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# PHILOSOPHY AND THE CRISIS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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The memory of Rick Turner is precious to all concerned with philosophy and with justice in our country who knew the man or have had the opportunity to study his, unhappily still unpublished, work. In this lecture I want to re-*pose*, in the context of the manifest crisis in our political affairs, two questions that were central to Rick's life and intellectual project. The questions are: what can philosophy, as a discipline, contribute towards an understanding of our situation; and of what assistance might it be to individuals or groups interested in rational reconstruction?

Since Greek times philosophy has had a central and proud concern with the social being of man. There is a contrary modern tradition that philosophy is a specialised professional activity not aimed at a wider public and not having intrinsic practical objectives. This tradition has, in my view unfortunately, many adherents amongst teachers of philosophy in this country. Richard Turner was passionately opposed to such removal of philosophy from the public sphere. He philosophised with practical intent, seeking to clarify the manner in which human reason might direct human conduct. Committed to the Enlightenment tradition of thought as essentially critical, his project - derived initially from Sartre - was to clarify the philosophical foundations of dialectical reason.

The nature of this project made Turner an especially significant figure amongst those defining strategies of opposition to the prevailing South African system. Critical work in the social sciences in South Africa has not benefited from continuous support and critique from philosophy - critique which, for its own self-understanding, it always needs. Turner's early death and the suppression of his posthumous manuscripts removed from the important theoretical debates which raged here in the mid-1970s what would have been a powerful voice defending the view of dialectical reason as critique. His work will have, I believe, to be reassimilated in the coming phases of the struggle. I hope that this lecture, which moves in the terrain of Turner's thought, will contribute to that reassimilation.

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The diagnoses made by the social sciences of pathology and crisis in South Africa are, at first sight, comprehensive. As a point of departure I would like to draw on work done in defining the crisis by economists and political scientists. Philosophy cannot proceed independently of such empirical work:

it is dependent on it. One of my tasks today will be to specify the nature of this dependence.

The economist Professor Charles Simkins has argued that South Africa need take only another generation to become an advanced industrial state. But its progress towards that goal is now faltering badly - chiefly because of extra-economic exclusion mechanisms. Politically controlled mechanisms have concentrated wealth so narrowly as to limit its effective deployment and cause high levels of unemployment. Professor Simkins draws attention to two major consequences of this. Firstly, unemployment is 'generating revolutionary forces which render expectations pessimistic and prejudice transactions essential to ordinary human existence.' Secondly, 'the forces of international competition and population growth may mean that a failure to make economic progress now will rule out prospects of a prosperous society for the indefinite future'.<sup>1</sup>

The crisis of motivation referred to by Simkins has been thematized by political scientists as a dissolution of social integration now acute enough to threaten the mechanisms of what are called 'systemic' integration - ie objective functional connections. The attempt made, since 1948, to fuse non-democratic modes of domination with progressive, privatized, industrialisation has been in overt crisis since 1984. The difficulties are the necessary outcome of an inner contradiction in the enterprise. Differentiation and privatization of production has been accompanied by an attempt to depoliticize the spheres of labour, production and distribution. The sphere of the political is supposed to play out in a symbolic realm of racial and ethnic identity formation and 'national independence' - a life world which has only tangential connection with the on-going process of modernisation. In consequence the system is constantly faced with dilemmas of having to violate normative rules of action implicit in the system. The reconciliation of social and systemic integration is, consequently, breaking down. The regime does not dispose of mechanisms with which to reconcile the norms and values of its members with its systemic functional requirements. Nothing in South Africa is called by its name. The banishment of the realities of class interest in the mystificatory discourse of race and the attempt to displace the conflict into the fictitious world of ethnic 'autonomy' has resulted in a widespread alienation of consciousness inured to a reality that is perceived, dimly, as a network of total deception. The growing presence of the Conservative Party reveals this truth. The party's force shows that we have passed the threshold of a legitimacy crisis. The next level is ungovernability.

