

**Cover Sheet:**

**Rick Turner, Participatory Democracy, and Workers' Control**

‘Workers’ control in the enterprise is a necessary condition for freedom but it is not a sufficient condition’ (Turner 2015[1972]: 64).

Detained, interrogated, and tortured by the South African security police in early 1982, trade union activist Neil Aggett prepared a written statement of his political views. In it, he insisted to his captors that

what are needed are democratic organizations that people are involved in and are controlled by the people themselves. This will bring about gradual change in all spheres of life. Without these democratic, open, legal organizations, there is no guarantee that the people will have any control of their destiny. (Aggett, cited in Naidoo 2012: 250).

Although they surely travelled in some of the same circles, there is no indication that Aggett and Richard ‘Rick’ Turner ever crossed paths during their all too short lives. As significant participants in South Africa’s ‘white left’ during the 1970s, both men regarded trade unions as one of the most potent of these democratic organizations available to Black workers as tools of their own liberation. Aggett, a medical doctor, worked as a trade union organiser for the multiracial Food and Canning Workers Union until his death in February 1982 after 70 days in detention (Naidoo 2012). Turner, a professor of political philosophy who was murdered by unknown assassins in January 1978, was more of an intellectual sparkplug for Aggett’s generation of younger radicals than a front-line militant. Yet his influence on a cohort of activists, particularly those who helped build democratic, non-racial trade unions in the wake of the 1973 Durban Strikes, was unmistakable.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the fact that Rick Turner spent a scant seven years as a visible figure on the South African political and intellectual scene, bracketed by his return from graduate study in philosophy in Paris in 1966 at age twenty-five and his government banning order in 1973, his influence on South African radical thought proved enormous. There are many angles from which one can approach his contributions—his relationship to Steve Biko and Black Consciousness, his development of a South African variant of existentialist humanism, his powerful synthesis of prophetic Christianity with this humanism, his radical approach to pedagogy and profound impact on a generation of white students, his commitment to a socialist non-racialism, and more besides. In this brief essay, however, I want to recall Turner’s labour politics, which I believe had a signal effect on the formation of independent Black trade unions in the immediate wake of the Durban Strikes and the radical democratic unionism these organisations subsequently came to pursue under the umbrella of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) in the first half of the 1980s (Friedman 2011). Most of all, I want to suggest that the workplace culture envisioned by Turner—a central element in his broad and deep commitment to ‘participatory democracy’ and his rejection of vanguardist political solutions—embodied a ‘workers’ control’ orientation that speaks to the current travails of the South African workers’ movement.

Indeed, it is impossible to understand the impact of Turner’s main philosophical statement, *The Eye of the Needle: Towards Participatory Democracy in South Africa* (1972), outside the context of the mass strike wave that shook Durban and its environs in January-March 1973. At the time of the strikes, Turner was a young lecturer in the University of Natal’s Department of Politics, where he had come from a brief stint at Rhodes University only three years before. During those three years in Durban, Turner had spoken at dozens of student meetings and addressed numerous organizations on a wide range of topics, including ‘radical

thought, socialism, communism, and the philosophies of Sartre [the subject of his PhD thesis], Mao Tse Tung, and Marcuse' (Republic of South Africa 1974:93). He had also worked with radical students in NUSAS who had already formed a 'Wages Commission' to investigate and publicize the poor pay and working conditions of Black workers in Durban and its surrounding industrial areas. Many of these students—David Hemson, Halton Cheadle, Jeanette Curtis and others—would come to play prominent roles in the new non-racial labour movement and workers' education initiatives that exploded after the strikes (Davie 2007; Hemson 2014).

