

Neville Alexander's non-racial, inclusionary vision of nationhood*

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The acknowledgement of superficial differences should not become, even potentially, a lever for marginalisation or exclusion of any individual or group of people. This is the essence of a non-racial approach to the promotion of national unity and social integration and cohesion.

Neville Alexander (2006:11)

Neville Alexander was deeply concerned to see the obstacles South Africa encountered on its way from the Apartheid state into one nation of equals. His concept of non-racialism embraced both the negation of race as a reductive signifier of cultural identity or difference and – as a consequence – the bridging of social divisions that have existed along race, class and gender. Alexander propagated “non-racialism” already in the late 1970ies when imaginations of a “black nation” took hold not only of the Anti-Apartheid discourse and black liberation movements worldwide but of the homeland policy of the South-African Apartheid government as well. Even Nelson Mandela’s position at the time was “that the African population– simply the majority of Bantu speakers – is the nation ... all others – Indians, coloureds and whites ... ‘racial minorities’” (N. Alexander quoted in Busch 2011: 112). On the other hand it was Mandela who advocated equal citizenship in his famous speech at the Rivonia trial of 1964: “I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportu-

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nities". There is a field of tension between both statements spanning from a multiculturalist model of nation-building based on group-affiliations to the vision of a colour-blind nation of equals.

The concepts of and relations between state, race and nation are less of philosophical than practical relevance as Neville Alexander continuously emphasized. They bear implications for a nation's constitutional design as well as for its politics and redistributive policies. This is all the more so when socio-economic disparities of status, income or education run along racially determined lines. The question arises then, whether colour-conscious or colour-blind approaches should guide policies of nation-building and transitional justice. The relevant literature is full of controversies on this question. There seems to be a growing consensus, however, that the political approach to achieve racial equality should be distinctively colour-blind because otherwise racial categories would perpetuate (cf. Krysan 2012). Against this view, defendants of affirmative action argue that to ban references to colour from politics, laws and public discourse would not make inequalities disappear as long as they are systematically based on colour. To counterfactually deny systemic racial discrimination would rather exculpate governments from further action and eventually treat individuals as the sole offenders (cf. Bonilla-Silva 2006).

Neville Alexander's works are located in the midst of this controversy. He generally argues for a non-racialist approach that is, if one looks closely, not entirely colour-blind. His view was based on a life-world perspective reflecting the reality of individual experiences as for instance poverty, lack of education, malnutrition, housing-problems, or health-damages. He is doing classic social-structural analysis so far. In following this research tradition, a second, deeper look focuses on group characteristics like class, gender, status, skin, language or origin. Discovering a strong link between one or more of these attributes and the living conditions of certain group raises questions of how and why. The answers, Alexander gave, had been achieved through comparative historical analyses as well as through political

and social action. In analyzing the interplay of class and race he identified Apartheid as a colour-caste system that had been deliberately constructed to serve economic interests (Sizwe 1979). Already in the late 1970ies he also recognized that replacing Apartheid would immediately raise the question of how the politically established colour-caste system could become de-constructed in order to achieve national unity.

Neville Alexander's vision of how nation-building and non-racialism complement each other was ahead of its time. His constructivist view on race was provocative and still exceptional when "One Azania – One Nation" was published 1979 under the pseudonym "No Sizwe" meaning "mother of the nation" in Xhosa. Since then he never ceased to emphasize that a non-racial society is not just the antithesis of a racial society but something that transcends both. Alexander developed a fine grasp of the discriminatory power of a prevailing discourse on race and also anti-racialism that, as a concept and practice, would be endangered to become a racist ideology on its own right. Eventually this could and probably would survive legalized racism for a long time (Alexander 1987:44-45: 2002).

Alexander was probably the first to anticipate a self-perpetuating ideological view on race nourished by post-Apartheid transitional policies that are based less on social than racial categories. To define the dominant societal cleavage along racial lines instead of class may have been part of the elite pact to overcome apartheid. Using class as an indicator for discrimination and starting-point of anti-discrimination policies would have demarcated the divisions shaped by the Apartheid system as well or even better than racial categories. Thus, as Alexander argues, transitional justice, did not necessarily involve race as a predominant reference for compensatory policy-making.

