

Neville Alexander on the Unresolved National Question – A Warning Ignored

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Amongst the scholars, academics, political analysts and activists – even those not favorably disposed to Neville Alexander's approach to the national question or his political convictions and practices, there can be little dispute about his immense contribution to the discussions about the national question in South Africa over the last several decades. His searching study and his erudition on the subject has played an important formative and critical role in the debates about the national question following the publication of his *One Azania, One Nation: The National Question in South Africa* under the nom de plume, No Sizwe.¹

In this article we will pay particular attention to this writing because it was perhaps his seminal contribution and provided the most comprehensive statement of Alexander's views on the subject. In it he first set out the basis for an historical examination of the national question, pointing to the wide range of perspectives representing those of political analysts, academics and scholars and most importantly, the ideas of the ideologues of 'liberalism' and apartheid and the views held by the organizations of the oppressed. In this work and in his subsequent writings Alexander explored the multiplicity of concepts relevant to the national question such as 'race,' 'nation,' 'national group,' 'ethnicity' 'separatism' and the like. His coruscating critique subjected many of the prevailing conceptions on this issue to a thoroughgoing scrutiny

¹ Alexander clandestinely began writing this book on Robben Island and completed it during the period of his house arrest in Cape Town from 1974 to 1979. He was motivated to start writing the book after a celebrated debate with Nelson Mandela on Robben Island. In his own words, "...I wrote [the book] really because of the debates I had with Mandela on the Island about post-apartheid South Africa, the new nation, nation-building, what it all means in terms of racial prejudice, racial attitudes, racial categories, class, gender and so on....The discussion took almost two years; we used to meet once a week and discuss whether there is a nation and how we would build a nation. Our position was that there is no nation, and we have to build a nation, and that this implied a whole lot of things about education, structural change and identity politics and so on...Mandela's position - I'm now abridging it - was that very simply the African people, the Bantu-speaking people of South Africa, are the nation. The others, the Indians, the coloureds, the whites, are minorities. He used the term 'racial minorities'" (Busch, B., Busch, L and Press, 2014:103-4). Shaun Whittaker (2014), forcefully expresses the view that Alexander's position on the National Question predates the debate with Mandela, Rather, it was largely informed by his reading of the Communist Manifesto and influenced by the perspectives of individuals such as Olive Schreiner and Isaac Tabata as well as the Workers' Party of South Africa.

that was important not only for proper theorization in its own right but also for its importance to the construction of the strategic practices necessary for confronting exploitative and oppressive relations in South Africa.

We believe that his influential writings on the 'national question' continue to inspire strong debate amongst serious thinkers and practitioners engaged in the difficult questions of social change and informs how we understand the nature of the contemporary conversations, academic writings, intellectual musings, policy pronouncements and other statements about South Africa's 'transformation' its 'development' agenda, and indeed its 'revolution'. In this contribution we set out to discuss Neville Alexander's work using the conceptual lens that he brought to the national question(NQ)through his writings, speeches and of course, through his practice. Such an examination will, in our view, be just as useful for what an examination of the NQ implies for the present- both theoretically and in practice.

Subsequent to the completion of his seminal work on the national question - *No Sizwe - One Azania One Nation*, Alexander wrote several pieces which elaborated and clarified his views on this issue further. Since time and space limit the scope of this article we cannot present the fullest examination of all these writings but hope, nevertheless, to provide a fairly coherent presentation of his ideas.

Alexander's approach has been the subject of some plainly tendentious, point seeking criticisms based on opposition to his theoretical and political orientation, sometimes deliberately misrepresenting and distorting his ideas and simply ignoring the substance of his many writings on the subject.² These criticisms are characterized sometimes by an astonishing neglect of any reference to the text of his writings and this is so, in our view, because much of

²Of course we do not regard the very useful and fairly comprehensive summary found in the paper by John Mawbey which was commissioned for the present project by the Chris Hani Institute for a workshop in 2014. We acknowledge the paper which is a welcome sign of openness of its originators to a broader dialogue. See Mawbey J. 2014. The Unresolved National question in Left thinking: Seeking Lineages and Hidden Voices. CHI. Johannesburg

what he argued stood against the dominant conceptions held within parts of the liberation movement. We deal with these distortions later, as we propose firstly to set out a clear exposition of Alexander's views on the National Question.

Alexander has written extensively about the national question as we will show and because our article cannot do justice to all his work and the criticisms it has evoked (such as they are), we are obliged to present a faithful rendition of his ideas to obviate the deliberate confusions we refer to. Careful attention should be paid to the substance of his writings and practices to understand fully – and critically – the content of his illuminating views on this important issue. Alexander's ideas must be judged by reference to what he actually wrote and did in practice without imputing to him ideas, political affiliations and theoretical orientations that he did not subscribe to or worse still, ideas and practices which he systematically analyzed and rejected.

Why did Alexander set out to address the national question?

In a useful introduction Alexander explains his purpose in writing the book on the national question following his imprisonment on Robben Island, during which time he had occasion to engage with some of the best recognized leaders of the liberation movement from across the range of political organizations.

It should be stressed that my approach has been motivated throughout by the desire to facilitate the unification of the national liberation movement by fomenting a discussion on the *basis* of national unity and on the political-strategic implications of ideas about who constitutes the South African nation.³

Key to understanding his approach was his intention to deal with the pervasive 'reactionary nationalisms' dominant both in the ideas of the apartheid regime and much of the liberation movement itself, the need to refute the 'propagation of bogus nationalisms, the main purpose of which is to dissipate the force of the class struggle by deflecting it into channels that will

³ No Sizwe 1979, *One Azania, One Nation*, viii.

nurture the dominant classes.⁴ For him these 'reactionary nationalisms' conflicted with the interests of the working class, making it necessary to counteract the 'nefarious strategies' associated with them. Furthermore, because social relations were mystified as 'race relations,' there was a need to 'illuminate the character of the *real* (socio-economic) basis of inequality and the *real* (ideological) forms in which it is expressed'⁵in pursuing national liberation, even after the demise of apartheid. For him 'bourgeois sociology' with its debilitating definitions, required a clarification of misused concepts such as 'race', 'nation', 'nationalism', 'ethnic group', 'color caste' and 'class.'

Afrikaner nationalism, liberal theories of the nation and the 'reserves' strategy

He begins his analysis of the national question historically and by reference to a careful examination of the orientations of both the National Party rulers and the various organizations of the oppressed. The National Party's theory of nationality arose from its struggle for hegemony against the background of the Post-War development of capitalism in South Africa. It was based on the idea that 'whites, because of their "superior civilization" and their European heritage, were entitled to rule'.⁶Its Afrikaner sectionalism arose historically from the defection, as a result of the conflict with the British administration, of early Dutch settlers who were mainly 'subsistence farmers' from the then Cape Colony around 1834-1840. The Boer Republics they formed to the north of the Cape Colony continued in 'quasi-feudal anarchy' until the mineral 'discoveries' of the latter half of the 19th century. The developing economic interests amongst the Afrikaans speaking (white) population of South Africa gave rise to a sense of 'nationality' amongst them based predominantly on their common language. Several developments including the conflicts over diamond fields, the emergence of an Afrikaans language movement in the Western Cape and the organized response of emerging Afrikaner agrarian capital gave impetus to Afrikaner nationalism fostered by the formation of the

⁴ No Sizwe 1979: Page 4

⁵ No Sizwe 1979: Page 4 Referring to K. Marx and Engels F, (undated) Manifesto of the Communist Party, in Marx Engels Selected Works, p. 51

⁶ No Sizwe 1979: Page 11.

