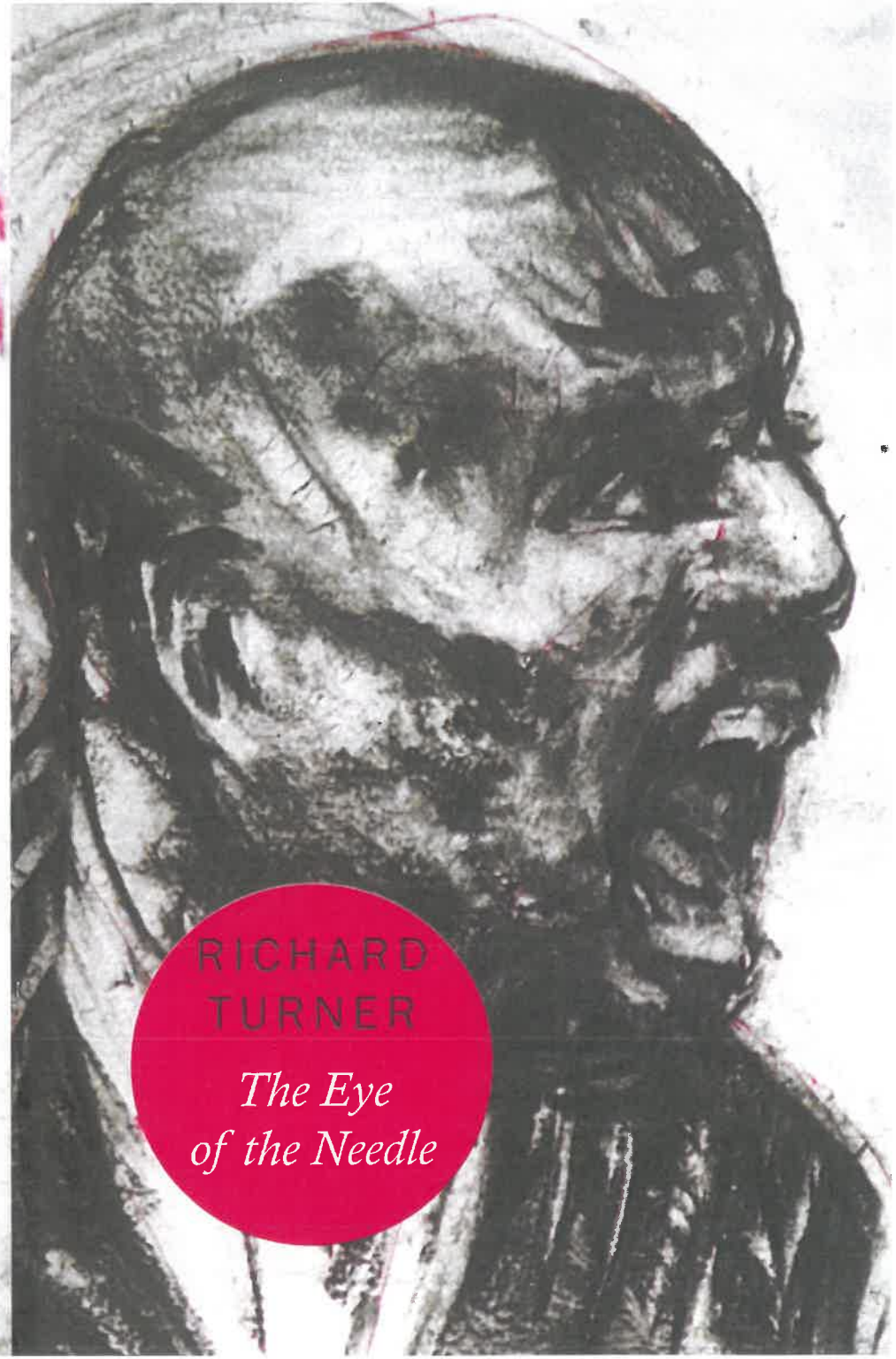
RICHARD TURNER *The Eye of the Needle*



This is a long way from policy positions and scenarios. It recovers the conceptual language of Turner and Biko and puts it to work in the thick of the 'present as history'. It opens up once more the dimensions of the historical struggle and it returns the theoretical attitude to the centre of action. It also shows us, or lets us see once more, the long, dangerous, interrupted, narrative which Benjamin termed 'to brush history against the grain'. It is in that narrative that Turner's cultural authority becomes evident.

