Chapter 5: Rick Turner and Engaged Political Philosophy as Activist Research

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Introduction

Saleem Badat's detailed exploration of anti-apartheid activist and scholar, Ruth First's life and work presents a compelling exposition and theorisation of activist research. Activist research on this account represents the unity of theory and practice (Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume); for the activist scholar, understanding and knowledge creation must be effectively translated into 'organized political action' with transformative aims (O'Malley as cited in Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume). Ruth First, Badat argues, would agree that research and knowledge 'must inform social action in the interests of building egalitarian, equitable, humane and democratic societies in which all are able to live rich, rewarding, cultured, secure, healthy, and dignified lives' (Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume). In Badat's contribution, the work of 'inform' is cached out with an emphasis on 'the development of political programmes, manifestos, plans, strategies, policies and tactics' (PSPs), and further with an emphasis on research questions that emerge through active membership in political movements (Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume). Badat's account begins from a close reading of the life, scholarship, and activism of Ruth First, and in doing so, leads us to a particular view of activist scholarship.

In this contribution, I raise the question of how this view of activist scholarship might be shaped differently if we began from another anti-apartheid activist who too is described as both scholar and activist: Richard (Rick) Turner. Both First and Turner were deeply committed to resisting the apartheid regime and both viewed academic rigour and critique as necessary tools to do so effectively. Their disciplines and approaches were different, yet both, in their life and work, were considered a powerful enough threat to the apartheid regime to be assassinated: Turner, aged 36, was shot through a window of his Durban home in early 1978 after a five year banning order (Keniston 2013), and First was killed on the orders of Craig Williamson by a parcel bomb in 1982 at the age of 57 (South African History Online 2011a).

Badat describes activist research as oriented towards social change: 'Not content simply to critique the status quo, (it) seek(s) to change it' (Isaacman as cited by Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume). He argues that First's status as an activist researcher is 'indisputable' given her research's focus on analysis of and for PSPs (Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume). This emphasis on social change is evident too throughout Turner's work, as I will argue in the sections that follow. Yet, the introductory chapter to Turner's 1972 *Eye of the Needle*, is titled '*The Need for Utopian Thinking*'. In today's disciplinary language "utopian thinking" might be more accurately classed as ideal theorising: that is, developing normative accounts of how society ought to function, the pursuit of unpacking what the ideal is. While Badat's presentation of activist research includes the 'analysis of the philosophical or theoretical underpinnings of PSPs' (Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume), I will argue that Badat's analysis does not fully capture the fullness of the role of what Turner termed utopian thinking in achieving social change. I argue that a Turner-inspired understanding of engaged political philosophy highlights the role that normative theorising of the ideal can play in transforming activists and shaping the foundations of activism in its scope and orientation. Following Badat's emphasis on the role of positionality in activist research, I argue that beginning from a different example of activist research can shed new light on the study of activist research.

Feminist and decolonial scholarship has convincingly argued for attention to how positionality can shape scholarship–both in what questions we interrogate, the ways we do so, and how we understand and frame the subsequent data and research conclusions (Dotson 2011; Collins 1986; Mellor 2022; Kumalo 2020). Badat too points to this: 'not just ends but also the theory, problems, topics and priorities that activist researchers pursue are conditioned by social and institutional contexts' (Badat in Chapter 3 of this volume) and argues, the analysis of First's activist research supports, contrary to 'eurocentric epistemology', that the person of the scholar is deeply relevant and speaks and acts from distinct positions within power structures (Badat in Chapter 3 of this volume). At times, drawing attention to positionality is a powerful critique of work that has failed to identify significant blind spots that directly influence the impact of a policy or theory, typically on a marginalised group. In political theory, a prominent example of this is the work of Charles W. Mills and Carole Patemen on the gendered and racial blind spots in social contract thinking (Mills 1997; Pateman 1988). In other cases, as I suggest here, attention to positionality and starting points creates space for expansion rather than tension: many, overlapping stories provide a richer, more textured picture and can serve to surface the core direction or truth of the matter at hand. This chapter, therefore, aims to present another lens on activist research, not in contrast to Badat's, but with the aim to widen one's view when reflecting upon and undertake activist research.

