Article

The contribution of radical Western Cape intellectuals to an indigenous knowledge project in South Africa

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Abstract
This paper examines the writings of Cape Town intellectuals Ben Kies and Neville Alexander to pose the question about the possibility of an emergence of an indigenous, or to use a term which Australian social theorist Raewyn Connell has recently used, a ‘Southern Theory’ for the social sciences in South Africa. The paper is an early exploration into what the essential and constituent parts of such a theory would consist of and against this attempts to explicate the views of Kies and Alexander in theoretical terms, and it draws on recent biographical work on Alexander. For the purposes of the study within which the paper is located, delineating these views and representing them in a closer theoretical exposition is an important first step.

Introduction
This article explores the contours and scope of the thinking around race and identity of the theorists associated with the non-racial movement that evolved amongst Cape Town intellectuals in the 1930s and that continues to inform the political and cultural work of contemporary scholars and activists. The article focuses on their political, social and broader cultural work in order to pose the question about the possibility of an emergence of an indigenous knowledge theory, what Australian social theorist Raewyn Connell (2007) calls a ‘Southern Theory’, for South African social sciences. The paper is an early exploration into the essential and constituent parts of such a theory. With this in mind, it attempts to explicate the theoretical
contributions of Ben Kies and Neville Alexander as an important first step. The article investigates the relevance of these theoretical views for the current challenges faced in South African education.

Connell’s (2007) work provides an important stepping-off point for this paper. The burden of this work, *Southern Theory*, is to explore the lineaments of a theory that does not operate in the ontological universe of the north only and that addresses itself to the contextual complexity of the local situation. The work is an important drawing together of the history of theory building in the last 100 years and focuses particularly on the evolution of sociology as a discipline. Her key framing concepts include the ideas that

1. autonomous social theory is a virtual epistemological impossibility in the age of modernity;
2. Intellectual Indigeneity subsists, as Connell (2007:234) recounts, drawing from the controversial but insightful work of Paulin Hountondji, the Dahomean [Benin] scholar, in an engagement with the social conditions of the local and its empirical specificity.

In developing this line of thought, Connell is careful to emphasise the politics of the epistemological project and its universalising inclinations. Indigeneity in this approach is not, as much anthropological thinking suggests, only about *origination* but, also simply about the fact of *occurrence* and so, hopefully, taking one away from the racialised conceits which have come to envelop discussions in cultural history. The focus of her critique is theory which is developed in the ‘north’ and which projects itself as universalist. A key point which she makes in critiquing modern theorists such as Giddens and Bourdieu is that their work is empirically grounded in their own social spaces and is insufficiently alert to the specificity of the context of the subaltern world: ‘A general social theory shaped around the objectivism/subjectivism problem necessarily constructs a social world read through the metropole – not read through the metropole’s action on the rest of the world’ (Connell 2007:45). Her concern about this lack of alertness is with the ease with which the intellectual authority of the margin is discredited, ‘ripped off’, relegated and disenfranchised – the ‘grand erasure’. The issue animating this paper is that the neglect or misunderstanding of the insights of local intellectuals over their own history and social environment is a problem that cannot simply be overlooked as an accident of history. Rather, it needs to be engaged with in terms of the larger political economy of knowledge production. A major problem, one which
this paper raises directly, is the ontological basis of our knowing and the foundational ways these forms of knowing – as they are constituted in dominance – fail to engage the complexity of the world.

**Knowledge production outside the academy**

An important feature of knowledge production in South Africa during the 1930s to 1980s is the vibrancy of the intellectual community outside of the academy. This was especially the case in the Western Cape where scholar-activists under the auspices of a range of socialist organisations, such as the National Liberation League (NLL) and the New Era Fellowship (NEF), forerunners and co-terminous organisations of the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), came to introduce into the South African intellectual community a powerful set of social and political ideas (see Drew 1996).

Two important texts describe the intellectual environment at the Cape in the 1930s and provide brief cameos of its leading figures. Baruch Hirson’s (2001) *The Cape Town Intellectuals* and Ralph Bunche’s (1992) *An African American in South Africa*, which described his visit to the Cape in 1937. Hirson’s work focuses on the emerging ‘white left’ in Cape Town and brings into perspective the role played by important left-wing intellectuals at the University of Cape Town, such as Lancelot Hogben, in shaping the character of social and political debate. Unfortunately, this work provides little insight into the kinds of contact that had taken place between intellectuals coming from outside the country and their local counterparts and how it was that the very particular brand of thinking around issues such as race and class evolve at the Cape. Bunche’s work similarly is unable to shed light on this. He had made contact with a number of important intellectuals and activists who, unfortunately, left a poor impression on him. He concluded, too cryptically for us to make much of what the substance of their discourse was, that they were too ‘high brow and above the masses’ (Bunche 1992:60).

As Bunche (1992) and many other scholars have argued since (see Chisholm 1994), the intellectuals in the NLL and its successor organisations had difficulty in communicating their message to ordinary people. These challenges are not unimportant but the significance of the social analysis that groups such as these were making, particularly for understanding the complexity of the South African situation, should not be underestimated. Christopher Saunders (1988:137), in summarising the contribution made by this group, describes them as Africanists and makes the point, for example, that ‘their work together embodied an Africanist intervention more radical
than Roux’s’.¹ They may have been more radical than Roux, but they were not Africanists in the sense that Africa constituted the sole focus of their attention. If anything, and this is a point that Alexander takes issue with them about, as we will see below, Africa tended not to be their primary point of reference. They had a fascination with Europe and it was only with the publication of the work of Basil Davidson that they began to look seriously at Africa itself (Alexander interview, May 23, 2007).