University of Natal, Durban, 1990

THE INTELLECTUAL REACH OF *THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE*

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Richard Turner was banned by decree in 1973, which removed his book from legitimate circulation and made it an offence to quote any part of its content. It had not sold widely, or even well, in the brief period between its first publication and the banning order, and those copies which were in circulation necessarily became part of a cultural underground. Turner himself continued to write essays and articles under a variety of pseudonyms, but *The Eye of the Needle* was effectively silenced by official decree. It is naturally very difficult if not impossible to follow the traces of the book in the oppositional culture but it is safe to assume that in the context for which it was written and first published, namely the SPRO-CAS Project of the Christian Institute (Study Project on being Christian in an Apartheid Society) the book left a strong imprint. This is most evident in the discernable movement away from traditional liberal palliative arguments towards more thoroughgoing radical analyses of the prevailing political and social conditions. The shift is reflected in the difference in tone and content between the early and the later publications of the SPRO-CAS project. Critical to that impact

was a reassessment of the significance of the black consciousness movement and a more searching analysis of the economic foundations of the apartheid system. Turner wrote the book in response to what he saw to be the problem of the SPRO-CAS project. He had no difficulty with what it was doing—his objections were to what it was not doing, namely, that it was unable to think outside of the conventional white liberal frameworks. Its general focus was on what white South Africans could be expected to accept as a viable path towards a future free of racial discrimination and oppression. It was his intention to rupture the liberal consensus with a radical critique of the society.

The second location of the book's immediate influence was in the group of students and intellectuals with whom Turner was in direct contact in and around Durban. It is difficult to disentangle the influence of the book itself from the inspirational effects of Turner's charismatic personality, but it seems sure that the book acted as an intellectual anchor for the group of like-minded individuals who had embarked on new directions in oppositional thinking and action. This is particularly true in two areas. One is among the group who were inspired by Turner to take up the issues of un-unionized black labour and the other is among the black medical students who, under the leadership of Steve Biko, had, in 1969 formed the South African Students Association (SASO) and were formulating the black consciousness position.

My speculation is that the book passed from these influential groups along the extended networks with whom they had contact in the generally rising challenge of radical opinion which had begun in the early 60s. After

the Sharpeville shootings, the political opposition moved sharply to the left. The ANC reversed its decision to pursue non-violent means of struggle and a parallel formation within the formal Liberal Party of a small group of young student activists who called themselves the African Resistance Movement (ARM) committed themselves to violent acts of sabotage. Turner had several friends in the ARM. By 1965, however, the opposition was effectively crushed with the leaders of both the ANC and the ARM either in jail or in exile. An economic boom accompanied the political quiescence which followed. The church, and particularly the Christian Institute, constituted a pocket of anxious liberal resistance to apartheid. Turner and his book were early harbingers of intellectual change and gave direction to the radical thrust against traditional liberal thinking and towards engagement with issues of class and race on new terms.

In the period 1972–80, the influence of the book waned and for several different reasons. The banning of Turner in 1973, which removed both the author and the text from circulation, is the most obvious reason but there were others that effectively marginalized the influence. Chief among these was the struggle over the nature of intellectual interventions in the labour field. Turner had conceptualized an extended educational project directed at the black working class. It was known as the Institute of Industrial Education (IIE) and was designed as a correspondence programme to be delivered to literate workers who were offered the chance to grasp the fundamentals of industrial labour and the economic foundations of capitalism as found in South Africa. The course was

offered in the form of workbooks which the students were expected to work through in detail and to submit reports to the Institute. Successful completion would earn the individual a diploma. It was an exceptionally ambitious plan which rested on a conviction that the workers would find the workbooks revelatory and that they would as a result draw their colleagues and fellow workers into discussion and debate about their situation. The influence of *The Eye of the Needle* can be felt running through the conception and implementation strategy of the programme. It was designed as a contribution to the intellectual culture of the working class. Its purpose was to stimulate individual enquiry and, through that, to the building of a collective class awareness of the economic and political conditions in which workers found themselves.

Designed as an intellectual intervention, the IIE project was confronted by the difficulty of recruiting learners, many of whom were illiterate and non-English speakers. It sought to respond to the problem by linking up with the nascent union movement which was forming after the Durban strikes of 1973. This however brought a different set of difficulties to the project. A new cadre of white Marxist intellectuals trained principally at Wits University and drawing on Althusser and Poulantzas rather than the early Marx, had formed around the union movement. And they were more concerned with building an organizational culture than in committing their energies to what seemed to them to be a free-floating intellectual culture within the working class. Their concern was the creation of a trained union leadership based on the shop floor. The focus was on training democratically elected shop stewards

in the principles and procedures of building union strength to contest the conditions and controls exercised in the factories by white management. To the union organizers the IIE was both irrelevant and a distraction from the main task. Its progress was, moreover, painstakingly slow and very expensive. In the initial stages, the IIE formed part of the newly constructed Trade Union Advisory and Co-ordinating Council (TUACC) but, as the tension between the two different approaches increased, it was clear that they could not be sustained as a partnership and the IIE was closed down.

