

## REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

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Neville Alexander. *An Ordinary Country: Issues in the Transition from Apartheid to Democracy*. Pietermaritzburg. Natal University Press. 2002.

*Reviews by Andrew Nash, Z. Pallo Jordan and Luvuyo Wotshela.*

Neville Alexander occupies a remarkable position in the life of the South African Left. He speaks with the authority of a former Robben Island prisoner – Nelson Mandela’s major left-wing adversary in prison debates in the 1960s and early 1970s – and a lifelong activist, always at the frontlines. But he has never been trapped by this authority. He retains the freedom of a creative thinker, always willing to explore new arguments and perspectives. In this, he is an emblem of what the intellectual Left in South Africa could be, resembling in some ways Mandela’s embodiment of what was best in the new South Africa at the moment of its birth. In both cases, the promise is worth having even if it cannot always be kept.

Alexander’s latest book *An Ordinary Country* started life as a series of lectures given in Germany in 1999 and 2000. Alexander speaks of it as a ‘work in progress’ (p. vi) and as ‘a volume of essays on important related themes or topics rather than a continuous narrative’ (p. 6). Both descriptions seem to me only partly true. The nature of the South African transition will occupy the minds of activists and commentators for many years to come, and no doubt Alexander himself will have more to say on it. But this book is written from a point of view that takes the transition to be essentially completed, for all that important new issues remain unresolved. In this sense, it is very different from *Some Are More Equal than Others* (Cape Town, Buchu Books, 1993), his volume of essays and speeches analysing the transition as it was in process, with its outcome still undecided.

Similarly, although the essays in *An Ordinary Country* are often quite loosely connected, Alexander seeks in all of them to grasp the overall character of the process and its line of movement, rather than treating specific topics in isolation or solely in retrospect. It is not so much that this work is incomplete or episodic, as his disclaimers suggest, but rather that its overall account of the new South Africa does not always add up, and its syntheses are often contradictory. Although the individual essays are illuminating and engaging each in their own right, it is worth asking how these larger lacunae and contradictions come about.

‘Viewed as historiography’, Alexander writes, ‘this book’s thesis is that the new South Africa had to happen in the way it did because of the specific history of the country and of the two main organisational expressions of the interests and desires of the population of South Africa at the end of the twentieth century and in the context of the geopolitical shifts that were taking place during the last

quarter of the century' (p. 6). Elsewhere he speaks of the new South Africa having become 'inevitable' (p. 53). 'No other outcome was possible', he tells us, apart from that achieved by the negotiated settlement (p. 58).

What was it exactly that 'had to happen in the way it did'? Before we can assess whether no other outcome was possible, we have to be able to say what the outcome of the negotiated settlement actually was. The title of Alexander's book suggests an answer that is straightforward but strangely hollow: *An Ordinary Country*.

The new South Africa is ordinary, in this account, in that it conforms to the patterns of global capitalism in the aftermath of the Cold War. Alexander emphasises that 'the ANC government, first and foremost, serves the interests of the capitalist class' (p. 49). Despite changes in its racial composition, this is 'the very same capitalist class that profited from the system of overt and systematic racism which the world called apartheid and which is now allegedly a thing of the past' (p. 59). This class has 'placed their property under new management' without compromising their right to private ownership of the resources of the country (p. 63). The new South Africa is ordinary insofar as the imperatives of globalisation drive it 'towards becoming a deeply divided society in which, as in all countries today, the divisions are determined by class' (p. 96). Alexander concludes that this pattern is set to continue into the future; that is, that class struggles will 'be fought out within the framework of a normalised capitalist society' or 'accommodated within the liberal democratic constitutional order, as they are in other such states' (p. 167).

But there is a second account of the outcome of the negotiated settlement running through Alexander's essays which is more or less openly in conflict with the argument that South Africa has become an 'ordinary country'. According to Alexander, the new South Africa's nation-building project is 'moving at a glacial tempo' and post-apartheid identity politics promise 'volatility and danger' (p. 82). The new South Africa has 'yet to find the appropriate political and social strategies to preclude the danger of a Yugoslav-like fragmentation of the country' (p. 85), in which the country 'falls apart into warring ethnic groups' (p. 91). In the meanwhile, poverty and desperation grows and the 'tidal wave of organised and syndicated crime that is overwhelming the country' takes on the dimensions of 'a surrogate low-intensity civil war' (p. 155).

To complicate the picture, Alexander alludes to a third possibility in his concluding discussion of 'new forms of struggle . . . being forged by ordinary people defending themselves against the barbaric effects of neo-liberal economic policies and practices' (p. 171). He is surely right to see these emerging struggles as no immediate threat to the new ruling-class. And it might be argued that even if these struggles were to grow in strength and cohesion, they could still be contained within a liberal democratic order. But if Alexander is right that 'a reincarnation of socialist thought, mass organisation and mass action will take

place sooner rather than later' (p. 167), then there is at least a question of whether it will leave the basis of the new South African order intact.

Which of these three is the inevitable outcome of the negotiated settlement: the stable and functioning liberal democracy, the powder-keg about to be blown apart, or the capitalist order in which workers are gradually creating new ties of solidarity and struggle? There is some truth in each description. But each of them describes no more than a single tendency within a larger and more confused whole. To project any one of these three lines of development into the future, as if no conflicting possibilities existed, would be a mistake.

My own view is that, as soon as one looks beyond the short-term future, the description of the new South Africa about which Alexander is most emphatic is also the least plausible. South Africa has always been subject, although in its own peculiar way, to the pressures of global capitalism. This was obscured by the exceptional moral status of apartheid after the 1960s. But there is no such thing as an 'ordinary country' in contemporary capitalism. Even if some are exposed to the pressures of the global system in more conventional ways than others, the system itself remains irrational, arbitrary, unequal and oppressive. And if you were to set yourself the task of imagining an ordinary capitalism, it would differ from the new South Africa in at least one respect. Normal societies do not have to work so hard at maintaining their normality. They do not depend so much on the illusion that they have undergone a fundamental change of character.

