

Neville Alexander: Revolutionary who changed many lives

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The death of Neville Alexander on August 27, coming as it does in the wake of the massacre of mineworkers at Marikana, is a double blow. He had the breadth of intellect and depth of knowledge to help the world to understand the significance of these events.

Throughout his life Alexander, who was born on October 2 1936, maintained the important combination of being both an activist and a scholar. His activism saw him imprisoned on Robben Island for 10 years and subjected to house arrest for a further six years.

His whole life he argued for and practised a principled approach to building an independent anti-capitalist left while emphasising the need for the unity of all organisations committed to a socialist future.

He believed that it was impossible to wage a successful struggle without a theory and remained committed to using the analytical tools of Marxism to develop this theory. His Marxism was not vulgar: it was enriched by his deep understanding of the South African reality with its complex intersections of race, class and gender. He was also an internationalist, following recent developments in North Africa and the Middle East closely.

In South Africa's increasingly crass intellectual environment, in which many around him were abandoning their moral compasses and replacing principled political interventions with buffoonery, he stood out as a voice of great insight, attempting to provide what he at one stage described as a "GPS" for the country.

The recent events at Marikana would have come as no surprise to him. Cutting through the hype about South Africa's celebrated transition to democracy, he warned repeatedly of the long-term dangers of the compromises arrived at during the negotiated settlement - compromises that ensured the continuity of the capitalist state and the highly un-equal social relations embedded in it.

Radical redistribution

In fact, in two books on the transition, Alexander argued that "it is common cause in South Africa that unless a radical redistribution of material resources is realised within the lifetime of the present generation, all the glib rhetoric of social transformation, national democratic revolution and African Renaissance will come to mock their authors and exponents in the years ahead". He warned repeatedly of the potential for social instability.

His prescient ability to predict South Africa's political trajectory made him an unpopular figure with the ruling establishment, who were often unsettled by his critique of the dominant, largely celebratory discourse of national liberation and their own role within it. But he was also widely respected, even by those he criticised.

Remarkably, despite the fact that he foresaw the mess South Africa now finds itself in, he never lost hope in the ability of its people to achieve the Azanian uhuru so many had hoped for.

His optimism was profound. He had a deep respect for humanity and the ability of the human spirit to overcome the most difficult odds and believed that human beings were not inherently self-centred. He knew periods of despair in his life, but he never lapsed into cynicism.

His great love for humanity also made him a very humble person. Not one to be impressed by titles and status (or what he liked to call “honorifics”), he believed that, in his own words, “intellectuals are not people who go to universities, but are people who understand how society works and how to change it”. He did not just mouth these sentiments, but lived them, continuing with grassroots work to the end of his life.

Alexander viewed ostentation with disdain. He was humorous, perfecting the art of scorn towards the politically and morally corrupt sections of the elite, but he was also always inspirational. His analysis was often enlivened by characters and events from German literature, Greek mythology and Shakespearean comedy, and his everyday speech was peppered with aphorisms such as “enough is as good as a feast” and “you shall be judged by your deeds, not by your words”.

No Sizwe

Alexander will be remembered for his pioneering work on the national question and language. Writing under the pseudonym “No Sizwe” in the 1970s, he critiqued the dominant liberation organisations’ approach to building a new united historical community.

He argued that they essentialised “race”, which would probably make it all but impossible for “race thinking” to disappear in a future South Africa. He firmly rejected the racial classifications of the apartheid state and drew on the concept of “racial capitalism” to explain the ways in which the South African state derived economic and social value from the maintenance of racial identities.

In the two subsequent decades, he developed this line of argument, asserting that, for South Africa to emerge as a nation, it would need to be united on all levels of the social formation, including the economic, cultural and social. To simply proclaim South Africa the “rainbow nation” was premature, because the material conditions that would allow a united nation to come into being were simply not present. These realities meant that the nation’s social cohesion was built on quicksand.

In fact, Alexander feared that society would fracture, creating space for opportunistic leaders to mobilise racial divisions to build power bases. Using the xenophobic attacks in 2008 as a salutary backdrop, he warned emphatically that “Things can fall apart very quickly. Our entire sociohistorical fabric can unravel within a few weeks: it took less than 100 days in Rwanda!”

In later years he argued that unless state institutions placed disadvantage rather than “race” at the centre of their transformative strategies, they would only benefit a narrow group of black people and –perpetuate race thinking at the expense of the working and unemployed poor.

His work on language developed his arguments on the national question. He believed that South Africa would not unite unless indigenous languages became the languages of power.

If Alexander could be faulted for anything, then it could be for insufficient introspection about why independent left organisations have so far failed to have consistent mass resonance and why their ideas have failed to become the general ideas of society. The last thing Alexander would have wanted is a hagiography.

Like a true revolutionary, he touched and changed many, many lives, including our own.

Our thoughts are with his family, his many friends and comrades, and his partner Karen Press.

Alexander's funeral this weekend will take the form of a private cremation. There will be many commemorative meetings in the coming few weeks throughout the country and beyond.

Hamba kahle, comrade Neville.

Salim Vally, Brian Ramadiro and Jane Duncan