Can philosophy add to, or make special sense of, these accounts of the ruptures and breakdowns in our society - these morbid symptoms of what Nadine Gordimer in a now famous lecture called (following Gramsci) the 'interregnum in which we live' - a time when 'the old is dying and the new

cannot be born'?<sup>2</sup> Do we need any special knowledge to grasp this time, anything beyond what is given us by the empirically based disciplines of economics, political science and sociology? Gordimer thinks that there are dimensions of our special moral chaos grasped most signally by writers who have, she claims, 'some faculties of supra-observation and hyperperception not known to others.'

However that may be and although I agree with Gordimer that there is a dimension which is not wholly illuminated in the social sciences, I do not think that it will be discovered by some special moral sense. Certainly philosophy does not claim any such exceptional judgement or ecstatic insight. What then does it claim? Might it be, perhaps, a meta-discipline - an enquiry which integrates the findings of the empirically based disciplines I have cited (and perhaps others such as psychology), into some kind of general theory of reality? Such claims have, since the time of the Greeks and down to the dawn of our own epoch, been made for philosophy. At the threshold of the modern world Hegel, who defined philosophy as 'its own time apprehended in thoughts', sought to make philosophy a science of the totality of knowledge. Such claims to systematic comprehensiveness have not been redeemed. Philosophy is not a meta-science that orders and situates in an intelligible system, a complete understanding of reality. Its claims have become more modest.

Well then, once again, what are its claims? What are its data and what form of knowledge does it produce? For nearly three centuries now, and emphatically since the Enlightenment, a powerful tradition in philosophy has claimed for itself the status of a 'critique' of existing reality. The modes of this 'critique' are diverse. But common to all the thinkers of the Enlightenment tradition (as will become evident, I have in mind especially Kant, Hegel, Marx, Freud and the writers of the early and contemporary Frankfurt school) is the conviction that it is a central concern of philosophy to show, with precision, how specific formations and mechanisms of power distort and deform human life. The proud title of 'critique' in this tradition situates philosophy in the realm of value. The claim is that philosophy develops a special, fundamental, kind of knowledge that enables it to emancipate human life from distortions and coercive ideological illusions where these constraints are systematically produced by historical and social forces.

This is a modern version of an old tradition. The teaching of the good life has, since time immemorial, been regarded as the true field of philosophy. But, since the transformation of the global economic and political systems of capitalism, the question has become lodged principally in the political sphere - and in a significantly new way. I should like to develop this.

Since the Greeks the connection of human identity and integrity with the political realm has been a concern of philosophy. Until the coming of the

modern secular order, however, politics was always relativised by transcendental concerns. In classical Greek thought the political was held to reproduce the order of the cosmos and so the task of 'teoria' was to assist the conformity of the soul to the proportions of the universe.<sup>3</sup> This figure was substantially reproduced in Christian Mediaeval Europe.

With the transformation of traditional society by capitalism the conception of politics as subordinate to eternal laws began to erode. The dynamics of market society, and later of industrialisation, ruptured the traditional religious order and restructured the life world of man as the object of a new primacy of the economic and political. This is the foundation of so-called 'Modernity'. The capitalist mode of production brought about a sense that man was the subject of his own history, not its passive object; that the conditions of life were made by man himself in the spheres of material production and the social and political arrangements that held it in place.

This historical transformation embodied a complex dialectic of emancipation and domination. The new sense of human power and purpose, the triumph (to use a phrase of the historian Reinhart Koselleck) of the 'horizon of expectation' over the traditional 'space of experience', was achieved at the expense of the dispossession of the majority of men and women in Europe and in the colonial world.<sup>4</sup> The capitalist order involved a qualitatively new kind of exploitation and pursued it with a new kind of intensity. Thus the reverse side of the emancipatory promise of industrial society was the savagery of class struggle.

