Moral Decay and Social Reconstruction
Richard Turner and Radical Reform*

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In 1972 Richard Turner published a remarkable book, *The Eye of the Needle: Towards Participatory Democracy in South Africa.* In this book he stressed the capacity of people to change the world in which they lived while at the same time providing them with a vision of a future South Africa based on participatory democracy. Most importantly, Turner placed heavy emphasis on the significance of black workers in the economy. He believed that it was through collective organization, especially trade unions, that black people could exercise some control over their lives and influence the direction of change in South Africa.

From 1972 he began to organize, with student activists, a programme of action research in which groups of students would enter industrial plants to gather information from workers on wages and work conditions in the factories in and around Durban.

In January 1973 over 100,000 workers went out on strike in the Durban-Pinetown area, breaking a decade of industrial acquiescence. A month later Turner was banned under the Suppression of Communism Act for five years. In the midst of this turmoil he began to write a book on these historic strikes. It 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 the social sciences in South Africa.

These were heady days when university-based intellectuals distributed pamphlets at factory gates at 6.00 a.m. in the morning, strategized with activists during the day and discussed Hegel’s relationship to Marx late into the night. In his 1990 Richard Turner Memorial Lecture Tony Morphet spoke about this period – from 1970 to 1974 – as the Durban moment. As formal evidence he identified four intellectual projects:

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Richard Turner’s philosophical work;

Steve Biko’s attempt to formulate the political discourse and practical programmes of Black Consciousness;

Dunbar Moodie’s reinterpretation of Afrikaner nationalism;

Mike Kirkwood’s reinterpretation of South African literature.

I would like today to identify a fifth - class theory and the new labour studies. At the core of Turner’s theory of South African society was the concept of social class and the exploitation of black labour. It was not race, he would say to Steve Biko, that explains the exploitation of the black worker, but the capitalist system. Do not let your Blackness blind yourself to the fact that your power lies in the unorganized working class, he would say to the advocates of Black Consciousness.

In this lecture I want to link this neglected but crucial aspect of the Durban moment with the present and with our future. I want to do this by focusing on the contribution of Richard Turner to our understanding of the central challenge facing our country in the nineties – moral decay and social reconstruction. I argue that, while outlining a radical vision, Turner provided activists with a strategic approach to power. This approach – what I will call radical reform – provides a strategy for tackling the massive task of reconstruction in the nineties.

I seek to show this by advancing three propositions. Firstly, that our country is faced increasingly by moral decay and social disintegration. Secondly, that Turner’s political writings combined a moral vision with a strategic approach to power and that the crucible for this approach was the Durban moment. Thirdly, that the innovations introduced during this period contributed in important ways to the rise and rapid growth of the labour movement in the eighties and that radical reform is likely to provide the basis for reconstruction in the nineties.

The question of corruption has recently been highlighted in the press. In fact the Democratic Party has estimated that the South African taxpayer has been cheated of over R5 billion during the past eighteen months.

Phil van Niekerk, writing recently in The Weekly Mail, is on target when he points to the hypocrisy of the current moral outrage against
corruption. Grand apartheid was one of history’s all-time scams, he writes. He is also right to stress the fact that in a period of recession people may use illegal methods to maintain their ‘culture of privilege’.

But Van Niekerk deals too dismissively with this moral outrage by the South African public. Indeed there may be a need to take the social significance and political function of moral outrage more seriously, especially in relation to our past and to the task of building our future.

Barrington Moore, in his important work *Injustice: the Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt*, has discussed the crucial role of the experience of moral outrage for the social and political possibility of resistance. Moore holds that all societies, however unequal and oppressive, involve a negotiated set of mutual obligations implicitly binding rulers and subjects together, so that there are limits to what both dominant and subordinate groups can and should do. Violations of this implicit contract may vary from case to case but always involve a basic denial of reciprocity, and it is this which arouses moral outrage and a sense of injustice, leading to resistance and revolt.

Underpinning Barrington Moore’s notion of an implicit contract are social institutions – the bedrock of society – such as the family, the school, the church, and the voluntary organized network of associations that hold society together.

It is these institutions that carry the norms and values of society – that is the rules of conduct which specify appropriate behaviour in a given range of social contexts. These norms, in a stable society, are backed up by strong sanctions, from informal disapproval to physical punishment and even execution.

What is happening in South Africa today is that these institutions are breaking down. This is evident in the explosion of white-collar crime, family breakdown and the alienation and dislocation of black youth. Youngsters in Soweto, for example, declare that teachers who they decide are ‘sell-outs’ deserve to die. A leading banker steals a large sum of money and then explains to the South African public why he feels he has been wronged!

