

Neville Alexander: Revisiting some of his Convictions and Proposals ¹

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Neville Alexander came to realise early in his childhood and youth the advantage that had accrued to him coincidentally through mere sharing everyday-life and dreams with people from a diversity of profiles and pursuits - rural/urban, youth/adult, labourers/artisans educators/learners - people from all walks of life, oppressed and toiling for a better future in their life-time ... [see: [OBITUARY: Neville Alexander \(1936-2012\)](#)].

Neville Alexander learnt pretty early to appreciate “**having a vision in life** - a vision to strive for, to be inspired and to be guided by.” The growing-up and the grown-up Neville Alexander was discovered and valued by friend and foe for the *intensive quest* that characterised him in his search for sustainable solutions to fundamental challenges and problems of his days - just as much as he was discovered and valued by friend and foe for the **humility and genuine friendliness** that characterised him even in heated debates on crucial issues.

Dear friends, looking back, we today can, indeed, wholeheartedly concur in the assertion: ‘**A great scholar and a principled activist** ... - the last of the true revolutionaries.’ [Jonathan Jansen]

Neville Alexander is one who had *not merely observed* the transition to a democratic polity, but had been involved in many different ways and at many different levels in bringing this new South Africa into being. Neville Alexander has spoken and written *with profound scholarship and sincere concern* on various issues - up to the Massacre in **Marikana on 16 August last year** - shortly before he died.

Neville Alexander kept on reminding us that the point of departure in turning a new leaf in South Africa in 1994 had been but the *result of a compromise*: Instead of *the socialist Azania* of our dreams not even 16 years ago, *apartheid capitalism* was succeeded by **post-apartheid capitalism**. There was no revolution; at best what we got was no more than regime-change, to use a blunt Americanism. [41] An exchange of role-players took place - with a few known exceptions.

With the events around the mineworkers’ strikes in Marikana and elsewhere in mind early last year, Neville Alexander made the observation: The continuation and intensification into the *post-apartheid capitalist system* of the levels of inequality and exploitation that characterised the *apartheid capitalist system*, in the context of an increasingly *barbaric neo-liberal global apartheid*, inevitably put workers against one another in a **dog-eat-dog competition** over allegedly scarce resources.

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¹ The author of this statement is rendering with brief comments and references passages from the latest publication: Neville ALEXANDER 2013. **Thoughts on the new South Africa**. Johannesburg: Jacana Media. ISBN 978-1.4314.0586-2 (221 pages).

In an essay published recently Neville Alexander points out in this regard “ ... ordinary working people have ultimately become aware that they can no longer depend on government or on the dominant classes to help them realise one of the founding promises of the new South Africa: 'A Better Life for All!' [158] He adds: “It has become abundantly obvious that we are heading for a period of intense class struggles. [158]

Neville Alexander recalls: South Africa is a microcosm of our modern world. It is one of a few countries where the *relationships, proportions and dispositions* of the population reflect the global proportions, dispositions and possibilities for human interactions. For this reason, though it is 'an ordinary country', South Africa is one where *hope for a better world remains alive*. He added: I genuinely believe that it is *not too late* to change course in the new South Africa. [vii-viii]

Neville Alexander grapples with questions that demand unconditional attention and thorough scrutiny: How do we re-establish a culture of positive values, one that is socially critical but not destructive in its modalities? What is the foundational value that should inform everything else we believe in and do? ... the kind of value-system that can inspire an entire generation of young people to take onto themselves the task and forge the instruments of social mobilisation on a large scale and for decades, rather than just a few years, knowing full well that the realisation of the 'dream' will change everything from the bottom up, and shape social structures and processes very different in form and effect from those of the neo-liberal imperialist agencies that now disfigure their lives and ruin our societies ...? [195-196]

Neville Alexander contends: “Another way is possible”. He speaks of “some of the consequences of applying the *principle of sufficiency* as the major moral force shaping post-apartheid South Africa”, saying “enough can already be a feast”. [197]. One example he gives: Individual brilliance expressed and deployed on behalf of and for the benefit of democratically legitimated groups at different levels of society would continue to be one of the drivers of all social progress, including economic development. [198] Individuals who attain opportunities to further their skills and deepen their knowledge in particular fields become and remain an invaluable asset to the whole community in which *umntu ngumntu ngabantu*; ‘*n mens is 'n mens deur mense* - nobody seek to excel at the expense and under exclusion of others. In such a community “enough can, indeed, already be a feast”.

Neville reminds us of the outstanding proposal to give our country the name **Azania** - a proposal shared and favoured long before the emergence of the *Black Consciousness Movement* in the late 1960s.

Last, but not least, we learn from Neville Alexander to reconsider the vision of a “rainbow-nation”: The rainbow, besides being an optical illusion, as an iconic metaphor of national unity, places the emphasis on coexisting colour-units. If the recent xenophobic events herald the end, that is, the disappearance, of the rainbow, this may well mean that we can start somewhere else. Neville Alexander proposes in that case that we conceptualise our multicultural reality in dynamic and indigenous terms by means of the metaphor of the Gariep, the great river that flows into the ocean of humanity. The main tributaries of the Gariep, this great river, (African, European, Asian and, certainly as well, modern 'American') that

flow together to constitute the mainstream-culture of South Africa will from time to time and from place to place, under different circumstances, have greater or lesser influence on the whole, but they *do not disappear altogether*. We can be both one and different in dynamic ways. We do not have to box ourselves into racial cages out of which it is impossible to escape, and for the preservation of which we are willing to lay down our lives in ethnic and genocidal civil-wars. Only such a conception of nation-building, of culture without borders, will do in the new South Africa; it will also open up the possibilities of freeing our minds and our creativity so that we can find synergies between the most radical economic, political and socio-cultural tendencies in our country and in our region. Once again: 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, a society where, if we return to the sources of our Garieb nation, we can fill the notion of *ubuntu* with humanistic, as opposed to mere folkloristic, content.

Remember, says Neville Alexander: We live at the Cape of Storms, which, if we change our angle of vision, is at the same time the Cape of Good Hope. [170-171]

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