It was to this situation that philosophy responded by redefining theory as critique. Increasingly inscribed in the dialectic of emancipation and domination, the philosophy of the Enlightenment, initially concerned with the ethical implications of secularization, became steadily politicized. It will be helpful to trace out some of the crucial stages of this critical reflection of, and on, societal developments.<sup>5</sup>

In the late 17th Century (for example in Pierre Bayle's 'Dictionnaire historique et critique' of 1695-7) 'critique' signified a questioning of divine revelation in the name of reason. Freed from theology the idea that reason pertained to mankind's regulation of its own affairs as a free and autonomous agent began to take shape. Bayle sought a 'republic of letters' in which truth would be defined in a public arena of unconstrained dialogue. The political implications of this, already clear in Bayle and Fontanelle, remained undeveloped for half a century - held in check by the authority of the absolutist state. But, as the social forces which were to culminate in the French Revolution of 1789 ripened, the idea of critique acquired public force. By 1781 - ie *before* the French Revolution - Kant declared in a new preface to his epoch-making 'Critique of Pure Reason' that his was the true

age of critique and that both religion and the legislature must submit to its test.

Kant's thought attempts a rigorous demonstration of the conditions for any possible knowledge - especially the conditions of human knowledge through which modern natural science is possible. Behind this lies an ethical purpose. Establishing the centrality of the knowing subject entails conferring on him respect as the 'founder' of such knowledge. Moreover, knowledge is inter-subjective. Secure scientific knowledge is possible only in a community of rational subjects. The idea that it is knowledge that constitutes the dignity of man, fused with the inter-subjective critique of knowledge conceived in reference to a system of cognitive faculties that included practical reason and reflective judgement, implied the revolutionary idea of a community of subjects whose rationality was both cognitive and practical. Kant's famous definition of the Enlightenment as 'the emancipation of man from a state of self-imposed tutelage, of incapacity to use his own intelligence without external guidance' acquires its full force in the context of the practical reason of a community of rational subjects.

Now it is vital to see that this 'critical' philosophy is both the expression and the guardian of the most significant attempt at a transformation of the political structure of society in all history - viz the claim made by the French revolutionaries to be transforming traditional political authority into rational authority.

What is involved in this claim of the emergent bourgeoisie in France? In order to legitimize their power the middle classes had to destroy the tradition of hereditary authority with its divisions into fixed 'estates'. Their immediate interest was the development of a commercial economy - a market unfettered by traditional authorities and rules. The bourgeoisie as a class could only, paradoxically enough, urge its own interest by inventing a new, allegedly universal, form of authority. This new principle was that of legitimation through public debate - one might almost say through publicity itself. The absolutely revolutionary claim of the French revolution was to rule by reason, to transform political authority into rational authority - where 'rational' meant criticism and counter-criticism, the systematic, discursive justification of social arrangements. The modern idea of democracy was born here in the conviction that the people as a whole are capable of deliberating and choosing on the basis of knowledge gained through full access to information. The principle had been established that social arrangements were to be the end product of the surveillance of autonomous critical thought.

The claim was, of course, in a large measure apocryphal. The triumph of the bourgeoisie and the coming of industrialization in Europe did not wholly democratize the public sphere and ensure that social arrangements were made in open debate. Society became skewed along class lines and the economic domination of the owners of capital quickly brought about the

political pre-eminence of this class. The result was the internecine warfare of the last two centuries - a struggle whose crises are marked by the European revolutions of 1848 and the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the counter-revolutions of Fascism and National Socialism and, internationally, the colonial wars after 1945. These watersheds of the class struggle show how partial and insecure the triumph of the public sphere and of rational authority has been. *Yet the principles of public debate and discursively defined rationality are, it has become apparent, the guarantors of freedom from arbitrarily exercised power in industrial society - and its only effective legitimation.* The present efforts to rehabilitate them in the Soviet Union is a good example. The development of technical reason, which directs the realm of production, needs, as a complementary principle, practical discourse, practical orientation about what is right and just. This discourse can emanate only from the public sphere and it must proceed pedagogically - not technically.

I should like to draw out what is entailed in this realm of 'praxis', of ethico-political discourse, which augments and corrects the realm of 'techne', the sphere of technically exploitable knowledge.

