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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150479/aaplatformi1/2>

ISSN: 0587-2405

e-ISSN: 2415-0479

Acta Academica •  
Platform: invitation  
for collaboration and  
conversation: 11-21

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# Remembering Peter Hudson<sup>1</sup>

I met Peter Hudson in 1986, at a conference at the University of Natal in Durban. We knew of each other by then, although we had not met. What brought us together over a number of years was the question of publication of the philosophical writings of Rick Turner, produced during the years of his banning from 1973 until his assassination in 1978. That context surely informs the sense of Peter's life and work that I'll convey here.

Although I knew Peter for many years, I should say that we did not spend much of that time in each other's company. This was partly a matter of geography: he spent his adult years in Johannesburg (mostly), Durban and Paris; I spent mine in Cape Town (mostly), Stellenbosch and New York. Perhaps neither us had the gift of sociability in the right measure. But every encounter with Peter was invigorating. I valued his friendship highly, and I mourn his loss.

## Encounter with Rick Turner

Peter was one of a cohort of students inspired by Rick Turner and Michael Nupen, who taught in the then newly-established Politics Department at the University of Natal in Durban (UND). The department had a mainly philosophical focus to their curriculum, and saw philosophy as an intensely political activity. Turner and many of his students, including Peter, played a formative role in the labour movement that emerged from the Durban strikes of 1973. But among that cohort, Peter was the one most seriously committed to philosophical enquiry.

1 Talk for commemoration of the life of Peter Hudson (24/12/1950–22/6/2019), held at the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, on July 22, 2019.

Peter lived in the house of Turner and his wife Foszia Fisher from 1971 to 1974. Keniston's biography of Turner creates a vivid picture of life there. Several of Turner's students shared the house with them, often with their partners. Each contributed what they could to household costs and labour; no-one paid rent; they took turns to cook, and discussion at the kitchen table went on into the night. Postgraduate classes were sometimes held in the kitchen or back garden. The security police kept watch on the house. Keniston discovered in a government archive, among other secret reports, one describing a "mixed social gathering" at Dalton Avenue, with '45 guests, of whom 19 were Bantus and Indians' (2013: 94-97).

Turner was placed under a banning order in January 1973, as were a number of students, at UND and elsewhere, who were involved in anti-apartheid politics. Among other restrictions, the banning order prohibited Turner from teaching, writing anything intended for publication, or meeting with any other banned person or with more than one person at any time.

Peter moved to Johannesburg in mid-1974. With Turner's recommendation, he had been appointed to a temporary teaching position at Wits. At Wits he also began a thesis on the work of the French Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser, whose work had recently been translated into English. Althusser's work was being taught at Wits by an American philosopher, Sheldon Leader.

## Dalton Avenue dialogues

In March 2015 – almost 40 years after the last time they saw each other – Peter wrote a memoir of Rick Turner: a strange but beautiful piece, which has since been published, including on free-access websites.<sup>2</sup> Its title is 'Let's talk about Rick Turner', which sounds a bit like an instruction, or an exhortation, to himself.

Peter's writing until this memoir—or what I've seen of it—had been somewhat austere, sometimes almost mathematical in its search for precision, even on questions where there is no agreement about how much precision is possible. In this memoir, Peter's writing is quite different but still recognisable; more like a short story than a conceptual analysis. When confronted by unexpected responses from his interlocutors, he asks: Why not?

The memoir begins with Peter, on a Durban summer day in 1972, losing the copy of Mao's *Little Red Book*, which Turner had given him. Hudson describes Turner's engagement with Maoism, and some of Turner's other engagements, before and after his banning order, including discussions with Steve Biko (also

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2 Available at: [http://jwta.org.za/volume\\_10/peter\\_hudson.htm](http://jwta.org.za/volume_10/peter_hudson.htm).

then under a banning order), Alan Paton, and my own teachers at Stellenbosch, Johan Degenaar and André du Toit (Turner's first teaching post in South Africa was in Political Philosophy at Stellenbosch). But the focus of the memoir gradually shifts to Peter Hudson rather than Rick Turner. Turner remained who he already was; Hudson was in a process of growth and change and self-discovery.

