

## LET'S TALK ABOUT RICK TURNER

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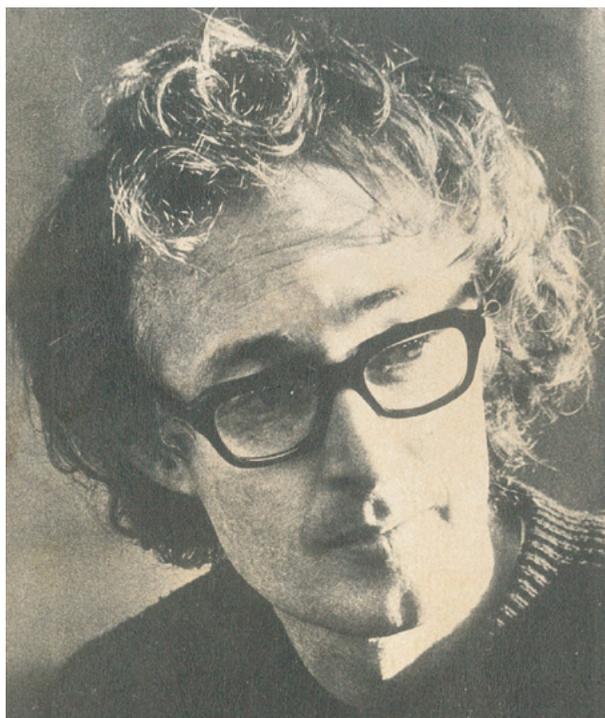
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*Peter Hudson remembers the academic and activist Rick Turner.*

#### 1. MAO IN DURBAN

I lost my copy of Mao's *Little Red Book* on a very hot January afternoon in Durban in 1972. I'm still not sure how it happened because I was always so careful with it – after all, it had been given to me by Rick Turner. People know he was a Sartrean through and through – his dissertation on the relationship between Being and Nothingness and the Critique of Dialectical Reason in Sartre – was widely circulated in Durban during the early 1970s especially amongst his post graduate students and his book *The Eye of the Needle* was well received, as was his article in *Radical Philosophy*. But I suspect far fewer were aware of his deep interest in Mao and the Chinese Cultural Revolution (still – depending on how one periodises it – in full swing at the time) (cf Badiou's periodisation of the Cultural Revolution in *Polemics*). I know about this because I was a student too of his then and he taught classes on Mao's Marxism and the Cultural Revolution which I attended (I also lived in the house he shared with Foszia in Bellair from 1971 – 1974).

His basic orientation in philosophy, the self-transcending Sartrean subject, was entirely of a piece with the leading motifs of the Cultural Revolution – 'change subjectivity, live otherwise and think otherwise'. These maxims and imperatives informed all his various political interventions – he took them with him into the nascent trade union movement in



Source: Lesley Hudson, photo of Rick Turner,.

Durban, into the student movement (NUSAS), into a wide array of community based initiatives, into his frequent engagements with the BC Movement and with Steve Biko himself. I was never privy to their late night discussions but I was there – and Steve Biko sometimes slept over (I was also present in the house when a delegation from the South African Association of Philosophy – Degenaar, du Toit, Suzman and van Wyk – visited him after had been banned, but I never heard what was said on that occasion either). And he definitely took them into all his pedagogic work too. He was himself constitutionally averse to authority and command – chains, and everything that smacked of the Party and its Truth – he was thus also interested in Mao's politics and the Cultural Revolution because

of the challenge they posed for an ossified State-Party apparatus and its correlate – a new bourgeoisie inside the Party – State nexus itself. Sound familiar?

He wanted to live and think differently, right here and now *and he did* even though, as we all know he paid very dearly for it. He was thus never 'underground' even after his banning and house arrest, but his path inevitably intersected with many who were. This did sometimes cause friction but – 'don't wait; think and act differently now!' just was his political being. A principal site of his politics was the University (Durban University where he taught Political Science) itself, and he went quite far in changing staff – student relations there. When students in the Department of Political Science (then in fact a sub-department of the Department of History) decided to call an assembly at which it was *expected* all staff would be present and ready to face (literally) their student critics who, I can assure you, were of course in 'struggle mode', the least that can be said is that Turner never intervened to block them. I know because I attended that assembly.