The difference between the Turner approach and the more instrumentalist Marxist approach in developing an intellectual intervention in the labour field can most clearly be seen by reference back to *The Eye of the Needle*. The central thrust of the book is the development of what Turner calls 'a theoretical attitude' which he defines as the ability 'to realize what things in one's experience cannot be taken for granted'. Much of the book is concerned with rupturing the accepted frameworks of meaning which had become conventional and taken for granted and thus examining the conditions of life from a fresh 'theoretical' point of view. This is what he sought to achieve through the IIE. It seems fair to say that the TUACC group of intellectuals were directly interested in exchanging one set of conventions for another and constructing a strong framework of meaning within which labour conditions and practices could be taken for granted. There was a strong application of theory but it would be an already formulated theory. Turner's comments in the book, that 'theory itself is not difficult', the 'theoretical attitude' that

is 'often difficult', make clear the problem as he saw it. He wanted to teach people to theorize.

Over a matter of two or three years, the TUACC intervention met with success in its terms in the construction of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) into a powerful and well-organized 'independent' labour movement—independent, in that it had no relation to the established white unions under the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA). Ultimately, in the mid 80s, FOSATU formed the core of the larger and more broadly organized Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) which forms the best organized component of the Tri-Partite Alliance (ANC, SACP, COSATU) which now governs the country.

By contrast the IIE fell away as a form of intervention. Its workbooks were used in the FOSATU training programmes but they were subject to the direction of the trainers and the training processes rather than independent sources of intellectual clarification.

It might be plausible to argue that the failure of the IIE project represents the central weakness of the case made in *The Eye of the Needle*. The vision at the centre of its argument—that it is workers' control which opens the way towards a fully participatory society devoted to the fulfilment of human capacities and needs—is very difficult, if not impossible, to implement in action. Difficult even to make a beginning on such a project. Such a view would be strengthened by a survey of Turner's later, and regrettably still unpublished work, where he is plainly concerned at a philosophical level with analysing the relation between ends and means.

An argument of this sort however would be more balanced if attention was also given to the history of *The Labour Bulletin*—another of Turner's intervention projects, and one that still survives. The bulletin is a small but regular journal which offers to writers with concerns about the development of a labour movement a space for critical enquiry and intellectual reflection. It has, at least to my knowledge, never missed a scheduled issue and it has proved to be the location of very intense debates within the labour community—most particularly when the independent movement was split over the issue of registration of unions with the state.

The success of *The Labour Bulletin* in a manner underlines the position of *The Eye of the Needle* and the IIE project. It was an intervention aimed not directly at workers themselves but at those who had committed their energies to creating a movement. It offered intellectual and theoretical critiques alongside commentary on modes of action and it accepted opinions from a variety of writers occupying different positions in the movement. In its position it occupied the middle ground between the planners and trainers on the one hand and the workers themselves on the other—a position which has proved durable and effective.

The return of *The Eye of the Needle* to the bookshelves in 1980 in the edition published by Ravan Press in Johannesburg had its own rather different intellectual context which is worth noting. With Turner marginalized, the book had fallen from notice during the middle to late 70s, but it was known to Mike Kirkwood, the man who assumed the editorship of Ravan Press in 1978. He had

known Turner in Durban and had been at the margins of the group involved in the formation of the unions. When he took over Ravan, he embarked on a strenuous and comprehensive radical publishing programme. His principal focus was on developing a significant readership among urban black people. He believed that the urban townships were bursting with interest and talent and that they provided the kind of milieu in which reading and writing groups were flourishing. Initially, he launched a monthly magazine called *Staffrider* which undertook to publish more or less every contribution that came its way, the argument being that its task was not to set or maintain 'standards' but to construct links between different writers, readers and cultural groups by allowing each to see what the others were doing. The writing was often of indifferent quality—the so-called 'Soweto protest poetry' and Africanist celebratory verse especially—but there were significant productions as well which became influential. Njabulo Ndebele in particular came to prominence as both a critic and a fiction writer and he was accompanied as a public figure by people such as Ingoapele Madingoane and Miriam Tlali.

