

Keynote Address
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Tribute to Neville Alexander – towards one Azania, one Nation

Good evening and thank you to everyone present and particularly to Karen Press, Neville's family members and the University of Cape Town for giving me this opportunity to speak.

Neville Alexander was a theoretician, academic, writer and teacher but also, and this will be the focus of my input, a socialist and a revolutionary. A revolutionary in the sense of both engaging with the world we live in, and, more importantly trying to change it.

The last time I saw Neville was about a week before he died and a few days after the Marikana massacre which still looms large on our political landscape. He was already very ill and struggled to talk for long periods of time but even then remained interested in understanding this event, what it may mean for South Africa/Azania and how significant it may be changing our reality, our world.

And Neville certainly tried to change the world. From the time of his early youth when he left Cradock, the town of his birth and moved to Cape Town to study at UCT. By building and often leading a range of organisations from Teachers' League of South Africa (TLSA), Society of Young Africa (SOYA), the Cape Peninsula Student' Union (CPSU) the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), the Yu Chi Chan club, the National Liberation Front, South African College for Higher Education (SACHED), Khanya College, the Cape Action League (CAL) and the National Forum (NF), the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action, the Worker's List Party, Project for Alternative Education in South Africa, the Langa Youth Reading Group, the Truth Movement.

He tried to change the world in many ways... by analysing, reading and writing; by being the key theoretician at important national and international political meetings; by engaging in guerrilla warfare; but also by sitting through endless campaign meetings to plan the minutia of transport, food, agendas, minutes for conferences; by interacting with sometimes conservative and myopic bureaucrats when trying to change policy; by helping to paint placards and banners for demonstrations; by reading to young children on a Saturday morning; by patiently and sometimes not so patiently listening to endless

circular arguments of comrades and friends and knowing that this is also part of the struggle. This person who integrated socialist theory and revolutionary action is the one I want like us to remember, even as we celebrate his rich writings and insightful analyses.

I met Neville when I joined Workers Organisation for Socialist Action in 1990. Neville was its first chairperson. From that time until his death in 2012, Neville was, for myself, and many others a key leader of the socialist movement nationally and internationally, even though he would constantly resist such accolades. One of my earliest memories of Neville is going on a door to door campaign in Elsie's River, collecting the 10 000 signatures required for us to participate in the 1994 elections. Side by side with many others, I sat with Neville through countless meetings: planning meetings, boring meetings, inspiring meetings, Sunday koeksister meetings. Distributed many pamphlets, painted many banners and had many arguments! So I did not know him only, as many of you may, as the university academic, writer, linguist but also as an activist who was experimenting with implementing social change now... and talked about making revolution soon.

On Socialism:

So, Neville was a socialist. Not a social democrat, not a liberal educationist but a socialist who believed in the fundamental and radical transformation of society. Believed that this transformation was essential to ensure

“that every child and human being has more than an outside chance of fulfilling their full human potential”.

Idealists and socialists are somewhat unpopular and hard to come by these days. As a society, we have become immune to the depth of suffering and deprivation which surrounds our beautiful cities. Inoculated from a young age to ignore the injustices of this wealthy nation that cannot feed and house its people. Where a rampant consumerist and individualistic capitalism is the norm. For many, the violent brutality that holds together this impossible mix of wealth and poverty is only seen through the acts of crime which spill into the quiet leafy suburbs we privileged few inhabit. To believe in a socialist, just, equal world today seems rather other worldly but as Neville said in his essay **No god hypothesis required**

“...if you can believe in heaven and other notions of a life of perfect harmony after death, it ought not to be difficult to conceive of the possibility of a raceless or a classless society here on Earth”.

And at the same time Neville would often couch the core of the socialist philosophy in the simplest biblical terms, quoting his great friend and renowned socialist Ernest Mandel

“...the most urgent need in our country today is the need to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless and care for the sick”.

The impetus, driving force, inspiration for Neville's socialism was a deeply felt compassion, respect and warmth for all people.

On Revolution and Revolutionaries:

I've mentioned revolution and revolutionary. Because one of the defining features of the left movement of which Neville was a part and which informed all of his work whether in the education or linguistic arena, was that we did not, and do not, see a gradual transition from the current system of capitalism to a new social, political and economic order. After completing his PhD in Germany Neville Alexander returned to South Africa and started teaching at Livingstone High School. He was profoundly affected by Sharpeville writing

"from the Defiance Campaign to Sharpeville, to Soweto a red line of blood and suffering gave continuity to our struggle through its many valleys and over its few but memorable peaks..."

and he understood that the Apartheid South African state could not be transformed without armed struggle. He therefore began building a guerrilla warfare movement forming the Yu Chi Chan Club and subsequently the National Liberation Front (NLF). As a result of this pursuit, Neville Alexander was imprisoned on Robben Island from 1964 to 1974. Despite the severity of the incarceration, Neville along with other political inmates turned the maximum security prison into the 'University of Robben Island'. While banned and confined to house arrest for 5 years, in 1979, Neville Alexander published *One Azania, One Nation: The National Question in South Africa* under the penname No Sizwe.