As an illustration of this way of approaching knowledge creation one can turn to recent research on the constellation Pleaides. Ancient communities around the world have myths about this constellation

(McClure 2021; Norris 2020; Norris and Norris 2021). Scholars have noted, that while these myths differ in some details, almost all of them have seven sisters or characters, with one that is in hiding, lost, or killed (McClure 2021; Norris and Barnaby 2021). Today we typically can only see six stars to the naked eye, however, the overlap of these different ancient myths points towards a deeper understanding of the history of the constellation. In puzzling how separate ancient communities such as those in Ancient Greece and Aboriginal Australia came to share similar myths, astronomers have used modern tools to analyse the motion of stars in the constellation to identify how stars that once looked like two to the naked eye now appear merged as one (Norris 2020; Norris and Barnaby 2021). Our knowledge of the constellation is enriched by our access to these myths told from different places—the myths while different in many respects, together provide a direction forward in knowledge creation both in our understanding of the skies and in the ancient communities living under them.

In what follows then, I argue that Turner's life and work can provide a different starting point to fruitfully expand how we think about the different dimensions and opportunities of activist research. In our aspirations for social change, this inclusive and multi-layered approach to activism and knowledge creation is essential to creating sustained resistance and tools for building a more just society. In exploring his utopian thinking and his written reflections on the value of utopian thinking within an oppressive state, I argue that a Turner-inspired approach to political philosophy can serve as another dimension of how scholarship can participate in the project of social change. This contribution is thus, framed in line with Turner's openness to engaging with a wide range of anti-apartheid ideas and approaches, so long as they are aimed toward social change (Keniston 2013: 99). It offers a kind of scholarship that is boldly ambitious in what it calls upon us to aspire to, but at the same time, unambitious insofar as it positions itself as one contribution upon many in the project of knowledge creation (Hobden 2021: 6). My hope is that this contribution adds one further dimension to consider as we grapple with how best to create research and research communities that instigate, guide, inspire and implement projects of social change.

Situating Rick Turner

Turner and First occupied different geographical and intellectual spaces; while the active period of their scholarship overlapped, their geographies did not. By the time Turner returned from his PhD studies at the Sorbonne in August 1966 (Keniston 2013: 38), First had left South Africa for the UK and she remained there throughout Turner's active years at the then University of Natal (1970-1978, including the five years he was a banned). First moved to Centro de Estudos Africanos (CEA) at Universidade Eduardo Mondlane

(Centre for African Studies at Eduardo Mondlane University) in Maputo in 1977 (South African History Online 2011a), only a few months before Turner's death in January 1978 (South African History Online 2011b).

Intellectually, Turner was a trained philosopher in the existential tradition, a training that shaped his life and activism deeply just as First's journalism can be seen to have informed her later approach to research (Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume). After completing his PhD at the Sorbonne in Paris, Turner returned to South Africa to assist his mother on their family farm, but soon 'found his footing as a radical educator within the liberal and left-wing student movement' (Keniston 2013: 39). Turner kept an 'open house' on the Stellenbosch farm, Welcarmas, where 'serious political issues' were discussed and where the central activity was 'engaged, critical conversation' (Keniston 2013: 49–51). While the apartheid secret police deemed such gatherings as parties with inebriated students, biographer Keniston described the farm as a sort of 'free university' space (Keniston 2013: 39, 48). In the following years, Turner continued to create these spaces of radical and critical engagement in Durban (Keniston 2013: 102), where he moved to take up a position as lecturer of political philosophy at the University of Natal in 1970 (South African History Online 2011a.), and engaged too with a wide variety of other left groups, remaining radical, however, politically 'ecumenical' (Colman as cited in Keniston 2013: 51). Turner's commitment to social change would often manifest in the expression of his ideas, in opportunities to give lectures, to teach, or to create space for critical discussion. It was, however, also pragmatic, guided by the principle that one should not rule out anyone who was willing to work towards social change: 'he was determined enough to find any and all potential openings for change in South Africa' (Keniston 2013: 100). Turner engaged with a wide range of individuals and civil society organisations, and was an active part of a number of resistance movements and moments (Keniston 2013: 99). From his early days back in the Western Cape, Turner was part of the University of Cape Town's (UCT) student sit-in to protest the government preventing the hiring of Archie Mafeje (Keniston 2013: 43–45; South African History Online' 2011b), and in Durban he was an active advisor to the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) (Keniston 2013: 66, 114). Turner's scholarship focused not only on the utopian, but also on the analysis of conditions on the ground, as seen in his participation in writing a detailed account of the 1973 Durban Strikes (Keniston 2013: 126).