Although personally a non-believer, Turner was also a frequent speaker at events sponsored by the dissident anti-apartheid church movement represented by the Christian Institute (CI) and the South African Council of Churches.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, many of his lectures and published articles between 1970 and 1973 sought to reconcile Christian humanism with new currents in socialist thought generated by the New Left thinkers he was reading and interpreting for a South African audience. *The Eye of the Needle*, in fact, hardly resembled an academic text. Rather, it was a radical, book-length, utopian call-to-arms produced by Turner on behalf of the Christian Institute's Study Project for Christian Action in Apartheid Society (Spro-Cas) with the intention to 'seek some vision of what South African society could be if Christianity was taken seriously' as a source of ultimate values incompatible with apartheid and capitalism. Turner's contribution was meant to provide the Spro-Cas initiative with 'serious consideration of socialism and such concepts as participatory democracy and workers' control' (Randall, 1973: 4-5). In doing so, Turner highlighted what he called 'the necessity of utopian thinking' (Turner, 2015: 1). But, as Andrew Nash observes, 'the main problem in understanding Turner's historical role is the apparent discrepancy between his philosophical utopianism and the strategic realism of the trade union movement in whose beginnings he played so active and widely-acknowledged

a role'(Nash, 1999:69). The idea of 'workers' control' marks the juncture at which such utopianism and pragmatism converged.

Before it was banned by the South African government eleven months after its release, Spro-Cas distributed *The Eye of the Needle* to at least 3500 people, 'mostly to young white and black trade unionists and to those whose radicalism needed a philosophical foundation,' CI staffer Horst Kleinschmidt recently recalled (Kleinschmidt 2013). This foundation was 'participatory democracy,' a concept that grounded Turner's approach to the workplace and much else besides. It is impossible to know if Turner was familiar with the New Left manifesto, the Port Huron Statement, penned by the American Students' for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1962. But because he cites it we can be sure that he had read Paul Blumberg's work of industrial sociology, *Industrial Democracy*, which quotes the key passages on the democrat control of the work experience from the SDS manifesto on participatory democracy in its introduction (Turner 2015: 51; Blumberg 1968: 8). Emphasising that in 'any contemporary society' the workplace represented 'the most vital area of people's lives,' Turner naturally concluded that 'the first essential for democracy is that the workers should have power at their place of work'(Turner 2015:46-47). While he acknowledged that forming trade unions—something Black workers could, in fact, legally do under apartheid--would have to be 'the first step in the direction of power for these workers,' Turner nevertheless insisted that these organisations could only serve as a 'check on management' able to make 'the work situation more comfortable' but not, in the end, more 'meaningful' (Turner 2015: 47). The result of this limited step, he feared, would merely be the continued displacement of genuine human needs into the sterile and inauthentic realm of consumption and commodities. As Turner noted elsewhere, most likely drawing on his

close reading of Marcuse, 'Passivity is the main trait of 20<sup>th</sup> century consumer man' (Republic of South Africa 1974: 692).

Thus, for Turner, to develop genuine participatory democracy at work, organised workers should aim ultimately at 'full workers' control.' Specifically, Turner argued, this would entail regular mass meetings and an elected workers' council in every enterprise to take over managerial duties. Building outward from this nucleus, workers could develop cooperative values applicable to all areas of their lives. To the degree that he saw extant working models of this utopian vision, Turner looked to Tanzania's Ujamaa village schemes, the Polish revolt of 1956, the Prague Spring in 1968, and above all (drawing again on Blumberg) Yugoslavia, a place Turner himself had visited while in Europe during the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Finally, Turner imagined that the cooperative ethic and autonomous activity associated with such workplace democracy would radiate outward to the political economy at large, making possible the emergence of a broad-based democratic socialism. 'The basis of political freedom' in this social order, Turner maintained, 'lies in the workers' control of the enterprise,' giving them the power to 'resist norms or priorities they considered totally unjustified' (Turner 2015: 81).