The new South Africa is a contradictory amalgam, in short, and the outcome of its contradictions is still far from decided. It is far from clear that the system will be able, as Alexander suggests, to 'slough off the integument of racially determined social relations' (p. 22). Does any part of its ruling elite still think this is a real possibility? They hope the black middle-class will grow fast enough to create the impression that the impoverishment of the majority is temporary, or that there is a real prospect for individuals of joining the privileged minority. But they rely on the rule of fear – not fear of arrest under the pass-laws or detention without trial, but the privatised fear of crime, debt, unemployment, and the countless other ways of not making it in capitalist society which do not easily lend themselves to collective resistance. The essential change in social relations has been to erode the racial basis of collective resistance, not to make race irrelevant in the lives of most South Africans.

Alexander is well aware that the new South Africa is the product of political choices. He is especially effective in pointing out the role of the South African Communist Party and Left forces within the ANC which have sought to 'dress up enforced compromise and retreat as victory' (p. 63). The essays in *An Ordinary Country* are conceived as a left-wing corrective to new South African 'triumphalism' (p. 5), deliberately aimed at 'identifying the points of leverage that are available to those who are not deluded by the trappings of representative democracy' (p. 7). But despite his own strong sense of how social out-

comes are shaped by political action, it seems to me that Alexander's analysis yields no clear perspective for the Left in the new South Africa.

Why not? Although Alexander gives a central place to class issues in describing the making of the new South Africa, these issues are far less conspicuous in his account of the political choices it raises. Capitalist industrialisation, he argues, by throwing together 'people of diverse provenance in South Africa' has established 'the loom on which the fabric of a united South African nation can be woven'. However, warping tendencies originating within the capitalist system itself have strengthened 'those elements that are disposed to tear this fabric apart'. As a result, 'the question that poses itself today is whether a post-apartheid government can neutralise these tendencies and initiate the centripetal patterns that are needed to keep the national state together' (p. 40). I think it is fair to say that this question – how to ensure national unity and keep forces of sectionalism in check – is at the heart of Alexander's account of the politics of the new South Africa. But the question lends itself to a deep ambivalence about class.

For the sake of argument, let us grant Alexander's point that 'if we do not promote national unity, that is, arrive at a core of common values, practices and national projects', then the new South Africa will 'fall apart into warring ethnic groups, each with a more or less separatist agenda' (p. 91). My own view is that this point is too broadly stated for it to be conceded or contested with much meaning; it leaves undecided how large a core is needed, how adherence to that core is ensured, and too many other questions. But it is more difficult to concede Alexander's point that the imperative of national unity must be pursued 'regardless of the class character of the leadership for the moment' (p. 91).

Since he joined the liberation struggle in the early 1950s, Alexander writes, he has adhered to a view that there is one South African nation (p. 38). This view was most fully argued in his *One Azania, One Nation*, published under the pseudonym No Sizwe in 1979. However, he now argues that 'the mistake that earlier versions of this theory of one emerging or evolving South African nation made was to assume that such a project was, or is, necessarily a socialist or working-class project' (p. 39). But the problem lies not so much in his answer to the question of which class will solve the 'national question', but rather in his assumption that this question can be the defining issue of a socialist agenda in the new South Africa.

In a context in which the relationship of the liberation movement to capitalism and socialism is genuinely contested, the national question provides an important arena in which a working-class programme can be defended and its tasks addressed. By focusing on the national question, socialism can be explained as a coherent response to a broad range of social problems, not only those that relate directly to the condition of workers. But in the context in which Alexander is writing today – in which the left has been decisively defeated within the movement – to give priority to the national question 'regardless of

the class character of the leadership' is effectively to commit yourself to creating national unity under the leadership of the capitalist class.

This slippage is most clearly evident in Alexander's major essay on 'Nation Building and the Politics of Identity', from which a number of quotations have already been taken. The essay begins with a critique of ANC policy on language and culture, but gradually shifts into a first-person plural presentation. For example, 'one of the most urgent issues *we* have to address in South Africa is that of ensuring . . . that our radical position on the language question [that is, the equal status of eleven official languages in the constitution—A.N.] is not rendered meaningless through the pressures of middle-class interests' (p. 92, emphasis added).

Who 'we' are in this and other formulations is never really specified. But its use becomes increasingly consistent with an appeal to a 'capitalist government' that 'wants to maintain its place in the new world order' (p. 96). Is this the leadership that will ensure that 'antagonistic contradictions are not generated . . . through sectarian mobilisation in the interest of self-seeking class agendas' (p. 99)? Is the national question to be solved by those whose class agendas are concerned strictly with exploitation of labour and would not make use of ethnicity to further that agenda?

Alexander's account of language and culture in the new South Africa is devastatingly accurate. His defence of Afrikaans, in this volume and elsewhere, is principled and courageous. His argument that an English-only or English-mainly language policy is 'in fact a policy of middle-class advancement' (p. 92) gets to the heart of the matter. But its importance is not quite what Alexander thinks it is. It is important as a means of resisting a new form of class-rule rather than imposing a progressive agenda on the new ruling-class.

There is a complex and difficult balance between building a socialist agenda and taking on larger historical tasks partly defined by the peculiarities of national context. Neville Alexander has much to teach us about finding and maintaining that balance in the South African context. He does this best when he keeps the limits of capitalism clearly in view.