Rick Turner was not, in other words, a liberal. He was not Alan Paton – he once took me to visit Alan Paton in the Natal Midlands – between you and me it was no 'group-in-fusion'! But he was ready to take a bullet for him. I was there when in a split second, he organised a circle of body guards to protect Alan Paton from a threatened assassination one afternoon at a political meeting at Bolton Hall in Durban.

When Eddie Webster first arrived in Durban from the UK to teach in the Department of Sociology at UND, he was met at the airport by Lawrence Schlemmer who brought him straight to Bellair where Rick and Foszia had arranged a very informal reception for him. We were keen to meet him – it was

said he had a new take on what, in those days, we called ‘the Gordian knot’ of class and race. Shortly after Eddie had arrived and been introduced, Rick took me aside and said to me *sotto voce* and with a broad smile – he’s a *Stalinist* you know!’ The joke, and the resolution of the paradox – why was he smiling? – lay of course in the fact that on this occasion what Turner meant by ‘Stalinist’ was just that – here is a man more interested in the theory of value and exploitation (objectivity) than in the theory of the subject, unlike Turner himself. The proof is that he and Eddie Webster immediately struck up a mutually very productive theoretical conversation over, precisely, philosophy and political economy, which was often conducted for what seemed to me like hours on end over the telephone (only land lines in the lounge back then).

Some ‘joke’ you might say – where’s the unconscious? It’s one of those tightly controlled ‘ego jokes’ Freud refers to (in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*) isn’t it? Look, he was criticised as ‘over rational’ or ‘rationalist’ and he himself was a very self-controlled and highly disciplined man. On top of this, his delivery was very even, almost colourless, dry and ‘mathematical’ – I suppose you could say there was something more Cartesian than Left Bank about him. Sometimes he lisped slightly and some found his voice could even become a little shrill after a while – (let’s spare a thought for poor Eddie Webster on the other end of the line).

“He wanted to live and think differently, right here and now and he did even though, as we all know he paid very dearly for it”.

I did, however, once see him really ‘lose his cool’ and it was – can you believe it – in the course of a blazing row over the unconscious, over the possibility

i.e. of self-control! Two visiting academics – a married couple teaching English at either Rhodes or UCT – I can’t remember which and I never knew their names to begin with, were defending the view that one could ‘do biography’ perfectly well without any ‘Freudianism’, any reference to the Freudian unconscious. Well, a lot of people used to think that in English Departments in those days – and perhaps a lot still do. Of course, Turner couldn’t stomach this – and they couldn’t stomach him – voices were definitely raised – unusual for Bellair. I just sat in the corner and listened.

Of course, this doesn’t finally settle the question of where he stood vis-à-vis the self-transparent and self-controlled subject (‘rationalism’), because it’s clear that the Freudian unconscious to which Turner referred and which he defended was the Sartrean conception in which at the end of the day, the unconscious is a mode of bad faith or self-deception and as such, it is often argued, fails to decenter the subject from himself to the same degree as the Lacanian conception which relies on the structural distinction between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enounced, the statement<sup>1</sup>. (There was a copy of Lacan’s *Écrits* on the bookshelf just above the bed he shared with Foszia – he told me he ‘hadn’t worked though it’). Be this as it may, what was it about Turner’s unconscious that got him so stirred up that afternoon (about the unconscious)? I don’t know – I wasn’t his analyst – he was much more like mine.

## 2. SARTRE AND THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE

This is how *The Eye of the Needle* was written. Rick worked in his bedroom, writing in long hand. As he finished a page, he would pass on to this mother, Jane, who typed it up. (Jane was chain smoking even though

Rick didn’t like it). She was in the room later occupied by Stan Newman (then SRC president) and that was later reduced to ashes by a firebomb: Rick received several ‘death threats’. Anyway as she finished a page she’d pass it on to me in the front room where I would proof read it and then pass it back to Rick; he was working, as he so often was, under the pressure of a deadline; hence the unrelenting pace of the process. At the end Rick asked me to comment on the manuscript I’d just proof read. I recall very clearly what I said to him on that occasion: I said I felt he needed – working within his own Sartrean co-ordinates – to place much more emphasis on the category of *scarcity* if he was going to be able to negotiate the passage from the ontological – his Sartrean subject – to the ontic of Apartheid. I was feeling my way towards a position I wasn’t yet able to clearly articulate. Was the Sartrean Cogito the best place to start off from if one wanted to account for South Africa’s racial / colonial antagonism? Just what was the conceptual purchase of the former on the latter? In order to split this subject from itself, so as to have a better chance of grasping the Apartheid antagonism – all I could do then was harp on about *scarcity* as a *relation between subjects*, which is what I felt was what was needed for the task at hand. But is a Cogito that is (constitutively) *socially* split still a Cogito? Another way of putting this would have been to ask whether the Sartrean ‘practico-inert’ is up to the task of grasping the specific, and irreducible, causality of the ‘structure’ rather than, as I was already beginning to suspect, dissolving it into the praxis of a subject; although I didn’t then, on that occasion, express my worries in these terms. I was already, and perhaps I knew it, edging my way away from theoretical humanism in