It was their radical stance on many issues, not least that of social identity, I shall argue, that made the establishment uneasy with them. Those few scholars in the academy who did come across them were often outraged by their work. Leonard Thompson, one of the country’s leading historians, had this to say of Hosea Jaffe’s *Three Hundred Years*, a text written in response to the tercentenary celebrations taking place around the arrival of the Dutch at the Cape in 1652, on:

> … what purports to be a history of South Africa which a Cape Town group of non-whites have recently published surreptitiously: a large proportion of the work is devoted to convincing the reader that the white liberal has always ‘ratted’…. Throughout the work the hero of the story is the Native or Indian or Coloured man who resisted the blandishments of the liberals…. (Saunders 1988:138)

But people such as Thompson misunderstood their mission. He and others tended to stereotype them as offensive intellectual poseurs. Their project was a great deal more searching. I argue in this paper that amidst the unquestioned difficulties that their work and practice presents, and a tendency to the dogmatic is one of them, one which effectively cuts them off from the heat of political struggle and so prevents them from extending and grounding their theory practically, they come to pose the question of social identity in a way which engages with, in the first instance, the social change that South Africa goes through. The work of Alexander, I suggest, poses the question of identity and citizenship in profoundly insightful ways. His approach, largely a result of his own framing of the issues, has come to be circumscribed in what has come to be called the ‘national question’. The idea of the ‘national question’ has effectively been corralled inside the race conundrums the country confronts. But Alexander’s work is more than that. The value of this intervention is to pose deep questions of our dominant historiographies and especially their weaknesses around the issues of race and class. The challenge which Kies, Alexander and other writers working in this tradition constitute is regularly bypassed and has in effect remained
a closed book to mainstream history, sociology and politics. But the reality is that they developed a counter-narrative to the racialised script deeply embedded in South African historiography, even in its radical versions.

The broad argument I make in this paper is that it is the originality of their work which we have to reassess. This originality, and indeed holding up its claims to indigeneity, I argue, is unable to be sustained inside the main body of the tradition and its organisational manifestations beyond the 1960s. The causes for this are complex. The challenge is taken up outside of it by Alexander, who, after 1960, no longer is associated with them. As emphasised above, the important point to make with respect to exposition in this paper is that it is not per se a discussion of the political history of this group of socialists but a focus on what it was that made them intellectually distinctive. The political theory of non-collaboration, which is the hallmark of their practical engagement and for which is why, largely, they have been ridiculed by mainstream politicians and scholars, is, to emphasise the point, not the focus of this work. It is their approach to race and identity.

**Who were they?**
The intellectuals of the NLL were a formidable group of young men and women who emerged in the interstices of the small zones of possibility that the constricted colonial life of the Cape made possible. They came from moderately educated families. Their parents, who would have made their way relatively far on the schooling ladder, were of modest economic means and invariably classified African (‘Native’ or ‘Bantu’ in the supremacist convention of the time), ‘coloured’ and ‘Indian’. They would have been people who would benefit from the attention of a discerning and caring teacher, had access to a library, and critically brought under the wing of one or other social movement (Wieder 2008). By the 1930s, these people were sufficiently visible in their various communities no longer to be seen as unusual. Over time they produced an entirely new and stimulating movement manifested in a range of political and cultural vehicles such as parent-teacher associations, teacher organisations, civic structures and debating forums.

In the 1940s and well into the 1960s they established, especially in the Western Cape and, as Gevisser (2007: 96-97) notes, in the Eastern Cape, the heartland of what is now too facilely described as African National Congress (ANC) territory, structures that engaged powerfully with local communities. These structures were unashamedly about ideas. They were, as Rassool (2001:2) has put it, intent on taking the ‘nation to school’. Their signature
An indigenous knowledge project in South Africa was that of the intellectual activist. It was not sufficient that people mobilised behind an idea, it was critical that they came to own it and to live it. The attitude they adopted to their work was that it was always necessary to be seeding ideas into the people to counter the racist and divisive ideology of the everyday. This work was difficult involving, as it did, more than simply winning political allegiance or proselytising in a narrow sense. The teaching and learning involved in it was deliberately about self-reflection in relation to the country’s history and the ways in which it had come to be used for the purposes of building racial identity. In its formative dimensions it required a cognitive engagement which was, of course, for many not easy. Their entire mode of address and deportment was that of the pedagogical. Politics was pedagogical. As Rassool (2001:2) explained, they assembled in a number of forums and meeting places where they debated, argued and wrote around the project of emancipation in South Africa:

Together, these constituted a long-range project in public education, with features resembling state-like rituals and practices. Through an analysis of power in society and the conditions of resistance and collaboration, a system of representation was created, complete with its own vocabulary, framing categories, nouns, verbs, activities and procedures through which the nation was defined, the ‘enemy’ named and conceptualised, and through which a moral code of behaviour was counter-posed to that of the ‘enemy’.

Rassool (2001:2) continues to explain that this movement came to produce a knowledge-producing impetus which took expression in leaflets, pamphlets, newspapers and books. Critical about it, as Dudley explained to Wieder (2008), was that it subsisted in a relatively independent intellectual arena. It existed in a fecund relationship with key dissident scholars in the academy, but it essentially came to constitute a relatively autonomous discursive space. Subjectivity and identity, as the key figurative tropes of the dominant racialised society against which it set itself up, were major objects of its practice. Rassool (2001:3) has projected this impetus as one which was defined by the imperatives of ‘identity formation’. In some ways it was more.