Afrikaner Bond (AB) which was 'an association of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois white (predominantly Afrikaans speaking) farmers covering the whole of South Africa.'⁷ This 'class vanguard of Afrikaner nationalism' led the fight against British imperial interests in the Anglo Boer War. After the war a significant part of the old Afrikaner agrarian classes were dispossessed. This and the prevailing drought forced them into proletarian lives in search of and competing for jobs with Africans from Southern Africa. Both their 'class-based' antipathy to British imperialism and the 'caste-based' antipathy to black workers laid the basis for a 'sectionalist mass movement' exploited by the petty bourgeois leadership of the Afrikaner Broederbond – the 'left-wing' leadership of Afrikaner sectionalism.⁸ Out of these developments grew Afrikaner nationalism combining 'liberal' and 'neo-Fichtean' nationalisms and enunciating a theory of nationality which Alexander summarizes as arguing that

(1) Nations are divinely ordained, pre-destined categories, ideal forms, the historical context of which is determined in concrete struggles of congeries of peoples; (2) nations are communities of culture, defined by a set of values acquired and maintained in historic struggles; (3) this culture finds its main deposit in specific languagesthe "badge of nationality"; (4) community of "race" is an inherent attribute of a nation so that people of divergent "race" cannot belong to the same nation.⁹

Alexander deals with "Liberal" theories of the nation by examining the various perspectives including those of Smuts, General Hertzog, 'the younger Hofmeyr', Margaret Ballinger and others - largely representatives of mining capital and urban English speakers. Their pluralist approaches to the idea of nation and the 'gradualist solutions' espoused by them hoped to steer the country to the idea of a 'confederation of racial groups' which existed under the domination of the 'white nation'¹⁰, and simultaneously gave expression to the 'central

⁷ No Sizwe 1979:Page 15

⁸ No Sizwe 1979: Page 20

⁹No Sizwe 1979: Page 25

¹⁰ Here referring to the capitalist ruling class supported by metropolitan capital.

question' of the supply of "cheap black labour."¹¹ These approaches failed however to transcend the limitations of their 'race-based' theorizations of the nation, in effect rejecting the 'radical' conception of nation propounded by Olive Schreiner who opined that 'there is that common South African condition through which no dividing line can be drawn. .. South African unity is a condition the practical necessity of which is daily and hourly forced upon us by the common needs of life'.¹²

Alexander deals with the genesis of the reserve (Bantustan) strategy following the growth and development of capitalism in South Africa and especially the strategy of 'emancipating indigenous capital' from the metropolis so that the returns on capital investment supported the development of state owned enterprises towards a policy of import substitution and the growth of local manufacturing and agricultural production. Most critically, this had to be done in the context of maintaining a regular and controlled supply of cheap black labour. 'Cheap' labour was decisive in both the segregationist and apartheid's strategy and was a 'crucial component of the capitalist system' as it developed in South Africa. The 'reserves' and later Bantustans were pivotal to the process of coercing labour into the emerging industrial, agricultural and commercial economy,¹³ and formed the objective basis for the passing of the various Land Acts, limiting access to land for the majority of the population, and the laws controlling the movement and supply of black labour and restraining its resistance to exploitative and oppressive conditions. These policies attempted to reconcile the interests of the various sectors of the emerging capitalist economy and extended the policy of segregation, relying on the support of the Afrikaner "nation" but gave rise inevitably to the resistance

¹¹ No Sizwe 1979: Page 29.

¹² No Sizwe, 1979: Pages 29-30

¹³ There is a raft of critically important literature on this issue which is not dealt with here. Legassick M. 1974. *Capital Accumulation and Violence*, Economy and Society, Volume 2 (3); Legassick M, 1974 (A) *Legislation, Ideology and Economy in Post-1948 South Africa*, Journal of Southern African Studies, Volume 1 (1); Legassick M, 1975. *South Africa; Forced Labour, Industrialization and Racial Differentiation*, Political Economy of Africa Ed. R Harris, Boston, Schenkman; Wolpe Harold, 1972. *Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa: from segregation to apartheid*, Economy and Society, Vol. 1(4); Wolpe H, 1988. *Race, Class and the Apartheid State*, James Currey, London

against the migrant labour system that characterized South African capitalism from its inception.

The Bantustan Strategy of the Nationalist Party

According to Alexander the Nationalist Party's Bantustan strategy speaks to its prescience in limiting the potential of an organized proletariat to lead the national liberation struggle. This represented the shift in the Bantustan strategy from a 'tribe-based' conception of nation to a pretense that it was about the 'right of self-determination' of nations. The Bantustan theory of nationality therefore attempted to extend the idea of 'nation' enunciated by the Afrikaner intellectuals of the Broederbond 'to the different language groups and colour-castes amongst the oppressed' and as Verwoerd said in 1958 'giving the Bantu as our wards every opportunity in their areas to move along a path of development by which they can progress in accordance with their ability'.¹⁴ Quoting extensively from contemporary statements by representatives of the ruling classes about this issue, Alexander shows the evolution of the Bantustan strategy in the idea of a 'divine' task assumed by Afrikaner nationalists, its consonance with its 'Christian National' beliefs and ideas about 'community of culture' and 'race', 'cultural pluralism', 'separate development' and other similar concepts 'riddled with inconsistencies'.¹⁵

Alexander deals similarly with the contradiction to be found in the 'liberal pluralist' approach to the national question, despite its terminological changes over time. Its underlying concerns were about the avoidance of 'violent conflict' and the retention of a framework of capitalist relations. Supporters of African nationalism amongst the proponents of this approach had adopted a position of 'non-racialism' and had been sympathetic to calls for 'one-man-one - vote'. This was the position of the former Liberal Party which pronounced its intention to use 'democratic and constitutional' means in the pursuance of its objectives - opposing totalitarian approaches such as 'communism and fascism'.¹⁶ Other liberal approaches - such as

¹⁴ No Sizwe 1979:Page 81

¹⁵ No Sizwe 1`979: Page 83

¹⁶ No Sizwe 1979:Page 87

that of the Progressive Federal Party, the progenitor of the present day DA in many respects - adopted an orientation based on the idea that South Africa was composed of a plurality of groups, and were critical of the Bantustan strategy because it represented a 'Trojan Horse' danger to the growth of capitalism. Variants of these 'liberal' approaches, including some which were attracted to the ideas of 'federalism,' made the case for a 'federation' based on 'ethnic' groups in an attempt to stave off the attenuation of capitalist property relations. Alexander asserts that the logic of these approaches shows how much a 'theory of nation' is in fact about 'the class struggle for national liberation'.¹⁷ The obvious political and economic imperative for the elaboration of the earlier separatist ideas was an awareness that the struggle against white rule could grow over into a challenge to the capitalist system itself because, in the absence of a viable and prestigious black bourgeoisie, the liberation struggle could well be led by a radical proletarian leadership. For the Nationalist Party the only alternative was to decapitate wrest this leadership from its proletarian roots, to decapitate it and redirect it into sectionalist channels. The force of 'African nationalism' as represented by the Bantustan leaders would thus be harnessed in such a way that it dissipated an inclusive African nationalism itself.