Two seemingly appropriate solutions had been found after the fall of Apartheid to soften racial conflicts and thereby pacify the nation: multiculturalist *rainbowism* on the one-hand and a policy of black empowerment to create new social cleavages

cutting across race and class on the other hand. The aim was to become a somewhat ordinary country where skin should no longer signify rich and poor. For Alexander both approaches were doomed to fail since would perpetuate racial thinking and, thus, impede non-racial policies of social inclusion and nation-building. Moreover they would thwart efforts to inquire into the repressive socio-economic mechanisms stemming from and surviving Apartheid as an exploitative racial system.

It is no coincidence but a result of a political compromise that the TRC did not investigate into the system and operating principles of apartheid nor seriously discuss the question of moral debt (Alexander 2002: 122). Instead the complex of truth and debt was blurred “by both trying “to ‘share’ it between victim and perpetrator and by individualizing it, that is, removing it from its systemic embedment” (op cit). Alexander regretted that no high ranking expert commission was set up by parliament to do research on the Apartheid system. As a consequence there was no truth allowing for a cataclysmic debate that could have formed the intellectual capital of a new republic (op cit: 116, 128; cf. Mamdani 1998). Alexander refers to the German “Historikerstreit” on the Nazi-past. He could have also referred to the parliamentary study commission investigating into the historical analysis and moral evaluation’ of the socialist past of East Germany. Its academic task comprised the relationship of state and party, the structure of the state security and surveillance system, the militarization of society, the significance of ideological indoctrination as well as the role of education, literature and the arts, human rights violations, acts and mechanisms of repression, the variety and potential of resistance and opposition, the role of the churches, the impact of the international system, prospects of restorative justice, and the significance of historical continuities and political cultures (Czada 2005:17).¹ All this was done to build a nation unified on the foundation of truth.

¹ As a footnote of history: The commission taking note of close relations between the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) and the ANC reaffirmed that a vast number of political tracts and publications of the ANC were printed in the East Berlin and smuggled to South Africa during Apartheid.

Among the scholars debating South Africa's past of Apartheid and post-1994 challenges, Alexander was a one-man think-tank to discuss as many questions as possible. He did it mostly in an academic fashion and occasionally as a public speaker. Actually, he discussed nation-building neither as a constitutional problem nor in terms of reconciliation and personal forgiveness first. He rather asked how did the system of Apartheid work and how, after its fall, would democracy and universal suffrage meet the material and educational needs of the formerly oppressed (Alexander 2002). As much as he stands out as a progressive intellectual protagonist of non-racialism, cultural diversity and distributive justice, Alexander considered the nation-state as being a potentially powerful agent of progress. This view appears somewhat outdated at least in the light of debates on the limits of national policy-making especially in times of globalization, marketization and the withering away of national sovereignty. Taking a closer look at his argument, the underlying problem is reminiscent of contemporary discussions in the European Union on how state and nation should relate to one another under conditions of cultural diversity, multilingualism, open markets and eroding capacities of nation states to solve their problems independently.

Neville Alexander and the Nation State

Nation states are still regarded as meaningful units of identity, economic activity and social welfare as well as of political decision making. It is widely agreed, however, that they would only succeed and remain effective in that respect if they are able to reconcile cultural differences with national citizenship. Too often governments have failed in the face of this challenge. When Neville Alexander started to write on nationhood and the national question the discourses were mainly based on political ideology and overshadowed by the cold war. The central concern of African nationalism revolved around issues of liberation from colonial domination then. Vicious struggles for national independence were fought in Southern African countries mainly by liberation movements. Most often they were firmly rooted

