

# NOT A RAINBOW BUT A RIVER

## PROSPECTS FOR A NONRACIAL FUTURE

By *Neville Alexander, with a response by Mahmood Mamdani*

At the time of writing in 2001, the late South African educator Neville Alexander was directing the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa at the University of Cape Town. Mahmood Mamdani was (and is) the Herbert Lehman Professor of Government at the School of International and Public Affairs and professor of anthropology, political science and African studies at Columbia University.



Neville Alexander



Mahmood Mamdani

*These excerpts from a conversation first published fifteen years ago<sup>1</sup> reveal the authors' lucid diagnoses and*

*the likely prognosis for social relations in South Africa. To read them in 2016 casts their warnings as prophetic.*

**T**he sickening recurrence of what are euphemistically labelled “racial incidents” in South Africa is an indication that much work remains to be done by all who cherish the ideal of a nonracial South Africa that drove the struggle against apartheid. In spite of these occurrences, most South Africans remain committed, at least rhetorically, to the idea of building a nonracial democracy in which both unity and diversity will obtain. *Under what conditions is the realisation of such a community possible?*

### **NEVILLE ALEXANDER: PROSPECTS FOR A NONRACIAL FUTURE IN SOUTH AFRICA**

#### ***The economic sphere***

To begin, we may ask: What should happen in the economic sphere of this

society in order to ease the development of a non-racial ethos?

It is common cause in South Africa that, unless a racial 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 for years to come. Even a relatively conservative commentator such as the Reverend Beyers Naudé is quoted as having said that “true reconciliation was only possible when we bridge the economic gulf, for you can’t build a society of justice on the increasing gap between rich and poor”. Only if the government moved towards an equitable redistribution of wealth, land, property and income could the political “miracle” begin to uproot the evil of racism in South Africa.

When we consider the continuing disparities between the rich and the poor, crudely, between white and black, we may well ask whether the new South Africa, in the words of Constitutional Court Judge Albie Sachs, is doing anything other than legitimising inequality. The point is best made by the simple story of Mr Maxwell Flekisi,

a father of three... earning R193 per week... [who] gives vent to the feelings of disappointment that are eating up millions of South Africans today, as reported in the Cape Times: “[Since] the 1994 elections Maxwell has felt an increasing edge of desperation in his life. A desperation that renders all the freedoms and dignity guaranteed by the new political dispensation void. ‘I can say that the promises made by the ANC have not been kept’”.

The real situation is that hardly any change has taken place in the relations of economic power and control. Moreover, in the foreseeable future and in terms of the prevailing system, no such fundamental change is to be expected. All the sources of economic power remain in the hands of those who controlled them under apartheid. The statistics are readily available. A recent detailed and extremely agonised analysis... cites the 1991 warning issued by the then left-wing economist Stephen Gelb:

An accumulation strategy which focuses on restructuring and regenerating the manufacturing sector in particular, by using the “neo-liberal” (market-based) policies to alter cost structures and explore profitability and to expand markets for manufacturers, above all through exports... would, in sum, reinforce the dualistic structure of South African society.

He adds significantly:

Yet that formulation captures the strategic direction adopted by the ANC government, which, at the same time, claims commitment to a vision that states “we cannot rebuild our society at the expense of the living standards of ordinary men and women. We cannot develop at the expense of social justice.”

What is beyond all doubt is that the macroeconomic strategy adopted by the ANC government... no longer has



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the unqualified sanction of those who can be said to have fathered it in the shadows of the political field of play. A shift has taken place in the strategies of the people who control the world economy... Joseph Stiglitz, a vice-president of the World Bank, during a recent visit to South Africa, captured the essentials of the change in strategic thinking in a newspaper interview. He found the prescriptions of the “Washington consensus” wanting on two fronts:

One: they fail to take account of the complexities of the real world, where neither the market nor information is perfect.

Two: together with World Bank president, James Wolfensohn, [Stiglitz] has shifted the values on which economic policy should be measured. To look at gross domestic product is not enough, they argue – the key indicator of global and national economic wellbeing needs to be human development and equity.

All this, however, is what we might label... household criticism, attempts at reforming and refining the existing structures and dynamics. It tried to deal with the software of the problem. What we have to do is to look at the hardware itself. The real question is whether the moral and political decision by which three hundred years of colonial plunder and rapine and half a century of apartheid, i.e. affirmative action based on “race” and “culture”,

are condoned can constitute a visible platform from which to launch the rocket of transformation. It might seem unreasonable and unrealistic to demand at this late stage that the history of dispossession, expropriation, racist exploitation and accumulation be revisited. However, the fact is that unless it is done, the logic of the capitalist system, as we know it, will simply reproduce the racial inequalities that have been programmed into the South African social system by the peculiarities of its history.