In the final analysis, therefore, the only difference between the National Party and the liberals was in their assessment of the nature and potential of the African nationalist movement. Though they expressed the interests of different fractions of the capitalist class, their strategic goal remained the same – how to secure the “free enterprise system” and how best to disorganize the proletariat.¹⁸

The responses of the oppressed – pre 1950s

Talking about the responses of the oppressed to the pre-Apartheid process of conquest and dispossession, Alexander explains that three alternatives might have been pursued by the

¹⁷ No Sizwe 1979: Page 90

¹⁸No Sizwe 1979: Page 91

oppressed. These were, attempts to re-conquer the land (with little hope of success after the Bambata Massacre of 1906), the religious option based on the Ethiopian movement and the response of the emerging black educated elite and petty-bourgeois class which sought a 'betterment of their own particular group.' This latter response was represented, *inter alia*, by the South African Native National Congress (later the ANC), the African People's Organization (A.P.O.), and the Natal Indian Congress (NIC). Their 'self-interested' approach was exemplified by a statement by Dr. Xuma who later became the President of the ANC as follows:

The educated African is our hope, our bridge. He is an asset that responsible and thinking White South Africa cannot afford either to ignore or to alienate without disastrous results in the long run. He should be brought into close contact and co-operation with the thinking Europeans. He must be consulted in all matters affecting the African community. It is he, and he alone, who can best interpret the European to the African, and the African to the European.¹⁹

There are similarly obsequious sentiments expressed by leaders of the other 'caste based' organizations which reflected the 'craven subservience to Anglo Saxon culturein the climactic but pathetic words of this petty bourgeois aspirant Englishman', says Alexander, referring to a speech made by Dr. Abdurahman as President of the A.P.O.²⁰

Organizations whose membership and orientation reflected the demands of the working class also emerged in the early 20th century. Trade unions like the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU) and others grew from the process of proletarian development at this time. In 1921 the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) was formed largely as a breakaway from the International Socialist League.²¹ While the CPSA was prepared, at first, to work with the 'petty bourgeois Afrikaner National Party' because of its anti-imperialist position, this position was abandoned in favour of a strategy of alignment with the 'liberal bourgeoisie' based, in theory

¹⁹ No Sizwe 1979: Page 47

²⁰ Page 48 Referring to the Presidential Address of the A.P.O of 13 January 1912.

²¹ Itself a splinter group of the pro-War, whites only, South African Labour Party.

and practice, on the 'conception of a two-stage revolution: first for bourgeois democratic rights and later for socialism'.²²

In the Communist Party, the debates on the national question began following J. Gumede's (an executive member of the ANC) visit to the Soviet Union in 1928. It took the form of a discussion about an 'independent Native Republic' which arose largely, (despite the resistance to it by a majority of its executive) from the need to reconcile the position of the CPSA with that of the Comintern and especially Stalin's formulation of the idea of a nation as an "historically evolved stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup manifested in a community of culture."²³At the time the slogan of an 'Independent Native Republic' was meant 'either as a separate black state' within South Africa 'or one in which (black) Africans were to be regarded as a majority "nation" (or group of "nations") as against white, coloured and Indian "national Minorities"'.²⁴

This formulation was not without opposition since, as Moses Kotane was to argue, the language question itself posed some difficulties for the wholesale adoption of Stalin's formulation because it gave rise to questions about whether there was indeed one African nation or many distinct nations. He had argued that 'The language question would form one of the main difficulties. There is no one language which is sufficiently known and spoken by a majority of the people in Africa.'²⁵Even those tendencies which were opposed to the CPSA, such as 'Troskyists'²⁶ viewed language groups as 'national groups' and 'colour-castes' for practical purposes suggesting to Alexander that there was a similar 'pitiable confusion' in their ranks.

Following the quest for 'non-European Unity' at the time, were two other organizations whose idea was to form a 'united-front type organization'. These were the National Liberation League

²² No Sizwe 1979: Page 50

²³ No Sizwe: 1979: Page 51

²⁴ No Sizwe 1979: Page 51

²⁵ No Sizwe 1979:Page 51

²⁶ Like the Lenin Club in 1934 and the 'Trotskyist tendencies and organizations.' Regarding this issue, he refers to an editorial in Discussion, journal of the Cape Debating society which was 'an offshoot of the Fourth International'.

and the Non-European United Front of 1938 signaling a progressive shift from the caste-based orientations of previous organizations and seeking a united approach on behalf of all the oppressed. Later other organizations following this trend were formed including the Anti-Coloured Affairs Department (Anti-C.A.D) movement, the All African Convention and in 1943 the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM).²⁷ These represented an important step away from 'caste-based' organization as the NEUM's approach to the idea of 'nation' also 'represented an incomparable advance on all previous prevalent views on the subject'. It called into question the 'caste-based' approaches preceding it and did not hesitate to declare its allegiance to the idea of a single nation based on a rejection of Stalin's definition of the nation, arguing that 'the ideological lag ... had to be bridged by means of a genuine national unity movement'.²⁸ But Alexander does not spare the NEUM his criticisms either, arguing that it continued to be confused about the concepts of 'nation and state,' and 'to describe the colour-castes and language groups of South Africa as nationalities.'²⁹ Furthermore although ideas of separatism were anathema to the NEUM, questions about class leadership were not posed or resolved.

Yet the NEUM's approach had a significant impact on the subsequent approach of the Congress Alliance. Especially in the context of post war developments, a younger group of ANC members sought a radical break with the bargaining and concession seeking approach of the past leadership of the ANC in particular. Its explicitly Africanist Youth League saw no place for whites in the liberation struggle and 'insisted stridently' at the time that 'Africans' were responsible for their own destiny while being prepared to form periodic alliances for expedient purposes with caste-based organizations. Alexander characterizes this as the view of the African petty -bourgeois 'which wanted to use black chauvinism in a manner similar' to

²⁷ Inspired largely by 'young Trotskyist and ex-Trotskyist intellectuals'

²⁸No Sizwe 1979: Page 57.

²⁹No Sizwe 1979:Page 56

the Broederbond usage of Afrikaner nationalism - and which similarly failed to include all South Africans in its concept of nation.³⁰

Post 1950's approaches of the Congress Alliance and the CPSA– 'pluralist' approaches

The rise of the Afrikaner nationalist power in 1948 and the torrent of legislation that came with it gave rise to a similar upsurge in the responses of the oppressed too, marred however by the 'caste-bound' prejudices of these responses which prevented the rise of a unified national liberation movement, despite the Congress Alliance which was to lead to the 1955 Congress of the People and the Freedom Charter. The Charter itself was framed on the basis of 'four national groups' -and continued to evince the influence of Soviet approaches to nationality – providing guarantees attaching to each 'national group' in respect of language , culture, and customs. Potekhin, whose views were influential in the Communist Party of South Africa ³¹(later SACP) talked about "a united Bantu movement "in the struggle for "a single Bantu nation of South Africa and the Protectorates",³² arguing further that ""there are no grounds for assuming that one nation can be formed which would embrace the Bantu, the Coloureds and the Anglo-Afrikaners ... The Indians are a completely separate group".³³

This approach which was influential in the CPSA and was consistent with the view espoused by the 'Africanist leadership' of the ANC.³⁴It was responsible for what Ben Turok, ³⁵recognized as the danger of 'talking about large national minorities' in the absence of any clear formulation of the national question.