Kirkwood, committed to his populist approach, was also concerned with a broader and deeper intellectual culture among black citizens. To fulfil this purpose, he mined the works of the revisionist historians most of whom were explicitly Marxist, having been trained at the School of Oriental and African Studies under Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido in London. By gaining permission to publish their doctoral theses in cheap book form, he was able to bring forward authoritative histories of the Xhosa

(Jeff Peires), the Zulu Kingdom (Jeff Guy), the Eastern Cape peasantry (Colin Bundy), Pondoland (William Beinart) and, most striking of all, the history-from-below of Johannesburg after the discovery of gold (Charles van Onselen).[1] Each of these works has had its own extended influence and they have far from run their course. Recent evidence of influence includes Zakes Mda's novel *Heart of Redness* (2000) which acknowledges directly its debt to Peires' work on the Xhosa, and Jonny Steinberg's study of prison experience (*The Number*, 2004) takes its foundation from van Onslelen's account of the early-twentieth-century bandit Nongoloza whose gang specialized in robbing mine-payment trains around Johannesburg in the early 1900s.

1 J. B. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856–57* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); *The House of Phalo: A History of the Xhosa People in the Days of Their Independence; Perspectives on Southern Africa* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1982). Jeff Guy, *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom: The Civil War in Zululand, 1879–84* (Durban: University Of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 1994); *The Maphumulo Uprising: War, Law and Ritual in the Zulu Rebellion* (Durban: University Of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005); *Remembering the Rebellion: The Zulu Uprising of 1906* (Durban: University Of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006); *The View across the River: Harriette Colenso and the Zulu Struggle against Imperialism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002). Colin Bundy, *Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1979). William Beinart, *The Political Economy of Pondoland, 1860–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Charles Van Onselen, *New Babylon, New Nineveh* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1982).

Kirkwood saw a natural place for *The Eye of the Needle* between the populist magazine context and the high academic context provided by the doctoral histories. It offered itself as something of a bridge because although it was of the highest intellectual quality, it was simply written, short and addressed very directly the conditions of life of the audience he had in mind.

Ravan Press declined shortly after Kirkwood emigrated in the early 80s and the book was not reprinted. It no longer exists. Doubtless, there are records of its sales but they are dispersed and hard to access which makes it difficult to estimate how well the book sold and which part of the market took it up. I can only report that, as the writer of the biographical introduction, I have been surprised on several occasions to have people make contact with me to arrange discussions of the text and of Turner himself. I became aware, for example, through one such personal contact that the book was being taught in a political philosophy course at Stellenbosch University in the early 80s. Through another I have more recently been consulted for a graduate thesis at the University of the Western Cape. It is obviously impossible to trace the lines of private readers who found the book through contact with individuals but the judgement must surely be that such influence was narrow if deep. The same judgement should lead us to conclude that the book ceased to be part of the public intellectual discourse and in my view that moment can be dated at 1983 when the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formally established.

The UDF was formed by a loose collection of individuals and organizations who called themselves 'Charterists'

proclaiming their common identity by their commitment to the Freedom Charter adopted by the Congress movement at a national conference called in 1955. From 1983 onwards the Freedom Charter became the source of the dominant oppositional political and intellectual public discourse a position which it retains to this day.

It is true that more or less 'private' efforts were made to revalue and extend Turner's influence principally in the 10 annual Memorial lectures (1986–97) at the University of Natal (now discontinued) and in a specially convened Fifteenth Congress of the Philosophical Society of South Africa (1988) in which his work formed the focus of discussion. I make the point about these efforts as 'private' because the papers in the lectures and the conference were all given by his friends and associates and were thus a further playing out of the narrow lines of influence which I noted earlier.

The Freedom Charter which formed the foundation of public political discourse remains the core document of the ANC. However, its central feature is its extended ambiguity. It can be read as either a socialist manifesto or a nationalist and populist call to action. It makes no mention of the party (either the SACP or the ANC) and it leaves the decision as to which path will be adopted to the decision of the leaders of the movement. As it turned out, the ANC leadership read it, and continues to read it, both ways, producing the theory of Colonialism of a Special Type (CST) and arguing for a two-stage revolution. A national democratic revolution following a nationalist route would be the first stage and would deal with the racial character of the society but it would then be

followed by a second revolution which would root our capitalism and establish socialism. The charter proved to be an effective foundation for grassroots mobilization and in 1985 gave a degree of coherence to the formation of COSATU out of the former FOSATU and a collection of UDF-aligned unions. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that Turner's direct influence was difficult to detect in the intellectual currents and debates.

The general assessment of the influence of *The Eye of the Needle* that I have been developing, that it was 'narrow but deep' in its early phase, but was subsequently marginalized, was confirmed and extended by the political philosopher Andrew Nash in his 1999 paper 'The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa' in which he examined the Western Marxist tradition from the 1960s to 1990.[2] What makes the paper significant for this essay is that he identifies Turner as 'the crucial figure in the emergence of (this) new radicalism'.