One can, of course, easily brush aside Turner's implausible vision here by pointing to the deep flaws in these few examples (although Turner did not embrace them uncritically), or noting that workplace democracy offers little to women and others excluded from collective forms of factory labour. But this would obscure the larger point, which is that Turner's deliberately utopian ideal of a more humane society placed fulfilling work at the centre of his politics of participatory democracy. This represented a particular kind of New Left ideological repudiation of both a Keynesian growth liberalism that emphasized expanded consumption as the primary goal of capitalist production, and the alienating labour that Turner and those like him associated

with the Stalinist command economies. In the former case, of course, this marked a sharp break with South African white liberals' faith that capitalist growth would erode the commitment to apartheid, concluding instead that capitalism was part of the problem rather than part of the solution. At the same time, however, Turner saw little merit in what the Soviet alternative model—and thus, by extension, the SACP--had on offer. 'There are,' he pointed out, 'no political institutions in Soviet society that would enable the people to assert their control over the means of production....The result is a large, inefficient and undemocratic state bureaucracy' (Turner 2015: 86).

When grilled subsequently by the Commission of Inquiry into Certain Organisations (known as the Schlebusch Commission), Turner reminded his inquisitors that *The Eye of the Needle* 'is not a call for revolt, it is a suggestion for what a just society would look like' (Republic of South Africa 1974: 561). In 'sketching an ideally just society' in his Spro-cas pamphlet, one ultimately compatible with a 'Christian model' of 'freedom and love,' like many of his New Left comrades Turner emphasized the need for 'meaningful and creative work, work that is an expression of my own autonomous being and not something I do unwillingly' (Turner 2015: 1, 45). He distinguished his vision from that of the Old Left, which in his view 'accepted the capitalist model of human fulfillment through the consumption and possession of material goods' (Turner 1971:76). The New Left, by way of contrast, sought to transcend materialist(ic) notions of human fulfillment and potentiality. Instead of regarding labor as a means to an end, Turner and the New Left sought out satisfaction in other realms—spiritual, sexual, communal, and, indeed, in the realm of production itself. As Turner put it in his 1971 essay 'The Relevance of Contemporary Radical Thought,' drawing on ideas popularized by Marcuse and John K. Galbraith, 'work satisfaction should be seen as one of the products of the production process, and

should not play a secondary role to narrow criteria of economic efficiency' (Turner 1971: 78). To the obvious retort that the South African reality, in which the vast majority of the population suffered extreme material deprivation, made this ideal irrelevant, Turner suggested that it was *whites* who would have to learn to substitute community for material values, and that they might even learn something from 'the human model characteristic of African tribal societies' (Turner 1971: 80).

Another important feature of Turner's thought that, like much New Left thinking, sharply distinguished him from the traditional Marxist Left was the question of means and ends. Turner insisted that 'only if the new culture is embodied in the process of moving towards the new society will that society work when we get to it'. 'We must ensure,' he warned, 'that all organizations we work in themselves prefigure the future' and thus 'be participatory rather than authoritarian' in character (Turner 2015: 123-124). Rooted in workers' shop floor organisations, this participatory ideal would form the bedrock of the new democratic South African unions inspired by Turner's thought during the 1970s.

Indeed, the hothouse political and intellectual climate provided by what Tony Morphet has dubbed the 'Durban Moment,' touched off by the massive strike wave of early 1973, proved an ideal laboratory for some of Turner's most challenging ideas. Spro-cas published *The Eye of the Needle* in late 1972, and the Durban strike wave broke out in January 1973, drawing in many of the University of Natal students who had worked closely with Turner. A month later, in the midst of the strikes, Turner himself was banned, making it impossible for him to publish anything under his own name, but his wife and intellectual partner, Fozzia Fisher was not. In 'Class Consciousness among Colonised Workers in South Africa' Fisher offered her own reflections—and perhaps those of Turner as well<sup>4</sup>—on the relationship between the Durban