There were, without seeking to reduce the complexity of the experience clear ontological dimensions. They brought an urgency to this work which is well-described in Wieder’s (2008) biography of Dick Dudley. It involved deep preparation, particularly for public engagements such as making a speech or an input to a gathering or, more intensely, when giving a formal talk. Alexander (interview, June 6, 2007) describes how in its detail this
meant that one’s verbal references, one’s quotes, the context against which one was invoking an allusion, had to be not only absolutely correct, but pertinent. There was a fastidiousness about those in control of the shaping process which demanded of the individual an almost complete re-imagination of his or her identity as a human being. One had to be asking more of oneself, what it meant to be a full, active and self-fulfilling human being. They were thus consummately modernists but modernists who held each other and themselves to demanding standards.

Psychoanalytically, there is much that one can make of this in the South African context of race. Central, I suggest here, is the desire, more, the explicit but under-articulated quality they demanded of each other, that one should exceed and even efface one’s own raced history which projected one in caricatures of one kind or another. In objectivist terms the temptation is to describe this process as ‘race suicide’, but the point was that they began their argument with the proposition that, actually, there was nothing in the notion of ‘race’. As we shall see, ‘race’ for them was a vacuous concept, and so, for many, because it was empty, there was nothing to get away from. They remained, however, powerfully aware of its ideological grip on the popular imagination and the effects it induced.

This ideological grip was their target. In their deportment they required of each other the disposition of modernism but, more importantly for the purposes of this paper, that which was deliberately, to coin a phrase, post-racial. This ideal was insistent and took its urgency from the contexts in which they worked where constructions of identity and their modes of description were only available in debased racial frames. The burgeoning language of apartheid, for example, and its insistent attempt to fill in coloured and African identity in the pejorative vocabulary of drunkenness, lewdness and, most pointedly, that of loss of self-control, would have been especially offensive to them. They would have been acutely aware of the relatively respectable work of the Stellenbosch University sociologist, SP Cilliers (1963:34), who in his *The Coloureds of South Africa*, distilled people he described as coloured into caricatures that have endured in sociology. One sees there the tragic figure of the post-slave roué – utterly out of control, prompting Cilliers, in the midst of his turgid sociological prose to comment, ‘(t)his presents an awesome picture indeed’ (Cilliers 1963:36). Martin (1999:178-9), building on the work of Jeppie (1990), has attempted to place these questions through his examination of the Cape carnival in a somewhat more complex light, but the project of the Cape socialists could not, at the
time, assimilate this complexity. They, come, therefore, themselves, to reconfigure and offer a model of what a post-racial world should look like. This is important for understanding people who lead the movement, Ben Kies, IB Tabata, Dick Dudley and Neville Alexander, and is explored in more detail below.

Understanding this complex view of the world is important, given the complexities of these developments in the Cape and, indeed, across the world where similar challenges were encountered. An important comparison to make is of course that of the Indian subaltern movement and the emergence there of the post-colonial movement. Key to my argument is that this perspective of the world is encapsulated and embodied in the thinking, deportment and behaviour of its subjects, and for the purposes of this paper, Kies, Tabata, Dudley and Alexander are deeply significant figures. In the forefront of this project as an ontological exploration is an awareness of the deep instantiation of race into the South African landscape. The contribution which this movement makes is to theorise and explicate this awareness around a new project of non-racialism.

Many features of this project need to be highlighted in order to understand the distinctiveness of the theory as an ontology. Characteristic of much of the work of the movement is its simultaneous foregrounding and sublimation of the individual. At its core, the project was, and remains, inspired by the Enlightenment project; it is deeply committed to the notion of the individual as an agent in his or her own history. In this respect the movement is unequivocally modernist. It is the individual who must step into history. In this, the basic individual human right to the franchise is non-negotiable (Mokone 1982:4). Along with the franchise are civil liberties. It is not sufficient, the argument goes, that people have the vote. They must have the right ‘to fight and organise to change their miserable conditions…. There (has to be) the deliberate and conscious abolition of inequality…’ (Mokone 1982:4). But this tradition also eschewed the position of the leader. Of course, this position takes its character directly from the vanguardist and indeed anti-Stalinist politics of the time, where the celebration of the individual is decried. The effect is to produce an unremitting submergence of individual identity within the corporate consciousness of the movement. In this respect, as Rassool (2001:4) has presciently remarked, and as Alexander has commented (interview, June 6, 2007), the construction of a personal biography around the figure of IB Tabata, as the leader of the Unity Movement of South Africa, is a deeply paradoxical and even puzzling
phenomenon which is not easy to account for in the fiercely egalitarian ethos of the movement to which they belonged. In fact, Tabata had, in dealing with a moment in which a process of his own apotheosis was imminent, written to his colleague Wycliffe Tsotsi in 1946: ‘One sees from their little request exactly the way they think. They still cling to this “little leader” business… They must learn to respect and turn their attention to ideas rather than the individual’ (Rassool 2001:6).