in Marxist thoughts and action. At the same time South Africa's National Party propagated its own theory of nationhood based on race: It asserted "the existence in South Africa of eight (sometimes nine) 'Bantu nations', one 'white nation', one 'Indian' and one 'Coloured nation-to-be'" (Sizwe 1979:4). This racial concept of a nation was basically the same as applied by the Nazi- Party in Germany against people that were not considered as members of the Aryan Race. It led to the expulsion and genocide of Jews, Roma, Sinti as well as to the subjugation of all who had been categorized as racially inferior. Neville Alexander had been confronted with this egregious violation of humanity during his doctorate in Germany 1958 until 1961. He was very much influenced by debates in leftist student circles at that time. As a member of the Socialist German Students Union (SDS), he acted as speaker at several of their rallies.² He also established contacts with fellow students from Algeria, Cuba and other countries involved in liberation struggles and with whom he distributed leaflets at the gates of industrial establishments among them the Mercedes Benz factories around Stuttgart in South West Germany (Czada 2012).

To fully understand Neville Alexander's vision of nationhood one must consider the political circumstances of the time and of his personal and intellectual life. During his studies in Tübingen, he not only wrote a top-rated (summa cum laude) doctoral thesis in German Literature and spent much time as an activist. He also studied Austro-Marxist and Sowjet-Marxist concepts on how to solve the national question in Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the Caucasian region. The fruits of his readings were reflected in his book "One Azania – One Nation" (Sizwe 1979). He introduces the national question with historical reference to "the centrifugal rupture of the Russian, Turkish and Austro-Hungarian empires shortly before, during and after World War I" and, in a stunning phrase, concludes: "South Africa is the Tsarist Russia of the Southern African sub-continent" (op cit.:2). Thus, he portrayed the Apartheid state as a prison of suppressed nations waiting for a socialist revolution.

² We got some knowledge about his activities from a diary and correspondence left by the estates of Hildegard von Windheim who died in 1975 in Tübingen. Another source are the archives of the Socialist Students Union and some newspaper articles of the time.

Concurrently, in referring to Marxist conceptions of nationhood, he distances himself from ethno-national concepts of liberation based on the formula of one language, one skin, one creed, one nation. The main purpose of such kind of nationalism would only serve and strengthen the oppressive capacities of a given state and, thus, counteract the liberation struggles of the time.

In citing from the Communist Manifesto “The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got” (Sizwe 1979:6), Alexander takes a clear stand not only in ideological terms but also in terms of a historical view on nationality (op cit.9):

Within a given historical epoch that theory of the nation is 'correct' which gives expression to and helps explain the processes by which the productive and creative forces of a society are freed from the beliefs, customs, prejudices and divisions that have become outmoded, retrogressive and obstructionist. This does not imply: that that theory will necessarily be the one to be implemented and realized within the relevant time-span, for this depends on factors other than the 'progressive' content of the theory concerned.

Alexander insisted that all social relations including nationhood are driven by dynamic forces and characterized by historical contingency. This view contrasts sharply with any backward-looking essentialism and primordial views of human affiliations based on origin. In discussing the rainbow metaphor Alexander develops an alternative dynamic image of national integration. His parable of the Great Gariieb is a poetic and powerful narrative of identity-formation in an emerging nation- authored in 1996 in the midst of debates on how the newly constituted South African nation would find herself in the shadow of a fractured past. It is worth to quote one of the most concise passages on nation-building in his own words (Alexander 2001:150 – 151):

... My own objections to the “rainbow” stem from the fact that its immediate source is the very different social and historical context of the U.S.A., on the one hand, and, on the other hand, that it highlights the question of colour and of groups conceived of as coexisting colour- or “racial” groups. [...] As an alternative, I have proposed the metaphor of the Gariiep, i.e., the Great River. This has numerous advantages in terms of describing the dynamic and the real variability or diversity of our society as it is structured at present.