In his Strini Moodley lecture in 2010 entitled *"South Africa, an unfinished revolution"* Neville speaks to the fact that few thinking South Africans are not shocked and concerned about where South Africa is today and

"...that most South Africans, certainly most oppressed and exploited South Africans, feel that they have been, if not betrayed, then certainly misled."

And we know this. We live in a South Africa with a widening gap between rich and poor, a nation where our education system cannot teach our children to read, write and add, where quality health care is primarily the prerogative of the rich and where the painful continuities of privilege and skin colour are inescapable. Yes, we have the vote, but the other dreams of a bright new nation seen so clearly in the heady days of the 1994 elections have been stillborn. The negotiated settlement drafted in the secret backrooms and the corridors of CODESA from 1990 to 1993 while the rest of the country was ravaged by state sponsored political violence, ensured that the economic and social fabric of the capitalist South Africa would remain unchanged. A political revolution, an isolated changing of the guard, has been orchestrated, simultaneously raising and dashing, the hopes of millions.

Of course, Neville was aware of the terribly uncomfortable position many well-meaning and genuine ANC leaders find themselves in where, to Quote from *An Ordinary Country* 2002 page 60/61:

'Today there are few people in the leadership of the ANC who do not realise that taking office is not the same thing as taking power. When they complain, as they so often do, that they are being stymied and betrayed by the bureaucracy which they have inherited from the apartheid state, they are in their own naïve way merely confirming the continuity of the capitalist state in South Africa. Whether or not it is fashionable to quote the founders of the modern socialist movement, there is no doubt that the view put forward consistently by men and women such as Marx, Engels, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and others that a revolution requires the smashing of the machinery of the old state and the reconstruction of society in the interests of the new ruling class has been completely vindicated in the case of the new South Africa.'

And, in *South Africa, the Unfinished Revolution* he says:

"The final disillusionment will come, of course, when the repressive apparatuses of the state, instead of supporting the exploited classes and other oppressed strata, turn their weapons on the masses to protect the interests of the capitalist class."

This chillingly accurate prediction saw light of day on 16 August 2012 in the events that unfolded on a small but now infamous Koppie called Marikana.

On Race and Racism:

Neville Alexander was known for his bold and uncompromising stance on race and racism. As far back as 1979, when most liberation movements and most of the scientific community still took the existence of race as axiomatic, in *One Azania, One Nation: the national question in South Africa* Neville wrote

"...to speak of the 'irrelevance' of 'race' still assumes the reality of 'race' as a biological entity. It is necessary to stress that my position, backed by a growing scientific tradition, leads to an interpretation of 'non-racial' as meaning the denial of the reality of 'race'.

One of the most diabolical features of the new South Africa is how the categories created by Verwoed 65 years ago and others over the last 400 hundred years have been embraced and promoted unchallenged as appropriate forms of social dialogue and scientific study. That this new country, born out of centuries of violent racial oppression, makes no attempt to build an anti-racism movement based on the premise that we belong to one race, the human race, is testimony to the sad fact that societies very seldom learn from history.

The ongoing requirement at all levels of government bureaucracy for people to categorise themselves has more than erased the brief period in our struggle history in the 1970 and 1980 where people, supported by among others, the liberatory philosophies of the black consciousness movement, genuinely questioned and rejected their classification into the four race groups we have inherited from Apartheid.

Today the ongoing use of these categories is promoted as a way to ensure redress. But, to quote Neville:

“Fighting race with race is bad social science and even worse practical politics”.

Taken on face value using race to promote redress is an extremely short sighted and dangerous policy which, as we have already seen, can very easily erupt into violent racial conflicts. Taken more critically, it can be seen as an attempt to disguise the fact that genuine, fundamental, change has not taken place. While a small layer of the black middle class may benefit from these policies and serve to make the surface appearance of corporations and professional bodies more palatable, the fact is that the majority of black South Africans remain trapped in the poverty cycle unable to find decent education or work while the struggle heroes of yesteryear occupy plush corporate board rooms.

With a slight of hand, the struggle is made to still be about race when it is in fact about class, “finish and klaar” to use some of what Neville called good South African.