Perhaps most centrally, Turner's activism was expressed in teaching. He viewed teaching as a tool towards freedom (Keniston 2013: 77), a fundamental belief that informed his critique that existing schooling and teaching methods controlled and trained students to live out specific roles in a hierarchical social structure (Keniston 2013: 86–88). His own style of teaching was instead deconstructive (Morphet as cited in Keniston 2013: 79). Turner's teaching aimed to 'un-train', to create space for students 're-evaluate their value systems' and their societies (Keniston 2013: 77). This approach had a lasting impact on Turner's

students and often developed into engagements well beyond the classroom (such as aforementioned gatherings at his home and participation in student meetings and protests) (Keniston 2013: 82). Turner, along with others, set up an organisation, Education Reform Association, which aimed to be a platform for students, teachers and parents to critically engage with each other and share ideas around schooling in South Africa with the aim of 'triggering' changes in the system (Keniston 2013: 91). And, even while living under a banning order, together with others Turner set up and developed materials for the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE), an educational programme for workers that functioned ultimately as a type of correspondence course (Keniston 2013: 154–157). Here we see some similarity to First who is described as 'flushed with elation' at the experience of teaching in Dar es Salaam where her subject, development studies, was seen to have relevance and the students were responsive (Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume). Her research at CEA was motivated by the need for research-based contributions to the work of consolidating the revolution, but also, relatedly, the education of those in whose hands the revolution rested (Badat in Chapter 3 of this volume).

This brief introduction into the life of Turner highlights just how fully he as a scholar was an activist: the many ways he participated in and initiated action towards change. Utopian thinking was one (albeit central) tool among the many that Turner brought to his activism, including his teaching style, charismatic ability to bring people together, and his driving commitment to find a way to break through 'the cracks in the system' (Keniston 2013: 100). Turner's analysis of the South African political context did not become a driving force of change. Perhaps this is because his ideas did not fully capture the complexity of the given moment, or simply because activists at the time chose a different direction. We should also consider that Turner's ban in 1973 prevented him from continuing to bring these ideas into the resistance discourse (Keniston 2013: 128, 133). However, Turner's philosophical thinking was described as a 'catalyst' and his role as a thinker and teacher is described time and time again as transformative for those who encountered him (O'Meara as cited in Keniston 2013: 133, 234).

On Badat's description of activist research, the fact that Turner's theory of participatory democracy did not form the basis for a political movement's PSPs (political programmes, policy, manifesto, plans, tactics or strategy) would exclude it from the category of activist research. Drawing upon Turner's existentialist perspective, the following section presents the case for activist research of a different kind. This expanded understanding of the role of research within activism better encapsulates the full range in which the work of the scholar can be integral to the work of changing society.

Turner's activist utopian research

Turner was a committed existentialist who drew little to no line between his academic, political and personal lives: 'he was committed to making his life choices consistent with his political philosophies' (Keniston 2013: 69). The title of Billy Keniston's biography of Turner, *Choosing to be Free*, captures the role of this core existential commitment: the idea that, ultimately, we are radically free, there is always a choice. Turner's resistance and activism was rooted in claiming this freedom, even within a deeply oppressive state. In Turner's personal life, this manifested in, for example, openly living with and marrying Foszia Fisher in defiance of the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act. Dan O'Meara recalls Turner speaking of this in exactly these terms of freedom: 'I have chosen to be free and I accept the consequences' (Keniston 2013: 76). In his academic life, Turner's existentialist philosophy was present in his commitment to the 'necessity of utopian thinking', and the role it can play in understanding and evaluating our own society, identifying the changeable, and more boldly envisaging a changed society (Turner 1980).