³⁰ No Sizwe 1979:Page 59

³¹ He later became Director of the Moscow Africa Institute

³² No Sizwe 1979:Page 97

³³ Quoting Potekhin: Page 98

³⁴ No Sizwe 1979: Page 98. There is a rich body of references and quotes about the national question and especially about 'national minorities' Alexander criticizes in the pronouncements of people such as Ben Turok, Joe Ngwenya and Ben Molapo and the policies of the ANC and CPSA including in the Morogoro Conference.

³⁵Turok, a key member of the Congress Movement, suggested that the debates of the time were largely about national liberation in the sense that white domination must be ended and that the African people who in some way constitute a national entity would be able to establish a democratic society in which people of all colors could participate.

According to Alexander the Congress Movement and the CPSA were not unaware of the criticisms against their avowed position and devoted an entire issue of the *African Communist* in 1976-7 to the National Question. This was in part recognition of the power and sway of the emerging BCM who rejected the abiding pluralist approaches of the Congress Movement. He examines the writings in the journal pointing to its references to the 'nation' and to 'national groups' insouciant of the contradictory notions implied in these and in stressing the idea of 'the Africans as a majority national group,' criticizes its historical falsifications about the "indigenous owners of the land" and uncritical references to 'the racial origin of various communities' and references to the 'grievances of the "other national groups"', etc.³⁶ And he points to the considerable confusion about the question of class leadership in the struggle for national liberation.³⁷ For him such pluralist conceptions which echoed the views espoused by liberalism, and the inability to emphasize working-class leadership, left the Congress Movement vulnerable to the politics of the liberal bourgeoisie.

Alexander's own conception of the role of the black working class is dealt with variously in his writings and is best encapsulated in his Sow the Wind speeches thus³⁸

The black working class has to act as a magnet that draws all the other oppressed layers of our society, organizes them for the liberation struggle and imbues them with the consistent democratic socialist ideas which alone spell death to the system of racial capitalism as we know it today. In this struggle the idea of a single nation is vital "Ethnic", national group or racial group ideas of nationhood on the final analysis

³⁶ There is a rich body of references and quotes in No Sizwe 1979: Pages 99-105, which support the line of thinking Alexander criticizes which speak to the continuity of this line of thinking about the national question and especially about 'national minorities' in the pronouncements of the leaders - such as Ben Turok, Joe Ngwenya and Ben Molapo) and policies of the ANC and CPSA including in the Morogoro Conference.

³⁷ No Sizwe 197:Page 103

³⁸ Alexander N (1985). Nation and Ethnicity in South Africa, in Sow the Wind Skotaville Publishers, Johannesburg 41-57. The article was based on an address delivered at the first National Forum meeting held on the 11th of June 1983 in Hammanskraal now in the North-West province. The National Forum consisted primarily of black consciousness organisations, independent socialist groups and some trade unions. Originally its patrons included 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 'anti-racism' as its first principle.

strengthen the position of the middle-class or even the capitalist oppressors themselves'.³⁹

Developing his arguments further in the *Journal Transformation*⁴⁰ Alexander also deals with the 'four basic views' about the 'nation' in South Africa by both ruling class political parties and oppositional liberation organizations in South Africa. For Afrikaner nationalism they regarded South Africa as a multi-national state composed of several nations each entitled to seek their 'self-determination' and even their 'independence'. It is an approach reliant on the idea of 'ethnicity' and is in some respects similar to the approach adopted by 'pluralist schools of modern liberalism in South Africa.' Alexander makes the point that the ideological power of such 'ethnic' concepts of the nation need to be recognized because of its influence even on urban working class and middle class communities who were not averse to assuming such ethnic identities despite their acceptance of being 'South African' at the same time. In other words their concept of self-identity accepted both an 'ethnic' definition and a wider and more inclusive national character.⁴¹ The dominant position however remained the idea of a 'four-nation thesis'. In Alexander's view this position was essentially about the cooption of parts of the middle class and even of 'moderate elements' in the liberation movement. In the liberation movement itself this thesis was given its fullest expression in the writings of Anton Lambede and the ANC Youth League in the 1940s. As the Youth League's manifesto declared in 1948

South Africa is a country of four chief nationalities, three of which (the European, Indians and Coloureds) are minorities, and three of which (the Africans, Coloureds and Indians) suffer national oppression.⁴²

³⁹ Alexander 1985:Pages 55-56

⁴⁰ Alexander 1986

⁴¹Remarkably, this approach was accepted briefly by some elements within the Communist Party in the 1930's in conceiving of a 'federation of "ethnic" Soviet republics in Southern Africa': Alexander 1986: Page 76

⁴² Alexander 1986: Page 77 The reference is to Karis and Carter, 1972:32

Later the idea of 'four races' is overtaken by more contemporary conceptions of 'non-racialism,'- this latter concept was no different from the idea of 'multi-racialism'⁴³ since how this notion was understood remained problematic. If it implied the rejection of the concept of 'race' itself, denying the existence of 'races,' the implication would be to reject those actions and practices which are reliant on such definitions.⁴⁴ In effect unless the use of 'non-racial' is attached to the struggle against all forms of racism, that is, that its content is 'anti-racist' and seeks to eradicate the material conditions under which racist forms of power are developed in capitalism, all talk of 'non-racialism' would remain vacuous. Making the distinction between 'non racialists' who are in reality no more than multi-racialists and those who are steadfastly 'anti-racists, remains the critical defining factor'.⁴⁵

Internal Colonialism thesis

Alexander also deals with the critically defining (for the CPSA and the ANC) idea of the 'internal colonialism thesis' which was based on the 1962 programme of the Communist Party and which argued, in essence that "non-White South Africa is the colony of White South Africa," based on the differing access of whites and blacks to the productive assets (land and capital) of the country. He refers approvingly to Wolpe's criticism of the internal colonialism thesis that while the concept of 'internal colonialism' bore reference to capitalism in South Africa, it had similar connotations to the idea of "pluralism" and failed 'to clarify the nature of the imperialist relationship between the two South Africas'.⁴⁶ For Alexander this 'neo-pluralist' position (of the Party) was no less a justification for its two-stage approach and its orientation to class leadership in the national liberation struggle. In effect it sanctioned the leadership of

⁴³ Alexander N (1985). Nation and Ethnicity in South Africa, in Sow the Wind Skotaville Publishers, Johannesburg 41-57.

⁴⁴In the 80s, particularly during the mass mobilisations against the 'Tri-Cameral' elections and subsequently the Tri-Cameral parliament and the 'Koornhof Bills' Alexander belonged to organisations which were active consciously beyond historical group areas and produced literature for a mass audience rejecting the notion of 'races' and 'racial groups'. See for example, 'Introduction to "race" and racism – How does the Cape Action League see the struggle against racism', Cape Action League, 1986.