These puzzles notwithstanding, the subject-formation project in the NEUM is deliberately focused on the making of the ‘non-racial’ person. How this ‘non-racial’ subject is articulated is important for an assessment of the work of the movement and the distinctive contribution it makes. Clearly, as Rassool (2001:16) explains, its distinctiveness can be found in its attempt to chart a different route to modernity. Modernity, as Tabata (1980 [1959]:53) argues, is accepted in this world-view as an ‘inescapable fact… that is rapidly taking place in their mode of living, with all its hardships, and in their (the African people) habits of thought…. For the worker the machine and the factory dictate a new set of relationships and attitudes, and outside the factory too, also a new set of social and economic needs’. At the heart of this approach was a socialist understanding of what the world had become: ‘capitalism has not simply changed the habits of the tribalist and the feudalist. It has created a new man (sic)’ (Tabata 1980:53).

But this ‘new man’ – or new person – in the hands of the capitalist was deploying knowledge and information to ‘barbarous intent’: ‘The discovery of the limitless power of atomic energy is turned to the creation of diabolical instruments of devastation and destruction. The ways of progress are devious and growth is painful; the mechanical inventions of man have outstripped his social evolution and moral values’ (Tabata 1980:58). The new person, had to be distinctly more in the South African context; and as was the case in the Soviet Union and China, the two great experiments of ontology playing themselves out elsewhere in the world, had to undergo a complete renovation of his or her world-view. He or she needed to take a particular form to cope with the new complexity of capitalism. But in the South African context even more was asked for. At the heart of this project was a robust individualism explained and described entirely in the language of Enlightenment perfectibility: ‘Each member (of society) must be armed with the necessary equipment to play his part to his utmost capacity’ (Tabata 1980:58), but critically, it had to be so on the basis of a new non-racial spirit.

Universalist as the foundational language of the NEUM was, it remained,
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significantly, acutely conscious of the specificity of the local setting. Its empirical methodology for deepening this awareness was complex. While unambiguously Marxist, it sought to ground itself in the conditions of the local. Tabata’s own methods of data gathering were based on his travels into the countryside: ‘Tabata’s rural tours were a type of spatial practice of research, of “travel encounters”, of doing surveys and collecting data for later dissemination’ (Rassool 2001:18). It sought, also, to produce a deep cognitive engagement with the conditions of the local for the purpose of understanding how to move beyond it. The conditions of the local, especially for people such as Tabata and Alexander, were important to understand. Many of the important theoretical positions in the organisation came through searing discussions at key discussion venues such as the Stakesby-Lewis Hostel in Canterbury Street in District Six, Cape Town. There, as Dudley explained (Wieder 2008:45), young people were put through a rigorous induction process into the method of finding data, drawing on theory and generating theoretical propositions. Characteristic of these events was their eclectic nature. Young scholars and inductees into the thinking of the movement were required to cast their intellectual imaginations as widely as they could but to focus their analytic attention on the explanation of the local. Importantly the character of the South African society was at the heart of this analysis. Race, as a consequence, shaped up as its central target.

**Ben Kies and the non-racial ethic**

Amongst the central figures in the explication of the non-racial project were leaders such as Tabata, Ben Kies and Hosea Jaffe. Kies’ contribution to the movement is large, but unfortunately poorly documented. He is well-known for his lectures, some of which have survived. A key contribution was his Abrahamse Memorial Lecture given in 1953 on the contribution of the Non-European Peoples to World Civilisation. This lecture focused on the ‘myth’ of ‘race’ (Kies 1953:7) and sought, systematically to demolish the idea of ‘Western Civilisation’ and the idea of a ““Western man” with a “Western soul”, a “Western philosophy”, a “Western science” and a “Western way of life” (Kies 1953:8).

The significance of this work is great in focusing its attention on the seemingly unproblematic couplet of race and civilisation. It extensively addresses how the world of the 1940s and the 1950s, despite the horrors of the holocaust and the Second World War, continues to be drawn in the image of racial-biology:
The creed of the new myth requires the changing of only one word in the Nordic gospel, and it reads: “In Westernkind the world once more its weal will find.” The peoples of Asia and Africa are regarded as belonging to ‘backward’ or ‘child’ ‘races’, whose ‘inherent inferiority’ is patent from their numbers, skin colour, queer customs, heathen gods, laziness, treachery, primitive methods of farming, irresponsibility, fatalism and disregard for the sacredness of human life. In so far as it is admitted that the peoples of Asia have made any contribution to civilisation, it is conceded that they stumbled upon certain discoveries without appreciating their worth or developing them in a way from which society could benefit. As far as Africa is concerned (it is) the home of permanently child ‘races’ … (Kies 1953:8).

Kies goes on to make the point that ‘one of the more important tasks of our time is to dissect this myth… and to give our reply to it, on the level of ideas and in the field of practice’ (Kies 1953:9). The contribution begins this task, key for this discussion, by explaining its use of the term ‘Non-European’, and emphasises that it is only a geographical term and that it could refer to people of ‘any skin-colour, height, hair texture, skull or nose shape who live outside of the Continent of Europe’ (1953:9).