The union movement is not immune to this phenomenon of institutional breakdown. Bobby Marie faced this head-on in an article last year in the *South African Labour Bulletin* when he described the growing gap between leadership and the base inside COSATU. In this article he speaks of the decline of the union local and how these locals are being turned into ‘the passive recipients of the national directives’. More significantly, he points to the decline of the vision that drove union organizers before February 1990 to ‘make enormous personal sacrifices and push the union movement into achievements well beyond the resources available’.
When institutions break down, so do their sanctions. We have seen this in the willingness of the state to release murderers such as Barend Strydom. What impact does this have on our understanding of right and wrong when a man who cold-bloodedly murders eight innocent civilians is released after three years in prison? In situations such as these, social norms lose their hold over individual behaviour. The French sociologist Emile Durkheim had a name for this—
anomie. ¹⁰

Durkheim was writing at the turn of the century when the processes of change were so rapid and intense that they gave rise to major social problems, which he linked to anomie. Traditional moral controls and standards, which used to be supplied by religion, he argued, are largely broken down by modern social development, and this leaves the behaviour of many individuals unregulated.

This is what I believe is happening to institutional life in South Africa today. The social cement that held society together is crumbling and our society is faced by moral decay. Monique Marks, drawing on the concept of anomie and her research into the involvement of youth in Soweto in political violence, writes that:

If traditional authority has broken down, there is even less chance of the youth taking moral direction from parents and teachers . . . Without the presence of somebody which (sic) will give guidance and direction to the youth, responses to events and conditions will continue to be haphazard and disorganised. The expectations of the youth need to be limited . . . there needs to be some authority which can monitor these means and ends and so ensure that boundaries are maintained. ¹¹

What relevance does the work of Richard Turner have to our understanding of this moral crisis?

II

The significance of Turner’s writings is that he successfully combined a radical vision of the future with an argument for the strategic use of power. The first point to make about this vision is that it is a moral vision where the reader is invited to make a choice between capitalist values — where people are treated as things — and Christianity (or participatory democracy) — where society has people as its central value. The second point to make is that his vision of a future South African society was a radical one — there was to be a fundamental redistribution of wealth and power, workers would control industry and agriculture, and the economy would be run along planned lines.
It may be worth noting here that Turner’s vision of participatory democracy was typical of the New Left rather than the Traditional Left. As a result, he looked to workers’ self management in Yugoslavia as the best example of participatory democracy and not to the Soviet Union, which he firmly rejected in the *Eye of the Needle* as a ‘large, inefficient, and undemocratic state bureaucracy’.

However it is in a series of lectures entitled ‘The present as history’ that we see the strategic side of Turner’s thinking. In these lectures he explores the organizational possibilities for change. He makes it clear that he rejects armed struggle as unrealistic and economic sanctions as counter-productive, arguing instead ‘that there is only one sphere in which Africans do have potential power and in which their power potential is in fact growing: this is within the economy’.

It is important to note here that in these lectures Turner explored favourably the possibility of using the institutions of separate development (especially Chief Buthelezi) as a platform through which a link could be made to the potential power of the urban working class and ‘thereby develop a coherent and powerful black political movement in South Africa’. However this suggestion needs to be placed in its context — at this time the ANC from exile had links with Buthelezi and it was only in 1979 that these two national movements — Inkatha and the African National Congress — began to take diametrically opposed paths. Turner’s combination of a radical vision with a strategy of reform was to have a profound impact on the intense debates that took place in the early seventies on economic growth and its relationship to social and political change. These debates had been dominated by the assumption that change in South Africa would either take place through revolution, where there is a sudden shift in the balance of power and the old ruling class is destroyed altogether, or the leadership of the subject group would be co-opted and the status quo would remain. Turner pointed in the direction of an alternative, one in which the subject group is able to challenge the dominant group through the mobilization of an independent power base. Such a power base implies a permanent organization which is able to mobilize its members.

The creation of democratic trade unions, he believed, would lead to a change in the balance of power that would not lead to a revolutionary rupture, but to compromise and radical reform. Durban after the 1973 strikes was to be the crucible for this alternative approach to social change, the labour movement the agent, and Turner’s ex-students and colleagues from the University of Natal the creative implementers.