Turner's *Eye of the Needle* illustrates that he understood his writing as a tool to work towards concrete social change. We might think this is despite its utopian nature, yet Turner argues in the opening chapter, 'The Need for Utopian Thinking', that it is because of its utopian nature (Turner 1980). We can see this aim of influence in the fact that the book's envisaged audience shapes the approach to the issues at hand. The book was first published in 1972 as a publication of the Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society (SPROCAS), thus, consciously reaching a particular audience of white liberals, who Turner addresses explicitly. In the book, and other work, Turner makes use of Christian frameworks and examples—see, for example, Chapter 2, 'Human Models: Capitalism and Christianity' (Turner 1980) and in 'What is Political Philosophy?', the use of the principle of 'love thy neighbour' (Turner 1968: 1–2). Turner himself was not a practising Christian, and later converted to Islam to marry Foszia Fisher (South African History Online: 2011a). Yet, he strategically made use of examples and addressed issues that were relevant to his audience, an audience who he explicitly aimed to convert to agents for more radical societal change. *The Eye of the Needle* is, therefore, both explicitly framed as utopian thinking, that is theorising of the ideal, and explicit in its aim to create social change. This combination is ostensibly in tension, however, through closer analysis provides insight into the role of research in changing not only policy, but people themselves.

In the opening chapter of *Eye of the Needle* Turner explicitly challenges South African liberals. Here, Turner appears to be priming his readers to better receive his radical theory of participatory worker democracy through explaining and arguing for the value of utopian thinking and openness to the full extent of what is changeable within society. He accuses white liberals of falling within those who do not

account for the full realm of the possible: instead, white liberals fail to distinguish between the 'absolutely impossible' (such as a lion becoming vegetarian) and the 'other-things-being-equal impossible' (such as a Black person becoming prime minister of 1970s South Africa) (Turner 1980: 1). In failing to make this distinction, liberals aim too conservatively in their work for change, offering up their "old goats" in an attempt to protect their prize lambs, but never imagining or acting toward a world where the predator can be resisted head on (Turner 1980: 1). One of the goals of the book can be seen as convincing white liberals to radically rethink the realm of the changeable. For Turner, society and the liberals who he addresses, treat political and social institutions as mountains which we have to work around (Turner 1980: 2). The existentialist Turner argues instead that social institutions are fundamentally changeable—there is always a collective choice. While there might be limits through the imperatives of human nature and organisation, for the most part our institutions seem settled only because we live within one small moment of time—and when we view these institutions within history, we should notice that social institutions can and do change (Turner 1980: 2).

Much of Turner's published philosophical work does not provide specific policy guidance to political movements or activists, yet it does significant work to re-orient the scope of activist work and to inspire more radical ambitions. This could appear to be a strong contrast with First, who was described as 'the least utopian of the revolutionaries' (Miliband cited in Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume). I would suggest, however, that this phrasing mis-frames the contrast between First and Turner. This use of utopian appears to point more to the idea of idealistic than the idea of ideal theorising. It highlights First's dedication to paying attention to the facts on the ground and the ways that policy needed to better respond to these realities: much of her research centred on analysis of, and for, the development of political programmes, manifestos, plans, strategies, policies and tactics (Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume). And, importantly, it speaks to her commitment to not take movement policy and ideological priorities as a given to work within, but as starting points that remain subject to critique and evidence-based interrogation (Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume). First's political commitments provided the 'questions to be researched, but not the answers' (Badat in Chapter 3 of this volume). This use of rigorous critique and analysis to inform policy creates activist research that prioritises close working relationships with those developing policy to inform the relevant research questions. At the same time, however, it remains critical to ensure the production of independent research that can better steer the movement (rather than producing research to back up existing ideologies). Turner too argued for this kind of close attention to the facts, to always begin with interrogating the reality of the context, however, this understanding of context was used by Turner as a foundation for theorising the ideal, rather than for research aimed primarily at informing policy.