The perspicacity of the work, as an ontological route-marker for the movement he belongs to, is of profound importance. This perspicacity emanates from an engagement with the historical, scientific canon long before this kind of writing appears in the work of the world’s most significant anti-racist scientists such as Stephen Jay Gould. Not only is Kies familiar with the latest anthropology of the 1950s, the work, for example, of the Leakeys in East Africa but also of the emerging work of South African anthropologists such as Dart and Broome who are beginning to talk of the southern African region as being the ‘cradle’ of humanity. Kies continues with this line of thought to acknowledge that

We are in no position at the present time to pronounce upon the weight of the evidence thus far produced by the newer line of research. It is sufficient for our purpose to say that we, the so-called ‘children of Ham’, together with Messrs D.F. Malan and Eric Louw derive from the same stock, homo sapiens, as Dr. L.S.B. Leakey and the Mau Mau whom he is now so bitterly fighting. The human race is now, as it was when homo sapiens evolved, one biological species, with the same number and formation of bones, the same brain and nerve structure, the same internal organs, the same four types of blood groups … and the same capacity, in fact propensity, for interbreeding. Geographical dispersal, isolation and diet, have not made the slightest difference to the biological unity
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of man as a single species, and provide no scientific basis for a division into what are popularly mis-called ‘races’. (Kies 1953:12)

The target of this thinking is a society which Kies and colleagues such as Tabata (1974 [1950]:1) saw as a ‘complex social structure in which the ordinary class divisions (which are easily observable as the pattern of society in Europe) are complicated and obscured by multiracial distinctions, constituting a veritable maze of conflicting interests, both real and apparent’.

A further dimension of this writing is its focus on the meaning of culture. Kies, for example, distances himself from the race-culture homology, and its iconicisation with ‘functionless architecture, literature that does not sell’ (1953:13-14). Tabata (1974:1) takes on white hegemony in South Africa and the ways in which the race-culture homology is perpetrated by arguing that the racist state ‘bolsters up the myth of itself as the master-race, a herrenvolk, the idea being that the progenitors of this country, in some mystic past, must have issued from the lips of Brahma, while the black masses originated from the grosser parts of his anatomy’. Kies, in explicating the power of all people to make civilisation defines culture ‘as the measure of man’s (sic) control over nature, a control exercised through experience shared among social groups and accumulated through the ages. It is [in] deepening and extending the scope of this control that man has added so immeasurably to the potentialities of his life...’ (Kies 1953:13-14). He brings this argument to a conclusion by saying that ‘it is from his culture, ... that man derives his humanity’, and begins his social history (1953:13-14). Critically, in emphasising the significance of the slow process of ‘trial and error’ – the first cultural stage through which every society goes – he makes clear how important to the discussion of the idea of a common humanity is the reality that the first processes of domestication of animals and the cultivation of plants takes place outside of what is understood as Europe today. In any event, he continues to argue, in a way that precedes Chakrabarty’s (2000) Provincializing Europe text by 50 years, in none of those sites ‘was (there) any sign of a “pure race”...so-called “Caucasoids” lay mixed with the Negroids and Mongoloids in a way which admits of no way of telling whether one of them had invented a dolichocephalic harness, or another a brachycephalic wheel or still another a mezzocephalic alphabet...’ (Kies 1953:18).

The use of irony in this text aside, a key feature of this approach, giving its identity framework its distinctive character, was the belief, explained by Tabata (1974:1) that the world they sought to create was not ‘something
bloodless, static and lifeless…. What we want is a dynamic approach depicting a living body in a state of motion, capable of adjusting itself to the play of forces around it and in turn interacting with them…’. The belief in the power of the human mind and body and its universal capacity for agency is the leitmotif of Kies, Tabata and their colleagues.

**Neville Alexander and the theorisation of non-racialism**

The impetus established by the work of Kies is not significantly advanced within his immediate circle or by any of his associates. Through, on the one hand, a series of complex social and political forces, such as the forcing of the NEUM underground, and, on the other, organisational choices, Kies’ great insights are effectively left under-utilised. What comes after Kies, in the fellowship circles of the movement of which he effectively remains at the helm until his death in 1979, is a rehearsal and a retreading of the organisation’s essential postures, even as the world changes dramatically in the 1970s and 1990s. In the process the organisation becomes mired in the essentialist politics of non-negotiability. Non-collaboration as a thesis of practice is invoked so rigidly that it cuts off the possibility for the dynamism that the organisation rhetorically claims it stands for. It is left, instead, to people such as Alexander, to carry the mantle for the non-racial idea.

Alexander’s (1979) key ideas are explained in his work *One Azania, One Nation*, published under the name No Sizwe and elaborated in texts such as *An Ordinary Country* in 2002. Alexander has rarely been discussed in the same space as the leaders of the NEUM. To those who know both Alexander and the NEUM, it is hardly surprising. Emerging from the same orbit as they do, albeit in different generations, their political and intellectual careers take distinctly different routes after the parting of the ways of the Tabata section of the NEUM from the Kies and Jaffe group in 1959-1960. Thereafter, their organisational commitments kept them apart. Leaders such as Dudley held on to his teaching position at Livingstone High School, and Alexander spent the better part of the next ten years on Robben Island Prison, followed by five years under house arrest for leading the Yu Chi Chan Club in a discussion about armed resistance. In taking very different organisational directions, the individuals in these factions and groups came to have very little to do with one another. Critically, while their basic positions around the question of race and non-racialism remained intact and largely in concord, they moved in very different strategic questions around race.

Of great significance in looking at these figures, it is interesting how their
organisational trajectories propel them towards very different readings, interpretations, and even strategic decisions with respect to the South African situation. Strikingly, however, as pointed out above, their commitment to the non-racial ideal places them in a similar place. Dudley’s enactment, for example, of his non-racialism takes profound expression in his work as a teacher. It is important to note that he becomes, after the sudden deaths of Ben Kies and Victor Wessels in 1979, the major thinker in the NEUM (Wieder 2008:126). As the repression of the 1960s and the 1970s bit into the fabric of the everyday, the NEUM chose to go underground. It was Dudley’s responsibility, during these times, to hold the organisation together. Unlike Alexander, whose work is visible in his writing, the same cannot be said of the Cape socialist leaders. They certainly wrote and one is able to discern the central elements of their work in the *Teachers’ League Journal*, the mouthpiece of the eponymous organisation. But the thrust of this work is polemical. It does not lend itself to theorising. So effectively, theorising ceases when the NEUM goes underground. When it resurfaces in the 1990s, in the range of organs through which they choose to speak, it is evident that they failed to move beyond Kies’ brilliance in the early 1950s, and more sadly, turned his insights into clichéd formulae.