The image presents itself because of the historical fact that South African society, as we know it, has come about through the flowing together—mostly violently, sometimes in a relatively peaceful manner—of three main “tributaries”—carrying different cultural traditions, practices, customs, beliefs, etc. These currents or streams are the African, the European and the Asian. Today, we have to add, as most countries in the world have to do, the modern American, or “coca-cola”, stream. It is an indigenous image. The Gariep (Orange River) is one of the major geographical features of this country. It traverses the whole of South Africa and its tributaries have their catchment areas in all parts of the country. It is also a dynamic metaphor, which gets us away from the sense of unchanging, eternal and god-given identities. For this reason, it is appropriate for the transitional period in which we are living. It accommodates the fact that at certain times of our history, any one tributary might flow more strongly than the others, that new streamlets and springs come into being and add their drops to this or that tributary, even as others dry up and disappear; above all, it represents the decisive notion that the mainstream is constituted by the confluence of all the tributaries, i.e., that no single current dominates, that all the tributaries in their ever-changing forms continue to exist as such, even as they continue to constitute and reconstitute the mainstream. This is very different from the notions of multicultural societies prevalent in Europe, North America and Australia—where a main stream (the Anglo-Saxon or the German, etc.) dominates while it “tolerates” the coexistence of other (minority) cultures. In view of the present debate about our “Africanness”, this is an important way of seeing what we are trying to capture through the images and metaphors we use to express our intentions and our orientation.

Concretely, my position means that we have to accept that identities in South Africa today are subject to rapid change; we have to open windows onto one another, allow as much mutual influence to happen as possible.[...]. In spite of the passions that are so easily inflamed when this or that “sacred” practice or belief is questioned, we have to begin to understand that what we want to bring about in the new South Africa is a cultural domain without boundaries.

Alexander’s narrative of a nation in the making depicts a vibrant political community facing the future with great openness and dynamism, and promising equal opportunities for all and freedom of choice regardless of origin, colour-caste, religion and language. This comes close to contemporary conceptions of a “post-national” (Habermas 2002) Europe that reaches beyond the idea of a Europe of fatherlands as the former French President Charles de Gaulle put it. Integrationists reject the idea of a Europe of homelands and strive for a homeland Europe instead.

The latter comes close to Neville Alexander's narrative of the Great Gariieb as it deconstructs nationality as an inescapable status bound to origin.

In regard of the origin of its people South Africa is more diverse than Europe. Nevertheless the basic challenges are similar. How to balance universal citizenship with cultural autonomy is still a problem in both regions. Europe can probably learn more from South Africa and especially from Neville Alexander's somewhat European thoughts rather than vice versa. The question how to reconcile universal rights based on citizenship with legitimate claims to autonomy and self-determination of different cultural, linguistic or religious entities has been discussed intensively during the South African constitutional process. Neville Alexander took a clear position on that matter. He had always opposed the granting of special group related rights and privileges – during and after Apartheid. Such privileges, for him, formed the core of Apartheid as a non-inclusive, socially disruptive concept.

Especially race should be absolutely irrelevant as a signifier in social relations, in politics and policy-making, as well as in social and economic matters. Moreover, one should start to unthink race in achieving a non-discriminatory, non-racial society. For Alexander this was not only a human rights issue as usually treated in condemnations of Apartheid. Another aspect of his critique lies in the fact that concepts of racial and cultural segregation distract from socio-economic class cleavages and simultaneously suppress discourses on nationality and the nation state as a community of common fate and destiny. The nation of will and solidarity united by choice that Alexander had conceived of as the only tolerable form of nationhood, could only emerge from discourse. Such discourse was banned under Apartheid as evidenced not the least through the fact that he had to smuggle his book "One Azania, One Nation" out of the nation to be published under a pseudonym.

As a Marxist thinker Neville Alexander was convinced that social and economic living conditions shape social identities, and that policy makers should address

them instead of artificially constructed racial attributes. At the same time he was a liberal thinker when considering democracy and individual liberty as key to freely develop one's cultural identities. The experience of Apartheid influenced Alexander's work together with his Marxist readings on class and nation. Against this background he came to conclusions that are in many ways similar to the most advanced theories of nationality, equal citizenship and cultural autonomy as they have been discussed in Europe and in academia worldwide. The French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy condensed the debate under four headings: redefining patriotism, rethinking identity, repudiating borders, reevaluating homelands (Levy 2007). In this context he referred to the concept of "constitutional patriotism" in the sense Dolf Sternberger (1979) used it, then Jürgen Habermas and, before them, the French philosopher Julien Benda in his Address to the European Nation (Benda 1933). In its core the concept associates patriotism not with a place but with a narrative of common fate, not with a land but with a constitutional structure of law and justice, not with ancestral roots or, worse, with race, but with a universe of principles and ideas put to the service of all (Levy 2007). Alexander used the same approach but with a focus on what this kind of patriotism means for the marginalized and disadvantaged under conditions of a fractured history.