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War clouds darken the skies as the first month of the year 2003 ends. There is a great likelihood of the history of a century ago repeating itself, neither as tragedy nor as farce, but as an international holocaust. In its day the Anglo-Boer War which ended a century ago, was regarded as emblematic of imperialist bullying of the weak by the powerful. That war came close on the heels of a British

attempt to effect regime change, under the pretext that Kruger's South African Republic was undemocratic. Both Boer Republics, where Black people were rightless helots denied the vote, were indeed explicitly undemocratic. Despite this, with the exception of Turkey, every European government was opposed to Britain. An unusual consensus ensued among otherwise mutually competitive imperial powers, who became odd bedfellows in their shared antagonism towards British aggression. It was generally acknowledged that the war was precipitated by the 19th century's principal imperial power. Within every other nation too, public opinion was overwhelmingly critical of Britain for provoking a war with what the Irish republican socialist James Connolly described as a 'simple peasant nation'. On this issue Tsar Nicholas II, and his arch enemies – the populists, the social democrats and anarchists – found themselves in the same trench. In Germany, the Kaiser exploited vocal anti-British sentiment to his advantage and piloted a naval construction programme through the Reichstag virtually unopposed. In France, the socialists and radicals sat comfortably in the company of their political opponents on the right. In a movement not dissimilar to the broad spectrum of opinion opposing the war plans of the Bush Administration in our day.

Britain felt herself vindicated by the policies pursued in her two colonies, the Cape and Natal. The Cape's policy of the franchise for all civilised men in principle was colour blind. In Natal the more conservative White minority had effectively kept the franchise from all but six Black potential voters despite official rhetoric about a colour blind property-owners franchise. The concentration camps cast light on an aspect of colonial warfare, well known to its victims, but hitherto hidden from the view of most European citizens, that made Britain's case even less convincing. Though she was victorious, Britain had lost the moral high-ground.

To win the war Britain marshalled the forces of her vast empire. Canadian, Australian, New Zealand and even Indian troops fought alongside Welshmen, Scots and Irishmen. The war turned out costlier than its instigators had anticipated but the prize of South Africa under British dominion was thought well worth it. To make its newly acquired territories a going concern Britain had to win the cooperation of the defeated Boers. The compact concluded at the end of the Anglo-Boer War signalled the recognition that the shared interests of the White propertied classes transcended ethnicity. The search for Boer-Brit unity, in the face of the colonised majority, is the backdrop against which 20th century South African history unfolded.

The Chinese peasants' secret society, the Yo Hetuan or the Boxers, who rose up against foreign encroachments on China's sovereignty in 1900 were not as fortunate in attracting international solidarity. In the far east the imperial powers stood together. The German general, Waldersee, led a mixed expeditionary force made up of European, United States and Japanese troops, marched on Beijing and suppressed the uprising. It was, parenthetically, in the context of

the Boxer Rebellion that Kaiser Wilhelm coined the phrase 'yellow peril'. The sensibilities that had inspired so much sympathy for the Boer cause did not apply to the Chinese.

Ironically, the title of Dr Alexander's monograph, *An Ordinary Country*, belies its substance. What one discovers between the covers of this book is precisely how un-ordinary South Africa and the South African experience has been. 'South African exceptionalism' was debated for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century among the left and liberation formations of South Africa. Political strategists pointed to its relatively large naturalised White population as one among many features that made South Africa different. The distinct patterns of interaction between colonised and coloniser as well as the contradictions engendered by inter-imperial rivalry had ensured that colonialism in South Africa evolved features that were not so much exceptional, as different, from the rest of the continent.

Speaking in the Cape Colony's legislative council in 1852, William Porter, the Attorney General of the colony, declared: 'Now, for myself, I do not hesitate to say that I would rather meet the Hottentot at the hustings, voting for his representative, than meet the Hottentot in the wild with his gun upon his shoulder'. It cannot be considered coincidental that these words were uttered after what South African history books used to call 'the Second Hottentot Rebellion' of 1851. The rebellion of the Kat River settlement was suppressed with a good measure of brutality and, after being found guilty of treason, its principal leaders, were transported to Australia as convicts.

While Black South Africans were victimised by both the Boers and the Brits, neither had been in a position to act with absolute impunity. Colonial history before 1902 abounds with examples of alliances, relations of clientage and dependency that tempered, re-channelled and contained the capacity of the rival colonisers to act as they pleased. The last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the re-negotiation and re-definition of these through war and peaceful political struggles.

The peace concluded at Vereeniging in 1902 began to bring South Africa into closer alignment with the other African colonies. As Mahmood Mamdani has argued, in its essentials, apartheid was the institutions of European colonialism in Africa carried to their logical and absurd extreme.

The 1909 Act of Union raised the Whites, collectively, to the status of a ruling race, lording it over subject peoples. Presiding over this racial oligarchy were the country's leading economic institutions, the mines and the mining finance houses, whose power and influence affected practically every facet of life. But while the special form of colonialism which became the hallmark of 20<sup>th</sup> century South Africa served the interests of big capital, personified by the mines, it was the outcome of struggles waged between White colonial society and independent Black polities during the 19<sup>th</sup> century; struggles waged by Blacks in alliance with some Whites within colonial society; as well as strug-

gles waged among Whites, to the exclusion of Blacks, within colonial society. The basic law of the land defined South Africa's political institutions as the preserve of the Whites. Black voting rights in the Cape suggested that Blacks might incrementally be allowed to enter this charmed circle. But most Whites saw them as a temporary nuisance to be tolerated for the time being, but destined to be discarded at the convenience of the White electorate. Thus from 1910 until the mid-1940s Black South African politics was in large measure a rearguard action to fend off the threat of complete disenfranchisement.