the direction of the theoretical anti-humanism of the Althusserians.

If I'm right, then Turner wasn't alone. Formally his problem was identical to that confronting de Beauvoir (in the *Second Sex*) the 'Trojan horse' (of proto-structuralism) inside the 'fortress of phenomenology' (see MacCumber, 2011, Chapter 11).<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the coherence of her analysis, it is bought via a *silent repression* of the Sartrean subject and an equally silent reliance on a proto-structuralist conception of structure (the gender relation itself). This latter ends up accounting for the structures of consciousness and not vice versa – i.e. it ends up supplanting the role assigned to consciousness itself in the Sartrean universe.

Fanon's BSWM is also very interesting in this respect because there too it is possible to identify two distinct problematics at work: One, based on the category 'Man' which leads into an epistemological impasse (when it comes to accounting both for Whiteness and Blackness) (see Hudson, 2013 (b)) and another, which takes as its *terminus a quo* the colonial relation itself, understood as irreducibly 'over-determined' or 'differential', and which allows us to break out of the circular tautology of 'Man'.

But, back to Turner: this wasn't the end of our discussion – round two was coming up. Turner hadn't finished with me yet.

### 3. ALTHUSSER IN JOHANNESBURG

In July 1974 I left my job as NUSAS Wages Commission Co-ordinator, left Bellair, and moved to Johannesburg, where, via Turner's intervention, I took up my first (temporary) appointment in the Wits Department of Political Studies. There I met

Sheldon Leader, under whose supervision I began a dissertation on Althusser.

Sheldon Leader was the first actually to teach Althusser (and Balibar) – as a substantial part of both the third year and honours courses in the Wits Politics Department. Yes, he brought an 'analytic' – acquired from Yale and Oxford – slant to things, but why not? Yes, he was a philosopher of law, but that is precisely why he was drawn to the Althusserian perspective, with its promise of being able to combine both the specific effectivity of 'the legal' – and the effect on it of the 'structure of structures' i.e. the social 'totality', to which it belongs.

#### "Where you might ask was Maoism in all this?"

Leader was a charismatic teacher and let's face it, cut quite a figure on the motorbike he used to get around Johannesburg in those days – and he got around quite a lot. An American, yes, but one who gave of himself immediately and unstintingly to the project – as had been the case in Durban – of constructing 'independent' trade unions in the Johannesburg area. Leader was as much a 'workerist' as Turner. In Leader's case the vehicles were the IAS and the emerging MAWU (Metal and Allied Workers Union) – Sipho Kubheka, Gavin Anderson, Bernie Fanaroff and Phil Bonner, all knew Sheldon from his involvement in the IAS and MAWU. I know this because I was briefly chair of the IAS<sup>3</sup>. Leader's courses, particularly on Balibar's contribution to Reading Capital - Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism, influenced many students – including, if I remember rightly, the first intake of Development Studies students at Wits. (Glen Moss, Susan Brown, Stephen Friedman, Johnny Copelyn and Chris

Albertyn were amongst the Wits students who attended Leader's classes).

We became adept in the lexicon and grammar of Althusserian theory: Over-determination, structural causality, combination, specific effectivity, relative autonomy, structure in dominance, subjects as trager (bearers), determination in the last instance – this, dare I say it, was the mantra – it was 'articulation' all the way down (of elements, of instances, of the structure – of the social whole itself). Whereas previously, in Durban, Laing and Cooper's exposition of Sartre, *Reason and Violence* had been 'what to read', now, in Johannesburg, it was 'Pre Capitalist Modes of Production' that was *de rigueur* – Hindess and Hirst were all the rage – and a copy of Balibar's *Self Criticism*, which appeared in the British Althusserianism journal, *Theoretical Practice* was passed around. Leader had written a paper on *Over-determination* which I took with me when I visited Turner at Bellair in September 1977, just before I left for Paris. Someone had already sent him a copy – on arrival I discovered he'd read and digested it.