Nationhood in its historical Context

The story leading up to "One Azania – One Nation" tells much about its underlying intention and the political positions which are presented therein. Neville Alexander himself characterized the book as a critical reflection on debates among the prisoners on Robben Island (Busch 2011: 112 – 115):

"I wrote it because of debates with Nelson Mandela that we had on the island over the future of South Africa after apartheid. We discussed a lot on the new nation and the process of nation building – what all this means in the face of racial pre-judices, racist attitudes and categories of class and gender – in-

cluding the language question of course. The discussions lasted almost two years. We met once a week and discussed whether there was a nation and how we would build one. Our common position was that there was no nation, and that we would have to build one, and this would involve many details in terms of education, structural change, identity politics and so on. At that time we did not use these terms. But that was what we were talking about. Mandela's position was, to put it shortly, that the African population— simply the majority of Bantu speakers – is the nation. All others - indians, coloureds and whites - are minorities. He used the term "racial minorities". So the question of race and national unity - the building of the nation – became very important in my thinking, and I understood that this was a nut difficult to crack in a South Africa after apartheid. Therefore, after I came out of prison, I have researched and finally published the book on the national question *One Azania, One Nation*. I wrote it to provoke a discussion in South Africa about all that – and finally it worked. It touched also the language question. This was my first publication about language and the national question. By doing this work, a whole network of people emerged, academics and political activists, who helped me with the research. The book finally came out in 1979. I wrote it while I was in house arrest. But I started to do preparatory readings and hiding pretty much notes in my study materials already in prison. The really deep research took place when I came out. Several topics women's liberation and gender politics and - aside from simple identity issues - the racial question and the class question have been dealt with together. Ginny Vollbrecht and I have helped to change the sociological discourse in South Africa, because we insisted that the three things - class, race and gender - must be treated as an ontological common topic".³ I

In reading this it becomes clear that the first impulse for his book on the national question was less academic than political - a dispute of him with the ANC and other groupings engaged in the liberation struggle. There was obviously a fundamental disagreement on what the nation is among the Robben Island prisoners. In *One Azania, one Nation* Neville Alexander did not refer to this in a direct way. Instead he researched and described the various concepts of nationhood in South Africa as they had been discussed at that time within the ANC, the Africaner Broederbond, the Non-European Unity movement, the Black Consciousness Movement, and the Communist Party. Apart from using historical material – written statements, speeches, manifests – of these groups he studied theoretical concepts of nationality and the national question. Here the focus was on Marxist theories and debates on

³ Ginny Vollbrecht, a sociology lecturer at UCT, provided Alexander with academic literature that would otherwise not have been available for him (cf. Busch 1911: 104).

post-colonial national liberation struggles that he had become acquainted with during his PhD studies in Germany. As an activist in a number of leftist groups he met students from Northern Africa, namely Algeria and from South America and Cuba in particular. He was also very knowledgeable about historic debates on the national question in the Soviet-Union and in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Here one must know that both states consisted of many ethnic populations and therefore attempted to cope with ethnic, linguistic, cultural and partly also religious diversity and conflict. Both states collapsed and left hyper-nationalist conflicts, genocide and ethnic wars behind them. Neville studied and knew these warning examples more than any other South African activist in this field. The national question he raised emanates from the tension between cultural spaces that are not and – in a diverse society – cannot be in line with any given political and legal order. So one must give up the old nationalistic concept of one state, one culture, one language, one religion, one unalterable essentialist identity, that brought so many divisions, wars, sufferings and harm upon mankind. Alexander felt committed to the ideas of proletarian internationalism and anti-imperialist liberation which he and his fellow-students thought to be an attractive answer to these problems.