⁴⁵In this regard see Derrick Swartz 2010 September *Multiculturalism and Identity in Post-Apartheid South Africa: How far have we come?* Address at the Red Location Museum, Port Elizabeth

⁴⁶ No Sizwe 1979:Page 106

the 'liberal bourgeois'. Alexander is however critical of the political implications of Wolpe's attempt to salvage the Communist Party's position through his elaboration of the relationship between the capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production as constituted in the urban and Bantustan parts of South Africa..⁴⁷He suggests that the characterization of South Africa as a 'colonialism of a special type' is imprisoned within a pluralist approach which depends on a 'mystified' conception of 'race' (even though the 'racial factor' is of the 'greatest importance' in its proper perspective) leaving it open to 'the winds of sectionalist opportunism'.⁴⁸

He turns his attention to the NEUM, (after 1964 the Unity Movement of South Africa) recognizing that its approach was a considerable advance on that of the Congress Movement. But even in its (NEUM's) case there were occasional slippages referring to 'nationalities'. And despite its claim to seek the unity of the oppressed it was inherently – in part because of the nature of its federal structure – unable to overcome its avowed aim to 'discard the divisions and prejudices and illusions which have been created and fostered by their rulers'.⁴⁹As a consequence it was unable to bring together organizations across the 'racial' divide' and 'foundered on the rocks of petty-bourgeois opportunism,' leading to a rupture in its ranks in 1959 'largely along lines of colour'.⁵⁰ In the case of the PAC, despite its rejection of the idea of 'multi-racialism' and the Bantustan scheme it did not abandon its Africanist position aiming, as it did, 'at government of the Africans by the Africans', a position he characterizes as the 'perfect instrument of the liberal bourgeois' opposed to Afrikaner sectionalism. He remained unconvinced about its subsequent shifts in regard to 'coloureds' and people of Indian origin who could now be members of the PAC referring to its ideological somersaults in exile which

⁴⁷No Sizwe 1979: Page 107. He refers in particular to Molteno's observation that Wolpe 'concedes to National Party ideology the possibility of decolonization *via* political "independence"'

⁴⁸No Sizwe 1979: Page 110. Here he argues that the idea of 'race' was [pervasive enough to affect Trotsky's approach to 'nationalities. Alexander himself used the concept of 'racial capitalism' to describe South Africa at the time.

⁴⁹No Sizwe 1979: Page 111

⁵⁰Alexander argues that despite the subsequent shift on this issue sounded in Tabata's Presidential Address on the founding of APDUSA, the NEUM even in exile remained powerless to transcend its organizational weaknesses. He makes similar criticisms of the 4th internationalists in South Africa who simply equated any approach to the concept of a nation with 'bourgeois deviationism.' He is critical of its economistic view of the liberation struggle and its failure to go beyond propounding a unitary view of nation. No Sizwe 1979: 112

he regarded as no more than opportunistic.⁵¹ Alexander is critical of the BCM's position too despite its mutations over time, arguing that it had failed 'to understand clearly the relationship between colour-caste and class' because of its pre-occupation with racial prejudice.⁵² He concedes that later the SASO Presidential Address of 1976 recognized class interests, rejects capitalism and adopts an anti-imperialist stance and also the idea that the struggle for national liberation had to be understood beyond the idea of colour, 'also in terms of class interests; skin colour has in fact become a class criterion in South Africa'.⁵³

Clarifying critical concepts

Alexander devotes an entire Chapter in his book to clarify some of the critical concepts used in the discussion of the national question. These include concepts like 'race', the use of which is unavoidably associated with social hierarchy, prejudice, discriminatory practice and with stereotypical depictions of members of society. He rejects the concept of 'race' not only because of its reliance on phenotypical attributes, but because of the dangers inherent in racial (and racist) descriptions and because the concept is so 'pregnant with confusion' and so given to opportunist usages in the political, economic and ideological domains. He seeks a new vocabulary about the usage of 'race' arguing especially that there is no logical reason 'for inferring the reality of "race" from the fact of racial prejudice'.

He refers similarly to the use of 'ethnic', as a 'humpty-dumpty' term because of the confusion it engenders by its nebulosity and the inability to explain the basis of the ostensible solidarities which are implied in it. The concept of 'ethnic groups' and 'ethnicity' which have

⁵¹But even these changes in its orientation were hardly principled as was to become clear in its later statements on the national question as published in the journal *Ikwezi* in 1977. No Sizwe, 1979: Page 119

⁵²The earlier position espoused by Biko was overtaken by an orientation to both colour and class and a rejection of the influence of liberalism and an ostensible opposition to capitalism. Added to this was his critique of the appropriation of the idea of cultural nationalism by its commodification 'as a matter of course' by capitalism of which it is a part, referring to all manner of afro-fads and artifacts. No Sizwe 1979: Page 122. See also Alexander 2001: 111 regarding the more 'nuanced' position of the BCM as stated by Harry Nengwenkhulu who argues that racism was not merely a matter of 'false consciousness' and the integral nature of the relationship between racism and economic domination.

⁵³No Sizwe 1979: Page 125. In a review of NoSizwe, I.B. Tabata, President of APDUSA has been highly critical of the No Sizwe orientation to the BCM, arguing that its position is based on political expediency and negates what is germane to its overall orientation. Space does not allow for a critical review of Tabata's position save to say that it is based on a very incomplete reading [as Tabata himself admits] of the whole of the text.

come to supersede 'race' theory, is dealt with more fully in his collection titled *Sow the Wind*⁵⁴. For him, confusions abound about the meaning and usage of the concept in the 'different tendencies in the liberation movement today'. For those who adopt usages such as 'national groups' or 'ethnic groups' their argument is that

It is a self-evident and undeniable reality that there are Indians, Coloureds, Africans and Whites (national groups) in our country. It is a reality precisely because each of these national groups has its own heritage, culture, language, customs and traditions.⁵⁵

Alexander shows how this approach re-enforces separatism and how in fact its adherents played into the hands of organizations like Inkatha and the PFP in their advocacy of a Federal Constitution for the country. Alexander did not however adopt a class reductionist approach to the national question as he has argued many times. For him

To deny the reality of prejudice and perceived differences, whatever their origin, is to disarm oneself strategically and tactically. It becomes impossible to organize a mass movement outside the ranks of a few thousand students perhaps.⁵⁶

As for the concepts of 'National Group' and 'National Minorities' and the potential and real confusions these have caused since, he argues that

The "races" in South Africa are not "national groups" precisely because they are not nations and because they do not desire separate statehood. The term "national group" like "ethnic group" shifts the emphasis from alleged biological to alleged cultural and political attributes of the group. Whereas "race", however, has either no political significance at all or, if it has, implies some state of inequality, the term "national group" implies specifically a political dynamic towards separation or accommodation among

⁵⁴ *Sow The Wind* (1985) Skotaville Publishers, Johannesburg 41-57.

⁵⁵ Referring to none other than ZacYacoob (later one of the first Constitutional Court Judges of the country) speaking at the first general meeting of the TIC in May 1983. 1985:page: 47.

⁵⁶Transformation: Page 50

various “national groups” each retaining as much sovereignty as possible within a federal or confederal set up.⁵⁷

He provides, largely as an alternative, a lengthy exposition of the concept of ‘colour-caste’ as useful in characterizing ‘the officially classified population registration groups’ in South Africa, recognizing the complexities of its usage and especially the debates between Cox and Berreman and others raising criticisms against the usage of the concept.⁵⁸

Given his reservations about how the concepts are used he undertakes an explication of the central concept of ‘nation’. In this he draws on Marx and Engels’ Communist Manifesto who argued that

The working men have no country.Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself *the* nation, it is so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word.⁵⁹

Basing himself on this he asserts that there can be no timeless definition of the concept affecting all circumstances and contexts. For him Stalin’s definition referred only to the period of the bourgeois democratic world revolution and although it refuted the position of Austrian social democrats Karl Renner and Otto Bauer, remained an arbitrary definition which required one to ‘find a nation’ that meets its definitional premises.⁶⁰ Consequently the nation could best be understood as historically determined in the specific circumstances and material relations between classes and was dependent on the level of political consciousness attained by the classes through class struggle. It was directly impacted on by the form of state bequeathed to colonial states because of the capitalist relations and markets it imposed on mostly classless

⁵⁷ No Sizwe 1979:Page 139

⁵⁸ See his detailed discussion of the debates between Cox and Berreman at 159 et seq. His main argument about the use of particular concepts however is that definitions are neither immutable nor uncontested and are given to socio-political practice reliant on the underlying theories – or lack of them – relevant to their usage.

