RICHARD TURNER AND THE POLITICS OF EMANCIPATION*

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Richard Turner died in the early hours of January 8, 1978; he was gunned down, at the age of 37, by an assailant who has yet to be identified. In the decade since then political violence in South Africa has escalated to the point where we now stand on the brink of civil war. Or perhaps I should say anti-political violence; for there is a sharp limit to which the purposes of politics and violence can be reconciled. There is, to be sure, an intimate and complex link between the two; it has often been suggested that war is the prosecution of diplomacy by other means, and, by a logical extension, that civil war is the prosecution of politics by other means. But the link is one of tension, for the one does not simply translate into the other as the need arises. Instead, we typically find that violence tends to drown politics in its own purposes. As Hannah Arendt remarked in her observations on revolution, the justification of violence must also constitute its political limitation. To cry havoc and let slip the dogs of civil war, therefore, marks not the prosecution of politics by other means but its failure; indeed, its death.

Politics is my theme; a particular kind of politics, the sort of politics which lies at the heart of Richard Turner's life and work, which I have chosen to call a politics of emancipation. It is a politics which has never flourished in South Africa — it has rarely enough flourished anywhere — but at crucial moments in the history of our country it has flared briefly and brilliantly, rendering the past transparent and illuminating the future as a horizon of possibilities. And then, as always, the darkness has closed again. For Richard Turner, the darkness concealed an assassin. For us, the darkness conceals many assassins; the path forward, if it exists at all, is dim, and certainly blood-coloured; our torch, if I may extend the metaphor, is almost out. We must surely pause here, to take stock of the passage of events which have brought us to this sticking point. We need to reflect critically on our past in order to take control of the future back into our own hands. I suggest that central to this task is an engagement with the work of Richard Turner. For Turner's project is, at its core, a transcendental one. It is transcendental in a double sense — in the sense of its own internal purposes, which aim, through a process of redemptive discourse, to render society transparent and thus to transform it; but also in the sense that his life

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and work are a triumph of the human spirit, of dedication to freedom and justice, which is in no way negated by his death and indeed survives beyond it to resonate powerfully in our own time.

Richard Turner was born in Cape Town in 1941. His childhood was unexceptionally that of a white middle-class South African, and on leaving school he charted for himself an unexceptional course: in 1959 he registered at the University of Cape Town for an engineering degree. Midway through his second year, however, he changed his direction of study to philosophy. The change of course is the first indication of the crucial role that philosophical enquiry was to play in his life and work. The study of philosophy led him in 1964 to the University of Paris, where he completed a doctorate on the political work of Jean-Paul Sartre. A distinguished committee examined and commended his work: Jean Wahl, Raymond Aron and Sartre himself. It is Turner's engagement with Sartre which underpins all of his politics.

If I may be permitted some extremely bald compression, the heart of Sartre's work is an attempt to sustain a materialist model of human behaviour without at the same time reducing human volition to structural causation. He seeks to do this by means of a set of crucial ideas: the notion of project, as a continuous and critical extension of human choice into the future; the category of the practico-inert, referring to the ways in which human choices rebound on actors in unrecognisable and unwanted form; and, most memorably, the distinction between the group and the series, as a way of explaining how individuals can engage in authentically willed collective action. In capitalist societies, social institutions depend for their survival on an opacity which separates the people embedded in them: they constitute a 'series', a collection of atomised and alienated individuals. Under such conditions, there is almost no possibility of collective action. Precisely because the experience of the members of the series is shared, however, there remains the theoretical possibility of the atomised ensemble undergoing a transition to a 'fused group' — a highly volatile social structure characterised by authentic and spontaneous forms of collective action, and which may in turn undergo further transitions, either preserving or losing crucial moments of this authenticity. The emergence of a fused group is never purely the result of theorising, but requires, to some extent, a revolutionary spark that abruptly illuminates the nature of the series.

At the heart of these ideas is the conviction that social structures, however complex and tortuous they may appear, are the products of human choices; and for precisely that reason they can be changed. That conviction provides us with a vision and a hope, but not yet with a politics. But the politics are already implicit in the theory; for collective action, in these terms, does not emerge from a

process of external education but rather from one of internal reflection, either implicit or explicit. As Turner expressed it in his dissertation on Sartre, we constitute our values through a process of synthesising all our experience. Behind this assertion lies a theme that is crucial to Turner's politics. It is that consciousness — political or otherwise — is not a scarce resource that is presided over and administered by a political agency. Consciousness is intimately linked to social being, and, more importantly, to activity, to an active, practical engagement with nature and with society.