### *The stubborn facts of history*

Today, the movement of history is becoming increasingly discernible. There is a clear shift of power in various sectors from exclusive white control to increasing black, token and real, managerial control. This is indicative of the fact that the black middle class, which has been kept in confinement artificially through the policies of apartheid, has finally liberated itself. There is no doubt that the rapidly growing black middle class of people are the real beneficiaries of the compromises reached in 1993–94. They, rather than the urban and rural workers, constitute the base of “rainbowism” and have every interest in exploiting and even exhausting the implications of that metaphor in economic, political and sociocultural terms. I shall indicate presently that this particular metaphor popularises and entrenches the notion that coexisting colour (or racial) groups and probably helps to create captive markets for ethnic entrepreneurs.

To put the matter bluntly, it is in the interests of such entrepreneurs among the ruling elites to try to keep the definitions of the black “ethnic groups” as fluid as the National Party ideologues had done in the case of their white constituency previously. By doing so, the cohesion of the majority of the oppressed and their common interest in national liberation, which constituted ➤

the ideological basis of the struggle against colonialism and apartheid, can be pressed into the service of those who are now in the position to inherit or accumulate power in all social spheres. The “minorities”, which might once again be allowed to fragment themselves as much as they like, are accommodated within a model human rights charter and a genuine culture of tolerance. On this reading of the evolving situation, one or other versions of an “Africanist” solution of the question of national and subnational identities appears to be in the offing. However, the actual boundaries of the dominant social category have not yet been drawn. An excellent illustration of the fluidity of the concept “African” in the South African context is the lyrical extolling of his African being by Thabo Mbeki, the deputy-president of South Africa, in a recent, and very significant, speech in Parliament. It is also clear that the struggle over the definition of identities in South Africa has only just begun.

### ***The political importance of metaphors***

One way or the other, there can be no doubt that South Africa has reached a watershed moment as far as identity politics is concerned. For this reason, it is vital that all journalists, as well as political and cultural pace-setters consider deeply and carefully what metaphors and what social categories they create, support, reinforce or, alternatively, counter, undermine and discourage.

In recent writings... I have systematically raised the issue of the importance of political metaphors. It is axiomatic that political metaphors born out of one set of conditions are not automatically appropriate for a different set of conditions. It is, therefore, problematical that so many South Africans are ready to imitate other countries’ jargon and discourse

in order to describe the very different reality in which we are living. I cannot, for example, judge in any more than superficial ways the appropriateness of the rainbow metaphor in the context of the United States, but there is little doubt in my mind that it is arguably the worst metaphor with which to symbolise the destiny of the Republic of South Africa. Instead of the “foreign” colour-centred image of co-existing racial groups, I have put forward the more “indigenous” image of the Gariiep (“the great river”), which is the Khoe name for the Orange River, with its many tributaries that have their catchment areas in all parts of the country.



## **Decolonisation is not possible without deracialisation.**

The essential notion behind this suggestion is that we have to conceive of the social categories in a more dynamic manner; we have to underline the *process* of identity formation rather than the *reified notions* of existing and inherited identities... In this conception, settler-colonial societies such as South Africa have been constituted, culturally speaking, by the confluence of different tributaries... In South Africa, these are, very crudely, the African, the European, the Asian, and the modern “American”. The tributaries are never washed away as in the assimilationist model... While they obviously affect the common cultural area in different ways, they are themselves influenced... by backwash effects from the main stream. We can demonstrate the truth of this assertion by taking almost any domain of social

life, such as sport, religion, language, and so forth.

### **MAHMOOD MAMDANI RESPONDS**

I shall begin in the same way that Dr Alexander does, with apartheid. Often, apartheid is understood as being a part of 350 years of racial discrimination. I disagree with this. The last 350 years have been the consequence of colonial rule. As with any form of colonial rule, apartheid too turned around using two core identities: race and ethnicity.

Race was an identity that united beneficiaries. Afrikaners, Dutch, English, Portuguese, Greeks, Germans were all united into a common identity called “white”. Ethnicity was not used to unite victims under the label “black”; it was used to fragment them – Xhosa, Zulu, Pedi and so on.

What the New Left in South Africa called “racial capitalism” should have been called “colonial capitalism”. We would have then been in a position to draw some lessons from the experiences of decolonisation around this continent. The relevant lesson for our purposes is that decolonisation is not possible without deracialisation. Even the most conservative forms of decolonisation required deracialisation.