Turner is presented as a 'Sartrean through and through' – that is, following Sartre's view of the human subject as inherently free, and limited only by their own choices. Turner had written a doctoral thesis on Sartre in France in the 1960s. His book *The Eye of the Needle* (first published in 1972) was a critique of racism and capitalism and an argument for radical political change in South Africa, based on a simplified version of Sartre's existentialism.

Peter describes proofreading the manuscript of *The Eye of the Needle* as each page was typed, and recalls his uncertain response when Turner asked what he thought of it:

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.

Put differently, Peter felt there was a problem with Turner's case for socialism, but could only express his disagreement in the vocabulary of the Sartrean Marxism that he had learned from Turner. What other version of Marxism could he draw on? Indeed, the very term *Marxism* then risked prosecution in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950. Turner spoke of his own politics as 'radical', and made the case for socialism as conforming to a 'Christian human model'. But new versions of Marxism were by then beginning to find their way into the syllabus, with the term conveying its claim to being a science. It was only a few years later, after the acquittal of Glenn Moss and others at Wits in 1977, that Marxism made its way more openly into the academic curriculum (see Moss 2014).

Peter's memoir of Turner ends with their encounter in Durban in 1977, with Peter about to leave for doctoral studies in France. By then, Peter had shifted his allegiance from the existentialist Marxism of Sartre to the structural Marxism of Althusser. Turner's view that each of us could choose to be free, if only we had the courage to do so, made way for Althusser's quest for a science of social relations,

revealing the determinants of our social identities and seeking the unique concatenation of conditions in which capitalist crisis could lead to its overthrow.

Peter's memoir gives the final word to Turner, and recalls his own capitulation, not because he was convinced, but when his 'reserves had been depleted'. It was the last time he saw Turner.

## View from Stellenbosch

I read Turner's book *The Eye of the Needle* as a first-year student in Stellenbosch in 1972. I was much influenced by it, but without any concrete sense of how to act on its critique of capitalism. I recall passing it on to fellow-students also involved in anti-apartheid politics, thinking it might become part of our collective perspective.

Steve Biko's writings had a much greater impact then and in subsequent years, especially after the Soweto uprising of 1976. Biko provided a more concrete sense of the process we were caught up in. I was reading Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1976—following its path across the contradictions of consciousness in world history, often presented as the history of the West—while the contradictions of racial capitalism in South Africa were reverberating through the revolt that began in Soweto, and spread across the country, with the potential to change everything.

I found my way to Marxism from there. That process included encounters with Unity Movement educational programmes in 1977; with student activists at Wits at a conference in January 1978; and with black working-class students at SACHED in Cape Town in 1979, where Neville Alexander became director, once his banning order expired.

I began teaching political philosophy at Stellenbosch in 1977. By then, my main research interest was in the history of South African political thought and its philosophical premises. What else would a Hegelian Marxist in South Africa do, if not to seek to discover an underlying pattern that made visible the movement of consciousness in the context of the struggle against apartheid?

In this context, I discovered – initially from Tony Morphet's biographical introduction (1980: xxix-xxxii) to a new edition of *The Eye of the Needle* – that Turner had worked on a philosophical project during the years of his banning, reconstructing the development of a materialist dialectic from Rousseau to Sartre, including substantial studies of Kant and Hegel. Although several people knew of these writings, only one of these texts had been circulated, and then only among a few people.

In the years of his banning, Turner had not abandoned his existentialist commitments, but sought to deepen them, by understanding the historical trajectory that Sartre had drawn on and that had made his ideas possible. He had been awarded a Humboldt Fellowship and hoped to travel to Germany for further research once his banning order expired, and if it was not renewed.