In this context it is left to Alexander to reinvigorate the non-racial idea, and indeed to take it to new levels of sophistication. A larger and more comprehensive study of Alexander’s life and work will show how he comes to think the way he does. His biography is an important exemplification – ironically – of the *possibility* that inhered in the ontology that Kies offered to the discussion about social identity. What ignites this possibility is the shaping encounter Alexander has with German philosophy and psychology, the sociology and practice of struggle issuing out of the Algerian and Chinese Revolutions, and then, critically, his deep conversation with the grounded African nationalism of Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, undertaken during his ten-year incarceration at Robben Island from 1964. Out of this, I suggest, emanates a next logical stage in the theory-building exercise around the self and the identity of the post-racial South African begun by Kies. The value of the Robben Island experience for the development of a new sociology and historiography of South Africa has yet to be fully explained, but one sees in Alexander how high Enlightenment and modernist education is brought into a deep engagement with the demand, which Nelson Mandela insistently stands for, that the social experience of Africa, its history and its inner dynamism, has to be retold on its own and not the
ethnocentric terms of European interpreters.

Alexander’s (1979 and 2002) key contributions to this discussion are found in his *One Azania, One Nation*, written during his period of house arrest after he was released from Robben Island under the name of No Sizwe, and his contemporary work, *An Ordinary Country*. Fiercely combative, *One Azania, One Nation*, surveys the literature on race and concludes ‘(I)t is necessary to stress that my position backed by a continuing scientific tradition, leads to an interpretation of “non-racial” as meaning the denial of the reality of “race”’ (No Sizwe 1979:136). In making this argument, he uses what is known scientifically at that time about the study of genetics. This work makes the point that how much we now know about this subject attenuates the ‘race’ claim even more fundamentally, that ‘all mankind has far more genes in common than the alleles which differentiate the various races…. Only 5-10 per cent of all our genes are concerned with the little superficial frill of variation on which races are classified’ (No Sizwe 1979:134). He brings South African historiography and sociology into his sights in this exercise. He takes issue with Anthony Richmond, for example, who argues that ‘(i)n sociology a “race” is understood as a category of persons whose social positions are defined in terms of certain physical or other characteristics that are believed (emphasis in original) to be hereditary …. Whether or not biologists continue to use the term, the reality of race as a socially defined attribute cannot be denied’ (No Sizwe, 1979:135). This view, he continues, is held by many scholars who are ‘otherwise intransigent opponents of racist doctrines (1979:135). He suggests that this approach is flawed, because

Put very simply, this approach implies that, because a very large number of human beings (but how many? By what statistical formula is an adequate number to be arrived at?) believes that there are ‘ghosts’, science must accept the reality of ‘ghosts’ because the belief in their existence occasions individual and group behaviour that could be expected if such things did in fact exist. Because ‘many’ people still believe that the sun revolves around the earth, therefore, the sun does revolve around the earth! Or because racial prejudice is a very real phenomenon, therefore, race is a reality? (No Sizwe 1979:136)

Alexander’s frustration with the South African scholarly community is almost palpable. Earlier, he makes the comment that

(I)n the only country in the world where this belief constitutes the basis of state policy, it is amazing that so few have bothered to examine the concept of ‘race’ as a political priority. Indeed, except for the Unity Movement and less consistently the P.A.C. (the Pan African[ist]
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Congress of Azania), few political publicists seem to be able to write on their country without using the concept of ‘race’. With minor exceptions, there does not exist a single document by a South African which sets out the scientific position regarding ‘race’ for the activists in the liberation movement. (No Sizwe 1979:133)

What then is his own contribution? Having fingered the scholarly and political community as ‘race’ recidivists, what is his innovation? His innovation subsists in an attempt to explain the distribution of power and privilege in terms of class, caste and colour. At the heart of this triangle is an attempt to keep the specificity of place, time and social dynamism in tension. The South Africa he looks back on is a social landscape forged in the turbulence of conflict around resources, beliefs, ideas and, critically, the social imaginary. What does this nation look like? How does its morphology change? What are the motor forces that drive this change?

His Marxist roots remain evident in his analysis. And in declaring his position he, at once and without hesitation, allies himself with the new thinking emanating out of what comes to be known as the Revisionist School, the group of young South African Marxists who were influenced by the turns that were taking place in social theory in the United Kingdom, France and Germany. On the back of the almost synchronous uprisings in various parts of the colonial world, the civil rights and anti-war struggles in the United States, and the student revolts in Europe, in a productive recovery of Marxist thinking through the Frankfurt School of thought, a group of young neo-Marxists in a number of leading British universities begin to recast the terms of South African historiography. The work of these scholars is well-known to historians and sociologists trained in the 1970s and 1980s. One of the early front-runners in this turn was a Canadian, Rick Johnstone, who published *Class, Race and Gold* in 1976. This work had major repercussions for social theory in South Africa. It took aim at the dominant liberal analysis of South Africa and argued that its ‘pluralist predilection for mere classification of social formations in terms of group self-perception… leads only to a circular description of South African society…’ (No Sizwe 1979:150). Johnstone put forward an explanation of South Africa as a ‘class system – as a system of class instruments, produced and determined in its specific form, nature and function by the capitalist system of production and its constituent class structure...’ (No Sizwe 1979:151).