⁵⁹ No Sizwe 1979: Page 6

⁶⁰He shows how Stalin’s approach was 'based exclusively on historical material relating to European experience, [- see reference to Mnackacanjani on 166] ignoring the development of political consciousness and its impact on the process of struggle and its importance in defining the idea of nation.

societies. It made whole peoples 'disappear', ruined cultural treasures and languages and wiped out pre-existing boundaries, forcing some to congeal into proto-national units. It subordinated local leaders and 'mortgaged the incipient colonial bourgeoisie' to imperial capital.

In Alexander's words

On general ground that entire one can say about nations in the modern world is that they will consist of antagonistic or potentially antagonistic classes ... and that consciousness of nationality arises in the course of the struggle for national liberation.⁶¹

Furthermore Alexander's position is based on the assertion that the nation was constituted by those who were 'prepared to throw off the yoke of capitalist exploitation and racist oppression' and who resisted and opposed any attempts at dividing the population 'on the basis of language, religion, tribe, or caste'.⁶²

National liberation could not therefore be interpreted either as the demand for territorial separation or the democratizing of the political system within the framework of capitalist relations and raised the important question of the 'permanency' of the 'revolution,' which was regarded as critical by Marxists in the NEUM and even by some thinkers in the CPSA.⁶³ Somewhat prophetically Alexander recognized that

because bourgeois democratic demands *are* revolutionary ... the nationalist tendency not only continues to have resonance among the people, but, ...will continue to be the greatest danger to it, assured as it is of the full support of all the imperialist states.⁶⁴

⁶¹ No Sizwe 1979:Page 167

⁶² No Sizwe 1979: Page 178

⁶³ In the case of the NEUM, its demand for 'a new division of the land was potentially the pivot on which the revolutionary movement would turn from a movement for bourgeois democracy into one for the realization of socialism in South Africa'. Referring to Point 10 of the Ten Point Programme of the N.E.U.M

⁶⁴ No Sizwe 1979:Page 180

For him the task facing the liberation movement was thus to 'propagate' the 'fundamental distinction between *national* liberation, and the *nationalist* "liberation" proffered by bourgeois liberalism.'⁶⁵ This historical role in his view could only be discharged under the leadership of a politically conscious working class.⁶⁶The working class alone was capable of producing national unity through the extension of democratic rights to the whole of the population, since that was not possible for the middle classes given their relationship to the capitalist system. Only the working class therefore could assume the project of democratizing the country and building the nation implying that

The nation has to be structured by and in the interests of the black working class. But it can only do so by changing the entire system. A nonracial capitalism is impossible in South Africa. The class struggle against racial oppression becomes one struggle under the general command of the black working class and its organizations. Class, colour and nation converge in the national liberation movement'.⁶⁷

These arguments are further elaborated in an article published in *Transformation*,⁶⁸ where he also refers to the need to reverse the reality of landlessness and seize 'political power' as a *sine qua non* for the achievement of nationhood and talks of the limiting nature of the idea that a common language is a condition precedent for constituting a nation.⁶⁹ Following Anderson he argues that the development of 'print languages' facilitating the rise of nation states because of its role in linking emerging capitalism to 'national consciousness,' although he does not accept the idea that 'language is the badge of national consciousness,' asserting

⁶⁵ No Sizwe 1979: Page 180.

⁶⁶ See his discussion of Lenin's idea of 'self-determination' as well as the debates that took place in the European context in both No Sizwe 1979 and in Alexander 1986.

⁶⁷ Alexander 1986: Page 75. Referring to his earlier writing 1983:11

⁶⁸ Neville Alexander. (1986) Approaches to the National Question in South Africa, *Transformation* 1 (63-95)

⁶⁹ Alexander 1986:Page 68

that in fact nation states can be conceptualized without the requirement of language 'communality'.⁷⁰

Post-Apartheid effects

Writing about the post-apartheid period, Alexander suggests that even the middle-classes who find some resonance with the idea of the 'rainbow nation' and 'social cohesion' has largely abandoned these ideas given the social pathologies facing the post-apartheid state and society. In its place there is now even more confusion and an identity crisis among the middle classes engendered once again by a range of conceptions about national identity and 'a singular ineptitude of the country's cultural and political leadership to indicate the possible trajectories of national development.'⁷¹This confusion is in part attributable to the unfamiliarity of those who engage in these issues with the historical development of the present state of affairs in which 'the patriarchal, racial caste system of the pre-capitalist period' laid the foundations for the evolution of racial capitalism in South. Tracing the development of the ideological positions adopted in the liberation movement and the contested notions of democratic transformation, Alexander argues that

Indeed, one of the major challenges facing the post-apartheid dispensation is the creative resolution of the tension between the historically evolved ethnic and racial consciousness of the population and the intuitive aversion to group affiliation in the political sphere (given that apartheid had imposed racial and 'ethnic' categories in order to further the agendas of successive white regimes). The promotion of national unity, a national identity and social cohesion more generally (with due regard to the

⁷⁰ See his very useful discussion of Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined community'. Alexander 1986:page 73 et seq. We simply cannot do justice to Alexander's extensive writings on the language question, indeed on 'language and the national question.' Chapter seven of *One Azania One Nation* begins to engage with the issue of language in relation to the national liberation struggle. These initial thoughts were expanded and became the basis for Alexander's subsequent ground-breaking work on language policy. Ten years after *One Azania One Nation* Alexander published *Language Policy and National Unity in South Africa/Azania* (Alexander 1989) aimed at developing an inclusive language policy to challenge the social and racial divisions in South African society. See also *Interviews with Neville Alexander – The Power of Languages against the Language of Power* (Busch, B., Busch, L and Press, K, 2014).

⁷¹ Alexander N [circa 2011] *The Unresolved National Question in South Africa*: 1-11

contradictory and often conflictual potential of these goals) will ultimately depend on how this fundamental issue is approached.⁷²

Despite the pre-apartheid expectation that the concept of 'race' would 'wither away' with the advent of a democratic polity and precisely because the Congress Movement has become the heir to the post-apartheid state, 'race' consciousness has remained very alive. The period of mobilization under the UDF and the National Forum towards a non-racial position notwithstanding, the position that is now the 'dominant paradigm' has reverted to the older multi-racial tradition of liberalism expressing the tenacity of the historical grip 'on the consciousness of the masses of the people'.⁷³ This has had undoubted consequences for the trajectory of the post-apartheid state, evidenced in the outcomes of the affirmative action⁷⁴ strategies based on 'race.'

The potentially devastating consequences of this scenario are beginning to manifest themselves in the defensive racist attitudes of entitlement, professional incompetence that breeds inferiority complexes, and all too often, resentment of any kind of excellence. In addition, elitist attitudes and aspirations to glamorous lifestyles thrive amidst the devastation of the townships and the former homelands, hire-purchase fantasy worlds crumble into dust while the blight of corruption, fraud and outright theft continues to spread.⁷⁵

In his *An Ordinary Country*⁷⁶ Alexander further argues that after the abolition of the racist forms of political and economic control, South Africa was no more than an 'ordinary country, limited in its search for national sovereignty as a consequence of the 'logic of global production'. His scathing criticism of the leaders of the post-apartheid state refers to their justification for their '180 degree ideological and political turn' Coming to terms with the

⁷²Page 41

⁷³ Alexander N 2012. The Unresolved National Question: See also Alexander N. 2006 on Affirmative Action.