Practical politics, in this sense, and the 'praxis' of philosophy are closely interconnected. Industrial society is future oriented, constantly requiring new decisions in historically entirely new situations. For this ethical discourse and historical orientation are essential. A critical account of how we came to be what we are, a reflection on the particulars of our self-formative process, is an indispensable part of any attempt at rational orientation and planning. Throughout the industrial epoch, philosophy, drawing its strength both from the still unresolved antagonisms of society and from the need for clarification of practical objectives, has been a guiding and emancipatory force.

Early in the 19th Century Hegel provided a model for such philosophical reflection. He showed that such reflection does not have a fixed point of origin. There is no Archimedean point from which criticism can proceed: it is dependent on something prior which it takes as its object. Hegel argued this by demonstrating the need to replace the epistemological paradigm of philosophy by a phenomenological self-reflection of mind, a tracing of mind's becoming through the processual overthrow of the limitations entailed in each stage of its development. Reason emerges through the dissolution of constraints.

In Hegel's Idealism this occurs without human intention. Marx therefore proposed a materialist variant: the process of the self-formation of the species replaces the autonomous unfolding of reason. But the figure is the same: reason is a reflective liberation from coercive illusions and philosophy acquires its force in the articulation of reason as critique. Marx called this power to dissolve modes of consciousness incompatible with progressive life

'critique of ideology' and he thought, fatally, that this exhausted the realm of reflection. It does not. The scope of critical reason is wider - as the persistent and necessary attempts to ground dialectical reason philosophically, from Lukács to the present day, shows. The materialist transformation of Hegel has not yet been completed. But it remains the real task for philosophy concerned with social emancipation.

For our purposes it is enough to notice that both Marx's 'critique of ideology' and Freud's use of the Hegelian model of reflection in his theory of psychoanalysis testify to its power. What both the Marxian and Freudian uses underscore is the advance of Hegel's construction over the early Enlightenment in taking seriously the distorted consciousness that inhibits development at any given moment. Such shapes of consciousness are not mere illusions. They are symptoms of dogmatic or retrogressive forms of life which need these illusions to make sense of themselves.

It is my thesis that this model of critique is, in essence, what underlies the production of practical critical discourse in the public sphere of advanced societies. What the model expresses is the dynamic moment of self-reflection which makes public discourse so effective. Where society is progressive its own practice and self-understanding is dynamized by this model of reflection. By the same token where society is reactionary it repudiates the self-reflection which threatens to dissolve the archaic, regressive consciousness, to which it clings. In such societies, of course, philosophy is thrust back to the role of pure critique - in particular critique of the dissolution of the critical public itself.

Space for such opposition is made by the persistent tendency of society to regress. The public sphere is always endangered, and with it rational historical evolution. The eruption of National Socialism shows for ever the vulnerability of industrial civilisation. A European regime set about reversing the trend of the Enlightenment. Against the principle of historical evolution Hitler set a-historical immutable domination (the so-called *Führerprinzip*); against equality racial supremacy; and against publically defined reason the implacable imperatives of the biological life force and the defence of 'racial identity'. These themes of National Socialism have been nascent in industrial culture and made partial appearances in Europe in the 19th Century. We must recognise this and note that National Socialism is not an episode - it is the (as yet most acute) phase of a perennial disease. Lesser anti-democratic regimes have shrunk back from the terrible consistency of Hitlerism. But the intrinsic hostility to reason is quite widely spread.

The collusion of the South African ruling classes with the categories of race and the *Führerprinzip* is manifest. The degree to which these concepts have been disastrously invoked in uncoupling South Africa from the inherent logic of societal evolution has long been apparent. But it may be that the power of these ideologies will be even more destructive in the moment of



their defeat than in the decades of their triumph. The, rather timid, beginnings of an effort to dismantle the crasser features of the social engineering of Apartheid have been carried through by government and carefully chosen technocrats who have not seriously challenged the principle of Führertum. In consequence, long before racial domination is effectively transcended a new and particularly insidious distortion of public life by forces of modernization indifferent to public debate and democracy has begun to take shape. This has not been widely recognised and it is only, I want to argue, by using the philosophical model I have sketched in order to illuminate the logic of this domination, that we can fully grasp the extent of the pathology of the South African system and, hopefully, gain clarity about what is involved in any attempt seriously to re-structure it. Only philosophical reflection can go beyond the description of systematic dysfunctionality which the empirical social sciences can furnish. It will also show that the system will not easily be made functional by piecemeal adjustment but will require quite radical restructuring.