### 4. BACK TO DURBAN AND SARTRE

Rick first wanted me to tell him all I could about the split that had taken place in Johannesburg between the 'workerists' – committed to the industry by industry construction of bottom-up democratic union structures with a heavy emphasis on 'worker education' – on the one hand, and on the other, all those more inclined to generalise and 'jump start' or, at the least, accelerate the organisational (and revolutionary) process. And, why not, - the boom, it is true, had 'petered out' and strikes had broken out all over the country. But, on the other hand, it was equally true that both the workers' movement and

the national liberation struggle had taken a very hard blow indeed during the previous decade and, if we weren't starting from scratch and *tabula rasa*, there was little to persuade us we were not. One way or another, a decision had to be taken, no matter how difficult or 'abyssal'. The division wasn't, back then, with 'populism' or 'national democracy' (with the unions playing their well-defined role as part of the People in the NDR). All that came later, in the 1980s, which Rick never lived to experience.

What did the signifier 'workerist' really mean in South Africa then, and to whom did it mean what? Yes, but let's not pussy foot – let's cut directly to the chase: did it really carry – and why should it have to – all the ontological and political baggage with which it is sometimes freighted? Did it involve the reduction pure and simple, of the proletariat to the worker, who, in his turn, is reduced to his 'mass being' (i.e. his inert and massive social presence)? And was this the ontological 'hot house' for a politics of conciliatory unionism that separates the working class from antagonism, always keeping this side of antagonism, disavowing and side stepping it, thus leading the working class away from any revolutionary programme? In other words, just a repetition *ad nauseum* of the 'practico-inert'.<sup>4</sup>

Let's just say that in South Africa in the 1970s it was difficult to avoid having directly to confront, and thus 'experience' antagonism, precisely as *real* and *not* as *symbolic* (Badiou, 2012, 216). The subject face to face with the real of the failure of the symbolic to close in on and totalise itself wasn't the result of a 'glitch' (even one with an 'absent structural cause'). On the contrary, as Fanon makes very clear, the colonised subject *does not exist* in the gaze of the Master and thus doesn't exist for himself either.

The subject 'emptied of identity' is the 'normal' or 'default' position of the colonised subject. Here, under colonialism, the relationship between social reproduction and antagonism is different from that of 'pure capitalism' (See Hudson 2013 (a)).

Where you might ask was Maoism in all this? Where was the 'mass line', where were the 'rightists' and the 'linbiaoists'? What has to be emphasised here is that there is no stable Archimidean point from which 'objectively', and in the full serenity of the truth, to determine 'deviations': there are only deviations which themselves seek to occupy (appropriate) such an impossible position.

One way or another, it was a workerist group – Chris Albertyn, by then an organiser with the TWIU (Textile Workers Industrial Union) – and also a 'workerist', was there and stayed to the end.

Leader's paper came up. Rick said he was a little puzzled by Leader's approach which he thought too rooted in an 'analytic' notion of causation and explanation focussing on different possible permutations of necessary and sufficient conditions and models of nomological deductive explanation. Leader knew his Hempel, Nagel (Ernest), his Kuhn, Feyerabend, and Lakatos – as well as the whole Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science crew.

But I could also see what Rick was getting at – from his point of view, he wanted to discuss how Althusserian 'structuralism' – and calling a 'spade a spade', that's what it was – dealt with the 'structure-subject' relationship – what he wanted to know was what was left of the subject *stricto sensu*, not of the ego but of *the subject, subsequent to* the Althusserian/Balibar intervention?

I did the best I could, earnest Althusserian that I was, to drive *all of the subject* (back) into the

structure. After 'metonymic causality', I went straight to the point, insisting that the lack or void of a relation is a) distinct from the lack of any subject, and b) that the lack of the relation (structure) is 'prior to' the lack of the subject (no matter how empty this latter).

But Turner was waiting for me and very prepared to defend to the hilt the absolute irreducibility of the subject to any structure whatsoever. How else, he pressed me, are you Althusserians going to account for the very possibility of the revolutionary subject itself. And don't talk about contingency, he went on, (as if addressing all the structuralists in the world) if you're not ready to talk about such a subject – because your structural causality – which is precisely minus such a subject – can only obey the law of necessity.