⁷⁴Neville Alexander, 2006. *Affirmative Action and the Perpetuation of Racial Identities in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Edited version of a Lecture originally delivered at the East London Campus, University of Fort Hare 25 March 2006

⁷⁵ Alexander N 2012

⁷⁶ Alexander N 2002

most barbaric consequences of capitalist or free-market dogma'.⁷⁷ He points to the impact of the political negotiations and the political compromise that prevented the realization of the goals of 'reconstruction and development' and of the electoral promises made by the parties that opposed racial oppression.

Alexander calls for the conscious development of a 'new historical community' freed of the blight of racist ideas and 'ethnic' approaches to deal with the systemic roots of racism, economic marginalization and exploitation to counteract the hegemony of the assumptions that underlie these approaches. He calls for the development of ideas and practices beyond the 'glib rhetoric about social transformation, national democratic revolution and an African Renaissance' and the recognition of the critical importance of the problem of wealth and inequality. Moreover the continued promotion of the racial categories of apartheid is hardly a 'harmless' practice since there are, as Alexander argues, other means to achieve the goals of redistributive justice not reliant on the usage of racist social identities. It requires a stronger debate about the 'racial imaginaries' which continue to confuse and strengthen the hold of racialist forms.

Pursuing a new imaginary, Alexander employed the metaphor of the Groot Gariep (the Orange River) to symbolize the possibilities for recognition of the many tributaries of a great, more encompassing and humane South African society. While the metaphor of the 'Rainbow Nation' is used to foster unity it unfortunately, in an unintended way, fosters the debilitating sense of belonging to discreet groups such as 'africans', 'coloureds', 'indians' and whites, placing the focus on different 'races,' 'nations', and 'cultures'. Instead of this, the metaphor used by Alexander, evocative of the fluidity of a great river, the Groot Gariep, symbolizes South African society as constituted by the confluence of different tributaries into the mainstream of a

⁷⁷ Alexander 2002: page 2-3

broader river. These tributaries symbolize cultural practices and beliefs originating from different parts of the world at different points. Alexander wrote⁷⁸:

The influences from Africa, Europe, Asia and modern America (in that order) can be discerned in every aspect of the lives of South Africans. These influences have impacted on our religions, languages, music, dancing, sport and even dietary preferences. While some influences might be stronger than others, we need to recognize that in this integrative dynamic there is no dominant mainstream that should assimilate and submerge other influences. The essential point is to use this dynamic to build integration and a sense of nationhood without denying cherished practices and beliefs and without undermining diversity. It should be understood that the mainstream of a common South African culture and nation is in the process of being formed through the convergence of all present and future tributaries.

Alexander's detractors

As we had suggested earlier Alexander's ideas (not unexpectedly, given his political and ideological orientation) have been the subject of either neglect or misrepresentation. Most remarkably a collection of writings on the National Question was put together by Maria van Diepen 'for the Dr. Govan Mbeki Fund'⁷⁹ some 10 years after Alexander's *One Azania One Nation*. Its contributors were drawn from arguably the most well-known and faithful theoreticians and strategists of the Communist Party and ANC, including Slovo, Meli, Pahad, Mzala, Jordan, Wolpe, Asmal, Tessa Marcus and others. In examining the *References, Indexes and Notes* of van Diepen's collection we found only three references to Alexander's writing one of which referred to his article in *Transformation*;⁸⁰ while one reference was in Pahad's paper⁸¹ which provides 'in brief chronological order the political history of the people of Indian origin in South Africa' to show that they 'constitute a part of the national question'. It makes no reference at all to Alexander's work but refers derisively to 'Trotskyists like Neville

⁷⁸Alexander, N and Vally, S, (2012), *Racism and Education*, Education Rights Project Series, Centre for Education Rights and Transformation.

⁷⁹Van Diepen, M. (ed.) 1989 *The National Question in South Africa*. Zed Books London

⁸⁰ Neville Alexander. (1986) Approaches to the National Question in South Africa, *Transformation* 1 (63-95)

⁸¹Pahad, E. 1989 *South African Indians as a National Minority in the National Question* In Van Diepen, M. (ed.) 1989. *The National Question in South Africa* Zed Books London 86-95

Alexander'.⁸²Slovo's paper⁸³ is no more than a restatement of the SACP position criticized by Alexander. It relies on the classics of 'Marxist-Leninist' literature to which it refers copiously in a critique of what is called "'workerism" 'which denies that the main content of the immediate conflict is national liberation which it regards as a diversion from the class struggle'; 'a more sophisticated version of the left-workerist position ..(which) puts forward a view of working class political organization more appropriate to a trade union than a revolutionary political vanguard'; and 'at the other end of this debate there are views that tend to erect a Chinese wall between the struggle for national liberation and social emancipation'.⁸⁴ It refutes Alexander's criticisms of the 'Colonialism of a Special Type' (CST) thesis, arguing that the CST

(d)oes not imply a two-nation thesis, nor does it ignore class divisions within the communities. The CST thesis correctly describes the reality that, in the post 1910 period, the substance of the colonial status of the Blacks (sic) has remained intact even though its form may have altered. It is this reality which provides a correct starting-point for grappling with the complex problem of the relationship between national and class struggle. It is obvious that until the colonial status of Blacks is ended the process of building one nation cannot be completed.⁸⁵

It also deals with Alexander's claim about the dangers of 'black anti-white chauvinism and ethnic separatism.'⁸⁶Mzala's article⁸⁷ is a much more comprehensive study of the historical evolution of the idea of 'nation' 'self-determination, the 'black republic thesis', South African capitalist development and the 'White Labour Party.' Yet it ignores completely Alexander's

⁸²Pahad: Page 93

⁸³Slovo, J. 1989. *The Working Class and Nation-Building* In Van Diepen, M. (ed.) 1989*The National Question in South Africa*. Zed Books London Pages 142-151 at : 148-149

⁸⁴Slovo J: Page 1

⁸⁵Slovo J: Page 148.

⁸⁶Slovo: Page 149. His explanation here repeats almost verbatim his article of the previous year. See Slovo, J. 1988. *The South African Working Class and the National Democratic Revolution* Umsebenzi Discussion Pamphlet, South African Communist Party.

⁸⁷ Comrade Mzala. 1989. *Revolutionary Theory on the National Question in South Africa*. In Van Diepen, M. (ed.) 1989*The National Question in South Africa*. Zed Books London 30-55

writing on these very issues and specifically his criticism of the SACP's approach. He asserts somewhat categorically the SACP's ubiquitous references to its 'correct position' as follows.

The thesis of the South African liberation movement (as represented by the alliance of the ANC-SACP) on the national question represents a creative application of the most advanced theoretical principles of social change'.⁸⁸ Page 30

In effect he completely ignores Alexander's very comprehensive treatment of that 'creative application'. He provides *a single reference* (merely pointing to the existence of No Sizwe's writing) by way of introduction to his article which makes the claim that the SACP's position represented 'the most advanced theoretical principles of social change'.