The project consisted of two parts: the one educational, the other organizational. In May 1974, along with colleagues from the
University of Natal, Turner launched the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE), an ambitious intellectual project that included a correspondence course on labour studies for black workers, a research institute (Charles Simkins was the first employee) and the *South African Labour Bulletin*. Harriet Bolton, Lawrence Schlemmer, John Copelyn, Alec Erwin, Foszia Fisher, Beksise Nxasana, Omar Badsha, Halton Cheadle and Dave Hemson were some of the key figures in this initiative. Gatsha Buthelezi was the Chancellor.17

From its beginning the IIE fell between two potential roles: either to be a resource to build the shop floor leadership of the new unions, or to be an adult education centre with the aim of educating workers in general in union and community leadership. Both tendencies were represented in the IIE and it vacillated between the two until, towards the end of 1975, the union position came out on top and the IIE was brought directly into the educational work of the unions.18

An important part of the educational project was historical: what lessons, the workers wanted to know, can we draw from our own labour traditions? A worker newspaper *Abesebenzi* was launched with a column on popular history by Luli Callinicos — the first exploratory step in what was to become her trilogy, *A People’s History of South Africa*.19

To understand and contribute to this project, a new generation of academics stepped outside the class-room. We began to interview workers and learn about their work and living conditions, as well as their past. Initially such work had a didactic aim, responding to a demand from the new unions for educational material. Articles were solicited by the *South African Labour Bulletin* from academics who took labour seriously. Bonner’s article, for example, on the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) of the twenties was critical of that organization for failing to organize urban African workers and he warned of a vague political populism.20 Social scientists in South Africa, influenced also by the new school of radical historiography emerging in exile at that time, were forced to rethink and to reconceptualize their research programme in a manner very fruitful for the social science project as a whole.21

The second part of the project, the organizational, led to important strategic innovations which profoundly affected trade union development as well as the course of political struggle in South Africa.22 The adoption by these emerging unions of a strategic use of power introduced a new way of operating. Where possible, these unions sank deep roots on the shop floor, transformed as it was by the dramatic economic changes of the sixties and seventies. The introduction of the shop steward committee and the recognition agreement in factories in Durban at this time 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.

There were two components to the union’s strategic use of power:

1. Democratic processes to win voluntary consent from members for action and restraint when necessary;

2. Tactical flexibility, which included a capacity to distinguish principles from tactics, and to choose those tactics most likely to succeed, including negotiation and compromise. These strategies, in the new economic conditions of the seventies, facilitated the growth of the trade union movement, ultimately resulting in the government’s legal recognition of black trade unions in 1979 – a decades-long demand on the part of black workers.

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 ANC, which aimed at the state’s overthrow. Furthermore, in place of a vanguard movement to smash the state, the unions sought to build a broad movement based on strong factory structures, held together through practices of democratic accountability. This is not to suggest that non-violent struggle was adopted by the labour movement as a principle; rather, in the context of the security clampdown of the sixties and seventies, it was an appropriate strategy for internal opposition.

It was for this reason that in 1974 the IIE argued (against SACTU who wished to isolate them from international support) for an association with Ruskin College in England. SACTU argued against this link on the grounds ‘that there can be no effective African working class organisation within the present economic and political structures’. The new unions, they said, would either be crushed or co-opted. It was also for this reason that when the newly formed Soweto Students’ Representative Council (SSRC) called a series of stayaways from August 1976 to June 1977, the new trade unions, with the exception of one Black Consciousness-aligned union, remained aloof, fearing that their modest organizational gains would be destroyed by the power of the apartheid state.

The shift of the struggle to the schools of the Witwatersrand marks
the end of the Durban moment; no longer could the factory be isolated like some sociological experiment from the wider struggles for democracy in South Africa. The national struggle was re-emerging and asserting itself into the heart of the workers’ movement. Of course it had been there all along; workers in Durban were not some collective *tabula rasa* waiting empty-headed for ‘the academics on the hill’ to tell them what to think. In a survey conducted of membership of the new unions in 1975 it was found that 11% had previously belonged to SACTU.\textsuperscript{24} The fact that the national movement had deep roots and historical appeal was something that was never adequately dealt with theoretically or strategically by the intellectuals of the ‘Durban moment’.

More significant was the presence in Durban and Pietermaritzburg of ex-political prisoners recently released from Robben Island such as Judson Kuswayo, Jacob Zuma, and Harry Gwala. Anxious to find a conspiracy between the ANC-SACP alliance and the new unions, and conflating the New Left with the Old Left, the state went on the attack. In December 1975 two of the editors of the *SALB* were arrested under the Terrorism and Suppression of Communism Acts for allegedly promoting the aims of the alliance. The state was in the coming year to embark on a sustained offensive against the leadership of the new unions, which culminated in the banning of 26 unionists in November 1976. The *SALB* was to be the only part of the IIE project to survive this period of repression by retreating into the university and becoming more of an academic journal.\textsuperscript{25}

It would be tempting to conclude that state repression on the one hand and the insurrectionist politics of the post-Soweto generation on the other, had marginalized Turner and his project of radical reform. This would be a serious error. I would like, in the third part of this lecture, to deal with the implications of radical reform for the process of transition in South Africa in the eighties and nineties.\textsuperscript{26}

III

I suggested in Part Two of this lecture that Turner had pointed in the direction of an alternative strategy of transition to that of revolutionary rupture, namely that of radical reform. I have furthermore suggested that Durban in the early seventies became the crucible for this approach, and the strategy developed and the innovations introduced were to help shape the approach adopted by the labour movement in the eighties.