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 without through the repetitious preaching of keywords and slogans. In his play *The Measures Taken* Brecht characterises communist cadres as 'blank pages on which the Revolution writes its instructions'. It is in much the same way that a didactic politics proceeds. But it is a bad politics, for it either doesn't work — since it is grounded in an inadequate sociology of consciousness — or, when it does work, it produces results very far from the open and democratic society at which it ostensibly aims.

The work on Sartre provided Turner with a political vocabulary, a language of freedom so to speak, which would allow him to step beyond the bounds of the given and the conventional, to engage all those around him in searching and critical dialogue. He returned in 1966 to a South Africa in which the public space was not only narrow and cramped, but growing daily narrower under the pressure of a repressive government. As it grew narrower, so he expanded his commitment to a redemptive discourse, until, at the height of his powers, he was regarded by the state as one of the most dangerous opposition figures in South Africa.

The political project which flared so brilliantly in the early 1970s began simply enough, through teaching — first at UCT, Rhodes and Stellenbosch, and then, from 1970, in the Department of History and Political Science at the University of Natal in Durban. Turner's method of teaching relied heavily on the use of dialogue and critical discussion, through a continual movement from the given to what is not given, an ever more searching interrogation of unspoken assumptions and preconceptions. Education, in this manner, is fundamentally self-education; the teacher is present as a facilitator rather than an instructor. Certainly the effect on students was electrifying; students from as far afield as the Faculty of Engineering attended his lectures. The student left, in particular, was galvanised by Turner's lectures — not necessarily because he told them what they wanted to hear (he frequently didn't) but

because his method of enquiry seemed to provide both a hope for, and a challenge to, the future. Between Turner and the student left there quickly developed a running dialogue, in which no part of the field of possibilities was left shadowed or unexplored.

This would, of course, have been a period of flux and openness in student politics whether Turner had been there or not; the effects of the French student revolt were just beginning to percolate through to South Africa, and other forces were simultaneously at work. The revisionist historians had opened a searching discussion of the relationship between racism and capital accumulation; black political opposition was coming slowly to the surface again after a decade of political passivity; the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) had been shaken to its roots by the angry desertion of black students in 1968; and penetrating all of student life was the noncomformist popular culture of the late '60s. The dialogue between Turner and NUSAS gave a potently critical edge to the student politics of the period. At the same time, however, Turner acted as a brake on student militancy. He was resolutely opposed to student violence — partly because he had himself witnessed the tragic consequences of such violence in the early 1960s, but more importantly because in his view the conditions prevailing in South Africa neither justified nor required violence within civil society. What was required, rather, was a critical culture, the sort of culture which could enter and inhabit civil society at every level, thus constituting a new social order in embryo within the old. Violence was more likely to hinder the development of such a culture than to foster it. But protest, legal or otherwise, could contribute importantly to the building of a critical culture; and here Turner played a crucial role in student affairs. He did not attempt to organise students, as the Schlebusch Commission which recommended his banning later charged. Rather, through a process of dialogue and engagement with Turner, students developed strategies of protest that were themselves committed to dialogue and engagement. A typical incident from 1970 illustrates what sort of protest was at issue. After a number of students in Johannesburg were arrested, students in Durban planned to stage a protest march. It struck Turner that instead of pointing posters at the white public it would be more fruitful to try talking to them, and he put this to students at a mass meeting. The tactic was taken up; some 500 students took their case to the white public in groups of two and three, arguing their position from door to door and winning support through dialogue and critical engagement.

At the heart of Turner's envisaged critical culture there lies always this process of engagement and argumentation. If a position could not be argued for it was not worth holding, and it had to be argued for openly with all opponents. Of his own position, he

declared simply, '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.' The project was the construction of a democratic socialism in South Africa; its method was the building of a critical culture, a culture that could be actively lived in the here and now rather than be deferred to the future, that would expand outward, not through a process of dogma and didacticism, but through Socratic dialogue. Its point of articulation with civil society was always the lived experience of men and women, the practical basis from which consciousness derives; for fundamental shifts in consciousness are not the product of education, but rather of action, mediated by reflection. Turner was keenly aware of the need to 'organise', but this meant essentially the facilitation of events and situations in which people would act, and, in reflecting on their action, would see the structure of social relations as increasingly transparent. As a model of political activity, it is not bound to any particular set of interests, but finds application at every level of society; and from the sphere of student politics, Turner's engagement expanded progressively outwards.

