

Tribute to Neville Alexander (born 22 October 1936; died 27 August 2012)

Tuesday 4 September 2012, by [DOLLIE Na-iem](#), [MAHATE Hamied](#), [MARSH James](#), [MOTALA Enver](#), [PEASE Jean](#), [SAMUELS John](#), [SOLOMON Marcus](#), [SOUDIEN Crain](#), [VALLY Salim](#) (Date first published: 27 August 2012).

Neville Edward Alexander meant many specific things to many different people. For the most part of his adult life, he grappled with life's contradictions, its dilemmas, its twists and its beauty as a socialist intellectual and a revolutionary Marxist since his political baptism in the Non-European Unity Movement's student wing, the Cape Peninsula Students' Union. In the unfolding drama that captures his life's work, Alexander eschewed the presumed impartiality of the scholar who pretends to stand "on the wall of a threatened city" and write about the oppressors and the oppressed. Like Antonio Gramsci, Amilcar Cabral, Che Guevara and Leon Trotsky, Alexander's place has been "within the revolution's threatened city". His political and academic choices were ideologically inspired and his writings were crafted unambiguously to promote the interests of working people and their allies.

Alexander was born in Cradock in the Eastern Cape on 22 October 1936. His father was David James Alexander, a carpenter, and his mother, Dimbiti Bisho Alexander, a school teacher. His maternal grandmother was enslaved as a child in Ethiopia in 1888, rescued on the high seas and eventually brought to Lovedale in the Eastern Cape. His formal schooling was at the Holy Rosary Convent, and his university studies were at the University of Cape Town and the University of Tübingen in Germany where he completed his doctorate on the dramatic work of Gerhardt Hauptmann in 1961.

After Sharpeville in 1960 and after his return to South Africa in 1961, Alexander opened up a debate within the African People's Democratic Union of Southern Africa (Apdusa) about the armed struggle. He formed the Yu Chin Chan Club which included Marcus Solomon, Kenneth Abrahams and Fikile Bam. This organisation was superseded by the National Liberation Front. He was arrested in 1963 and convicted in 1964. Alexander spent 10 years on Robben Island where he had an epic debate on the "national question", first with Walter Sisulu and then with Nelson Mandela. In more ways than one, this exchange prefigured his own written exposition of this question in *One Azania, One Nation*, which was published in 1979. In this work, Alexander draws up a Marxist interpretation of nationalism, its limits and possibilities and its dire consequences. *One Azania, One Nation* is his philosophical and political template for much of his subsequent writings.

In 1981, Alexander became Western Cape director of the South African Committee for Higher Education (Sached). Through Sached, he established Khanya College, an institution that was created to serve as a bridging organisation for black students en route to university study. He also established the National Language Project (1985) and the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (Praesa) in the 1990s.

In June 1983, he formed the National Forum with Pandelani Nefolovhodwe, Saths Cooper, Lybon Mabasa and others, and which had as its patrons Desmond Tutu, Albertina Sisulu and Emma Mashinini. This forum drew up the Azanian Manifesto, a set of demands and injunctions calling for a socialist state in South Africa. For Alexander, this forum was an effort at a united front of oppressed people's organisations, and had as its aim the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by a more equitable distribution of the country's resources. In the early 1990s, he initiated a new political

organisation called the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action and to which he has remained committed.

Alexander's literary output includes eight books and numerous scholarly articles that have been published in refereed journals, and through political and educational organisations with which he has been associated. One Azania, One Nation was followed by *Sow the Wind* (1985), *Language policy and National Unity in South Africa/Azania* (1989), *Education and the Struggle for National Liberation in South Africa* (1990), *Some Are More Equal Than Others* (1993), *Robben Island Dossier* (1994), and *An Ordinary Country: Issues in the Transition from Apartheid to Democracy* (2002).

In his writings, Alexander rejected the notion of "race" as a valid biological entity. While he accepted that racism exists as a social construct, and with the life-and-death consequences of the former apartheid regime's Bantustan policies and Hitler's delusions about a master race, he criticised the lack of a scientific understanding within the former South African liberation movement's perceptions about the phenomenon of "race". Instead, through his work, he experimented with notions of colour-caste, class and identities, and marshalled his thoughts to develop an indigenous theory of knowledge about humanity's genealogy and evolving consciousness.

What separated Alexander from many other academics and intellectuals is that his pursuit of knowledge was anchored in the existential imperative to act in the "here and now". He stood on the shoulders of equally agile and committed writers and thinkers such as Ben Kies and Isaac Bangani Tabata, who were leaders in knowledge production outside the academy. His interrogation of contemporary debates and conversations on language and nation-building places him among the leading scholars and committed writers on the future of humanity. His synergy with former SACP stalwart Harold Wolpe's *Race, Class and the Apartheid State* (1988) is not accidental.

Neville Alexander was a radical participant in the making of South African history. In his own words, written in 1995 after the democratic elections in 1994: "The nation is being imagined, invented, created before our eyes. Indeed, we are extremely fortunate to have been afforded ringside seats by Clio enabling us to observe in the most concrete manner possible the contest between the nation conceived as a community of culture and the nation as a political community. As organic intellectuals, however, we resemble Brechtian rather than Aristotelian theatre-goers. Like every other would-be mother or sire of the nation, we want to be involved in its conception even if only as midwives to the wondrous fruit of the womb of our struggle. At worst, we are willing to be mere critics, those (usually tired old) men and women who stand around in the labor ward admiring or bewailing the features of the new-born infant."

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