Admirable as this work was, Alexander rejoined, it ignored the real and
material nature of consciousness: ‘It is not a chimera. People act in response to immediate physical facts as they perceive them, and how they perceive them depends in great part on how they perceive themselves’ (No Sizwe 1979:151). Here Alexander makes his innovative move and comes to insert into the South African discussion a model of the dynamic of South African society which only the work of Wolpe (1988), almost ten years later, possibly matches in conceptual sophistication.

Alexander argues that the Johnstone analysis fails to ‘accord the proper weight to what I call the “level of consciousness”’ in his analysis. Consciousness comes to constitute the focus of his efforts. In this he confirms his own intellectual heritage. That movement out of which he comes has as a preoccupation the making of the new post-racial South African. While class struggle animates the conflict in South Africa, Alexander agrees, in so far as it describes what is happening ‘in-itself’, it is ‘as important to establish the relation between this level and what is happening for-itself’ (emphasis in the original) (No Sizwe 1979:151). This work he suggests in his later writing (see Alexander 2002:23) makes the mistake of seeing race as an epiphenomenon of class and, ‘false consciousness’. He argues that what is needed is a framework which can explain ideology – that which moves what is in people’s heads, the ideological medium in which Afrikaners, for example, conduct their struggle. He suggests that this has important consequences for the system as a whole. Equally, Alexander continues, it needs to be recognised how much caste notions constitute the ambit of consciousness of white and black South Africans in the ways in which they present themselves.

Alexander’s specific innovation is to recruit the notion of caste, instead of race, and draws on the definition of Gerald Berreman who describes castes as ‘“birth-ascribed groups which are hierarchically ordered and culturally distinct. The hierarchy entails differential evaluation, rewards, and association”’ (No Sizwe 1979: 146). The work that this notion does is capture the dynamism of the South African social formation as a structure that had evolved: ‘(c)aste consciousness is the ideological framework in which the political activities of the groups are formulated’ (No Sizwe 1979:151-2). He yokes this notion onto Johnstone’s class framework to produce a class-colour-caste analysis which eschews the permanentist notions of race as biologically composed or those of caste as hermetic seals, as understood in the Indian context. In this manner Alexander highlights South Africa’s distinctiveness. Features of the analysis, clearly to be seen, are embodied
in a sustained awareness of structure. Critically, however, anticipating leading neo-Marxist analyses developed by British social historians, such as Raymond Williams, he places emphasis on the ability of people to engage with the conditions in which they find themselves. They do so informed by their history but never totalised, in the sense that structure is all, by it. They are the subjects of their time but remain able to think their way out of the grip it imagines it has on them.

Crucially, this analysis did not make headway in South Africa and has not been conceptually elaborated. As I suggest above, Wolpe (1988) alone provides a level of theoretical comprehensiveness equal to this (see also O’Meara’s (2009) comments on Wolpe). Alexander (2002) himself returns to it almost 20 years later in An Ordinary Country and talks directly to what he perceives as having been the ‘serious weakness’ of the new class reductionism. This weakness of reductionism has had the effect, he suggests of, bringing the race-class debate to something of a stalemate, mired in empiricism where, both the race and class reductionists have come to argue, as Saunders recently suggested, that ‘the nature of the (class-race) relationship could only be determined by examining the evidence…’ (Alexander 2002: 26).

Alexander comments:

In my view this amounts to a premature closure of a continuing debate…. It is a debate that will not lie down and die because it continues to reflect the tenacious reality of class conflict mediated by historically contingent social, institutional and mental structures, often harking back to remote pre-industrial times. (2002:26)

Towards offering a way forward for the debate and talking directly to the history of separation in the country, he brings the discussion down to the question of ‘habitus’ and emphasises the importance of helping South Africans to escape from the ‘culture’, ‘race’ and ‘language’ essentialisms with which they are preoccupied. He puts forward the idea that South Africans need, consciously and deliberately, to learn a new identity. Briefly, the project he advocates is one which interrogates the ways in which social phenomena have been verbalised so that the substantial ‘nominalisation’ by which they came to be named can be historicised and so consciously corrected: ‘…with a view to revealing once again, the social dynamics which these nominal forms put a brake on. In this way, I believe, it might be possible by means of our discursive practices to reinforce other (my emphasis) social developments that make for transformation in the direction of greater equality of opportunity and more freedom of choice’ (Alexander 2002: 108).
The nation in this process returns to school. And in the process, its people begin the journey of deliberating constructing themselves as South Africans. Imagination is central, but it is not an imagination without empirical correlates. Within its compass lie, to be worked with, ‘other social developments that make for transformation’. The full complexity of life experience is one’s heritage and not only those that dominant forces seek to valorise and present as what stands for social identity. In this, he says, future generations of South Africans should ideally:

• speak three languages, of which English will be one, as a matter of course;
• communicate effortlessly with any other South African in the language of their choice, depending on the overlap in their respective linguistic repertoires;
• have various sub-national – for example, regional, linguistic, religious or other cultural (but excluding racial) – identities, depending on their context;
• be open to the extension of any of these identities, including the national South African identity, should historical evolution point in the direction of regional or continental, and even global unification;
• cherish a genuine regard for and tolerance towards cultural, biological and political diversity as vital pillars of a democratic society and of the survival of the human species.