strikes and the ‘class consciousness’ of African workers. From a Sartrean perspective, the essay described how an atomized working class might be suddenly moved to collective action erupting from the daily relations of the shop floor. Such spontaneous action appeared rooted in the shift from ‘serial’ to ‘group’ praxis, in which the ‘relation to the other is a source of strength rather than of weakness.’ More often than not, this transformation in consciousness was provoked by ‘a situation which suddenly illuminates the possibility of action for a large number of people’—the paradigmatic recent case in South Africa being that of the Durban strikes (Fisher [Turner] 1978: 201, 213). In particular, in Durban in 1973 the ‘serialized’ experience of separate factories was overcome as striking workers realized that others were engaged in spontaneous mass action without police repression. Using his colleague Gerry Maré’s name as a front, Turner published in the *South African Labour Bulletin* a similar analysis of the East London strikes that broke out in 1974 (Maré [Turner] 1974). Fisher—or was it Turner—did admit that during the 1973 upheaval workers’ demands remained economic, and ‘certainly, they do not think in terms of workers’ control’ (Fisher 1978: 215). At the same time, as this essay pointed out, in an apartheid situation where managerial prerogatives remained virtually absolute, in fact ‘all issues are issues of control.’

Further evidence of Turner’s hand in analyzing the 1973 strikes can be found in a comprehensive booklet on the labour upheaval entitled *The Durban Strikes*, and in other material produced by the workers’ aid society founded by Turner, Fisher, and the students who had been active in the Wages Commission and in building Black trade unions in the aftermath of the strikes: the Institute of Industrial Education (IIE). Written almost contemporaneously with the widespread job actions that defined the ‘Durban Moment’, *The Durban Strikes* offers immediacy; drawing heavily on interviews with workers and employers, the study serves as both

an excellent documentary record of the events themselves and as an example of the thinking of Turner and his cohort of young radicals. Seeking the immediate causes of the strike outbreak, the pamphlet concluded that ‘the strikes either came about through some quite complicated underground organization (of which there is no evidence)’ or ‘else they came about as a result of a large number of independent decisions by unofficial leaders and influential workers in different factories’ ( IIE 1974:6). Investigating the process by which the multiple decisions made by African and Indian workers to down tools—as well as to return to the factory—the IIE concluded that ‘consensus seems to have emerged from continuous discussion’ on the shop floor and in the streets, hostels, taxi ranks, and buses (IIE 1974: 40). In fact, *The Durban Strikes* presented the strikes as a textbook example of ‘spontaneous mass action’--that is, ‘a situation in which each individual recognises his or herself in an ongoing action’ (IIE 1974: 92). It is impossible to know if Turner wrote those exact words, but it is hard to read them without seeing the profound influence of his thinking in this document. Indeed, on the same page, *The Durban Strikes* concludes that ‘Sartre’s concept of the “groupe en fusion” [in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*] describes this form of spontaneity well.’ Here indeed we see the footprints of Rick Turner a year after his banning.<sup>5</sup>

While the mass strikes of 1973 soon dissipated, they nevertheless formed the basis for an ongoing effort to build more permanent organisations amongst Durban’s Black working class. As *The Durban Strikes* put it, while the strikes had resulted in a ‘modest pay increase’ for workers stretched to the financial breaking point, ‘the other main achievement of the strikes is less tangible but perhaps even more important. It is the sense of solidarity and potential power’ workers had discovered on the shop floor (IIE 1974: 46) In the years following the strikes, in addition to publishing the influential *South African Labour Bulletin*, the IIE produced a handful

of ‘workers’ handbooks.’ These pamphlets sought to cultivate this power by promoting basic education while explaining South African history, the development of capitalism, basic economics, and the principles of factory and union organization and negotiation to a nascent cohort of shop stewards and potential union officials in the newly formed Black unions.<sup>6</sup>