Of course there are a number of other possible solutions to deal with diversity. One could conceive of a nation as being based on one dominant culture confronted with marginalized minority cultures for instance. The markers of identity that have been used or abused for political expedience on that score are manifold: race, ethnic origin, gender, religion, class or region. Yet to divide a nation along such cleavages has often turned out to become politically problematic or even explosive. The worst case in this respect is the forced supremacy of a minority group over a majority usually based on a *Herrenvolk* ideology, in one word: apartheid. This can hardly be a lasting answer to the national question. And indeed even the apartheid regime experimented with a number of methods to handle the problem through racial constructs of nationality, homeland citizenship and self-government.

To turn the colonial relation of minority rule around, which means to establish majority rule on an ethnic base, would not solve the problem either. The likely result is a structural, permanent legislative majority without much hope to get a change in government for a long time. This is all the more true when a majority government cultivates a paternalistic relationship with ethnic voters. Party patronage and clientelism up to and including corruption would be a most likely consequence. Such a situation could basically end up in what political scientists call a "Dictatorship of the Majority". Of course there are efficient constitutional remedies against that: the rule of law and an independent judiciary protecting the individual, counter-majoritarian institutions like constitutional courts, federalism, bicameralism, supra-constitutional rights, and not the last constitutional minority rights. The latter, however, carry the risk of categorizing and dividing a nation into groups anew, and thus perpetuate its social cleavages. The very special case of a majority claiming preferential treatment appears to be especially problematical. Neville Alexander argued in a lecture originally delivered at the University of Fort Hare (Alexander 2007: 101, 104) that one should not employ "discursive as well as socio-economic strategies that had been engendered in the USA context and that, in some cases, had already been left behind or, in other cases, had clearly led into a dead end there".

Neville Alexander's argument suggests that we are not dealing with a minority syndrome. Black South Africans constitute the majority of the population of South Africa. It follows that by applying a strict majority principle they could insist on new ways of sharing whatever revenue the state can raise from the productive activities of its citizens. Interestingly, Alexander did not remain with distributive issues but emphasizes "that through their control of parliamentary power, they can reshape the way in which we identify ourselves, even if this process takes generations rather than decades. The basic issue that we must grapple with is the optimal relationship between our national (South African) identity and all manner of sub-national identities" (ibid, 104). Thus, redistributive policies are not considered to be

the basic issue but derive from issues of identity and resulting acts of solidarity. In all his considerations on the national question, Alexander envisages nation as *Solidargemeinschaft*, a community of shared values and supportive solidarity. Here, he shows a clear affinity with the ideational foundations of the continental European conception of state as a political community of solidarity.

Affirmative Action and the national question

In a historical perspective racial identities occasionally led to civil wars and even genocide – most likely in times of economic recession when a cultural majority attempts to blame a socially closed minority for being in control of the economy (cf. Alexander 2007: 92). Neville Alexander had a true fear genocide could happen in South Africa someday. He was afraid the deployment of racial categories in legal rules, policies and regulations would legitimize and perpetuate to think and act in a racially discriminatory way towards others who should rather be seen as fellow citizens. This would particularly hit the youth who, although born after Apartheid, has been still categorized as black, white or coloured according to affirmative action programmes. Because of its pointed criticism his reader's letter on UCT's admission policy (Alexander 2011b) seems worth quoting. It proves him as the intellectual fighter he always was.

“By making concessions to race thinking, for example, by putting it in little squares with racial labels to be checked on application forms for the alleged purpose of tracking the tempo of “transformation”, we are establishing or consolidating the template of a genocidal grid, one that is all too real in the consciousness of those who are so labelled and categorised. ... this issue is not about colour or “race”; it is about disadvantage. ... it was not because people were “black” in skin colour that they were disadvantaged; it was, among other things, because they were forced to go to underfunded and generally under-resourced institutions, such as schools and bush colleges, that they were disadvantaged. It is an insult of the first order to believe, even implicitly, that I am disadvantaged because of the colour of my skin or the texture of my hair“

Alexander's alternative solution to remedy past injustices comes without a racial classification scheme. He believed that better schools starting with mother-tongue teaching would build-up a resourceful inclusive society in the long run, and, thus, obtain an "organic affirmative action programme" without a racial script (Alexander, 2011#, 313-315). By contrast quota regulations would only create new divisions without overcoming the old ones. As a result and against all original intentions, national unity and solidarity would suffer. Here, I think, Alexander touches a raw nerve but may be too pessimistic in his assessment.

