigorate the work of Richard Turner.

Much as I would have liked to write a thesis which focuses on the impact of Richard Turner on South African politics, I have found that my research does not principally support this conclusion. Much more significantly, I have found that the lasting questions raised by Richard Turner have to do with his lack of impact, his marginalization, his inability to break through established patterns of political discourse and action.

Every country has their own hell. In South Africa, the hell of apartheid has given way to a new kind of desert of possibilities. Realistically, the prospects for social justice are slim. The only escape from cynicism, at this point, lies in utopian thought, in articulating and defending a vision of an 'ideally possible society.'

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