At the end of the 1866 war Count Cavour of Piedmont reputedly remarked, 'Now that we have created Italy, we have to create Italians'. The pertinence of Cavour's remarks resides as much in the similarities as in their differences between the South African and Italian transitions. The unification of Italy came about through a combination of military expeditions undertaken by a reformist state, revolutionary warfare conducted Garibaldi and his colleagues and a number of negotiated compacts leading to the incorporation of the Papal states. In contrast, by the time of the 18th Brumaire of 1799, the imperatives of the revolution had rendered the creation of a French nation superfluous. The struggle against absolutism at home and wars against its allies from the rest of Europe had forged France into a nation state and her people into a nation with a shared identity.

South African liberation movements optimistically expected to rerun the French experience. Every strand of opinion and tendency among the liberation movements, including the most hardline 'Africanists', envisaged a democratic order in which Whites would constitute a significant component of the South African population. All shared the confident belief that the liberation struggle would have the therapeutic effect of lancing the boil of racism, thus creating the environment for a process of healing which would result in the emergence of a single nation.

Every political struggle invariably entails an element of contingency that may lead to unexpected and unplanned for outcomes. The historical upshot was simpler yet more complex than many of the theorists and strategists had anticipated. Rather than a revolutionary eruption, change came to South Africa as a negotiated settlement with a host of explicit and implicit compromises. The radical courses that either the Black elites or the working classes might otherwise have preferred had to be deferred. *An Ordinary Country* attempts to explore the implications of this outcome and the feasibility of a successful nation-building project given the internal and international constraints within which it will have to unfold.

Though he is aware of the constraints imposed by the negotiated settlement and the international environment, Dr Alexander tends to write of these as if they are extraneous and might well have been evaded or even ignored. At the end of the 1980s, democratic agitation in Poland, Czechoslovakia and the GDR had led to the collapse of Communist regimes in each of these countries. For the



first time in decades the right felt comfortable with the aggressive promotion of democracy and the protection of civil liberties. Hitherto these had been the causes of the left. While the left held western and imperial governments accountable for human rights violations it adopted an attitude of benign tolerance to the abuses of socialist and post colonial governments. South Africa's democratic breakthrough occurred in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent discrediting of socialism as a viable and humane alternative to late monopoly capitalism.

It remains unclear to what extent the events of 1989 and 1991 led to a rethink among many of South Africa's Communists. Without even a cursory bow in the direction of Maynard Keynes, many of these former socialists have embraced cautious macro-economic policies designed not upset the sensibilities of transnational corporations and potential international investors.

The growing strength of the right as an international political force can also be measured by the retreats executed by the Social Democratic parties of Europe. The enthusiastic embrace of the market economy by the exponents of 'post modern socialism' and the 'third way' became an additional expression of neo-liberal triumphalism. The international political environment after 1990 did not favour movements of the left – more especially those that would have to appeal to western altruism and empathy in the absence of a Soviet bloc that might have compensated for western hostility. A number of events and occurrences during the 1980s had made western socialist, social democratic and left-liberal formations wary of colonial liberation movements. The atrocities of the Cambodian Khmer Rouge and the brutal suppression of the democratic movement in China had confirmed their scepticism.

The African environment in which South Africa embarked on its path to democracy had been greatly transformed since the 1960s. True, some of the old stalwarts of the anti-colonial struggle were still on the scene. Kenneth Kuanda, during whose presidency Zambia had hosted every liberation movement on the sub-continent, received Nelson Mandela in Lusaka as an honoured guest in 1990. Shortly thereafter he himself was ousted from the presidency of his country by an ex-trade unionist, Frederick Chiluba, at the head of a post-liberation democratic movement protesting the one-party state. Chiluba's victory represented both a repudiation of past political practice as well as the left-leaning policies UNIP had pursued. Left-inclined social policy had been discredited by the political practice of the party that had led Zambia since independence. It shared responsibility with the leadership of UNIP for the country's failure.

The indigenous constituency mobilised to support these policies was the highly educated elite who staffed the offices of multi-nationals, local and international banks, government offices and who dominated the professions. By the 1990s in a number of African countries some thirty years of independence had resulted in the crystallisation of a new social stratum – a highly mobile middle class, in possession of internationally marketable skills, who had lost faith in

radical solutions and preferred conventional trickle down economics. They are local, but networked and associated through business and politics, with their counter-parts in the rest of the world. In one country after another they were turning their backs on the old parties in search of coalitions that better expressed their interests and aspirations. Though the social policies they advocated were conservative, these movements were able to ride the crest of a wave of mass discontent and popular disaffection.

The post-liberation democratic movement assumed a number of forms across the continent. In Uganda Yoweri Museveni's national movement had taken power at the helm of a popular revolt against a thoroughly corrupt indigenous elite. In Zaire, now once again Congo, active democratic agitation was beginning to stir among bodies of civil society. In Kenya a more resilient opposition to Arap Moi's regime was taking shape but it required another twelve years to drive him out of office. In Mozambique the revanchist-inspired RENAMO also lay claim to the mantle of democratisation and won recognition as a loyal opposition to the ruling FRELIMO. The governments against whom these movements took the field were often conservative, but others were considered radical. What the movements had in common was the demand that governments be compelled to be more accountable to the nation by the holding regular free and fair multi-party elections. They attracted varying degrees of support from the international community.

Political democracy in South Africa is the product of extra-parliamentary democratic action by a constituency of poor and propertyless people. The franchise enables the ordinary citizen to intervene in the political process in order to shape social policy. The expectations the newly enfranchised had of democracy inevitably were high. Democracy would empower them by redistributing wealth and opportunity. Arriving at a moment of historic defeat with the left in retreat internationally, South African democracy was born constrained by an international climate of neo-liberal triumphalism.

