

From Azania to the new South Africa: Thinking with Neville Alexander

[B O O K R E V I E W]

Alexander, Neville (2013) **Thoughts on the New South Africa**. Johannesburg: Jacana.
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When Neville Alexander died in 2012 he was 75 years old. He could look back on a long and significant – and certainly exemplary – life as an activist, scholar and public intellectual. Yet it is difficult not to think of Neville Alexander as someone who had died too soon. More than just a role model for a younger generation of academics, committed intellectuals, and campaigners for a democratic socialist alternative in South Africa, Alexander was at the time of his death very much still a fellow traveller; a generous, durable and effervescent participant and partner in all manner of critical and reconstructive dialogues and projects. Completed shortly before his death and published posthumously, **Thoughts on the New South Africa** certainly reinforces the impression of a vital voice interrupted.

Neville Alexander will be remembered as an anti-apartheid struggle icon, imprisoned on Robben Island (alongside Nelson Mandela and others) for a decade (Alexander, 1994), and moreover as a prominent scholar of educational practice and especially sociolinguistics and language planning in South Africa before and after the 1994 transition (Alexander, 1989, 1990, 1993, 2002). But rather than basking in the glory of his struggle credentials, being redeployed to the boardrooms of multinational companies or allowing himself to be commodified as a dispenser of either sanitised or faux revolutionary political sound bites, Alexander navigated the new South Africa as a principled, calm, yet unrelenting left critic of the new ruling elite. Late in his life he described himself as one of those “incorrigible revolutionary socialists [...] who were clear that the 1993-94 agreements were in essence about stabilising the capitalist state and system in South Africa and creating the conditions for its expansion as a profitable venture” (Alexander, 2010: 4). In Alexander’s (2010) reading of what transpired in South Africa in the years

following the commencement of negotiations between the apartheid regime, the business elite and the ANC and leading to the 1994 elections, the short-lived Government of National Unity and the adoption of the neoliberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy, he noted that

“we have been catapulted into the ugly world of modern-day capitalist barbarism with its devastating features of high and growing unemployment, increasing social inequality, horrific violent crime, racist and xenophobic dog-eat-dog conflicts, among many other things. This is very far from the almost utopian revolutionary euphoria with which most South Africans, unaware of what had been agreed upon in the devilish details of the negotiation process, had so proudly cast their votes on April 27-28, 1994.” (p 5)

This is by now, since the re-vitalisation of radical social movement politics in the late 1990s, and since the almost canonical left analyses of the transition by scholars like Bond (2000), Marais (1998) and Terreblanche (2002), a familiar critique of post-apartheid South Africa. However, its basic tenets were already present as analytic predictions and warnings in Alexander's work throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, establishing him not only as precursor, but also as someone whose continued involvement reinforced the historical continuity between an established political tradition and the current left critique of capitalism in both its scholarly and radical social movement manifestations in post-apartheid South Africa. Here is Alexander a year before the first democratic elections:

“In spite of its vulnerability, the ruling elite has retained its grip firmly on all the repressive apparatuses of the state. In this regard, the triumphalist illusions still rampant in some circles of what is now fast becoming the ex-liberation movement amount to a dangerous condition that has to be cured quickly if we are to see the way ahead clearly and avoid catastrophic mistakes.” (Alexander, 1993: 8)

Of course, these catastrophic mistakes have not been avoided. Yet there is nothing defeatist or even disillusioned about Alexander's last book. On the contrary. With a title that deliberately recalls a much earlier work by Olive Schreiner, **Thoughts on South Africa**, likewise published posthumously (Schreiner, 1923), Alexander looks back, takes stock, and seeks to inspire his readers. As he writes in his introduction, “I genuinely believe it is not too late to change course in the new South Africa”; and that he hopes, by revisiting his “intellectual, scholarly or journalistic interventions” over the last number of years, the book could act “as a possible launching pad (one among many) for a national rethink and dialogue about where we are heading as a society and where we think we ought to be heading” (p viii). And whilst Alexander does not provide a blueprint for an alternative future, the change of course he advocates is not restricted to better governance, the attraction of “foreign investors” and black economic empowerment. Alexander in his last book had remained as resolutely anti-capitalist as he had remained resolutely non-racialist (and anti-nationalist) in his envisioning of a truly postcolonial South Africa. In the process he challenges political suppositions of both capitalist right *and* socialist left.

In the first three chapters Alexander looks back, almost cryptically, on neglected strands of struggle in South Africa, countering what he sees as “many distortions and, sometimes, conscious falsifications of the history of our struggle” (p 1). He focuses in particular on the Unity Movement and the Black Consciousness Movement – both movements Alexander had been intimately involved with and which are discussed “in an elegiac tone and in a biographical

mode” (p 1). One wishes Alexander had had the time and inclination to write a full-length autobiography. These thumbnail sketches, with their tender recollections of the people who had inspired him and offered him his apprenticeship in struggle and revolutionary humanism – and the important role he affords women and educators in these accounts deserves mention – leaves one begging for more historical detail.

After this all too brief historical and autobiographical excursion, Alexander revisits and reasserts the important work he had done in the areas of education, language planning and what used to be called “the national question” (constantly reinvigorated by Alexander, throughout his career and once more in this book, through questioning analyses of the ways in which national, ethnic and racial ideologies are being reproduced across the political spectrum in South Africa). Alexander’s reflections on education remain vitally important in South Africa today; it is an account steeped in grassroots activism and community work, richly described in this book, which cannot be dismissed as impractical or “merely academic”. His writings on language planning represent perhaps the pinnacle of his scholarly career: it hasn’t been equalled, in scope, imaginative vision and political acuity, by anyone in South Africa, and even internationally Alexander occupies an important place in the scholarship on language and (especially postcolonial) society. Finally, Alexander’s discussions of the pitfalls of race-based affirmative action and Black Economic Empowerment will be controversial, but are not meant to be merely provocative. Alexander’s integrity and insight as an intellectual is such that he lifts these debates out of a mire where political mudslinging and self-interested commentary from all sides of the spectrum often set the rhetorical tone, and restores them to a level of fundamental reflection on the questions of who we are, who we can be, and where we are going. After all, Alexander insisted to the end that “South Africa is the one country in the world where, for historical and cultural reasons, it is possible to demonstrate that a raceless society is possible” (p 171).

Towards the end of the book Alexander notes that he has refrained from developing yet another analysis of capitalism and its current global crisis. Indeed, it is not a demanding text theoretically. Alexander communicates simply and comes across as level-headed, clear-sighted and pragmatic – but he manages to do this without in any way compromising his idealism, critical humanism and anti-capitalist agenda. In other words, it is the kind of socialist text that even the liberal mainstream will not be able to ignore or dismiss easily, as they are wont to do with leftist ideas, as “ideological” (as opposed to their “realism”). That alone makes this a treasurable book, even for those of us who already know Alexander’s work well. But it is also more than that. It is a book that reminds one just how inspirational a single revolutionary life can be.

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