The van Diepen volume is evidence of and justifies the claim that the SACP simply 'airbrushed' Alexander's oppositional ideas. If the Party ideologies were interested in debate they certainly had no intention of seriously debating with Alexander. Even after the van Diepen volume Alexander has been dealt with in the most cavalier way. In his 2013 Lecture,⁸⁹ Pallo Jordan simply ignores what Alexander wrote for over three decades, referring only to his 'One Azania One Nation'. In the Section 'Neville Alexander and the National Question' there is little discussion of Alexander's position and more about Trotsky's ideas on the 'Black Republic,' failing in fact to acknowledge Alexander's direct discussion of Trotsky's position on the 'Native Republic'. There is only a brief reference to the Alexander's view of 'race,' misrepresenting it (as we will show later) by suggesting that 'he virtually implies that it was invented'; compounded by a number of non sequiturs in the arguments Alexander makes about 'national and class aspirations' and leading him to attribute to Alexander the very opposite of what he

⁸⁸Mzala: page 30

⁸⁹ Jordan, P. 2013. *Waiting for October: Revisiting the National Question: A Lecture in Honour of Neville Alexander*. NMMU, Port Elizabeth. Incidentally Jordan too made no reference whatsoever to Alexander in the van Diepen volume. See his Jordan P, 1989 *The South African Liberation Movement and the Making of a New Nation*. In Van Diepen, M. (ed.) 1989. *The National Question in South Africa*. Zed Books . London.

has argued⁹⁰. Quite inexplicably Raymond Suttner in his extensive 2011 paper⁹¹ too makes no reference at all to Alexander's influential 'One Azania One Nation'.

As for other criticisms of Alexander's writings on the national question, we can refer to Tabata⁹² who is critical of Alexander's view of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) position and makes the unqualified assertion that 'Let it be categorically stated that the struggle in South Africa is NOT a colour struggle between White and Black. It is a CLASS STRUGGLE'.⁹³ Reviewing *One Azania One Nation*, Brian Bunting⁹⁴ makes the criticism that

No Sizwe refers to 'Africans', 'Coloureds' and 'Indians' in quotation marks and calls them colour-castes instead of something else has not enabled him to formulate either a national theory or a programme of action more effective than that of the existing liberation movement headed by the ANC of which the Communist Party is an important component....By this stage, however, it is too late for No Sizwe to come forward with new definitions. He has shot his bolt and revealed that all his agonizing is due to the fact that he does not understand the relationship between class and national struggle in the South African context. His theories, while interesting as semantic exercises, have no practical outlet and are therefore valueless to the liberation movement.⁹⁵

Amongst his last writings analyzing South Africa after 1994 is his *South Africa: An Unfinished Revolution?*⁹⁶ Alexander's essential argument is that despite 1994 no 'social revolution' has taken place and in reality the post-apartheid state has extended capitalist relations. At best South Africa has achieved what might be described as a 'regime change' signifying changes 'in

⁹⁰ Jordan: pages 6-10. See also Jordan, P. (2012) *A Century of Struggle: The Nation and Class*, *New Agenda*, Issue 45 First quarter.

⁹¹ Suttner, R. 2011. *Revisiting National Democratic Revolution (NDR): the 'national question'* Paper presented to the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Development Seminar, University of Johannesburg 13 April 2011

⁹² Tabata, I.B. 1980 Review Of Neville Alexander's Book: "One Azania One Nation", From the Files of UMSA.

⁹³ Tabata I.B. page 5. Original upper case emphasis.

⁹⁴ Bunting, B. 1980. No Sizwe, One Azania, One Nation: The National Question In South Africa

1980 *Marxism Today* - Reviews

⁹⁵ Page 31

⁹⁶ The 4th Strini Moodley Annual Memorial Lecture, held at the University of KwaZulu-Natal on 13 May 2010.

the form of rule and the institutions of the state machine' without any alteration of economic power or of the 'management of the repressive apparatuses of the state'.⁹⁷

I want to say as clearly as possible that apart from incorrigible revolutionary socialists, such as myself and many others who were routinely maligned as "ultra-Leftists" or even more anachronistically, as "Trotskyites", the bourgeoisie and a few of the leaders of the Congress Alliance were clear that the 1993-94 agreements were in essence about stabilizing the capitalist state and system in South Africa and creating the conditions for its expansion as a profitable venture.⁹⁸

Conclusion

The implications of Alexander's views for the present should be obvious to any discerning reader since the national question remains not only unresolved but also mired in ever greater mystification - in many ways forebodingly anticipated in Alexander's ideas. We are, to be sure, reaping the stormy consequences of the theoretically and practically flawed concepts of nation which relied on the problematic ideas of 'race', 'nation', 'ethnic groups', 'cultural groups' 'racial minorities' and the like – descriptions which persist to this day as resolute beacons of a racist past. The desultory discourses of 'nation' based on such descriptions especially in the vocabulary of South Africa's political leadership attest both to the poverty of its ideas and the abandonment of any notion of a common humanity and a shared history in the struggles against a racist regime. Unsurprisingly criticisms abound about the possibility of racialized and xenophobic genocide *a la* Rwanda and Yugoslavia, 'warring ethnic groups,' the abandonment of the project of 'social cohesion' and a common South African identity.

A further implication of the debate on this issue concerns how and who writes history and whose politics can be hidden from view, because only those who have ascended to political power need be recognized as participants in history. Such a view violates the rich and

⁹⁷ Alexander 2010: Page 2

⁹⁸ Alexander 2010: Page 4

contested traditions, political ideas and practices fundamental to the struggles against apartheid. The ascension to power is not the end of history or of the national question - since it remains as contested today as it has ever been.

To conclude, we can do no better than to quote at some length Alexander's perceptive observations about the fate of the national question in the very last article he wrote on this issue. In it he argued that ⁹⁹

Partly because of the racist and xenophobic incidents that became prominent in South Africa in 2008, discussions about whether or not there are any South Africans have brought two issues very clearly to the surface. On the one hand, it is obvious that the fading notion of 'the rainbow nation' is an expression of the end of the euphoria and catharsis that accompanied the release of Nelson Mandela and the subsequent historic events in South Africa. Fewer and fewer people, more specifically in the middle classes to whom the notion was most appealing in the early 1990s, now believe that a sense of national unity and 'social cohesion' is attainable in the prevailing circumstances of extreme social inequality, high unemployment, predominantly and continuing 'black' poverty, widespread violent crime and social insecurity, the ravages of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, as well as the ever-present threat of xenophobia. In short, quality of life is rapidly deteriorating for all. At the time of writing, shortly after the Football World Cup spectacular in 2010, many ideologues and naïve propagandists for one interest group or another are hoping against hope that the policy of bread and circuses, which has become a major part of the economic growth strategy of the ruling party, will revive the sense of hope and of a genuinely creative and constructive future that characterised the early years of the Mandela administration. These will remain vain hopes unless fundamental changes are made in economic, social and even in cultural policy...One does not need much imagination to see all the possible initiatives that can be taken by

⁹⁹Alexander, N 2010. 'The unresolved national question in South Africa', Jeenah, N (ed) in *Pretending Democracy – Israel, An Ethnocratic State*. Johannesburg: Afro-Middle East Centre

civil society and government if the commitment to a non-racial South African nation is to be realised. If, however, this vision is absent, we will inevitably stumble into the jungle of racial conflict and the fragmentation, rather than the expansion, supersession and transcendence of the national state. Once again, we would confirm the wisdom of Proverbs where the sage asserts: *Where there is no vision, the people perish!* (Proverbs 29:18)

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