

**Keniston, B. (2013). *Choosing to be Free: The Life Story of Rick Turner*. Johannesburg. Jacana. (276pp.; R220)**

Reviewed by **Richard Pithouse**

Rick Turner, a philosopher and a committed and effective radical, was assassinated in Durban, South Africa, in January 1978. Turner had, along with Steve Biko who was murdered in police custody in September 1977, been a leading figure in what came to be known as “the Durban Moment”. The phrase, which was first coined by Tony Morphet (1990), refers to a period in the early 1970s in which Durban became a site of significant political innovation in the struggle against apartheid, innovation that was conceptualised and organised outside of the strictures of the exiled African National Congress (ANC) and South African Communist Party (SACP). Morphet argued that “the Durban Moment” enabled a “structural shift in the received intellectual patterns of the social world” (1990, pp. 92-3). It also had enduring political consequences of real significance (Macqueen, 2014; Webster, 1993).

The Durban Moment had direct links to the student rebellion that had leapt from city to city - from Prague to Paris to Cape Town and Mexico City – in 1968, as well as the black power moment in the United States and anti-colonial struggles elsewhere in Africa. Like the rebellions in 1968 the Durban Moment was closely linked to the university. Biko was a medical student at what was then the University of Natal while Turner was employed in the politics department<sup>1</sup> in the same university. The bulk of the people that cohered around these two charismatic men were students.

Biko and Turner, who had a warm personal relationship, were both animated by the kind of charisma that enables others to come to voice and action as autonomous personalities. Turner is remembered as a gifted teacher who used Socratic methods to encourage his students to come to their own conclusions (Greaves, 1987; Macqueen, 2014).

In striking contrast to modes of leftism in which radical postures are implicitly taken as an end in themselves, even when they are unable to attain any sort of meaningful political efficacy, Biko and Turner were both highly effective political actors. Biko was a key protagonist in the emergence of the black consciousness movement, an event of real political weight and consequence (Gibson 2011; Mangcu, 2012), and Turner was an important protagonist in the alliance between radical students and workers that produced a powerful black

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<sup>1</sup> With important exceptions in some of the historically black universities academic philosophy in South African universities has often taken a form that is narrowly analytic and far removed from any concern to advance a philosophy of praxis. Radical ideas have often fared much better in history and sociology departments (and on occasion in anthropology and literature too), and where radical philosophy is engaged in the academy it has and remains more likely to be in a politics department than a philosophy department.

trade union movement that played a central role in bringing down apartheid (Friedman, 2014; Webster, 1993).

Thinkers like W.E.B. du Bois, Aimé Césaire, Julius Nyerere and Frantz Fanon were central to the philosophical foundations of the young black intellectuals that made the black consciousness movement (More, 2014). For the young radicals that cohered around Turner, many although certainly not all of them white, Western Marxism (Gramsci, Marcuse, etc.) was central (Nash, 1990). But there were significant overlaps in the intellectual influences of the circles around Biko and Turner. Jean-Paul Sartre was a primary philosophical influence for Turner (Fluxman & Vale, 2004; Greaves, 1987; Macqueen, 2014) and an important thinker for Biko and other intellectuals in the black consciousness milieu (More, 2014). In a profoundly unfree society the form of radicalism at the heart of the Durban Moment was characterised by a choice, an immediate choice, to assert freedom against oppression. Paulo Freire was another thinker whose work was pivotal to both of the political projects that made the Durban Moment. The Freirean aspect meant that, at least in principle, there was a shared commitment to dialogical modes of engagement with people outside of the university based on an aspiration to mutuality and reciprocity. This was in direct contrast to various forms of leftism that, then as now, were rooted in the idea that an enlightened vanguard would bring politics to the people who, at best, were capable of “spontaneous” protest in an almost biological response to deprivation or repression.

The Durban Moment was a brief opening, a period of just a few years, that was swiftly crushed by state repression following which authoritarian forms of leftism reclaimed some of the political space that had been opened by more participatory and democratic modes of militancy. Forty years later, with the ANC having turned to outright repression to contain popular dissent and, with the partial exception of Julius Malema’s Economic Freedom Fighters, authoritarian modes of leftism unable to sustain productive connections with escalating popular protest, there is growing interest in the Durban Moment and in Turner’s commitment to participatory democracy (Turner 1972; cf. Fluxman & Vale, 2004).

There are some important academic articles and theses on the Durban Moment and on Turner’s life and thought. But Keniston’s biography of Turner is the first book length examination of the Durban Moment from the vantage point of the present. Xolela Mangcu’s 2012 biography of Biko is largely grounded in Biko’s life in the Eastern Cape and doesn’t offer a full illumination of Biko’s life in Durban. Keniston’s book is also the first book length study of Turner.