Conservative deracialisation, narrow deracialisation, was called “Africanisation” around this continent. In South Africa, it is called black empowerment. I think it should be properly called black business empowerment.

Black business empowerment is an idea whose time has come. I mean this in the following sense: anyone who thinks you can have a predominantly white bourgeoisie in a predominantly black country, after independence, without political upheaval, should have their heads examined.

All I am suggesting is that you cannot have political independence in this era without its consequence, capital

accumulation amongst those colonised yesterday. Our choices lie not in whether there will be capital accumulation or not, but its extent and nature and in the relationship of its beneficiaries to the state and to the bourgeoisie.

We cannot go away from black business empowerment, but we can go beyond it. The real question we need to focus on is: How do we broaden deracialisation? In the economy, how do we go beyond benefitting a narrow elite tied to the bootstraps of the apartheid bourgeoisie to ensuring a dignified livelihood for the great mass of working people? And in society, how do we go beyond business, to deracialising education and culture, science and sports?

This is where I have my first disagreement with Dr Alexander. He says in “Prospects for a Nonracial Future in South Africa” that the real beneficiaries of the compromise in 1994, the real social base of rainbowism, are members of the rapidly growing black middle class. I disagree.

The beneficiaries of rainbowism include two groups. The first and largest are most of the beneficiaries of apartheid, and the smaller group comprised of some of its victims, both to whom rainbowism has given a new lease on life.

The beneficiaries of rainbowism among the victims of apartheid are too few. The social base of rainbowism among black people – even among the black middle class – is too narrow. Rainbowism involves too much of an embrace of inherited inequalities.

On the horizon, if I may speak as a university intellectual, is an impending clash between rainbowism and nationalism, between an embrace of inherited inequalities and a mobilisation against it, between the “reconciliation” ideology and “renaissance” ideology.

The relevant question is: Will the mobilisation against inequality be rhetorical – even demagogic – or will it seek to reconnect with and rekindle the

social and political movement that brought apartheid to an impasse?

Most likely, it will involve a mishmash of both. But the terms of the mishmash, and the direction in which it will flow, depends on initiative, our initiative.

### **Minority rights and majority aspirations**

When I first read Dr Alexander’s critique of the rainbow as a metaphor and the call to adopt the Gariep (the great river) instead, I was delighted. My response was not mainly because the rainbow is an English word, and Gariep a Khoi word. It is more so because the rainbow has no notion of a majority: there is no black in the rainbow! The Gariep, in contrast, allows us to think both of the main stream and the streams that joint it along the way and become part of it...

But then I read Dr Alexander saying that the Gariep he has in mind has no cultural mainstream, that it comprises four minority streams... I disagree.

I would like to put a set of propositions to you. First, the question of identity in the public sphere is not really that of cultural identity. It is of political identity.

Second, political identity is about entitlements. Why is it that few or none of those who want to be defined as Africans today would not have stood up twenty years ago to say so? The answer is simple: to be considered an African today is to be entitled, whereas to be considered African twenty years ago was to be stripped of any entitlement.

There is a lesson here. At the core of identity politics is a question of entitlement. The question of entitlement is really that of social justice. If we do not address the question of justice forthrightly and swiftly, it will boomerang on us in the form of identity politics, whether racial or ethnic.



**We cannot go away from black business empowerment, but we can go beyond it.**

This means that so long as the legacy of apartheid is not addressed, the core identities created by apartheid will be reproduced. The core majority identity will be black, jelled around a demand for entitlement. And the core minority identity will be white. Dr Alexander’s Gariep will have a political mainstream.

This has a bearing on how we think about minority rights... [T]he key condition for the realisation of a nonracial democracy is not the protection of minority rights but the realisation of majority aspirations. To think otherwise, to ask minorities to think of their rights as opposed to majority aspirations, is to do them disservice. It is either to prepare them to fight back in the cause of an era gone by or to prepare them to leave the country!

Dr Alexander is right that identities are fluid. But identities are also reproduced through institutions and crystallised as entitlements. This is why, if we want to deracialise identities, we have to deracialise institutions. This is why, if we want to deracialise identities, we have to deracialise institutions. If you want a nonracial society, you cannot shut your eyes to racial inequality. The only road to non racialism is deliberate, rapid and sustained deracialisation. In the specific context of South Africa, there can be no deracialisation without black empowerment. [NA](#)

#### NOTE

1. From CV Hamilton, I Huntley, N Alexander, ASA Guimaraes and W James (eds). 2001. *Beyond Racism: Race and Inequality in Brazil, South Africa and the United States*, London: Lynne Rienner, 471–508.