As the starting point for his enquiry, Nash takes 'the demise of the generation of Marxist intellectuals and activists that emerged in the 1970s' as the negotiated settlement of the early 1990s took its course. His purpose is to 'grasp the rise and fall of that distinctive form of Marxism in South Africa primarily by examining its philosophical premises in their relation to the larger South African and global historical processes'. These premises he finds exemplified in *The Eye of the Needle* and he identifies

2 Andrew Nash, 'The Moment of Western Marxism in South Africa', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 19(1) (1999): 66–81.

five key instances in the book which, he argues, shaped not only the formation of the independent unions but also underpinned the work of the revisionist historians.

The first premise anchors the concept that 'politics is identity' and identity is a matter of individual or collective choice without theoretical limits. Nash quotes as confirmation the passage from the book that human beings 'can choose about anything. They can't always get what they want but that is a different question.'[3]

The second premise is that political identity is the product of ethical choice as insisted upon in the book in the choice between a human model and a capitalist model. Identity is thus dynamic and open to change. It is not fixed by national or class origins and the choice is guided by either an 'internal morality or a transcendent morality'.[4]

The third is the condition that the emphasis on choice limits the sense of historical context. History provides 'models' which can be freely chosen rather than providing binding traditions and shaping contexts.

The fourth is that organization is not engagement in political action; rather, it is to be seen 'as a catalyst' in the formation of identity as, in the process of organizing, consciousness is transformed and people learn new ways of seeing the world.

The fifth and final presupposition is a conception of political analysis as the product of an independent and external point of view committed to ethical constancy but

3 Ibid.: 69.

4 Ibid.

possessing a strategic mobility in considering the options available for choice.

Nash's identification of the five premises in Turner's work gives a clear view of the critique of capitalism made in Sartrean terms in *The Eye of the Needle*. His paper goes on to argue that these intellectual foundations were the source of Turner's influence both in the nascent labour movement and (more surprisingly) in the work of the revisionist historians writing within a Marxist framework. If Nash is correct, and I believe he is, it places *The Eye of the Needle* at the centre of the Western Marxist tradition in South Africa. Nash goes further to enquire into the specific political and intellectual context in which the tradition took root.

The key feature of the context Nash describes is that it was primarily a small group of white students and 'perhaps no more than a dozen' intellectuals gathered round the independent union movement. This underlines the narrowness of Turner's influence already referred to. Politically and sociologically this loose grouping shared a sense of disillusion at the state repression and the weakness of the liberal opposition and they could find no available role in political life. Consequently they were in search of new ways to conceptualize the movement of society and any potential roles which they might take up in the rising resistance to apartheid after the widespread spontaneous strikes in Durban in 1973.

From the vantage point offered by Nash's analysis it is not difficult to see why Turner's book should have been inspirational to a group of students and intellectuals already stimulated by the student 'revolt' in Europe and

the US in the middle 60s. It was a formulation which struck more than one chord in the white intellectual milieu. It provided the crucial assessment of racial capitalism at the same time as it pointed to a role for white intellectuals in building a black working-class consciousness through organization. What is more difficult to see is why and how its influence, beginning in so narrow and limited a context, should have penetrated so deeply into the oppositional culture developing in the labour unions and in the field of historical studies.

By the time of the formation of FOSATU, the five premises identified by Nash had become embedded in the conceptual framework of the movement. FOSATU placed identity, in the sense of working-class identity, at the centre of its programme and the path to that identity was through the development of working-class consciousness. FOSATU was to be the organizational catalyst which would make it possible for workers 'to see the world in new ways' and bring forward the issue of ethical choice. Moreover, shop-floor organization would mean that the movement would remain in the hands of its members and would not be subordinated to a political structure or leadership as had happened under SACTU, the labour wing of the Congress movement. The authenticity of the working-class consciousness was to be ensured through the democracy of the shop floor.

In the case of the radical historians (all of whom were white), Nash's case is that the strength of Turner's appeal rested on the concept of choice as in a choice of paradigms. The preceding generation had worked within a liberal paradigm which framed the core issue of South

African history as the racial prejudice which had developed out of the contact between the races under the conditions of the frontier. Apartheid was the irrational social outcome of racial prejudice and the barrier to South Africa's development as a liberal democracy. The historical critique focused on Afrikaner nationalism and its racist ideology.

Prompted by British left-wing historians such as E. P. Thompson, Christopher Hill and Eric Hobsbawm, young South African scholars undertook an inversion of the liberal paradigm, choosing instead from a variety of Marxist-inspired frameworks of analysis and they found themselves working with the same essential foundations that Nash identifies in *The Eye of the Needle*.