For a University such as UCT, the issue of race is critical at many levels. At a social level, it relates to how students on the campus are integrated and at a political level it is important as it relates to admissions policies and other attempts at social redress. It can be argued that as academics and intellectuals we are constrained by societal rules and broader issues when it comes to these two areas. The same cannot be said when it comes to the issue of race in science and race in research. Like an enormous elephant in the room, this issue is pointedly ignored by our institutions. The minutia of every scientific category in research studies is examined for accuracy, reproducibility, measurability etc and then race is just thrown in, unquestioned, unchallenged. Even when race is not part of the study question, it is added in as an almost knee jerk “demographic”.

The fact that the last objective quantification of Black, Coloured, Indian and White was done by the Verwoedian population census takers with the aid of hair pencils is just not seen, thought about or discussed. Researchers who question the use of race are seen as difficult, overly sensitive and obstructive.

As an institution of higher learning, what contribution can we make to ameliorating the social devastation being caused by racial prejudice and race based thinking? We, as scientists, as academics can at make clear that while race may be a real social construct and racial prejudice is without a doubt a powerful social force, race as a biological category is non-existent. That we can no longer use the “short hand” of race to describe social class, education status, language group or any of the other categories that have been used to justify this. The time for this dangerous short hand is over. Let us do the

proper work. If we need to examine the role of diet and economic status on health, lets evaluate those things, if we want to look at the role of language and or culture on health seeking behaviour and adherence, lets ask those questions.

Using race as a lazy social category in our research bolsters it's social currency as a rational, justifiable and biological category in a country and world that is tearing itself apart with racial division. It is time to stop creating and recreating race based thinking in our work. This is within our power and would be a fitting legacy and to the Neville Alexander we are honouring tonight.

So, as we gather here today, renaming this building after Neville Alexander, how do we rethink our broader responsibility as intellectuals as agents for social change.

It is easy to become seeped in pessimism and throw our hands up in despair at the mammoth task of building a new country and indeed a new world. Despite many decades of struggle, many moments of triumph and disaster, brilliance and error of both himself and the political left; even though there was no socialist revolution in his lifetime nor any immediate hope of radical change, in his last book, Neville Alexander shows an unbridled optimism and encourages us to

'take a step back and try to get perspective on what has actually been happening since 1990, when the new South Africa began. Even more optimistically, I hope that such a rethink will inspire the reader to find a point of engagement, with a view to initiating or becoming part of trajectories that can lead to that other country most of us had in mind...'

In the discourse and writings of the last few years of his life, Neville talked to a move towards new forms of political organisation. Forms that were more open, more responsive and used a new, less rhetorical language including music, dance, poetry and all forms of culture. To build organisations that recognised that there are many terrains of struggle, organised labour being one but also education, health, language and the environment. In the conclusion of his last book Neville encourages us to:

"...rebuild our communities and our neighbourhoods by means of establishing as far as possible on a voluntary basis, all manner of community projects that bring visible short-term benefit to the people and that initiate at the same time the trajectories of fundamental social transformation to which I have been referring".

When I read this quote, I remember Neville in his 70 s, this giant of an intellectual, sitting and reading to pre school children in Langa at the Vulindlela reading group and then dancing to Brenda Fassie's catchy tune by that same title. Vulindlela, open the way... This particular community project spoke to his tremendous love of children, of music and of course of reading too.

So this part is clear. We need to act locally to create a tangible improvement in the lives of our people whether this is by volunteering at local clinics, running reading groups, building cooperatives, enabling food gardens or transforming schools.

But we also need to look at the global picture and the more fundamental change needed. Perhaps taking Neville's work forward, not as a 'frozen in time' set of truths but rather a series of questions that still need to be answered, can be a beginning.

Perhaps we can take the collective answering of these questions together with local community work as part of the struggle towards revolutionary change. And what are those questions?: what do we mean by nation building; what is race and what is its role in the new South Africa; what is democracy: electoral and participatory democracy; how do we hold the state accountable but also be our own liberators by fixing that street lights and cleaning the local park; how do we develop a value system for a new society while crushed by the brutality of the current one? And then out of this, what organisational forms speak to this work and how can they become places where empathy and humanitarianism flourish in the *now* while we build our vision of a different world for tomorrow.

Jonathan Jansen is quoted as saying that Neville was "The last of the true revolutionaries..." I hope that in this one instance he is wrong and that some of those beautiful ones are not yet born and yet others live among us. I hope that Neville's name on this building will encourage those who learn within in to live as he did, with courage and integrity, to always ask the difficult questions and to be so bold as to try to change the world.

Thank you.