

## Review

### Billy Keniston (2013) *Choosing to be Free: the life story of Rick Turner*. Auckland Park: Jacana

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It is perhaps a reflection of our times of disillusionment with the current political parties that we have begun to see the emergence of autobiographies that reflect critically on the post-apartheid period: Frank Chikane, Jay Naidoo, Ronnie Kasrils, Ben Turok, all part of the post-apartheid political order, now deeply critical of its failures and re-discovering their radical roots. These ‘post-power radicals’ lament the loss of vision, the self-seeking nature and widespread corruption that characterises contemporary South African politics.

Billy Keniston’s *Choosing to be free: the life story of Rick Turner* takes us back further in time to the roots of the internal democratic movement, to the so-called Durban moment, that brought together the two social movements that were to define anti-apartheid resistance in the seventies, Black Consciousness and the labour movement. These were heady times, the high-point of apartheid; before the decade was over both leading intellectuals of these movements, Steve Biko and Richard Turner, were dead, killed at the hands of the apartheid police.

Keniston, an American with roots in the anarchist movement, has evocatively captured the life story of Turner. Born in 1941 in Cape Town of British immigrant parents, Turner followed a familiar trajectory of a middle class English-speaking white boy; early childhood on a farm outside Stellenbosch, loved cricket, schooled at St George’s Grammar School and eventually graduating from the University of Cape Town (UCT) with a BA degree. The early 1960s was a time of turmoil for a left-leaning student at UCT: disillusioned liberals were beginning to embrace radical ideas and a small group, the African Resistance Movement (ARM), initiated a campaign of sabotage.

Although Turner was friendly with some ARM members, he eschewed both the ARM and the Oxbridge path of many of his peers, and decided to study at the Sorbonne in Paris. This was to prove a turning point in his life as it was here that he was able to deepen his interest in the work of Jean Paul Sartre, and ‘Sartre’s notions of human freedom, of the essential capacity to choose one’s values and behaviours’ (29).

Turner, now very much a product of the emerging European New Left with its destalinised Marxism and deep commitment to participatory democracy, returned home in 1966 to the city of his birth. It was a time of left pessimism and Turner found a ready audience on the fringes of the student left at UCT and Stellenbosch. But it was for Turner a time of wandering and exploration, that ended at the University of Natal in 1970. ‘There’, Keniston writes, ‘he would truly thrive, intellectually, politically and emotionally, and come into his own’ (56).

Turner arrived in Durban to teach politics at a time when a new generation of radical white students was emerging. These students, such as Gerry Maré, Halton Cheadle, Karel Tip, and Charles Nupen, were the brightest of their generation and became a crucial constituency for Turner’s ideas. The point of departure in Turner’s radicalism was his critique of white liberals, the dominant ideology at the so-called liberal universities at the time. White liberals, Turner argued, were ‘white first, and liberal second’. By this, Keniston writes, ‘he meant that their capacity to envision any fundamental change to their way of life or their values was profoundly limited and compromised by their daily participation in a racist social, political and economic system’ (63).

Turner was to go beyond a critique of white liberals, a critique he shared with Steve Biko, to find a role for the emerging white radical. Keniston correctly describes Turner as ‘a teacher; this was his profession and his passion’ (77). But the crucial point about his radical Freirean pedagogy, as Halton Cheadle suggests, was to help ‘us to make an important shift, away from just a generalised opposition to apartheid and increasingly towards a class-based way of seeing the world’ (85). As Dan O’Meara, a junior lecturer with Turner at the time, remarks, “‘Rick offered us this idea that it is only by working with black workers that whites can effect change’” (123)

Turner’s most important contribution in the realm of ideas was his powerful series of essays, *The Eye of the Needle: towards a participatory democracy in South Africa*, published in 1972. The central idea in this short book was ‘the necessity of utopian thinking, the need for activists to have

an alternative vision of what the world could look like. But it was more than a long term vision of ‘a decentralised and cooperative economic and political structure, in which hierarchy is obliterated as much as possible and autonomy is maximised’ (xi). For Turner it was also an argument for incremental reform as a step in the process of transformation.

It is on the point of strategy that I find myself uncomfortable with Keniston’s portrayal of Turner. Keniston draws very effectively on interviews with a number of people who were close to Turner but in the end he sees Turner very much through a particular lens, the New Left of the 1960s and with a quasi-anarchist eye. Keniston implies that Turner would have strongly disapproved of the direction the movement took after he was assassinated on January 8, 1978. He denies any continuation of the Turner legacy into the present.