To illustrate, let me cite four examples of radical reform from the democratic labour movement:
Firstly, there was the decision to register trade unions in 1979 under the Labour Relations Act. This led not to co-option but to a legitimization of the union as an institution and the rapid growth of shop floor based unions in the eighties.

Secondly, there was the recognition agreement. The negotiation of recognition agreements in the eighties was an important step in establishing the rule of law on the shop floor.

Thirdly, there was the decision to enter industrial councils and through these institutions to establish the power of the union at a national industrial level. This enabled unions to make demands around industrial training, retrenchment and industrial restructuring. Instead of being co-opted, as the critics of participation in Industrial Councils argued, the unions have extended their power and opened up new terrains of struggle.

Fourthly, there was the successful anti-Labour Relations Amendment Act campaign that led COSATU in 1990 to decide to participate in the National Manpower Commission (NMC). It is of particular interest that two of the leading figures in the restructured NMC are Halton Cheadle and Charles Nupen, both students of Turner.27

By treating state structures such as the NMC as negotiating forums, and backing-up its bargaining position with mass action such as stay-aways, the labour movement has developed practices of radical reform rather than adhering to a Leninist notion of revolutionary rupture. Thus the campaign of mass action between 1988 and 1989 against the amendments to the Labour Relations Act ushered in a new era characterized by the politics of reconstruction. In the process, the labour movement has logically extended a strategy of negotiation backed up with industrial action first developed on the shop floor to contest managerial authority. More recently this strategy has been employed to influence state policy through participation in forums such as the National Economic Forum (NEF). ‘It is another stage of advance in the negotiating process’, according to COSATU Negotiations Coordinator Naidoo, ‘that we’ve been participating in for the last twenty years, moving it logically onto a higher level because we are unable to solve certain things unless we bring the government in.’28

The central question raised by this account of gains made by the labour movement in the eighties is, ‘What within such a process, is to distinguish radical reform from reformism?’29 Drawing on Andre Gorz’s writings in the sixties in France, John Saul identifies two attributes of radical reform, or what he calls structural reform. One lies in the fact that reform, to be radical, must not be ‘comfortably self-contained’, but must be part of an emerging project of structural transformation. In Gorz’s words, ‘any intermediary reforms are to be
regarded as a means and not an end, as dynamic phases in a progressive struggle, not as stopping places'. Secondly, radical reform is rooted in struggles from below, rather than on high and is part of a process of empowering the working class.

In a sharp critique of the concept, Marxist economist Laurence Harris argues that it is weak in principle and unrealistic in practice. The principle embedded in the concept, he says, is that of determinism, that reform strategies will necessarily carry the movement forward. This, however, is an inaccurate interpretation. At the centre of the notion of radical reform is its open-ended nature, i.e. that the outcome of any reform initiatives depends on whether power is used strategically in a way that empowers workers.

Harris is on stronger ground when he argues that the conditions necessary for the success of corporatism - sustained high growth and improvements in working class conditions - will not be present in South Africa. 'As a result, conflict over control of production and the distribution of resources will intensify and undermine any (corporatist) arrangements', he says.

This critique of radical reform gets to the heart of the dilemma facing socialists in the nineties - the options have narrowed. As Gay Seidman puts it:

In the past militant labour activists often believed they knew how to proceed once they gained control of the state: programs of nationalisation and state ownership... But with the collapse of Eastern European States, a general pessimism about statist solutions was reinforced. Moreover, most Third World movements recognize that socialist experiments have proved extremely risky... Monetarist ideologies, which insist that growth requires unlimited freedom for capital, seemed to have become internationally hegemonic.31

That is why socialist economists such as Stephen Gelb see the crucial struggle lying in the effort to

intervene and shape a capitalist order which is both more humane and more dynamic than has been true of... capitalism in the past, a capitalist order which could be more favourable for socialist prospects in the long run, by enabling the working class to become considerably better off, economically and politically, than they have been.32

This quotation from Stephen Gelb raises crucial questions about the relationship between reformism and radical reform, questions which will have to be left to another occasion.