Nash's extension of the assessment is compelling. Not only can he point to the ways in which the genetic blueprint was established in *The Eye of the Needle* but he can also identify how several other unexpected phenomena in the progress of Western Marxism in Turner's account capture two crucial, if contradictory aspects, of the influence of the book.

What Nash does not offer is an account of the power of the writing to capture the imagination of a generation of intellectuals and activists coming from diverse backgrounds and commitments. This is an important question to consider, as the present signs of renewed interest in the book suggest that it has not lost its capacity to engage the political imagination even in very different circumstances.

All utopias are fictions and it may be as well to consider Turner's claim for the 'necessity of utopian thinking' as the necessity of fictional or imaginative thought. The

Eye of the Needle is a fiction, in the sense that it makes dialectical connections between a deep and obscured past and a distant future. In so doing, it opens the present to a fresh enquiry with the potential to recast the conditions of the moment within a new social narrative. 'Fictions,' Frank Kermode tells us, 'are for finding things out,'[5] and what Turner does in his book is find out the conditions of the South African present—especially in terms of what things can be taken for granted and what things cannot.

The fictional element is immediately evident in the construction of the narrator of the text. It is visibly Richard Turner the teacher, but it is also an explicitly Christian consciousness and voice which is used to address his chosen readers to make them aware of the implications of their founding traditions. The perspective which the narrator occupies for the purpose of his fiction is that of a 'free man', and his major model for a free man is Jesus himself. The Sartrean influence in the perspective is clear enough but the Christian formulation of a universalist morality is critical to the dialogue which Turner sought with his immediate interlocutors. The universalist perspective offers him the possibility of what he calls transcendent morality, that is, a morality which is not tied to the defence or prosecution of particular interests but to the universal human interest. Thus he can ask 'What is human life for?' and find his answers in love and freedom. Turner then crystallizes the issue of interests in the form of a choice between material interests and human interests. This opens the way

5 Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 39.

to the critique of capitalism and of liberal approaches to its reform as those of an 'internal morality' which seeks to defend the choice of material interests by making them less oppressive than they are at present.

The second fictional strategy in the book is in the re-ordering of the conventional historical narrative. When the book asks us to view 'the present as history', it breaks the hold of the present contingencies and opens a way to view the future from a vantage point outside the existing structures and conditioned roles and to see the future as open to choice. This move, together with the narrative form, gives to the reader a powerful sense of personal agency which is a major part of the book's imaginative strength. Although, as Nash's critique makes clear, this sense of available agency proved in the end to be illusory, it remains very real at the moment of reading and reflection. If we accept Nash's view that the perspective is ahistorical and rests upon the construction of the 'free floating intellectual', which is in turn developed from Sartrean existentialism, we can see that the constructions of the book are in fact fictions. The book makes no mention of its Sartrean foundation and presents itself as having come solely from a 'free' and steady reflection on the conditions of racial capitalism in South Africa—that is the essence of the fiction.

If my argument that the book is a particular form of paradigmatic fiction is correct, does it make a difference to the way we receive its political formulations? If we take the view that fiction is untrue to the conditions it describes, we might be inclined to dismiss its vision of participatory democracy as delusional. But, if we follow Kermode's view that fiction is for finding things out about the relations between the contingencies of the present and the inherited intellectual traditions we would take a very different view. The *Eye of the Needle* (in my view, following Kermode) is precisely about finding out how the conditions of 70s South African life could be brought into concord with the inherited Western traditions of intellectual life.

The concord which the *Eye of the Needle* established between South African social life of the 70s and the Western Marxist tradition made two forms of intellectual activism possible. One was the capacity to entertain visions of a distant future; and the other was the ability to analyse the present from the radical perspective of a universalist morality. The two were intertwined in the book—the vision generating the analysis and the analysis directing the vision. Turner set out to find what would be necessary to overcome the conditions of racial exploitation and his findings pointed to participatory democracy founded on workers control of production and circulation. The conditions he imagined for the implementation of such a democracy sharpened the analysis of the present forms of social structure and action,

What he learned in preparing the work along these two paths was that a good deal of deconstructive work was required before the vision could be given imaginative energy. The word 'deconstruction' had of course not been invented at the time and it was certainly not practised as an intellectual craft as it came to be in the 80s, but the seeds were there in the forms of Sartrean reflection. In the deconstructive moments in the text, Turner's brilliance as

a teacher becomes ever clearer. One of his chosen modes is the domestic analogy compressing complex historical issues into exchanges between individuals. Some typical examples will suffice to illustrate what I have in mind. Reflecting on

