

Editorial

Richard Turner was, and arguably remains, the most brilliant, original and intellectually arresting South African philosopher of the post Second World War era, if not of all time. The prematurity and nature of his assassination, conjoined to the difficulty in accessing much of his later work, also renders him one of the potentially and tragically most ‘forgotten’ figures in South Africa’s intellectual history. Turner’s clarity of mind, precision in the articulation of his ideas and the punctiliousness of his research and scholarship were peerless. His intellectual range was extraordinary—covering as diverse (yet in the way he engaged with them) intertwined, topics such as the history of European colonial expansion and its impact on South Africa, the philosophical itinerary of dialectical reason from Rousseau to the thinkers of the Frankfurt School and the fundamental philosophical flaws in the writings of Louis Althusser. At the moment of his death by gunshot, he was exactly halfway through reading – with every page read annotated – the Habermas-Luhmann debates. Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*, along with the writings of Dummett on Frege, were next in the lineup of books to be read.

I mention this because, while Turner was a *political* philosopher, his most important writings remain relatively unknown. This is because Turner’s output was interrupted by a terrible ‘caesura’ – namely his banning in early 1973 by the infamous South African Minister of Justice, Mr. Jimmy Kruger, and the inscrutable and unaccountable ‘state security apparatus’. This banning order precluded him from publishing, or preparing for publication, any written work. It also effectively reduced his life to one of ‘house arrest’: he could not leave the magisterial district of Durban, he was not permitted to be in the company of more than one person at a time and he could not teach or supervise the thesis work of students. He was barred from entering the premises of centres of learning and instruction. Mr. Kruger, who infamously said that the death in custody of the Black Consciousness leader, Steve Biko left him ‘cold’, saw Turner ‘the most dangerous man in South Africa’. These very words were said to the then German Ambassador, who pleaded with Mr. Kruger to permit Turner to take up a Humboldt Scholarship in Germany. (Turner was prohibited by his banning order from leaving the country.)

Under these circumstances, Turner repaired to a life of intensive scholarship and writing, depending on the help of friends – myself included – to secure material for him, and to hide ‘Samizdat’ versions of his many pre-publication drafts. These writings included, among much else, his unpublished treatises



on Rousseau and Kant, his 'Notes' on the history of dialectical reason and his critique of the then fashionable Louis Althusser. It can, however, now safely be said that he very skillfully – with the aid of his partner and wife, Foszia Fisher and the willing connivance of his close friends – regularly broke many of the restrictive terms of his awful banning order.

Indeed, in the darkness of that time, there were many moments of jollity and fun. Permit me one anecdote: Richard Turner spoke fluent French, having studied under Jean Wahl in Paris, where he completed his doctorate. But he wanted to read Kant, Hegel, Marx and Adorno (among many others), in the original German. So every Friday evening he and Foszia came for German lessons from my wife, a specialist in German philology, with a doctorate from the University of Freiburg. Of course we always set a special table where, in the event of a police raid, it could be claimed that he was eating alone! One night, in the middle of his German lesson, there was the unmistakable banging on the door by the Security Police. Naturally, I had no choice but to let them in. The lead officer, a Warrant Officer King, demanded to know where Dr. Turner was. I dutifully directed him to the lounge, where Turner was indeed alone with my wife poring through his German exercises! 'Why do you come here every Friday evening, Dr. Turner?' demanded the Officer. 'To learn German' replied Richard Turner. 'Why do you want to learn German?' continued Officer King. 'To read Hegel in the original' replied Turner. 'Ah' said the Officer 'all you people who read Hegel – you REALLY want to read Marx, no?' Turner responded that he was indeed interested in Hegelian idealism, and asked Officer King if he'd ever read Hegel. 'No', replied King, 'but I have book by him on my shelf – it's very difficult – I tried reading some footnotes, but I couldn't understand them'. Soon Turner was in dialogue with the Officer (having explained to him that the latter's suggestion that Turner take a Berlitz School course, rather than learn at the feet of a real expert and university lecturer, was not appropriate to his needs). That was Turner's style: he brought philosophical – indeed classically 'Socratic' – methods into all his encounters with people of whatever stripe or political orientation. Warrant Officer King, I sensed, left as a somewhat different man.

When I say that Turner was a *political* philosopher, I mean this in a double-barreled way. Much, though not all, of his philosophical work was focused on how to address the social, political and economic ills that afflicted modern capitalist societies in general, and South Africa in particular. But his life as a philosopher is not to be understood as that of the holder of an academic post who publishes critiques of society in prestigious journals, writes books and enjoys the security of institutional tenure. While exemplary in the conventional 'academic' sense of a philosopher, Turner was also a radical activist. As the articles in this issue note, he engaged in critiques of the 'white liberalism' of the time, engaged in constructive and mutually respectful exchanges with Steve Biko and Black Consciousness thinkers. and played a pivotal role in generating the dynamism that got the 'new trade union' movement underway in the context of the Durban strikes of 1973. He played a key part too in the

founding of civic organisations of several stripes. His impact on a generation of students – and colleagues – was profound.

I return briefly to the anecdote: it reveals something often missed in reflections on Turner. Richard Turner was not just a ‘situated’, politically engaged, philosopher. He was also a profoundly *syncretic* thinker. That is why he could not join the Communist Party. That is why he could engage a Security Branch Officer in courteous dialogue. That is why Anthony Egan is correct to identify his empathetic engagement with SPROCAS, a Christian anti-Apartheid project – an engagement which issued in the writing of *The Eye of the Needle*. I smuggled the subsequent, extended, version with the Postscript, out of the country, via Amsterdam to Paris from where it went to the United States of America to be published by Orbis books – an undertaking on the part of a Christian anti-Apartheid scholar. It was also no accident that the then great liberal Catholic theologian, Archbishop Desmond Hurley, was one of the keynote speakers at Turner’s funeral. Similarly, in his conversion to Islam to marry Foszia, Turner took the conversion seriously. (He was not allowed to marry her under secular South African Apartheid era law). He studied the Koran deeply, read many works on Islam including the vast study of Mohammed written by Maxime Rodinson. He confided in me that he found enough in the Koran to make his conversion possible.

The key point that I am making is that Turner cannot easily be ‘classified’: his ideas evolved in ongoing encounters with other, often diverse and divergent strains of thought. He was happy to draw on arguments and thinkers that were ‘outside’ of any one accepted canon. He liked much of what John Stuart Mill argued in *On Liberty*, he drew on sociological methodology for the empirical work that he guided on matters such as class action and white perceptions of the Durban Strikes.

In this ‘openness’ to thought and argument, and to carefully assayed evidence, Turner stands as an example of what is needed more than ever, not only – though perhaps especially – in South Africa, but globally. He was a thinker of genuinely global stature. His radicalism was *real* radicalism: it was driven by a desire to understand, and to get to the very roots of a matter. But he never lost sight of a qualified version of Marx’s famous 11th Thesis on Feuerbach.

I shan’t summarise the articles in this edition. They speak eloquently for themselves and advert to many of the critical themes in what is relatively well known about his role in wanting to foster the transformation of South Africa into a non-racial, libertarian-socialist, humane and just society. What I do hope that this edition will do is spur a younger generation of scholars not only to read *The Eye of the Needle*, but to begin to explore his post-banning writings, housed in the Library of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. There is a danger that Turner’s remarkable life and achievements come, in some ‘established’ account, to be seen as ‘frozen’ in what he accomplished before his 1973 banning.

Raphael de Kadt
On Behalf of the Editors

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