The jury was in on publicly owned economies, we were told, the private sector did it better, more efficiently. Market forces stimulated a consistent improvement of quality. The avowedly socialist regimes of China, Cuba and Vietnam bent with the prevailing wind to avoid being broken or uprooted. A democratic South African government, no matter by whom it was led, would have been compelled to take account of these realities once it had assumed office. Recognition that one's options are limited is the pre-requisite for rational action.

It is nonetheless true that South Africa's eight year old democracy has generated new contradictions of its own. Seizing the opportunities that opened up with the arrival of democracy, elements of the Black elite have clambered or have been assisted into the corporate elite. Others have become leading civil servants, some are serving on the bench, yet others head state-owned enterprises. A yawning income gap separates them from the majority of Black South

Africans. The salience of race in defining political options will very likely decline. But it is still self-evidently the dominant factor today.

Alexander's attempts to press apartheid into the mould of the Indian caste system are as unconvincing now as they were in the late seventies. While he finds Mahmood Mamdani's characterisation of apartheid as the quintessence of colonialism very attractive, Alexander appears hesitant to recognise its dominant colonial features lest these lead him to embrace a national democratic rather than a socialist solution. He consequently prefers the deficient phrase, 'racial capitalism', to 'colonialism of a special type'. Perhaps because the latter is so closely linked to SACP and ANC discourse?

Among the liberation movements of our region the illegal ANC was probably the most prolific publisher. Commencing with less formal early publications, *Spotlight on South Africa* and *South African Freedom News*, by 1990 the ANC was producing a monthly, *Sechaba*, a weekly *Newsbriefing*, a cultural quarterly, *Rixaka*, in addition to *Dawn*, the journal of Mkhonto weSizwe, *Voice of Women*, and the newssheet *Mayibuye*. Inside South Africa the ANC-aligned mass democratic movement churned out an impressive number of journals permeated with political debate. It would be surprising if Alexander was unaware of these publications and the debates they carried. His assertion that the explanation given to him in prison by Nelson Mandela in 1965 remained the ANC's approach to the armed struggle is unsubstantiated. At best, it is misleading. It's a matter of historical record that the late 1980s the ANC was still considering an insurrectionary option.

Thanks to decades of mass agitation the politically mobilised and socially active among the Black population are the working poor of the urban areas. The urban unemployed and the rural poor remain largely marginalised, though squatter communities and informal settlements have mastered collective action and employ it regularly to back their demands. Black elites, with the exception of NAFCOC, are largely unorganised, relying more on effective networking than the weight of their numbers. Organised labour remains the best organised and most numerous progressive constituency.

It is an historical fact that democratic institutions – the rule of law; the separation of powers; an independent judiciary; regular elections; freedom of the expression; equality before the law; etc – were brought to the peoples of southern Africa through the agency of their respective national liberation movements. The corrosive effect of the expediciencies that persuaded some movements when in government to compromise these institutions, eventually corrupted them. Some degenerated to become the principal violators of democratic freedoms and human rights. While a number of parties and governments have adapted to and embraced the post-liberation democracy wave, others thought that they could resist it by riding the leopard of other sources of mass discontent. ZANU (PF) chose the latter course and embraced illegal land occupations as though it had initiated them. It then harnessed the energy of that

movement for electoral purposes using its activists to intimidate political opponents and to impress voters into supporting it.

The ignominious collapse of Soviet socialism completely discredited authoritarian regimes of the left along with their coercive methods. Socialists, social-democrats, left-liberals and even the remaining Communists, these days display far less patience with left governments that employ anti-democratic methods to remain in office. The widely held view is that democratically elected governments, even if they are right-wing, are preferable to unrepresentative left-wing power wielders who feel constrained to repress the very people whose interests they purport to represent. That shift implies that today the international left is no longer willing to accept progressive social policy as an alibi for undemocratic political practice.

Principled socialists have consequently felt obliged to repudiate the Ton-ton Macoute methods of Zanu(PF) while holding at a distance the MDC, a democratic opposition that seems to lack a social conscience. The parties of the Socialist International, including the Swedish Social Democrats who had previously supported ZANU during the liberation struggle, have all abandoned ZANU(PF) and seek instead to promote the MDC. The left-liberal civil liberties and human rights lobbies in the west have turned away from ZANU(PF) in disgust, leaving it open to hostile attack by its long-standing enemies on the right and centre.

The mass mobilisation that finally brought the apartheid regime to the negotiating table has bequeathed South Africa a vibrant civil society and a plethora of mass organisations. In addition to the Constitution this politically engaged public are the best guarantor against any temptation to exceed its powers on the part of government. Such mass formations will also keep government alert to the needs of the poor and will become the hatchery for politicians representing the popular classes.

Regrettably the least talked about dimension of the so-called 'South African miracle' is the manner in which it reconnected democracy and liberation. The door to democracy, prised ajar by mass struggles re-inforced by international solidarity, was finally flung open when both sides recognised that their shared interest in the success and prosperity of South Africa could be more swiftly and certainly attained by reducing the potential for conflict in the South African polity. A negotiated settlement necessarily entailed hard-nosed trade offs and conscious retreats from previously held positions by both sides. Submitting to the temptation to characterise these as a 'sell-out' is not merely puerile, but also sterile. Not surprisingly, those political formations that have yielded to this temptation find it difficult to make themselves relevant in the post-1994 political terrain.

At a time when White ultra-right revanchism is once again a palpable national security threat, social scientists should resist the siren songs of historical amnesia. During the last three years of apartheid South Africa came closer

to the racial armageddon the White right hoped to provoke than many today care to remember. If the then clear and present threat of the war was averted by the concessions the ANC made to Constand Viljoen's phalanxes, surely that should outweigh defence of an abstract principle.