I wrote to Turner's widow, Fozzia Fisher, in August 1981 and then travelled to Durban, where she let me make copies of the roughly 500 pages of his last philosophical writings. (It turned out that about half of these pages were a reworking of his earlier doctoral thesis on Sartre.) Once I'd read them, I wrote to her to propose publication of the most finished of the texts in a short book. Once the question had been raised, a number of Turner's former students and colleagues became involved. But nothing came of it until Fisher decided in 1986 that Peter Hudson should edit these manuscripts for publication. I wrote to Peter to give him my sense of how they fitted together, and to wish him well with the project. I don't think we ever spoke of it again.

A year or so later, Peter decided not to continue with the project. My understanding – from Michael Nupen, as I recall, rather than Peter – is that Peter had accepted the task out of loyalty to Turner, but without being at home with or committed to that kind of historical reconstruction.

By then, or soon after, it felt as if the moment for this philosophical intervention had passed. Once Mandela had been released, the need for philosophy was lost in the euphoria, and the discipline was soon integrated into the circuits of global academic competition.

In the years when Peter and I were talking about Turner's unpublished manuscripts, they were still largely unknown to all but a small number of people. Because his banning order prohibited him from preparing any written work for publication, he had pursued this work in relative secrecy. Turner's assassination came soon after the killing of Steve Biko, while in police custody. Many of Turner's colleagues and comrades feared that this was the beginning of a wider elimination of radical critics of apartheid. They collaborated in typing out Turner's handwritten manuscripts, which were then kept in the German consulate in Durban, where they could not be seized by the security police. They wondered who would be next.

Although Turner's unpublished texts have been accessible for many years since then, at least in the archive, there has been no real engagement with them.<sup>3</sup> It's as if those years of philosophical work had never been done.

## The Durban moment today

In November 2015, I was asked to write a tribute to Peter Hudson, for the occasion of his retirement from Wits. I spoke of Peter as continuing the legacy of Rick Turner, Michael Nupen and Durban in the early 1970s, and then said: 'That moment is often memorialised these days, but its original spirit lives on in Peter's work'.

The Durban moment, as Tony Morphet (1990: 89-99) described it, was defined by its *collective* sense of new and expanding possibility. Can it be right then to think of its spirit living on in Peter's work after that collective renewal had subsided?

Turner's former student, the poet and artist Peter Sacks, recalls Turner saying to his students: 'I know it is difficult, but we've got to think more clearly than the state allows'.<sup>4</sup> (The state did not allow Turner to continue thinking. It stopped him from participating in the collective enterprise of critical thought, and then it sent an assassin to kill him. Even if we do not know for certain whether his assassin was following official instructions, the state covered up for him).

I speak of Turner's legacy being continued by Peter in the sense, above all, that we can so clearly imagine Peter's students learning from him the need to overcome the established limits of thought; conveying to them – even if it was never put into exactly these words – that *we've got to think more clearly than capitalism allows*. We may still have to learn to think more clearly than a carbon-fueled civilization allows, as the state and capital will not do it for us. Philosophical thinking remains a matter of life and death in our time, even if not always literally our own.

Turner's legacy is no longer hidden today. He has been memorialised in a university building named for him, and street, and an annual memorial lecture, which continued into the 1990s. But there is a sense in which the meaning of his legacy has been lost from sight. Peter Hudson's memoir brings it vividly back

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3 See the special issue of *Theoria: a journal of social and political theory* 151 (2017), on Turner and his times.

4 Available at: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/richard-turner-peter-sacks>; on Peter Sacks, see also: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/03/25/an-artists-archeology-of-the-mind>.

into view, without exhortation or sermonising, instead by describing his own emerging differences with Turner. In a sense, it is now part of Peter's own legacy.

The contest between Sartre and Althusser in South African Marxism no longer matters in the way it may have then. What matters far more is the relentless spirit of debate and enquiry, which Hudson and Turner shared on that day in 1977; the willingness to see Marxist philosophy as an endless and necessary quest, indeed a matter of life and death. Turner's thought was by then in the process of change, although the writings in which he explored new directions were probably unknown to Peter then and were later effectively suppressed by those close to him.