I didn't think he was doing justice, and kept on saying so, to my insistence that the structure is lacking in the first place, and that it, the structure, is *consubstantial* with the subject (of lack). But, to tell the truth, I was struggling to think my way from the one lack to the other – 'consustantial' was just a fudge – my reserves were exhausted and Turner knew it.<sup>5</sup>

Chris Albertyn – him again, yes he's still there – why isn't he getting on with his union work? – called 'time' – much to my relief. Rick told me a little about the 14<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement where I was going to stay and then we left and I never saw nor spoke to him again.

The story itself doesn't end here however because 'post-Althusser', beginning in the early '80s (through Badiou and Žižek) we have witnessed the return – if not the revenge – of the subject in Marxist thought.

Neither, Badiou nor Žižek, unlike Sartre, starts with the subject. In *The Theory of the Subject*, Badiou insists on this – the subject is not his starting point but is arrived at (Badiou, 2009, Part VI). But having said that, Badiou, for whom the primary void is that

of Being (the empty set  $\emptyset$ ) and not of the subject (see Badiou, 2005, Part VIII), and who insists his subject is post-Cartesian (and here he differs from Žižek), nonetheless develops a concept of the subject as irreducible to the structure of any ‘situation’ whatsoever, and without which fidelity to the Event and its transformative potential is unthinkable. For Badiou ‘subject’ is what turns on and destroys itself *qua* differential structural identity and ‘destruction’ is what gives being to lack (Badiou, 2009, Part VI).

Žižek says he’s Cartesian – but, to begin with, his cogito is that of the fading, instantaneous cogito, never finally free, moreover, of the Evil Genius; the cogito of lack, if you wish, not Descartes’ transparent and self-sufficient *res cogitans* (see Žižek, 1999). Like Badiou, he doesn’t begin with the subject either;  $\emptyset$ , the empty Žižekian subject is a necessary (structural) condition of any differentially constituted symbolic order, but doesn’t, for all that, exist independently of it (see Žižek, 2005: 11). And, in this precise sense, whatever he says, his subject is also post-Cartesian. Be this as it may, in both cases, and I’m sure I’m not the first to point this out, what is conceptually posited as ‘subject’ is, quite precisely and *de jure*, that which cannot be ‘posited’, something uncannily close the incompressible and ‘monstrous spontaneity’ of the Sartrean subject (as lack or ‘nothingness’), a subject that is subject only to the ‘law of non-identity’, over which Turner so dug his heels in that hot day in September 1977. He was already, ‘avant la lettre’, what later came to be known as ‘the New Sartre’<sup>6</sup>.

## ENDNOTES

1 Subject of enunciation: taken from Benveniste, 1958: the distinction between enoncé and énonciation, between the subject of the statement, the enounced and

the subject of the utterance, the enunciation, is most transparent in the Liar’s Paradox, the statement ‘I am lying’ where two subjects can be identified, one who is lying and one who is not. Lacan invokes this distinction in accounting for the radical division produced in the subject by the unconscious. This division is structural in that the two subjects are irreducible to each other, with the subject of the énonciation ‘fading’ into the statement. (see Lacan, *My Teaching*, 2008).

2 On the relationship between consciousness and facticity in Sartre and de Beauvoir – see Arthur 2010, Chapter One.

3 IAS (Industrial Aid Society) a worker and trade union support organisation formed in the early ‘70s in Johannesburg.

4 See Badiou’s discussion of ‘workerism’ in France in the 1970s in Badiou 2012.

5 See Zizek, 1994, on the subject of lack/the lack of the subject.

6 The New Sartre: this refers to the Sartre retrieved from the misleading conception of the Sartrean subject presented by his ‘immediate’ (structuralist) successors and opponents. For the latter Sartre’s subject is the self-sufficient, autonomous, classical humanist, subject. But this, Howells and Farrel Fox point out (see Howells, 1992 and Farrel Fox, 2003), is to confuse the Sartrean subject with the ego which, precisely, takes itself as the self-identical and self-sufficient source (of its thoughts, decisions and actions). Whereas Sartre’s subject is, right from the start, split between absence and presence, marked by a lack of being making it impossible for the ‘for itself’ simply ‘to be what it is’ (Farrel Fox, 16). This conception of the subject thus anticipates several contemporary attempts to ‘rethink the subject’.

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