In spite of imperfections, the bitter disappointments and its evident shortcomings, South African democracy has delivered what it has because this country's economic infra-structure remained largely intact. Even a brief war would have gravely impaired the state's ability to bring health care, education, clean running water, electricity and telecommunications to the working poor. The housing backlog would have been compounded by the devastation of existing housing stock.

Casualties among the young, who invariably do the actual fighting in all wars, would have profoundly complicated the impact of the HIV-Aids pandemic. I am still persuaded that accepting a great deal more than we had, while recognising that it was less than what we had striven for, was the wisest course.

Peace and stability are not mere abstractions to those who actually live through and with the consequences of war. The wealthy and other members of elites can usually buy their way out of fighting wars, as the 'chicken hawks' leading the Bush administration can testify. The poor pay for wars with the sweat, tears, blood and the corpses of their young. This is especially true in Africa where instability and wars have all but destroyed the promise of independence. The pursuance of stability and peace require the eschewal of zero sum politics in Africa. The firming up of democratic governance is a *sine qua non* for the success of that project.

Among the great weaknesses of South African historiography is a tendency to objectify Black South Africans. It was easier to portray them not as subjects acting on and shaping the historical process, but rather as history's victims. Neville Alexander strays perilously close to casting Blacks as the objects of the decisions of others. His treatment of the post-1990 transition to political democracy throws this into particularly sharp relief. Reading his account one could form the impression that the course of events was determined by South African monopoly capital, the reformists among the Broederbond and international imperialism. In this scenario the leadership of the liberation movement appear as bit players, borne along in the slipstream of the real actors of history. The defectiveness of such an approach is clear when one recalls the relative helplessness of the De Klerk government faced with the escalating provocations of the 'third force' among its own security forces. Let us recall too the uncertainty of the ANC's efforts to contain mass anger after the murder of Chris Hani.

Yet my reservations about the manner he treats these issues do not detract from the quality of the book. The way it provoked me to argue with it attests to this. Dr Alexander raises a host of issues and questions that are fundamental to South Africa's transition. It is a stimulating read that is bound to provoke much

debate. The British gold standard had established the centrality of gold as the international medium of exchange in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The First World War demonstrated that oil, as an energy source and as our primary lubricant, would assume even greater importance than gold in the future because it keeps the cogs of our industrial society turning. It is ironic that after a century that supposedly put an end to ideology, Hobson is being vindicated by both the words and deeds of western policy makers. The weaknesses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century notwithstanding, the events unfolding during these first months of 2003 demonstrate the continuing relevance of the Marxist critique of imperialism.

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South Africa's transition to democracy and the African National Congress's accession to power in the late twentieth century have stimulated new historiographical developments. Neville Alexander's book, *An Ordinary Country* (2002), provides an invigorating examination of issues and developments that have influenced the transition to democracy in South Africa. Dealing with a subject on which there is ample new material and no lack of opinion, Alexander skilfully illustrates how the socio-historical background of South Africa and the leading contributors to South Africa's negotiated settlement shaped the transition as it did. As difficult as it is to be confident about writing on the recent past, let alone the challenges of understanding new historical processes, Alexander even goes a step further by making predictions concerning directions the South African transition is likely to follow.

These predictions are not provided without conjecture and indeed they are articulated well, after an examination of the most glaring and salient features that characterised the process of South Africa's transformation to democracy. Alexander's analysis of South Africa's transition to democracy and of the formation of the post-apartheid state (chapters 3 and 4) provides a contextual framework that is equally critical of the issues that form the main thrust of his book, that is, his detailed analysis of the process of nation-building, as well as the generation of the new politics of identity. As significant aspects of South Africa's social transformation, these are well rehearsed and have been fused well in his discussion of his politics of reconciliation (chapters 5 and 6).

*An Ordinary Country* is divided into seven chapters with an impressive introduction in chapter 1. Separate sections are provided for notes providing references for points raised in the main text. There is also a comprehensive bibliography, as well as an index. The only appendix contains extracts from the South African Constitution (1996). Selected extracts deal with the 'promotion

and protection of rights of cultural, religious and linguistic communities, role of traditional leaders and self determination'. They appropriately correlate with some of the main issues regarding social transformation highlighted in Alexander's study: identity, authority, citizenship and democracy.

Alexander begins his study with a one-chapter background that discusses 'race' and class in South African historiography. Unlike Fukuyama, who following the significant changes in South Africa from 1989 onwards pronounced the end of history, Alexander chooses history as a basis for his examination of South Africa's transformation process.

Throughout this work, I have tried to spotlight the relationship between events on the ground and the conception or visions of the political and the cultural-intellectual leadership of the people. The interplay between the objective movement of history and the ways in which this is perceived, influenced and shaped by those who, for whatever reason, have been vested with the authority and the power to initiate, co-ordinate and organise mass action is the real subject of historiography (Alexander, 2002, p.7).

In identifying his examination of post-1989 South Africa's transformation process as a subject of historiography, Alexander provides a useful criticism and synthesis of 'race', class and the South African historiography. It is well known that the main influential historical themes: industrialisation, mining, nationalism, both African and Afrikaner, have shaped the pattern of the South African historiography. Liberal and radical historians have concentrated on the speed with which a common South African economy and a society emerged, but were reshaped profoundly by forced segregation.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging this factor, Alexander goes even further to illustrate how the study of 'race' and class triggered the broadening of research methods, drawn widely from other fields of the social sciences during the 1980s (pp.19-23). These have added a new dimension to South African historiography, which for a long period has been almost exclusively, dominated by a liberal/radical rapprochement approach.