## Critique of the theory of national-democratic revolution

In the time since hearing of Peter's death, my mind has been on his life rather than his writings. His writings are an essential part of his life, but I've thought more of the mood and intention that animates his writings rather than their logic and conceptual structure. In some of his areas, I'm also probably not a competent judge of his work, and I don't aim to give an overview of it here. At the same time, an account of Peter's intellectual life would be incomplete without some account of him as a writer.

The article for which Peter is probably still best known is 'The Freedom Charter and the Theory of National-Democratic Revolution', published in the journal *Transformation* in 1986, a few years after his return from France to take up a teaching post at Wits.

What made Peter's article stand out was its style of immanent critique—that is, its way of undermining the SACP position not from the perspective of a rival point of view, but by following the implications of SACP theory more fully and exactly than the SACP theorists themselves, and showing how they lead to inescapable contradictions. By being scrupulously fair to the positions and authors under discussion, even gentle, his critique becomes all the more powerful.

He introduces the essay by setting out conflicting interpretations of the Freedom Charter, beginning with its adoption at Kliptown in 1955, and focusing on the regrouping of political forces around the Freedom Charter in the mid-1980s. He sets out various interpretations of the crucial economic clauses of the Charter, showing how they had changed over the decades since its adoption. At each point, these are presented as plausible and then steadily shown to be contradictory and self-undermining. The dominant interpretation, examined most fully in his article, is that provided by the theory of national-democratic revolution.

The term *national-democratic revolution* (or NDR) had been introduced into the political vocabulary of Soviet Communism in Moscow in 1960 and into South Africa's political vocabulary at the congress of the South African Communist Party in 1962. It had an earlier history in South Africa, in the form of the Native Republic thesis, adopted at a Comintern conference of 1928. To introduce that lineage would be to show the ways in which this strategy was linked to the interests of the Soviet state, rather than working people globally, and show the underlying opportunism of the theory of national-democratic revolution. But Peter takes pains to show the theory in its best light, before taking it apart.

The central focus of his examination of NDR, it seems to me, is the seemingly abstract question of whether racial identity, rather than class identity, is *necessarily or contingently* dominant within the black working class in the conditions of apartheid South Africa. If necessary, then something like NDR follows from that. But insofar as it is contingent, then its reinforcement through the strategy of NDR is also an obstacle to class liberation, and a reinforcement of class rule, whether in racial or apparently non-racial form. NDR stands in the way of the class power it claims to promote.

Even when the theory of NDR is at its weakest – for example, in asserting that black capitalists in South Africa are naturally aligned with the people as a whole, and not with international monopoly capital – Peter never seeks to score points. Precisely because his treatment of NDR and its history is so gentle and fair-minded, its conclusion is all the more devastating.

The theory of NDR was always tied to alliance with the Soviet Union. In that context, it disappeared from the vocabulary of the liberation movement during the period of negotiated settlement and during Mandela's presidency. It was resuscitated, in a very different form, during Mbeki's presidency, largely as a means of enforcing internal discipline, in the name of supposed revolution, within a movement essentially committed to neoliberal capitalism.

Even without the language of revolution, it is possible to read Peter's argument today as providing a preview of events such as the Marikana massacre in 2012, and processes such as the plunder of state resources by political leaders aligned with the Gupta family. Then, as now, the response of the ANC and SACP was essentially a retreat from theoretical argument, or a dismissal of it.

Peter was acutely aware of questions of political contestation, but often seemed to address them from a distance. It seems possible to me that this may have been a conscious choice, and closely related to his situation as a teacher, seeking to provide political and intellectual resources to new generations of students, but leaving them to draw their own conclusions. But writing of this kind

was both a powerful example and stimulus to intellectual clarity and responsible and a powerful political resource.

