



Non-racialism in South Africa

The Life and Times of Neville Alexander

Allan Zinn (ed.)

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The late Neville Alexander was a committed anti-apartheid activist and revolutionary Marxist. He is remembered, above all, for his staunch defence of non-racialism in both his intellectual and political work. Shortly before his passing, Alexander was a vocal critic of UCT’s racial admissions policy. He argued that the university’s choice to use apartheid racial categories to administer redress would keep race-based thinking alive and would take us further away from and not towards a non-racial society. In a fiery polemic in the Cape Times (15 June 2010), he warned that UCT would “pay the price” for its “cowardice” on the race question. Alexander was unmoved by any form of submission to racialism. One wonders what he might have made of our current predicament in which “race” and “race-based” thinking defines our public imagination.

Non-racialism in South Africa: The life and times of Neville Alexander is a collection of presentations by activists and academics to a conference held at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University’s Centre for Non-Racialism

and Democracy in July 2013. It is a timely and refreshing work. The book takes the reader through Alexander’s thoughts on humanism, education, language, culture and identity. His commitment to lead his life as a revolutionary activist is also explored, allowing for reflections on the relationship between politics, morality and values. His views on non-racialism, and how such a politics might be defended in the face of mounting criticism (even by its former adherents), is patiently and deftly described in Crain Soudien’s “Afterword” and “Addendum”.

Perhaps the most interesting section is a discussion between Pallo Jordan, Enver Motala and Lybon Mashaba on Alexander’s most significant contribution to revolutionary theory in South Africa: *One Azania, One Nation: The National Question in South Africa* (London: Zed Press, 1979)¹. Alexander’s attempt to ground revolutionary praxis in a non-racialised conception of South Africa’s polity is an underexplored aspect of his work. Pallo Jordan assesses its strengths and weaknesses, traces its

historical roots and compares it with the South African Communist Party’s conceptualisations of “colonialism of a special type” and “national democratic revolution” from the same era. The exchange between Jordan, Mashaba and Motala is crucial reading for anyone concerned with historical debates on the national question in South Africa.

Non-racialism in South Africa is an excellent introduction to the work and life of Neville Alexander. The conversations between contributing authors make for a stimulating and interesting read, touching on a variety of the more significant historical, philosophical and political issues in South Africa. As Soudien notes, much more work is needed to present and understand Alexander’s work in full. Much more is needed to defend, restate and re-conceptualise non-racialism in confrontation with its contemporary critics and detractors. [NA](#)

NOTE

1. *One Azania, One Nation* is available from South African History Online at <http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/one-azania-one-nation-neville-alexander>