There are even more intriguing and perhaps some unresolved concerns highlighted on issues relating to nationalism and the dynamics of the liberation movement. The underlying assumptions of the revisionists who drew labour and reserves into the 'race' and class debate did at least recognise the shifting role of the reserves in the late twentieth century but failed to fully appreciate it. From being predominantly the home for rural migrants engaged in the formal sector of South Africa, the role of the reserves changed to that of facilitating social control, as well as offering space for the surplus people.<sup>2</sup> These multifarious groupings of people were drawn to various strands of socio-political involvement, ranging from homeland tribal politics and their patronage network, to militant resistance movements that were subsequently drawn together under the banner of the United Democratic Front (UDF) from the early 1980s. The complexity of the homelands' social and political setting and that of the South African townships, clearly meant that the history of political opposition

could not be reduced to that of the working classes or the rise of African nationalism.

The complexity of the social formation of South Africa is noted by Alexander, as his provision of divergent conceptions of the South African nation suggests (pp.31-42). Nevertheless, he is at a quandary to quantify the one conception that he himself adheres to: that of the *one South African nation*. Perhaps, though reluctantly so, he is also seduced by the liberal and revisionists writers' emphasis on apartheid's relationship to capitalism and class interests. So he argues 'the ordinary processes of capitalist industrialisation have thrown together people of diverse provenance in South Africa during approximately the past century and a half, thus establishing a loom on which the fabric of a united South African nation can be woven' (p.40).

Significantly, he does elaborate on this statement and more particularly he has highlighted the fact that the capitalist system also tends to reinforce elements that are disposed to tear this united fabric apart. There is, however, a strong case, based on historical evidence, to credit such an outcome more to the dynamic, but yet disruptive, nature of the apartheid policy than to the capitalist system on its own. Some of the human labour force this policy assembled around the industrial areas of South Africa had to filter through and adapt to different mechanisms that were also applied to the homeland base where it resided. The objective of assembling an idle labour force at this rural end encountered other competitions – control of rural resources and 'tribal' configurations that became day-to-day features of the politics in the homeland, while simultaneously creating interests and 'identities' other than those strictly confined to migrant labour patterns.

In acknowledging capitalism's role in assembling divergent elements for labour and production, Alexander should also emphasise that apartheid displaced a large number of the South African population away from the urban economy and proper infrastructure while its rural policy threw villagers into new 'ethnic' or 'tribal' arrangements by means of political party affiliations. The consequences of such contrasting practices remain a vital challenge to the conception of *a one South African nation*. It is almost impossible to quantify the disparities that resulted from the segregation policy. Nevertheless, it is clear, at least at a superficial level, that South Africa does appear as two worlds in one geographical field – from the first world of Johannesburg and Cape Town highways and suburban areas such as Sandton, Rosebank, Constantia and Newlands to the makeshift roads and shanty towns of Alexander, Soweto, the Cape Flats and Crossroads, from the well-administered, financed and organised farming communities of the Sundays and Gamtoos river valleys in the Eastern Cape to the communal and dilapidated rural villages of the Ciskei and Transkei.

Glaring socio-geographical and economic disparities did, however give an impetus to the liberation movement. Alexander illustrates convincingly how the four pillars of the ANC's resistance strategy were visualised between 1969



and 1980: home-based mass mobilisation campaign, armed struggle, underground struggle and international isolation of the apartheid government (p.47). But, surprisingly it was the negotiation path initiated by Nelson Mandela from the mid-1980s that was to constitute the basis for the transition to democracy, prompting some writers to conclude that the insurrectionary strategy the ANC had adopted hitherto was not succeeding.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, using his discussions with Mandela in prison during the 1970s as a valuable source, Alexander does illuminate the critical point that the decision to open up a negotiation process was conceived much earlier than it was unleashed (p.47).

There are some peculiarities of the transition to democracy that he brings to our attention. As a multi-class organisation, the ANC was prepared to adopt a neo-liberal economic policy notwithstanding its long-standing relationship with the South African Communist Party (SACP). One must ponder deeply whether or not the shift from a social democratic Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) to a neo-liberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy was a recognition by the ANC government that the swift redistribution of the country's resources could not primarily hinge on the state fiscal policy without a proactive input from a privately controlled market-base. Even more peculiar for Alexander was how the leadership of the white minority were caught by surprise when the ANC leadership was prepared to accept a neo-liberal economic policy. Its presentation on the world stage by the ANC, which hitherto had been mythologised as a 'communist and terrorist' organisation by the National Party and some right wing white political parties, benefited the ANC immensely (pp.48-49).

There is perhaps no peculiarity in the overwhelming role of Mandela in South Africa's transition. His outreaching negotiation process did at least diffuse the threat of 'white fears' and also accommodated their interests to a large extent. It also provided for other political organisations like the Inkatha Freedom Party, (IFP) which advocated the preservation of 'tribal' and regional interests. Nevertheless, Alexander does point out that even after eight years of transition to the post-apartheid state there has been no social revolution in South Africa, largely because service delivery operates at a snail's pace. For him, the ever-growing nest of poverty and unemployment is shaping the terrain for future political struggle that 'will constitute a challenge to the foundations of the prevailing system in southern Africa' (p.71). The economic pressures for even those who have jobs to work are enormously high and they could precipitate a militant class struggle as recent sporadic incidents around the country's work places have indicated.