> process of conquest and occupation as being one whereby whites merely took over unused land in a half-occupied continent flies in the face of the historical facts. But even if it were true that the blacks were never dispossessed of land that they were using at the time, the argument would still be invalid. For a person is never using all his resources at once. The argument is analogous to that of a man who enters my bedroom when I am in the kitchen, and then explains, when I return, that it was unoccupied—so it is his bedroom now. And perhaps, into the bargain, drives me into the pantry and takes over the kitchen as well, to punish me for complaining.[6]

Similarly in making observations on 'the prior inequalities of property ownership, passed on by inheritance', he comments that 'the right of property ownership is not "natural"': Heirs are not born with unbreakable umbilical cords connecting them to their property. The right of property ownership is a *legal* right, backed by the power of the state.'[7]

And thus the deconstructive work continues, bringing into focus the institutions and practices that constitute and

6 Richard Turner, *The Eye of the Needle*, pp. 36–7 in this volume.
7 Ibid., p. 67.

secure the present conditions in the society. Of particular interest is the analysis of the market as an institution.

> The businesspeople in the 'free enterprise' economy think they are free because there are no individuals looming over their shoulders and giving them instructions. Nevertheless, they are severely limited in what they can do with their money by the forces of the market. If they do not obey these forces, they will lose their money. They do not see this as limiting their 'freedom of enterprise', however, because they see the market as having the same status as 'nature'. When they go bankrupt, it is to them no more the result of other people limiting their own freedom than it would be if a tree fell across the road in front of their car. And if their workers, now finding themselves unemployed, were to blame people for it and complain that they were not free, they would be laughed at.
>
> But in fact the market is not a force of nature. It is other people going about their business. It is other people limiting what I can do. [. . .]
>
> To call a society in which I am told what to do, indirectly and invisibly, a 'free society', while calling a society in which the limitations operate directly an 'unfree society', is just nonsense.[8]

The argument proceeds to a conclusion that a social plan is required to recognize the rights of other people and to endeavour to 'maximize the freedoms' of all.

8 Ibid., p. 69–70.

The goal of all of the deconstructive work that the book contains is the fostering of the 'theoretical attitude'. Turner's purpose has been to demonstrate what things in the social order might be taken for granted and, more important, what things should not. Perhaps the first step towards being able to theorize about society, Turner tells us, would be to '*grasp the present as history*'.[9] The proposition sounds, and is, simple but it has far-reaching consequences in the development of the book. It is in fact the key to the deconstructive energy of the argument because, at a stroke, it places all aspects of the present social life as provisional and already in movement in the processes of change. At the same time, it opens the horizon of the future to a radically changed world.

Evidence for a renewed interest in Turner's work can be found in a variety of sources. There are several formal papers and unpublished manuscripts which explicitly focus attention on *The Eye of the Needle* and there is evidence that the text is being used in university teaching and graduate study. These instances are part of a wider intellectual ferment within the humanities in graduate and undergraduate studies which springs originally from the moment of social transition when the universities and intellectuals explicitly aligned themselves with national development strategies and focused their attention on the production of technocrat graduates. This particular moment comes under comment in the first (1990) part of this postscript. This move coupled with rising pressure on budgets and the instrumentalization of knowledge has

9 Ibid., p. 7 (emphasis in the original).

led to the humanities being starved of resources and devalued as fields of study. The response typified in the volume *Re-imagining the Social in South Africa* (2009) is to call for a revitalization of the critical thought which characterized the 80s. Just how that is to be achieved is less than clear but the thrust behind the call is strong. One of the chapters in the book (by Richard Pithouse) argues for the linkage between intellectual activism and popular politics and cites Turner explicitly as an iconic example of the kind of work that needs to recovered.[10] A similar and more extended discussion is developed by Tony Fluxman and Peter Vale in their essay 'Re-reading Richard Turner in the New South Africa' (2004).[11]

The revival of interest in Turner, and in particular in *The Eye of the Needle*, should not come as a surprise given the present conditions prevailing in the political culture. It is common cause that the ruling ANC is in a state of confusion and disarray. Beset by factional struggles at both national and local level, it is unable to resolve policy disputes and even supposedly democratic elective processes. There is no doubt that the loss of focus and unity of purpose are the result of the loss of the common enemy of the apartheid state but the critical point is that the political culture is without the intellectual resources to provide

10 Richard Pithouse, 'Shifting the Ground of Reason' in Jacklin Heather and Peter Vale (eds.), *Re-imagining the Social in South Africa: Critique, Theory and Post-apartheid Society* (Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), pp. 141–75.