### ‘Even communism is possible’

In September 2014 Peter gave a series of four seminars at HUMA (the Humanities in Africa research institute at UCT). The titles of the seminars were: The State and the Colonial Unconscious; Colonialism, Liberal Democracy and National Democracy; The Breast: Value of National Democracy; Subject and Structure in Fanon. Each seminar lasted for much of the afternoon, with Peter speaking for about an hour, and as much time left for discussion.

Perhaps because it was the end of the four-day programme, or perhaps because it has become commonplace to speak about Fanon on the basis of rough impressions, without having read his work or the sources he draws on, the discussion became unfocussed and scrappy. It got stuck on a somewhat futile question of terminology. Peter had apparently described his own position on some question, not clearly recalled, as that of a *Fanonian Lacanian*. The question was whether he should not – on that question, or in general – have given priority to Fanon, by describing himself as a *Lacanian Fanonian*. Once posed, the question kept escalating, without becoming any clearer.

It would have been easy and understandable for Peter to have, in effect, brushed aside a question formulated like this – by pointing out, for example, that you can’t clarify the relationship between two thinkers simply by giving one of them priority over the other. Or that saying Fanon’s name with a certain emphasis was not itself a coherent political position. Instead, Peter probed and listened, carefully and patiently, until he had grasped for himself the impetus and trajectory of the question.

From his reply, it seemed to me that he understood the question roughly as follows: after four days of presenting sophisticated theoretical analyses, why don’t you tell us where you stand?

Peter answered by listing – in a sequence that came to him quite arduously – a set of core beliefs that animated his project. The last of the four or five items of belief he listed was the one over which he hesitated the longest: *‘I believe even that communism is possible’*.

There was a time when Marxists would routinely have argued that communism was inevitable, or that it was the end-point of human history, or that communism was preferable to capitalism. Rick Turner’s *Eye of the Needle*, for example, can be understood as making the case for the communism as preferable to capitalism,

in a non-dogmatic manner; holding that communism most fully enabled the basic capacities of being human and remaining in open communication with your fellow humans.

Peter Hudson's statement that *even communism* was possible was somehow far more powerful than any of these alternative formulations. It did not deny that communism was possible. But it included a blunt admission that communism *may not* be possible; that the communist project may be thwarted not by class enemies alone, but by the limits of what was conceptually or historically feasible. Even if communism is possible, as Peter believed, his statement implicitly placed the communist project at the furthest end of what was possible. On reflection this is surely where communism belongs: at the furthest end of human ambition, not just somewhere in the spectrum of administrative efficiency.

Peter's formulation also seemed to make clear that this was how he viewed it, precisely insofar as it was the endpoint of the four days of exploring the obstacles in the way of communism and the traps that could lead us away from it. All of this made clear that the communism he spoke of was not that of the Soviet Union or North Korea or the South African Communist Party, in any of its incarnations from welcoming every Soviet invasion to evasive defense of Zuma's corruption and plunder.

When stated at the end of four days of examining the pitfalls of radical consciousness, Peter's belief in the possibility of communism was a belief that all the divisions of human society – between classes, genders and nationalities; between mental and manual labour; even the rift between humankind and the natural environment – could be repaired. It was because the ultimate goal was so utopian that the examination of the obstacles to it had to be so rigorous. It seemed to me that Turner's utopianism had been vindicated, through Peter's hard-earned and deeply-considered conclusion, perhaps through a far more strenuous route than Turner himself ever took!

Since then, I have sometimes wondered whether I agree with Peter's assertion that even communism is possible. For most of human history, we have lived in communist societies. In that sense, we know that it is possible; what is contested is whether, in a future communist society, we can retain the benefits of the agricultural revolution, the division of labour, police and taxation, religion and the natural sciences. In the age of climate and ecological crisis, we may be approaching a future in which *only* communism will be possible as a way of sustaining human existence.

Whatever the future holds, we will have need of the example and legacy of Peter Hudson.

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