There are even tougher challenges on issues relating to nation-building and the politics of identity. Ethnic division, racial and territorial segregation were the slogans of the apartheid government. Mandela's government of national unity (1994-99), fostered nation-building and a rhetoric of reconciliation. Nevertheless, as Alexander points out, the multicultural nature of our society raises

a critical identity crisis in the new South Africa. This is epitomised aptly by the existence of eleven official languages in South Africa. Vast challenges remain in promoting multilingual awareness let alone multilingual proficiency in a state as ethnically diverse as South Africa. Moreover, the imperative role of language around issues of social transformation clearly means that South African institutions have to ensure that 'language policy is synchronised with other social strategies calculated to promote national unity' (p.98).

National reconciliation and national unity were carried out through a formal vehicle in the form of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that was established by means of legislation in 1995 to investigate and document gross human rights violations committed within and outside South Africa in the period 1960-94. As Alexander points out, it was a point of convergence for many of the contradictions and the conflicts as well as of the many attempts at their resolution in South Africa. There were, however, stark problems regarding reconciliation none more so than that issues of morality, justice and the trauma and pain inflicted on the victims of apartheid atrocities had to be shared publicly and also between the victims and the perpetrators. Reparations were promised to the victims and amnesty was provided for perpetrators, on condition that they in turn provided full disclosure of their actions. Equally critical, the TRC proclaimed prosecution and no amnesty for those perpetrators who did not disclose their deeds.

As the instrument of a 'historic compromise', the TRC will go down as one of the most dramatic stage-managed processes which failed to achieve its goals. Most reparations to apartheid victims have yet to be paid. Perhaps fearing the disclosure of skeletons from its own closet and perhaps fearing to rattle the unity government it had forged with its previous opponents, the ANC-led government has allowed perpetrators who never disclosed their deeds to escape prosecution. Justice and issues of morality were sacrificed for political expedience. Moreover, as Alexander illustrates, there are very few people and hardly any social commentators and analysts who believe that reconciliation will be achieved by the TRC in the short to medium term (p.121).

Alexander's examination of the TRC takes us even further than the problems associated with reconciliation. In respect of its truth-finding mandate, its investigation into the gross human rights violations of the past, he poses the question whether the TRC process could be defined as history and whether the TRC report could be accepted as a historiography. There are critical limitations, not only do its findings fall short in factual detail of the deeds that were committed, but its text has also been constructed by authors who indicated unfamiliarity with the vast volumes of literature on apartheid, colonialism, racism and capitalism pertaining to South Africa. It serves as a classic example of how the past can be constructed and presented, but by no means will the TRC and its report close the door on the past. Nevertheless, the TRC report is held up as the 'official' history of apartheid South Africa (pp.132-133). In this particular circum-

stance, politicians have reconstructed what they perceive to be the past and have also made their mark on the South African historiography.

There have been many significant achievements. The fundamental aspect of the strategy of the Mandela government hinged on the 'continuity, coherence and stability of the present political entity and the social order on which it is based, minus its racial fault-line' (p.54). All South Africans have been enfranchised and the ANC has come into office, not into power. Alexander warns that the social ills of syndicated crime along with the high rate of unemployment have generated widespread feelings of insecurity, paranoia, intensified racial prejudice, xenophobia and pessimism. These have all led many, especially young professionals and skilled artisans, to abandon all patriotism and noble intention by choosing to emigrate.

There are even tougher challenges, Alexander argues further. For stability and confidence to be maintained, South Africa has to maintain its present liberal democratic constitution and its multi-party system. The hard core facts of history that have shaped disparities will not disappear, although South Africa has been put on the African map through the African Renaissance campaign, having been the subject of world eyes for its achievement of a liberal democracy. Despite potential challenges from either the right or the left of the ANC, the inflated but less delivering bureaucracy and the declining quality of life of the majority of South Africans represents the real threat to the continued rule of the ANC. As much as democracy is central to social justice, formal political rights conceived merely as 'one person one vote' are not sufficient for the full democratisation of our country.<sup>4</sup>

Alexander should be highly commended for providing an exhilarating and thought-provoking study. Ironically, as he himself subscribes to a specific political theory, his book is not for those whose thinking is confined to a specific political grouping nor is it for those whose thinking is formed by a certain guru. This book is an examination of a number of issues relating to the history and the transformation process of South Africa. It can be recommended to those who are interested in this field, as well as for those who are in the field of social sciences and policy studies.

## Notes

1. W. Beinart, *Twentieth Century South Africa* (Second Edition Oxford 2001), p.5.
2. Reserve, Bantustan and homeland are all terms for those areas officially designated for South African black people. These terms changed concomitantly with politics in South Africa. S. Greenberg and H. Giliomee, 'Managing influx control from the rural end: the black homelands and the underbelly of privilege', in H. Giliomee and L. Schlemmer (eds), *Up Against the Fences: Poverty, Passes and Privilege in South Africa*, (Cape Town 1985), pp. 68-84. H. Wolpe, 'Capitalism and cheap labour-power in South Africa: from segregation to apartheid' *Economy and Society*, 1,4 (1972), pp. 438-440. There is ample literature dealing with reset-

tlement and villagisation on parts of the Eastern Cape; see C. de Wet and M. Whisson (eds), *From Reserve to Region: Apartheid and Social change in the Keiskammahoek district of the former Ciskei, 1950 to 1990*, (Grahamstown 1997). C. de Wet, 'Betterment planning in South Africa: some thoughts on its history, feasibility and wider policy implications', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol 6, No ½, (1987), pp. 90-97. F.T. Hendricks, 'Loose planning and rapid resettlement: the politics of conservation and control in Transkei, South Africa, 1950-1970' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol 15, No 2 (1989), 306-325.

3. H. Marais, *South Africa: Limits to Change: The Political Economy of Transformation* (London 1998), pp. 74-75.
4. D.M. Smith, 'Redistribution and Social Justice after Apartheid' in A. Lemon (ed), *The Geography of Change in South Africa* (Chichester 1995), pp. 60-61.

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