11 Tony Fluxman and Peter Vale, 'Re-reading Richard Turner in the New South Africa', *International Relations* 18(2) (June 2004): 173–88.

new vision and a conception of the necessary practices to support a renewal of purpose. This is nowhere more evident than in the different factional appeals to the Freedom Charter as the source of authority. The Freedom Charter was drafted under the conditions of apartheid, and it was designed to draw disparate oppositional forces into a common front by minimizing the differences between nationalists and socialists. The resulting ambiguities serve now to fuel the discord between the factions as they struggle over access to resources both personal and political. Each faction provides its own interpretation of the charter, expecting by that means to be able to win the argument and take command of the movement. Recourse to the Charter goes beyond just the ANC. It provided the political and intellectual basis for the Congress of the People (COPE), the party which broke from the ANC after the dismissal of Thabo Mbeki. In this context it has proved as incapable of holding the new party together as it has in the ANC. Likewise, the recently formed populist party of the Economic Freedom Fighters stakes a claim to the Freedom Charter but, by setting distant popular goals such as the nationalization of mines and the expropriation of land without compensation, it has simply chosen rallying cries and ignored all forms of intellectual engagement with the political culture.

A simple measure of the confusion and discord in the political culture can be found in the use of the courts to resolve political disputes. Barely a week goes by without the courts being asked to rule on cases down the hierarchy from the President himself and his senior administrative officials (including the Police Commissioner) all the way to local branch levels.

The opposition Democratic Alliance is less wracked by conflict but it is not able to articulate a vision or a set of policies which go beyond the palliative liberalism to which *The Eye of the Needle* brought its strenuous critique. It is alert to the corruption of state power by the ANC but is unable to provide an intellectual analysis which might have the power to build a viable national opposition party.

In these circumstances, *The Eye of the Needle* will occupy a somewhat strange position. It is at one and the same time very much of the past but will now be also in the present, although it cannot be read as a set of prescriptions for political action in the present. The contingencies of present-day South Africa, and still more so of the global context, are very different to those which Turner addressed in 1972. Similarly as Nash's analysis points out, the premises of the book have significant weaknesses and they require not adoption but rigorous intellectual critique. What the book does speak to is the intellectual practice of critique, and this is both reason for the renewal of interest and the place where it has a contribution to make to the present political culture. The history of the book demonstrates the power of careful and thorough critique.

In his chapter in *Re-imagining the Social in South Africa*, John Higgins provides an insightful account of the importance of critique as the grounding of active citizenship. His argument, derived through a discussion of Marx and Edward Said, is that critique deals with representations or what is presented as reality and engages with all claims for presentation as mediated representations. His conclusion is that 'in the end, for Marx and for us (as for

Said) the notions of critique, representation and citizenship do not simply imply each other, but are inextricably intertwined in any formulation of what it might mean for a democracy to be actively participatory.'[12]

Higgins provides a taste of what such a critique might look like with a quote from Marx. With his attention on the preparations which the ANC is making to muzzle the press Higgins quotes: '[G]overnment hears only its own voice, it knows that it hears only its own voice, yet it harbours the illusion that it hears the voice of the people, and it demands that the people too should harbour this illusion.'[13]

My case for *The Eye of the Needle* is precisely that it engaged in a critique of the available representations of its time carried by Afrikaner conservative as well as liberal and black consciousness proponents and called them to account in terms of a universalist morality on the one hand and the direct experience of reality on the other. Just as it opened up to analysis the consensus positions in the 70s and moved the discourse forward to more radical formulations, so now its practice points towards similar

12 John Higgins, 'On Representation: Citizenship and Critique in Marx and Said' in Peter Vale and Heather Jacklin (eds), *Re-imagining the Social in South Africa: Critique, Theory and Post-apartheid Society* (Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), pp. 177–215; here, p. 213.

13 Karl Marx, 'On Freedom of the Press', *Rheinische Zeitung* 135 (15 May 1842). Available at: https://marxists.anu.edu.au/archive/-marx/works/1842/free-press/ch05.htm (last accessed on 21 March 2015).

forms of critique being addressed to the received ideas and representations lodged in the Freedom Charter. The book poses fundamental questions of social life, and in its search for answers it opens an imaginative universe of potentials in which to cast the present conditions. It is the stimulating exploration of a possible social narrative out of a repressive past towards a properly human future that engages the attention of readers and thinkers. It is inevitably a book that itself invites argument and critique simply because it is part of the past and a formative element in an important strand in South African thought and action. It was an intellectually brave book to have written at the time and it retains the energy of the spirit which made it what it was. As Higgins's final clause (what it might mean for a democracy to be actively participatory) suggests, the real contribution of *The Eye of the Needle* to the formulation of participatory democracy lies less in the political formulations of workers' control and more in the practice of critique for active citizenship.

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