Affirmative Action and the Black Economic Empowerment program had been designed to cut the linkage of race and class. The African "Nouveau Riche, the "Black Diamonds" as they are called in South Africa contribute to a new fabric of society that is increasingly characterized by cross-cutting social cleavages and class status. This can and – as I think – will feed a modernization process away from a pre-modern society entirely segmented along racial lines to a modern, functionally differentiated open society. Does this sound utopian? Modernity is not just a matter of economics but also, and even more of discourse. Is the folk concept of race so ingrained in South Africa that it would be impossible to make people see otherwise? If we agree with Neville Alexander that so called "racial groups" are nothing more than "imagined" communities constructed in social discourse then discursive strategies should also suit to disrupt such racial framings. Talking openly and loudly about the past and present of racial discrimination promises a way out of racial thinking, but might also reproduce stereotypes and re-open old wounds. To prevent the latter, participatory and communicative ethics would be an answer. Looking at Germany and how it dealt with its most dreadful episodes of genocidal racism, Neville Alexander said: "In Germany, I experienced that a society enslaved by the principle of racial discrimination can turn into a democratic society. I always kept this model in mind during the struggle against apartheid."

Indeed Germany experienced a fundamental transformation of its political culture and former racist discourse but apparently less an elite change after the Nazi rule, whereas in South Africa, as Neville Alexander and others (e.g. Bond 2000) complained, there was no deep social transformation apart from a partial change of elites. The truth is, most of the leading protagonists of Nazism were jailed or succeeded to flee the country, a few of them were sentenced to death, whereas a portion of lower ranks had just been removed from office. Followers remained untouched. Germany has transformed herself in the wake of generational change and through a cathartic discourse. Alexander had such a long-term intergeneration perspective in mind when calling for more inclusionary participation, equal opportunities and education for all victims of the former system.

Mass education was his key to non-racialism, qualified work and better welfare and thus to South Africa's social and economic future. And indeed: a nation of educated people bears huge capacities, a treasure greater and more sustainable than mineral resources can ever be. Neville wanted to explore these national human treasures. However, to tackle this plan would require a huge effort and involve enormous resources in terms of spirit and capacity – will and skill. Allow me to briefly consider one possible way towards empowerment that does not just enrich a few but has transformative potential and would strengthen the economy in the long term. The strategy focuses on workers' co-determination on the level of big companies as it has been occasionally discussed in South Africa but never realized. In systems with co-determination the workers are given seats on supervisory boards or management boards of a company. Thus, workers would get a say instead of shares. Worker' representatives sitting on boards, however, receive remunerations from this function aside of their normal wages. This money can then be channeled into a fund to give scholarships to talented working class students. The practice has been working in Germany for more than 50 years without any negative side-effects. In all joint-stock company's annual reports you can read the following sentences: "The employees' elected representatives have stated that their remuneration as Supervi-

sory Board members shall be paid to the Hans Böckler Foundation, in accordance with the guidelines of the German Confederation of Trade Unions". Of the funds collected this way tens of thousands of working class students have been enabled to study up to the PhD-level, and hundreds of research projects on social, political and work-related issues have been financed this way. The idea of getting black empowerment entrenched into South Africa by reserving seats for them on company boards as stipulated in a law on worker's co-determination in industry has long been discussed. The political support was meager. I can only speculate why such initiatives have failed. Owners and company managers almost naturally reject any idea to share power with organized labor in a regular and transparent way. May be union leaders are critical of such ideas as long as they can change sides and become CEOs or shareholders themselves. Not least those who have proposed to implement industrial co-determination have – as far as I know - not been part of the ruling party. Peter de Leon suggested it in the aftermath of the Marikana massacre. Law professor Jean Jacques du Plessis, born in Namibia and – like Neville Alexander - a fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation – moved to South Africa in 1993 to propagate the idea of industrial co-determination. The plan failed, and he went to Australia where he is now circulating the idea. ABC radio of Australia had an interview with him on March 3rd 2013 with this introductory statement:

"In the Anglo-Saxon world we love a good fight – our politics, our judicial system, our industrial relations, it's all about opposing sides battling it out for supremacy. Surely there's a better way? Well there is, says Deakin University Law professor Jean Du Plessis – at least for industrial relations and corporate governance. It's called Co-determination. And according to Professor Du Plessis it's one of the reasons why Germany is now an economic powerhouse"⁴.