Here we discover another important aspect of Turner’s democratic praxis, the conjunction of his radical pedagogy with the ideal of workers’ control. In *The Workers’ Organisation*, for example, the IIE offered a basic history of the transition to capitalism, pointing out in straightforward language that under industrial labor, workers ‘lost the right to control their work.’ It was the trade union, the handbook suggested, that could ‘increase their control over their work and their conditions of work’ (IIE 1975: 5-7). Much of the pamphlet, however, addressed a fundamental problem of organisation confronting the new unions born out of the strikes: how to foster a broad solidarity beyond a single factory, while not eroding the unity built amongst workers in the tight networks that had made spontaneous shop floor action possible in the first place. Although their booklet posed a system of factory-based representation as a solution, the IIE recognised that ‘the representatives may lose touch with the workers’ (IIE 1975:22). The danger was that with the growth of union bureaucracy, ‘the workers no longer solve their own problems through the strength that come from unity,’ looking instead to paid staffers (IIE 1975: 26). (In the context of the new unions, this had a racial element as well, with African workers potentially looking to educated whites to ‘solve’ their problems, exactly what Turner wanted to avoid). The proposed solution to this dilemma was a robust workplace democracy—and this, in turn rested on deepened education for Black workers, as ‘democracy is only possible with knowledge’(IIE 1975: 37). Indeed, the only way to make power flow upward

from the shop floor, rather than downward from the union officials, was to engage constantly in education, both in dedicated programs and in concert with actual union activity.

During the 1970s, this dual program led to considerable internal friction between activists devoted to the IIE's educational mission and those who regarded it instead primarily as a training shop for new unionists (Keniston 2014:174-186). The tensions that eventually tore apart the IIE by the end of the decade can be overstated, however, at least as they co-existed within Turner's own thought. Tony Morphet, for instance, surely one of the most important figures in keeping the intellectual substance of Rick Turner's 'Durban Moment' alive and relevant over the decades, implies that in this debate Turner (and Fisher) were ultimately outflanked by their more 'instrumentalist' comrades on the Marxist left, many imbued with the structuralism of 'Althusser and Poulantzas rather than the early Marx' (Morphet 2015: 224). But in my reading of *The Eye of the Needle*, Turner's educational project and his vision of participatory democracy rooted, first and foremost, in the workplace, are actually of a piece. As Morphet observed in a 2010 essay, Turner's major theoretical contribution to working-class struggle was the notion that 'the authenticity of...working-class consciousness was to be ensured through the democracy of the shop floor' (Morphet 2015: 235). But for Turner, this was entirely bound up with his idea of a democratic, authentic form of education. Indeed, he envisioned that such education would no longer be confined to the stultifying atmosphere of the schoolhouse, but would instead become a crucial element within the new factory regime itself.

*The Eye of the Needle* was completed in 1972; two weeks prior to his banning order, Turner added a 'postscript' on 12 February 1973, after witnessing a month of apparently 'spontaneous' work stoppages engaged in by thousands of African workers across the industrial sprawl of Durban. Alienated from their tribal roots and customs, yet poorly integrated into urban

industrial life, Turner maintained that the city's African workers 'resemble what has been described by sociologists as a mass society' of atomized individuals, with few institutions of social solidarity or integration (Turner 2015:155). In Turner's view, however, the strikes suggested that the factory might serve as just such a place. Moreover, he judged that the 'relative deprivation' experienced by urbanised Africans now enmeshed in a consumer economy would lead to new expressions of grievances—as indeed, Turner no doubt had witnessed in Durban as he prepared the 'postscript' in January 1973. In the absence of any effective political organisation, Turner noted, 'there is only one sphere in which Africans do have potential power'—the economy (Turner 2015:158-59). Grouped together in factories, African workers could find common cause and, through industrial action, collectively challenge their conditions of labour and life. Of course, as Turner wrote these words, that was exactly what was occurring all around him in the industrial enclaves of Durban a few miles from his study. This experience, he correctly surmised, could 'lead [Black workers] to an awareness of their potential power and the virtues of solidarity' (Turner 2015: 160).