The starting point of such reflection is the occlusion of the sphere of practical public discourse. Why has this become so critical now? After all, power has never been wholly legitimated by public debate, social arrangements have never been entirely the end product of autonomous critical surveillance. Most importantly, the realm of practical/political discourse has never had the partial autonomy which has allowed it to function, as in advanced industrial society, as a controlling and rationalizing influence. Political discourse in South Africa has always moved in the symbolic matrix of race, imposed by white domination. It has faithfully reflected power - and never developed a position from which it might effectively influence or challenge that power. As long as the claims of the masses of totally dispossessed were effectively stifled this did not upset the system. But now a twin weakness has appeared and the absence of critical public debate is becoming acutely distorting. On the one hand the claims of the working class are being articulated in ways (ranging from township riots to sophisticated trades union action) which the system has no way of totally controlling; on the other hand its own steering mechanisms are being progressively shown to be outdated - captive to dogmatized political imperatives which inhibit effectiveness and, above all, prevent re-structuring. The state apparatus, fashioned to entrench racial and class domination cannot reform itself from within. Its present constitution reflects its real base. Hence reform would have to come in response to pressure from other interests expressed through the sphere of public debate. In the absence of such debate in an antagonistic situation the state will tend to reproduce itself as a self-perpetuating repressive apparatus increasingly unable to reconcile the divergent pressures upon it.

And indeed this is quite clearly what is now happening. The South African state apparatus is now heavily involved in engineering consent in an environment from which open debate has been banned. The reflection on practical alternatives is narrowed and the state is becoming progressively less representative - even of the interests of its own constituency.

However, there is a clear limit to such manipulated co-option. South Africa's march to totalitarianism is not unidirectional because the system has had (and can only have) very limited success in co-opting broad sections of the oppressed racial groups. For the present its power to block revolution is unquestioned. But the increasing production of revolutionary energies is the logical consequence of the stalemate. Resolution by such energies may be uneconomical. But whether or not there is an alternative will depend on the strategic behaviour of powerful groupings in the society whose continued existence will depend on comprehensive re-structuring. I have in mind groups such as the trades unions, the institutions of higher learning concerned with the production of technically exploitable knowledge and, perhaps, the planning organs of big business. These institutions have an immediate and direct stake in rational modernization in South Africa. And there is evidence that, suffering under the progressively repressive character of the system, they are coming to realise the indispensability of a restitution of democratic discourse to block the slide to military-technocratic dictatorship. The only thing that will legitimize their opposition in the long run is broad mobilisation of public support.

It follows that such groups are, or could in their own interests become, vitally interested in investigation of the conditions under which critical debate might be re-established in South Africa. To the degree that they are, they will find it essential to uncover the distortions and coercive illusions of the apartheid state and, at its deepest level, to set free energies that have been systematically extinguished by the triumph of racial oligarchy. I said earlier that Hegel persuasively showed that there is no Archimedean point of criticism. There is no way of establishing rationality in South Africa other than by purging the system of its accumulated levels of coercive illusions and systematically maintained ideological untruth. There is no way of doing that other than by re-structuring the realm of practical discourse. And there is no way of doing that other than by re-integrating the discourse of the oppressed into public debate. The discourse of the oppressed is the potential healing of the system.

We have to learn that only unblocking the systems of communicative action will permit re-structuring on the levels of the economy and the administration. This is the inescapable pre-condition of any development. The logic of development is a democratic logic. Those seeking to think it through or to realise it will find the models provided by philosophy indispensable.

- The 1988 Richard Turner Memorial Lecture: delivered at the University of Natal, Durban, on 28 April

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