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Elsewhere I have introduced what I term 'engaged political philosophy' as a philosophical research approach rooted within the work and life of Turner (Hobden 2024). In laying this out briefly below, I aim to highlight that the distinction between First and Turner is not a contrast between the idealist Turner and the pragmatist First, but a distinction between scholars who, both committed to resistance and change, focused on different aspects and stages of revolution toward a changed society. First's activist research provided on-the-ground and practical support and guidance (and challenging critiques) to a liberation movement as it developed policies and strategies. Turner's scholarship was oriented toward a prior step in the process of societal change: convincing people that change is possible and widening the scope of what that change might look like in our political imagination. Turner used the theorising of an ideal society as a tool to challenge the ideological frameworks through which we engage with the reality around us and to shed light on implicit assumptions about society and institutions. Utopian thinking, as Turner terms it, brings ideological frameworks and implicit assumptions into dialogue with other possible ways of being and so provides the tools to better identify assumptions and challenge them (Turner 1968: 1).

Engaged political philosophy as a form of activist research

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Others have argued that Turner's approach to political strategy can be viewed as one that started with the utopian and worked backwards towards more tangible strategies and goals (Keniston 2013: 108). In other words: begin with an account of a good society, follow with an analysis of the obstacles to that society and then suggest political strategies based on the above (Nash as cited in Keniston 2013: 108). This approach is contrasted with the more familiar goals and strategies of those working for social change: 'developing strategies to respond to immediate problems' (Keniston 2013: 108). While this flipping of the order aptly captures the tension Turner experienced in much of his activism, a deeper exploration of Turner's approach to utopian thinking reveals too the activist strength in the philosophy itself—in its development and in engagement with it. Here I argue for the value of the activist nature of engaged political philosophy, not in the kinds of political strategies it produces (although it may do this), but in the prior work it does in transforming individuals and widening and orienting the scope of activist ambition for social change. This argument does not claim that First's work had no theoretical grounding, rather it points to the particular value in Turner's approach of producing normative theory of the ideal that was rooted within its context and explicitly, a part of the project of seeking to change society. Through an analysis of Turner's life and work we can identify four main (overlapping) steps of a philosophical research approach that aligns with his use of utopian thinking as a tool of resistance and

activism and, I argue, provides a useful method for activist research today.

First, one needs to understand the societal context. This includes working to verify and understand the basic facts and background to certain events as well as identifying how these facts are implicitly interpreted (Turner 1968: 1). In order to get to the heart of what is changeable in a society, Turner believed we need to understand the contingency of our present, as just one moment in history, and the implicit assumptions and beliefs that shaped our behaviour and our interpretation of the world around us in this moment (Turner 1980: 5–6). Our everyday actions and institutions are a representation of these implicit assumptions, and through interrogating them we can better understand ourselves, our society, and the foundations for our utopian vision (Turner 1968: 1).

Second, and related, one needs to understand one's own position within the societal context. Turner argues that our theory should be shaped by, and even at times constrained by, considerations of what a given principle would look like in action in the context in which we are theorising: 'moral principles are useless without an understanding of the situation' (Turner 1968: 2). Who develops and implements this theory is thus, a central consideration. The positionality of the scholar can also shape one's ability to be aware of the full extent of the possible, since, for example, privilege may obscure certain obstacles or structural injustices that ought to inform theory. Beginning with an understanding of context and positionality is likely to appear obvious, particularly to activist researchers of First's kind. For the development of ideal theory, however, it requires articulation to distinguish what Turner understood as utopian thinking from other forms of ideal theorising that begin from first principles.