Writing a biography is an immensely difficult task; more so when you have to rely on what others say about your subject. I think Keniston has done a good job, especially in bringing to life Turner’s early life; but the job is only half done.

I arrived in Durban in late February 1973, as the strikes were ending, and was driven shortly afterwards to Turner’s home in the suburb of Bellair. He had been banned for five years the week before. We spent the rest of the day talking; Turner said we needed to set up an institute for worker education to educate workers into what a trade union is. We should also create a journal to record worker struggles and analyse the emerging worker movement. The first, the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE) was launched a few months later; the second, the *South African Labour Bulletin* (SALB) published its first edition in April 1974, and still continues as a regular publication 40 years later.

I worked closely with Turner and his wife Foszia Fisher from February 1973 until December 1975 in the IIE and the SALB. My impression is that the mass strikes of 1973 profoundly influenced the focus of Turner’s work. With a devoted and very effective partnership with Foszia Fisher, Turner went beyond his early writings into the difficult task of building a democratic labour movement. In part he was ‘educated’ by his students (see the comment by Cheadle, page 119) to engage more directly with organisational issue, but he also had a clear understanding that it was through collective organisation, especially trade unions, that black people could exercise some control over their lives and influence the direction of change in South Africa.

Keniston fails to understand this shift in Turner’s thinking. Instead,

Keniston suggests that Turner's account of the Durban strikes, especially where he calls on employers and the apartheid government to legalise and recognise trade unions, 'points to a weak link between Turner's theoretical writing on workers' self management and his strategic thinking in the present tense' (128). Keniston then goes on to prescribe to Turner what he should have done: 'It is not the role of radical opponents of an economic system to tell the rulers of that system how they can more rationally or peacefully exploit and oppress the population. Nonetheless, in making the case for the legal recognition of African trade unions, Turner did just that' (128).

Quite the opposite: Turner was exploiting the contradictions inherent in the apartheid workplace and, in the process, winning space for democratic worker organisation. Given the nature of the apartheid workplace and the suppression of African worker leaders, Turner's argument for legal recognition made strategic sense. As part of his commitment to building organisation, Turner spent the first three years after his banning deeply involved in research and writing on workers and trade unions.

The first publication of the IIE published in 1974 and written largely by Turner with the assistance of Gerhard Maré and others, *The Durban Strikes 1973* was to become the first sociological study of the new type of industrial worker, the semi-skilled machine operator, setting a new research agenda for labour studies. In the concluding chapter of this book, Turner makes the case for the recognition of trade unions for African workers. Indeed this chapter was to become the first edition (Volume One, Number One) of the newly launched *South African Labour Bulletin*. Turner went on to write many of the articles, under a pseudonym, in the first two volumes of the *SALB*.

But his central pre-occupation in 1973 and 1974 was writing the Handbooks for the IIE correspondence course on labour studies.<sup>1</sup> The first Handbook, the *Workers Organisation*, analyses the transformation of capitalism, the rise of trade unions, the dangers of bureaucratisation and corruption, the necessity of democracy and the need for workers to be knowledgeable about their organisation. The aim was to turn the notion of agency into a practical handbook on 'the critical relationship between government and internal union democracy. A central proposition in the book *Workers Organisation*, was the concept of worker control, which 'locates decision making at the level of the shop floor worker, thereby pre-empting the possibility of elected leaders acting without engaging the base' (Lambert 2010:30).

Participatory democracy, the Handbook suggests, does not depend so

much on structures, but on leaders who promote a culture of participation. The role of a leader 'is to participate in the workers' struggle ... it is not a career or a way of getting rich ... they must expect to live at the same standard of living as their fellow workers' (cited in Lambert 2010). An autocrat is defined as 'somebody who is always telling people what to do, and will never listen to criticism from other people ... an autocratic leader will always think he/she knows best, and can learn nothing from the workers or anybody else' (cited in Lambert 2010). A bureaucratic approach emerges 'when the union moves out of the factory and into an office'. As a consequence, full time officials believe that they run the union, not the workers. Everything is left to the officials who end up 'spending more time having tea with the management than talking to the workers' (cited in Lambert 2010).

As can be seen from these radical notions of a union, calling for their recognition was no 'weak link' in Turner's thought: it was at the centre of how he saw his vision being progressively realised. In the last chapter of the *Durban Strikes 1973*, Turner writes that 'trade unions, with the right to organise freely, and the use of the strike weapon as a last resort, organised on democratic lines, and possessing their own sanctions over members, are the precondition for stable industrial relations' (IIE 1974:120).