Conclusion
The nature of this discussion, I suggest, amounts to an understanding of South Africa which is in comparative terms, and even for the purpose of a wider international discussion, novel. I have attempted to suggest that the scholars I refer to bring to the discussion on social difference and ‘race’ in particular a degree of innovation not seen or replicated elsewhere. The power of Alexander’s contribution is to call into question the easy ways in which ‘racial’ ideology sits on the ideological landscape and is incorporated, in most contexts elsewhere in the world, into everyday behaviour and what is assumed to be the modal character and even ontology of a people. It is correct to say that Alexander’s work is essentially about South Africa and that it speaks principally to the politics of racial languages of description, their classificatory dynamics and the implications of these for how South Africans see each other and come to develop ideas of solidarity – who are my ‘brothers and sisters’. His insistence, in these terms, on the ‘national question’ as an open question, for the future, makes him pre-eminently a
scholar of *South African* politics. But his contribution has a much wider significance than this. This, to conclude around the two main areas of interest introduced in this work, can be seen in the related realms of the ontological and social science theory. Talking to these, in relation to the contribution of a single individual in these realms, places one in extremely dangerous territory. This territory is the well-trodden area of hagiography and hubris. There are, no doubt, many issues one can take with Alexander’s approach. He has been described, for example, in conversations with intellectuals who know him well in personal communications to myself, as being too culturalist and, not sufficiently focused on the economic.

Whether these criticisms have weight has to be seen against the total corpus of his writing and will be engaged with in a future work. Directly relevant for the purposes of this discussion is the direction he suggests for the future South African. The significance of his contribution is the way he yokes his socio-historical analysis to a discussion about the nature of being – in his case to an ontology of becoming. This becoming begins for him in the past, but his past does not passively lie there in a state of nature awaiting excavation. It is a past that is alive and filled with possibility. It is here that his departure from the teleology of dominant historiography begins. Grant Farred’s (2009:89) powerful description of what he calls the meta-intellectual is valuable at this point. Farred shows how the meta-intellectual, and here he has Thabo Mbeki, former president of South Africa, in his sights, invokes the ‘part’ in his or her articulation of reality and how it works. The ‘part’ is a residue, a fracture in history, which is appropriated in the urge to produce a meta-narrative, a singularity, and so to become the metaphor for the whole. Out of the part the meta-intellectual extracts the material upon which his or her narrative power is constructed. In the Mbeki universe the synecdoche of race is incontrovertible. From it emanates the explanation for everything and particularly the content of our contemporary consciousness. Alexander takes another route.

Central to Alexander’s explanation of the state of consciousness is a recovery of the past in the full complexity of its particularities. In seeking to understand the nature of the contemporary moment he urges an appreciation of the full range of the parts that make up the historical canvas, the regional, linguistic, religious, and so on. He rejects the dominant and improper practice of using race as a substitution for these parts. His historiographic method is to bring this whole array into view and to demand an engagement with it. History is all of it and not simply a privileged part within it. From this
flows the ontological possibility for the future. Nothing from the past is sacred. Should historical evolution take a ‘part’ – language, culture or whatever – in a new direction, we need to be open to this possibility. He is acutely conscious, however, of how as a human being this future possibility is a social space in which intervention is possible. Central in this intervention is the deliberate cultivation, as he explains above, of a *genuine regard* for the diversity of human life. How one cultivates this capacity, he says repeatedly in much of his work, is through learning to listen to each other by understanding each other’s languages.

How, in bringing this discussion to a close, does one characterise the contribution Alexander makes? Important in his thinking, and what separates him from the utopian ontologies inherent in much communist thinking of the ‘new man’, is an openness to the future that is profoundly experimental. The experimental possibility that animates this openness is not, however, arbitrary in the sense that it is without a sense of where it could go. It is anchored in a deep regard for self and other. Specifically within this, he abjures the teleological lure of race and posits a view of the future that is marked by an awareness of the power that lies in the ordinary, in the little acknowledged parts of our lives that are not privileged in the way race is, for example. In a recent commemoration lecture in honour of Sipho Maseke (Alexander 2009:3) he commented:

(t)he real question behind these reflections (in this lecture) is how we can tap back into the power that actually exists in many different social spaces and instantiations…. It is clear, certainly to me, that this is the challenge that faces all thinking South Africans, and people on the Left specifically, if we are to have any hope of turning our society to head once again in a direction that can lead to the post-apartheid and even post-capitalist situation we had envisaged before 1996, more or less.

Coming out of this he demonstrates, as I have tried to argue, an awareness of the fullness of the past, in all its diverse complexity, which needs to be used ‘in our struggle for a humane world order, one where every child and every person has more than an outside chance of fulfilling his or her human potential. Today, we have to formulate these principles in a new language, one that will find readier access among the youth, to whom, as we say so beautifully but so ineffectually, the future belongs’ (Alexander 2009:10). It is this sociological perspicacity of Alexander in which he links the past and the future – an apparently ordinary view at some levels – which places him in a distinctive category – almost alone – in the company of his peers and
colleagues and which emphasises his importance for thinking about a new South Africa and even a new world.

Note
1. The Roux referred to here is Eddie Roux, the author of the well-known and influential text entitled *Time Longer Than Rope*.
2. He is referring here to the writing of Rudolf Rocker (no date) *Nationalism and Culture*.
3. Key politicians in the National Party who, at the time, were propagating the basic racial principles of separate development.

References