The following decade witnessed the efforts of Black workers and their white allies—many of them former students of Turner—to build democratic trade unions (Friedman 2011; Friedman 1987; Moss 2014; Copelyn 2016), crystallizing in the formation of FOSATU in 1979. That same year saw the publication of the report of the apartheid government's Wiehahn Commission, which recommended official recognition of non-racial trade unions and the incorporation of African workers into South Africa's industrial relations machinery for the first time (Lichtenstein 2015). At the time, union activists divided over whether this represented an opportunity for further struggle or a suffocating embrace. By then, Turner's banning had been followed by his 1978 assassination. Yet in *The Eye of the Needle*, anticipating that employers

might respond to shop floor upheaval by introducing a 'human relations' approach to their heretofore dictatorial managerial practices, Turner had observed that such a move would fail to displace the profit motive with an authentic emphasis on workplace satisfaction. 'Personnel management,' he remarked drily, 'merely involves oiling the workers, just as one oils a machine,' with the ultimate goal of improved workplace efficiency. The result would offer little more to workers than 'persuad[ing] them to cooperate more willingly in their own exploitation' (Turner 2015: 19-20). In his introduction to the 1980 edition of Turner's manifesto, Morphet observed that 'in arguing for the establishment of black unions it had not been Turner's purpose to aid the regulation of the labour-capital conflict..., but to help create a truly rational system of production, in which labour controlled capital.' Nevertheless, he acknowledged that for Turner the opening presented by Wiehahn might have 'represented an important concession of power.' At the same time, Morphet concluded, the new labour relations dispensation ushered in by Wiehahn 'laid an even urgent responsibility upon the unions to clarify and work towards genuinely rational; social production' (Morphet 1980: xxvi).

Have the unions met that urgent responsibility since that moment? Over the ensuing decades we have witnessed the formation of COSATU, the release of Mandela and the unbanning of the banned organisations, the end of apartheid, and the ascendance of the tripartite alliance with organised labour as a central partner in post-apartheid governance. Yet many observers contend that the promise of the 'Durban Moment' and Rick Turner's transcendent vision of participatory workplace democracy have been squandered. With only a few exceptions the COSATU unions, it seems, have fallen into just the sort of bureaucratic collaboration with employers and alienation from their members that Turner and his students cautioned against (Buhlungu 2010). Above all, like a flash of lightning the tragic events at Marikana in August

2012 illuminated the distance travelled. There the once heroic National Union of Mineworkers ignored the pleas of Lonmin's platinum miners, preferring instead to feather the nest of a leadership increasingly remote from the lives of the workers' it claimed to represent. Into the breach stepped democratically organized and autonomous 'worker committees', directly representative bodies empowered to speak to management in the name of all the workers—Sartre's 'groupe en fusion'—and more than a little reminiscent of the spontaneous collectivities thrown up during the Durban Strikes nearly forty years before (Sinwell and Mbatha 2016). These workers found themselves dismissed by the union, the company, and the state alike as deluded by witchcraft, unrealistic and anti-modern in their demands, and met with a hail of bullets, once again denied 'control of their destiny' (Alexander et. al. 2013; Marinovich: 2016; Lichtenstein 2012).

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1. Keniston 2014, is the only full-length biography of Turner to date, although Morphet 1980 offers a great deal of useful information.
  2. The fullest account of his political activities, no doubt provided by the Special Branch, can be found in Republic of South Africa, *Fourth Interim Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Certain Organisations*, RP33/1974, Annexure M, 552-564.
  3. His visit to Yugoslavia came out in his testimony before the *Commission of Inquiry into Certain Organisations*, vol. 4, Annexure M, p. 552.
  4. Nash (2009:169) attributes this essay to Turner.
  5. In his acknowledgements in the study, Maré slyly noted the banned Turner's role in 'initiating' the pamphlet, even while stating that 'we regret that we are not permitted to associate his name with this publication' (IIE 1974:2).
  6. These included 'The Workers' Organisation,' 'The Worker in Society,' 'The Worker in the Factory,' and 'The Workers' Negotiation Handbook.'