Neville Alexander was not a politician to push specific political and legal measures like co-determination forward. He was rather a prophet, as UCT-economist Francis Wilson stated in his most insightful obituary (*The Cape Times*, August 30, 2012. De-

⁴ ABC radio of Australia: Codetermination- the German way. <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/futuretense/codetermination--the-german-way/4541020> (accessed June 15th 2013); see also Deakin University Australia: <http://www.deakin.edu.au/research/stories/2013/02/04/its-called-mitbestimmung> (accessed June 25th 2013).

spite his analytical sense and commitment to critical theory, he was an optimist most of the time. He trusted the nation-state not only to constitutionally enshrine perpetual values of humanity, but also to use its administrative capacity to bring these values to life. For a long time he hoped that the ANC-government could achieve great things because it represents the vast majority of the country. Only after many setbacks in language policy did he resign as a prominent expert, advocate and policy advisor in that field. However, his and others expectations of a radical social change were unfulfilled.

Complaining about shrinking problem-solving capacities of the South African national government, he remained optimistic in regard of civil society initiatives. If governments can't help local communities, then civil society associations must help themselves. The most relaxing and joyful discussions we I had with international students during our so called "weekend-seminars with Neville Alexander" were on ordinary people's initiatives such as the Vulindlela Reading Club.⁵

The "We-ness" and "unique-ness" of South Africa / Azania

In Alexander's notion of nationhood "We-ness", is defined by principles of legal and political equality, non-discrimination and social solidarity among fellow-citizens. To be sure, this is still a national approach to politics, despite the fact that the capacities of nation states have decreased and national sovereignty has become questionable in the age of globalization. Alexander was aware of the limited capacities of governments to solve a nation's collective problems. To say, he trusted that politics and civic engagement can help to improve the social situation of the majority of the people does not mean he had feasibility-illusions. He was neither an ideal-

⁵ The Vulindlela Reading Clubs were initiated by Neville Alexander and others to create inspire, promote and support reading for enjoyment and the development of reading habits in mother tongue and additional languages among children and adults.

ist like Bishop Tutu⁶, nor a visionary realist like Nelson Mandela, nor a technocrat like Thabo Mbeki, nor a populist like Jacob Zuma. Alexander was not sentimental about national belonging. He was much more concerned with human rights and dignity than with national identity based on national pride. Being a cosmopolitan at heart Alexander did not glorify nationhood, nor did he diminish and transcend the nation state as it is common among European intellectuals these days. He was aware of the contradictions between, on the one hand, universal values and uniform equal rights and, on the other hand, the particular values and worldviews – not the least the manifold languages - of the “people”. The linguist Neville Alexander, more than the historian and political activist, provides evidence that his concept of nationhood does not thwart particular cultural and ethnic identities. On the contrary: to develop relations of mutual recognition and respect among people of different origin up to the quest for multilingualism would serve as a basis for his *Azanian* ideal of unity. Aware of ongoing theoretical debates on identity, nationhood and citizenship, the internationally experienced Neville Alexander did not regard South Africa as a unique case. But he considered South Africa to suffer more than any other country from a deeply entrenched and lingering racist legacy and from an internalized racist discourse. Therefore for him the project to which he has devoted his life had not yet been finished.

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⁶ Idealism is the crucial accusation Alexander makes against how the intellectual South Africa dealt with its Apartheid past. This is shown by his harsh remarks on the TRC, the reconciliation discourse and the rainbow metaphor in chapters six (On the Politics of Reconciliation) and seven (South Africa: Example or Illusion) of his book “An ordinary country” (Alexander 2002: 111 - 173).

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