Let me now conclude. For a post-modern generation, this privileging of class may seem to lack sensitivity to multiple identities such as
gender, ethnicity, race, nationalism, that are of such central concern to modern social science. But to stress the plurality of our society is to miss the central innovation, at that time, that lay at the core of the new labour studies – namely, class theory. And the importance of class theory was that it not only provided concepts to understand society; it also gave activists the means for approaching change in a strategic way.

I began this lecture by identifying the moral decay and social disintegration that I believe is taking place in South African society and asked the question: what relevance do the ideas of Turner have to this moral crisis?

The answer I trust is now clear: Turner provided a generation disillusioned by the repression of the sixties and the challenge of Black Consciousness, with a vision – a moral vision – of what a new South Africa could become, and he provided a strategy of how we could begin to reach it. Paradoxically the strategy of the democratic movement is increasingly beginning to look like radical reform but the vision has been lost – the world view that drove activists forward and made them, in Bobby Marie’s words, willing to make enormous personal sacrifices, has collapsed.

In part of course we are echoing global trends which have seen a general shift from the collective norms and values that were hegemonic at least in working-class organizations and other social movements in the sixties, towards a much more competitive individualism as the central value in an entrepreneurial culture that has penetrated many walks of life. But in important ways we are experiencing the sociological effects of a society in rapid transition. The apartheid institutions that once regulated norms are breaking down and in an ironic way the movement in opposition to that order has been deprived of its raison d’être. Between the politics of resistance and the politics of reconstruction has come a void, leaving the lives of individuals without meaning.

Debates about the future of South Africa are dominated by economists concerned with a new economic growth path and political scientists and lawyers concerned with a new constitution. What is urgently needed is a sociological understanding of the transition process and a vision of reconstruction that includes not only the economic and the political but the social and moral as well.

The reconstruction accord proposed by COSATU as a possible electoral pact with the ANC begins to address these issues, especially in its emphasis on the need to empower grass-roots organization such as civics, women, youth, students, parents and teachers to have power over decisions that affect their lives. In this way, Cosatu General Secretary Jay Naidoo says, 'we will build an effective countervailing
power to that of unresponsive and unaccountable state bureaucracy'. So too does the proposal put forward by the Nedcor and Old Mutual scenario team for a Socio-Economic Council to advise a transitional Government on social policy. But the mechanisms for democratic policy-making, says Moses Mayekiso, President of SANCO, should be open, transparent, and assign key roles to organizations of civil society. Resources should be assigned to make this participation possible, and keep the public informed.

These are the core values of Turner's vision of participatory democracy. This is the contribution of the life and writings of Richard Turner to the process of transition in the nineties. However, unless the strategic use of power is linked to a vision which includes a social plan to ensure that the main burden for the transition process is not carried by working people, then the promise of participatory democracy will not be fulfilled in the new South Africa.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this lecture to my wife Luli Callinicos, who shared the Durban moment with me, to my stepdaughters, Helene and Thalia, who have a very different memory of it, to my son Kimon, who was born during it, and to my daughter Alexia, who was a twinkle in my eye throughout the Durban moment.

NOTES

4. Tony Morphet, "Brushing History Against the Grain": Oppositional Discourse in South Africa', Theoria. no. 76, October 1990.
5. See E. Webster, 'Black Consciousness', Dissent, March/April 1974. This paper was drawn up in close collaboration with Turner, banned under the Suppression of Communism Act at the time.


13. Turner, p. 120.

14. Turner, p. 120.


17. IIE file, Personal Collection, E. Webster.

18. This interpretation is taken from an article by Johann Maree, ‘The Institute for Industrial Education and Worker Education’, South African Labour Bulletin, vol. 9, no. 8, July 1984. This debate foreshadowed the workerist/populist debate of the eighties, where workerists were concerned to prioritize the capital-labour relations in production and populists the need for class alliances. It could be argued that Turner would have identified with the latter position. This may have been the case although it could also be argued that he would have favoured close links with Inkatha. However, it is not a debate he participated in and I have chosen not to explore it in this lecture.

19. The three volumes are: Gold and Workers: 1886–1924; Working Life: Factories, Townships and Popular Culture on the Rand 1886–1940; A Place in the City: the Rand on the Eve of Apartheid. All three volumes have been published by Ravan.


23. IIE documents, Personal Collection, E. Webster.


28. Adler, Maller & Webster, Ibid.


30. Laurence Harris, ‘South Africa’s Economic and Social Transformation: From “No Middle Road” to “No Alternative”’. Paper presented at the Rethinking Marxism Conference, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, November 1992.


34. I would like to thank Glenn Adler for the phrasing of this paragraph.

