

Comment

Response to Eddie Webster's review of *Choosing to be Free: the life story of Rick Turner, in Transformation* 85¹

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'Where Turner argued for individuals to make ethical choices unconstrained by prevailing relations of power, Webster's concern is to locate him – and through Turner, Webster himself – as far as possible on the winning side.' (Andrew Nash 1998)²

For decades, Eddie Webster has spoken up repeatedly and consistently in defense of the idea that Rick Turner's approach to politics was faithfully carried on by the organisations of struggle that developed after Turner's death. Given this remarkable consistency, Webster's recent comments in reaction to my biography of Turner are utterly unremarkable. Anyone who has followed these debates – even only marginally – over the years could have guessed what Webster might say. Already in 1993, Webster went so far as to claim that COSATU's policies reflect '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'.³ For decades now, Eddie Webster has been doggedly concerned with placing Rick Turner on the so-called 'winning side' of history.

The question is, why is this such a compelling point of view for him? What is at stake in interpreting Turner's legacy in this way? Why would I, after five years of extensive research into the subject, insist, in contra-distinction, that Turner's political vision was largely eclipsed by the 'one-dimensional heroes' of the liberation struggle? I would like to try to grapple with the significant difference between Webster's position and my own.

As Webster has had plenty of space to frame his argument, I will not recount it here. In sum, the crux of his argument is that Rick Turner advocated for 'radical reform' (this term is entirely Webster's, not Turner's) and that I have over-emphasised Turner's Utopian notions at the expense of his strategic proposals towards reform. In sum, I reply that Rick Turner clearly advocated for an approach to politics that privileges dialogue and democracy above discipline and structure (and never abandoned his longing for a Utopian society) and that this methodology was openly opposed and eschewed by the organisations that developed during Turner's lifetime, and even more so in the years after his death.

I have no disagreement with Webster regarding his assertion that Turner had a strategic sense, and was keenly interested in practical initiatives towards the kind of social change he desired. Indeed, Rick Turner played a critical role in encouraging young whites to develop a class analysis, and even to make connections with struggles of the black working class. However, there was, at the core of Turner's politics, a steady attention to *qualitative aspects of social transformation*. For example, Turner attempted to make an alliance with trade unions in the hope that they could be part of an overall process of transforming what he called the 'human model' that governs our affairs, away from the capitalist human model and towards a Utopian model in which everyone is guaranteed meaningful participation both in their workplace and in all of the decisions that affect their lives.

Webster, and others who claim loyalty to the trade union movement, are fond of referring to the unions' traditions of internal democracy and non-racialism. Surely there is some substance to this, but the attempt to draw a clear link between these traditions and Turner's vision of participatory democracy is exaggerated at best, and disingenuous at worst.

Turner insisted on the need for organisations that, in his words, 'pre-figure the future. Organisations must be participatory rather than authoritarian... if people are to become conscious of the possibilities of freedom'. That is, Turner insisted that organisation – in-and-of-itself – is not a value; organisations must value 'people over things', resist hierarchies and encourage a climate of love and autonomy. It was precisely this insistence that alienated him from the trade union movement, and in particular men such as John Copelyn, Alec Erwin and all the rest that preferred power over process, structure over human beings.

Despite Webster's claim that my work is 'only half done', it is actually the case that my research into the Institute for Industrial Education and the

project's fate in relation to the emerging trade union movement is the most thorough to date. Webster's review of my work largely ignores the extensive interviews I conducted with John Copelyn, Alec Erwin, Omar Badsha, Halton Cheadle, Foszia Fisher, Tony Morphet, Dan O'Meara, Lawrence Schlemmer (and even Webster himself) regarding the IIE and its demise. This story is crucial to an analysis of Turner's legacy within the trade union movement.

Across the board, trade union organisers that worked with Turner recounted, unequivocally, that they found Turner's dialogic and open-ended approach to worker's education to be cumbersome and detrimental to the pressing task of building an organisation within a repressive political climate. This open hostility to the radical pedagogical approach of the IIE, and the concurrent decision to dismantle the organisation altogether (and, crucially, to absorb its budget into the trade unions) is carefully recounted in my book. In light of these heated debates and their very real consequences, why would Webster try to convince us that the trade union movement has been carrying on Turner's legacy over the past decades?

There is in Webster's emphasis a frightening denial of personal choice and personal responsibility. That is, Webster would have us believe that the apartheid state repressed and silenced Turner, while the movement affirmed him. This is an extreme over-simplification, and obscures a critical process of reflection into the values of the individuals and organisations that fought against apartheid. To illustrate this point, it is worth quoting Dan O'Meara's telling confession of his own political choices at some length: 'The kind of gutter Marxism (mechanistic Marxism) which emerged in South Africa provided a very easy answer to the new circumstances in the country after 1973. I became a Marxist at just that time, and it was psychologically an immense relief to me. It enabled me to answer all the questions that Rick's positions couldn't really answer for me'.⁴ Why doesn't Eddie Webster feel it is important to look critically at the widespread decision amongst the South African left wing to embrace a mechanistic politics, rather than a Utopian one?

Perhaps the pragmatists were more efficient than Turner ever could have been, more shrewd at negotiating, more conscious of the dynamics of Power – how to slowly build organisations with hundreds of thousands of members and usher in changes that affect tens of millions. I have no doubt that a turn towards the 'old left', towards a hierarchal, top-down approach 'works' as far as its own aims – the trade unions grew strong and the ANC has been in power for two decades. And, so, what is at stake here?

Webster has said that we are now at a crossroads, and I would agree. But, what is the essential feature of this difficult juncture of history? The current governing alliance is deeply stagnated, hemmed in by their own frightening mix of socialist rhetoric, Stalinist organisational principles and capitalist policies. If we are to unravel the thread from the present state of stagnation back through time, I think we will find that the critical moments of disjuncture lie precisely in the kinds of mechanistic politics that developed during Turner's lifetime.

While I have to assume that Webster intends to compliment Turner, it is ultimately either a false compliment, or a back-handed one. The ultimate erasure of Rick Turner's politics is to claim that they have been assimilated into the movements that developed after his death. As long as we believe that Rick Turner's vision was enthusiastically embraced by those who came after him, then we will remain trapped within a deadening cul-de-sac. What is needed now is a radical alternative to the politics that seem to be relatively permanent within South Africa.

Ironically, in understanding fully the extent to which Rick Turner was marginalised by the one-dimensional heroes of the liberation struggle, then Turner's ideas will have space to re-emerge as a viable alternative.

Notes

1. Webster, Edward (2014) 'Review of Billy Keniston (2013) *Choosing to be Free: the life story of Rick Turner*', Auckland Park: Jacana, *Transformation* 85.
2. Nash, Andrew (1998) 'Moment of Western Marxism', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 19(1):78. (<http://www.sahistory.org.za/r-turner/pdfs/Turner%20by%20Nash.pdf>).
3. Webster, Edward (1993) 'Moral decay and social reconstruction: Richard Turner and radical reform', *Theoria* 80:11-12.
4. Interview with Dan O'Meara, September, 2009.