The early '70s were important years for the growth of the Black Consciousness Movement, and through his involvement in community self-help projects, and a personal friendship with Steve Biko, Turner developed a critical yet sympathetic relationship with the BCM. The disagreement between Turner and the BCM was vast, yet it remained always fraternal. Black Consciousness, for Turner, was an authentic attempt to thematise the lived experiences of the black population; and, most significantly, it was coupled always with a searching critique of white western culture, the sort of critique that lay at the heart of constructing an alternative. By the very nature of the association, it was a limited one; but it lasted through some of the crucial shifts in the BCM, and in 1976 Turner — somewhat awkwardly, under the circumstances — appeared as an expert witness in the SASO/BPC case, a key trial of Black Consciousness activists.

Black Consciousness offered, at least potentially, a critique of the dominant culture; so too did Christianity. The early 1970s were equally an important period for the growth of Christian dissent, and here too Turner was crucially involved. The Christian Institute, founded in 1963, provided one of the key organisational expressions of the unhappy or outraged Christian conscience, and as the 1960s

advanced so it and other groupings such as the South African Council of Churches were searching for an understanding of apartheid and its alternatives. In September of 1968 a theological commission under the SACC produced a 'Message to the People of South Africa', calling on them to distinguish what was required of them as citizens from what was required of them as disciples of Christ. Out of this grew the Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society — SproCas, as it quickly became known — which appointed six commissions. Turner was regarded as essential for the politics and economics commissions.

He was not a Christian, and he stated the fact bluntly. However, Christ's injunction to do unto others as you would have them do unto you establishes, for Turner, a radical principle of justice. Christianity therefore constitutes a challenge to all accepted values; it is an invitation to continuous self-examination and transcendence. It must be committed, therefore, to a searching interrogation of the values of everyday life, and dedicated to building alternative values, where necessary, that will place people before things. This, Turner argued, obviously cannot be done in apartheid society; nor, he insisted, can it be done in capitalist society, for capitalism must necessarily place things before people and thus subvert the principles of Christian love. Turner's contributions to SproCas argued these positions consistently; he was impatient with the hesitancy and lack of critical imagination of Christian opposition in South Africa, and this impatience was to play an important role in motivating him to write the little book for which he is best remembered, *The Eye of The Needle*.

The Eye of The Needle is Turner's most enduring value statement, and I shall want to say something more about it in a moment. But the political work which has left the most lasting results in South Africa was his involvement in worker organisation. Initially, and characteristically, this grew out of his involvement in student politics; in collaboration with David Hemson and others, he set up the Wages Commission on the Durban campus. Its purpose was to gather information about the wage structure of factories in and around Durban; this information was used with devastating effect in the foreign press, and contributed importantly to the establishment of the EEC and Sullivan codes of employment. Out of this grew a host of worker-related projects. In 1972 Turner and others set up the Institute for Industrial Education, an adult education project that was designed to allow rank-and-file workers to perceive, through a self-educative learning process, the structure of interests in which they were located and hence the extent to which they could take control of their own lives. In the same year he and others laid the groundwork for the authoritative journal, the *Labour Bulletin*. The first issue only appeared in April 1974, after

his banning, and thus he was cut off from being publicly associated with it. Simultaneously with these projects, important trade union organisation was developing. The foundations of the umbrella union FOSATU, which later amalgamated with others to form COSATU, were laid at this point.

As these worker-orientated projects flourished, so Turner progressively disengaged from earlier involvements; and this shift has led some commentators to suggest that he adopted, around 1972, a more orthodox Marxist position in which class struggle is conceptually privileged. But such a shift in emphasis does not accord with the theoretical basis of his political activity, which rested always on the construction of a universal rather than a particular critical culture. Moreover, the shift can be explained in other terms. In the first place, the last thing that Turner sought was to be a leader. He was sharply aware, from his experience with students, that people tended to regard him in this way, and he sought always to avoid becoming an institutional fixture. His disengagement from earlier activities probably gew in part out of this, and had his banning not cut short this last phase of his work he would probably have moved out of worker-orientated projects in time. Certainly, he would have had to face a choice between teaching and unionism; towards the end of this period he was so busy that at one stage he moved a cot into his office.

Turner was, first and foremost, a teacher; teaching was a mode of engagement with the world that best suited his commitment to Socratic dialogue and critical enquiry. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Richard Turner was a deeply compassionate man who had a horror of human suffering. The Wages Commission investigations had shown that human suffering was rife in Durban factories. Some concerns — the Frame Group became infamous among them — were paying appallingly low wages. The engagement with unionism, therefore, was also an urgent attempt to help people in need; and precisely because the level of organisation was so low, it is scarcely surprising that unionism swamped his other activities. But it was not only that; at its core it was informed, as much as any of his other political engagements, by the attempt to build a critical culture, a coherent and lived set of alternative values and morals.