Third, one begins to develop the utopian theory, rooted in the analysis of steps one and two: utopian thought here is an 'invitation to begin the process of trying to change the society in a particular direction' (Turner 1980: 99). It is utopian in that it imagines the ideal society to which we aspire, however, it is not utopian in the sense of the impossible. Steps one and two are central in the work they do of identifying the changeable—those things that are not in fact imperatives of human nature or organisation, but products of our collective choice, assumptions, and beliefs. This provides the scope in which the utopian, or ideal, society can be articulated. One value of this step is that this scope is often much larger than it seems when we focus on more immediate tasks. It is limited only by absolute possibility, not restricted to only that which is 'other-things-being-equal' possible (Turner 1980: 1).

Fourth, the theorist should bring the theory back into dialogue with our context. This helps first, to deepen the theory and enrich it, considering its relationship to the context and its application within the context. It also plays a role in evaluating and understanding our society. Turner argued that to see our society against the 'yardstick' of the utopian gives us the tools to truly evaluate, diagnose, and understand our society as a first step towards changing it (Turner 1980: 99). It is only here that Turner turns to more

concrete strategies for change, as illustrated in the postscript to the *Eye of the Needle* (Turner 1980: Chapter 9). The philosophical work has prepared us and laid the groundwork for such thinking—it has provided tools to identify and challenge the implicit assumptions and beliefs in society and through envisaging the utopian society, it has built a new (and Turner argues, more accurate) ideological lens through which to interpret, analyse, and change our society (Turner 1968: 1).

We might worry that this kind of utopian thinking falls prey to the concerns raised in Badat's chapter about prescriptive or legislative scholarship that dictates to the people or the state what they ought to do and in so doing, removing or undermining, important democratic values of agency and political decision-making (Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume). Schatzki, as Badat usefully points out, rightly highlights that this is a false dilemma: prescriptive theory, or in the Turnerian language, utopian theory, can be brought into public discourse as one theory to consider alongside others with the public having freedom to discuss, adapt or reject it (Badat in Chapter 2 of this volume). In addition, Turner widens the scope of how we might consider the value and use of utopian thinking; and is consistently described as the opposite of narrowly prescriptive, using utopian thinking as a tool to facilitate others' critically engaging in their own beliefs and views rather than presenting his own (Keniston 2013: 77–79).

The role of utopian thinking for Turner is not then to point to what we must do in terms of concrete actions nor simply to point only to the ends for which we must aim. Utopian thinking as a process provides at least four valuable tools to activism: first, it challenges activists to consistently reflect and evaluate the realm of their activism—to be bold, but rooted in context, in determining what it is that is open to change in society; second, utopian theory can be used as a device against which the current society can be analysed, providing frameworks and models to better understand why the current society is the way it is, and to more accurately evaluate and diagnose the morality of our current society and its institutions; third, utopian thinking is itself transformative insofar as it is an act of freedom within an oppressive society and requires a critical examination of one's own and one's society's beliefs and assumptions; finally, utopian thinking provides the activist with an antidote to cynicism, to some of that hope of which Turner was consistently characterised by those around him (Keniston 2013: 235). Viewing normative and prescriptive theory in this way offers new insight into the role it can play in activist scholarship and responds to concerns of a tension between the robust participatory nature of democratic movements and normative theory that prescribes the "right" way forward.

Conclusion

In deeply oppressive societies, pragmatism, immediacy and small victories animate resistance movements: each life matters and so each victory that protects or improves lives is rightly, deeply valued. We have seen too, in the case of South Africa, the central role in resistance of the slow and painstaking work of organisation, and the essential role that researchers played in the development of policy in the post-Apartheid era. Turner's approach of thinking through utopian theory does not suggest we should turn away from pragmatism or organisation. I have argued that a Turner-inspired approach to utopian thinking does not remove us from the practical tasks of social change, instead it can have a central role in shaping the individuals within, and the scope and orientation of, our projects of social change. My hope is that this look at activist research, beginning from a different position, can enrich our perspective on the different ways, and the different stages in which, the project of knowledge creation can play a role in our pursuit of social change.

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