Keniston’s book has often been read, and on occasion reviewed (e.g. Egan, 2013), together with Beverley Naidoo’s superb and beautifully written 2012 biography of Neil Aggett, a trade unionist who died in police custody in 1982, as well as, more recently, Glen Moss’s valuable contribution, *The New Radicals* (2013). Naidoo and Moss both offer important accounts of the white left in Johannesburg that, although rooted in the student movement, found its political vocation in the trade union movement. Both books enable us to think the

Durban Moment as an event with national consequences. But the comparisons with the better written and more politically sophisticated books by Naidoo and Moss do not flatter Keniston's work. In Keniston's introduction and conclusion his attempts to reach towards poetic insight fall rather flat. Moreover the author is not able to sustain a consistent fidelity to the democratic radicalism that he wishes to affirm.

Nonetheless a biography of Turner is certainly a welcome event and for those unfamiliar with Turner's life the book does provide a useful account of its subject's life and political work. Keniston does not aim to provide a sustained account or exploration of Turner's philosophical work and so criticism of the book on the grounds of this absence is unfair.

Unusually for a biography much of this book is made up of a collage of interviews, long quotes and documents. This can be a lazy way of working that absolves the writer of taking on the sort of responsibility to his or her subject that Naidoo's recent book on Neil Aggett achieves with luminous grace. But in this case collage seems to work. A clear picture of Turner emerges and as the book reaches its climax the narrative that emerges from the collage of materials attains a real emotional power. Perhaps there is something to be said for a method in which the author edits, or perhaps even curates, more than writes. Certainly this method does allow a variety of voices to emerge.

But of course the editor or curator is not absolved of the political responsibility for making choices about what is included, and how. Keniston's primary political project is to bring out the stakes in the difference between democratic and authoritarian modes of leftism and to place Turner firmly in the democratic camp. Early in the book he quotes Sartre describing the French Communist Party as "putrid" and noting, that "we were never sure that they weren't in the process of slandering us somewhere" (2013, p.31). Keniston develops a sustained critique of what one of his interviewees calls "gutter Marxism" (2013, p.133) and what he calls the "cold", "mechanistic" and "crudely rational" Marxism of Stalinism and Leninism that, in his estimation, is "merely a tool to organise large masses of people – to seize and exercise power" (2013, pp.232-234).

In his generally positive review of Keniston's book Eddie Webster, in his youth a protagonist in "the Durban Moment", offers two critiques. The first is Keniston's claim that Turner's support for the official registration of black trade unions was an instance of clear contradiction between Turner's political ideas and his practices. Webster argues that, on the contrary, this position made perfect strategic sense as "Turner was exploiting the contradictions inherent in the apartheid workplace and, in the process, winning space for democratic worker organisation" (2014, p. 149; cf. Friedman, 1985). Elsewhere in the book Keniston demonstrates some awareness that abstract ideas about radical politics do not always fit well with actually existing political realities, including actually existing forms of solidarity and organisation. He quotes a former student radical explaining that when the idea of setting up a formal organisation was first proposed in a meeting between workers and students it turned out, to

the surprise of the students, that the workers' first priority for the new organisation was that it should provide funeral benefits. But Keniston's position on the registration question seems both ahistorical and to confuse the easy assertion of abstract political principle outside of any historical or organisational context with the altogether more difficult work of making the strategic choices required to sustain actually existing forms of mass mobilisation under a repressive state.

Webster's second critique of Keniston's book is perhaps more interesting. He argues that the new political culture that emerged in Durban around Turner's charisma had a serious weakness, one that Keniston doesn't address – an "ignorance of the existing national political tradition" (2014, p. 150). On two recent occasions Webster, speaking at Rhodes University, has recalled a survey run by white radicals in Durban in the 70s with the aim of determining who black workers considered to be their leaders which threw up a name (Moses Mabhida – a Communist who had been a leading activist in Durban in the 1950s) that was unfamiliar to the white left. Webster recalls that the response of Alec Erwin, once seen as something of a guru in some left circles in Durban, was not to take seriously his alienation from popular politics but, rather, to attempt to reinscribe his authority by declaring that the survey had to be fraudulent. This is a telling anecdote with regard to a city, and indeed a country, where more than forty years later there are still people on the middle class left, often but not always white, in which even rigorously researched accounts of organisational and intellectual political practices in a popular sphere beyond the reach of the middle class left continue to be dismissed, on an *a priori* basis, as romantic or even fraudulent.

Keniston makes an important point when he insists, in the conclusion to his book, that "the ultimate erasure of Turner's ideas is to insist that they have been assimilated into the movements after his death" (2013, p. 234). The same point could be made with regard to Biko. But his concluding remark, that today the problem is that "the organisations of the liberation struggle have gained so much power that nothing much else has room to breathe" (2013, p.234) erases both the real struggles that have been waged from below, and in recent years with enough force to provoke a wave of assassinations of grassroots activists in Durban, and the undeniable fact that the authoritarian left has often been part of, rather than opposed to, the elite power bloc that has sought to expel these struggles from the domain of the political.

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