This concern with the choice of values is fundamental to Turner's project, and it forms the basis of what is unquestionably his most profound and lasting value statement, the little book he published as part of the SproCas project in May 1972, entitled *The Eye of the Needle*. In it he sought to marshall the arguments for democratic socialism which lay at the heart of his life and work. In academic terms, it 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 internally contradictory. Turner himself made no immodest claims about it. Yet 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. Nearly all radical opposition to the government had been effectively crushed, and white liberals and Christians alike, in the search for a programme acceptable to the white electorate, were falling short of a full commitment to either liberalism or Christianity. What Turner sought to provide was a value-statement that could provide a fresh basis for political debate; instead of niggling over possible reforms, what was needed was a model of a just social order, cast in self-consciously utopian terms, against which all political activity could be indexed. In the opening paragraphs of the book he explains his purpose: '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.' He then argues that social institutions are, finally, nothing other than a lot of people going about their business, acting on the values they have consciously or unconsciously chosen; and that a different set of values would thus generate a different set of social structures. We are thus returned to the fundamental question of the choice of values, and what sort of politics are most appropriate to a value-orientated project. The argument is a utopian one, but there are fertile and infertile utopias. Turner's utopia is richly powerful; it generates a sense of transcendence and affirms the capacity of men and women to shape their society in accordance with rational goals. The book resounds quietly with an indomitable faith in human reason, and few people come from *The Eye of The Needle* without a change — for many a sea-change — in their thinking.

Some nine months after the book was published, the state finally acted against Turner; along with seven NUSAS figures, he was served with a banning order that cut him off from teaching and effectively curtailed his political activity. A banning order is a monstrous imposition, but Turner resolved to respond to it within the limits that were abruptly imposed on him. His task was made easier by the University of Natal's generous and unusual decision to continue paying his salary. His life project had begun with the study of philosophy, and it was to philosophy that he now returned. He applied for, and was awarded, an Alexander von Humboldt scholarship for post-doctoral studies in Germany, but was refused permission by the Government to take it up. He therefore turned to a re-examination of the philosophical tradition from which he had

begun: the relationship between the materialist dialectic and the individual as a knowing subject. One of his purposes was to produce a coherent model of the relationship between activity and reflection, and thus to elaborate the basis for an emancipatory politics. By late 1977 he had written some five hundred pages, much of it in polished form. He was of course forbidden to publish during this period; but his banning order was due to expire in early 1978, and he was preparing both for a return to teaching and for publication of at least part of the manuscript.

Neither purpose was fulfilled. On that January night an assassin stepped out of the darkness and cut him down; he died in the arms of his daughter.

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His art was the art of the Socratic dialectician; it was an art he practiced with quiet forcefulness but no arrogance or flamboyance. To be defeated in argument by Turner was never to be crushed. Dialogue with Turner was always a rich, almost a magical experience; the poet Peter Sacks, who was once his student, has given us this image of him:

> You sat among us on the floor
> translating Althusser,
> barefoot, jeans, a pale blue shirt,
> your black-rimmed glasses doubling
> the light, the red shock of your hair.
> At some slight turn of argument
> your freckled hands followed
> the actual phrasing in the air.
> "I know it's difficult in this country,
> but we've got to think more clearly
> than the State allows."†

Always his concern was to go beyond the limits of thought that were set by the State and civil society, to engage in dialogue and debate. For Turner, those disputing any question would always be involved in an act of emancipation if they advanced their cases rationally. Rational debate about the choice of fundamental values, therefore, lies at the heart of constructing a critical culture, at the heart of a politics of emancipation. It is a politics built around self-education rather than didacticism, around discourse rather than dogma, around argument about values rather than the assertion of them, around openness rather than closure; around the primacy of ends rather than means. It is a politics which fares badly in time of civil

† 'For Richard Turner': from *In These Mountains* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1986)

war, for the brutalisation of civil society tends to petrify political identities; it simplifies them dramatically into the good and the bad, armouring them with a horny carapace of dogma that renders them immune to dialogic reconstruction. How a politics of emancipation is to be redeemed under such circumstances I do not know, nor even if it can be redeemed. Without such a redemption, however, our future can only be grim — either more grim or less grim, depending on the course of the conflict; but grim.

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