This approach to strategy, what could be called radical or structural reform, was at the centre of Turner's contribution to social change. Keniston is right to argue that Turner became isolated after 1975 from the activists in the labour and student movement, but this was in some sense inevitable and was, after all, the purpose of the banning order. Keniston is also right to point to the rift that emerged between those, such as John Copelyn and Alec Erwin, who believed 'education should be subordinate to organisation' (interview with Copelyn cited in Keniston (184)) and those, such as Turner and Fisher, who had a broader conception of worker education.

But the predominantly middle class white leaders of this emerging movement were distanced from the black working class they claimed to serve. The pitfalls of this new political culture was its ignorance of the existing national political tradition (Webster and Lambert 2013). These 'hidden voices' were an essential part of the Durban moment and their determination to embed working class interests in the national movement was eventually rewarded with the foundation of COSATU in 1985. But the shop floor tradition, committed to translating participatory democracy into strong shop floor structures, had in no sense disappeared. The strategic compromise between the national democratic tradition and the shop floor

tradition was to merge into COSATU, where an autonomous trade union movement was recognised, with the ANC as the hegemonic force. It seemed for a moment in the mid-1980s through to the early-1990s as if the vexed labour question had been resolved through an equal partnership between COSATU and the ANC.

But this was not to be. The new political elite that emerged dominant in the new South Africa remained uncomfortable with an independent union movement. Labour stands now at the crossroads. The transformation of work from the standard employment relationship to growing precariousness, short-term, part-time and casual work, has transformed the conditions under which labour historically built its power. The challenge for labour is to develop new ways of organising, new sources of power and above all an alternative to the dominant regime of neoliberal accumulation.

In facing this challenge Keniston's account of the life story of Richard Turner has come at an opportune time. It forces us to reflect on the voices of the early-1970s and the clear vision that Turner developed that inspired a new generation of radicals. But in drawing lessons from the past, it is important that we capture the full picture of Turner's legacy, namely, that movements are not only the result of individuals (although they are crucial); it takes a network of people dedicated to a cause to develop a movement. The translation of the IIE Handbooks into Zulu, for example, was done by Bhekisesa Nxasana, a union-made intellectual, who was a vital 'hidden voice' in the Durban moment (Webster and Lambert, 2013:8-9).

Turner's contribution was to develop an alternative vision and conceptualise the importance of using power in a strategic way. As the strategy developed, firstly amongst his students, and then into the embryonic labour movement, it gathered a wider network of supporters. The introduction of the shop steward committee and the recognition agreement in factories in Durban at that time by young organisers such as David Hemson, Halton Cheadle, Omar Badsha, and Rob Lambert, was the key institutional innovation through which shop floor power was built. On the shop floor, unions could develop a strong factory-based leadership, less prominent than head office activists, and closely tied to their members. With the strong backing of their members, factory leaders had the power to push concessions from management, which not only created space for further advances, but also won concrete improvements in workers conditions thereby reassuring them of the efficacy of direct action.

In its emphasis on gradualism, flexibility and compromise with employers

and the state, the strategy stood in marked contrast to the armed struggle being waged by the African National Congress, which aimed at the state's overthrow. In place of a vanguard movement to smash the state, the unions sought to build a broad movement from below based on strong factory structures, held together through practices of democratic accountability. This is, I believe, is a central part of the legacy of Richard Turner.

His banning was testimony to the impact he was making, especially amongst students and progressive academics. The banning forced Turner to develop effective innovative strategies to continue his work. His assassination, the apartheid police decided, was the only way of ensuring that he was silenced, permanently.

Billy Keniston's book is the first full-length biography of Richard Turner. It is a highly readable and engaging account of this courageous and brilliant political philosopher. His assassination by the Durban security police at the age of 36 was a tragic blow to his family, friends, and colleagues in the internal democratic movement. His logical and rational mind is sadly missed as we begin again to explore alternatives to neo-liberal capitalism. *Choosing to be Free: the life story of Rick Turner*, eloquently reminds us of the rich past of the left tradition in South Africa and Turner's contribution to the socialist democracy that South Africa could become.

## Note

1. It was established as a correspondence course as Turner was not allowed to teach. Instead he wrote the four IIE Handbooks: *The Workers Organisation*, *The Worker in the Factory*, *The Worker and the Law*, and *The Worker and the Economy*. The exercises in the Handbooks were marked by Turner and Bhekisena Nxasana. The ideas in the Handbooks were conveyed by other members of the IIE Working Committee at weekend seminars.

## References

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- Lambert, R (2010) 'The Durban moment and the new labour internationalism', *Transformation* 72/73.
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