

Article

Neville Alexander: towards overcoming the legacy of racial capitalism in post-apartheid South Africa

Michael Cloete

cloetm@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

The problem of economic domination and exploitation has been a central focus of Neville Alexander's critique of colonial-apartheid South Africa. The refusal to entertain the idea of 'race' in abstraction from the more fundamental historical consideration of capitalism – as the systematic foundation of white wealth and privilege – has resulted over the years in his progressive isolation (as an academic and political activist) from the mainstream of liberation politics. For Alexander, the privileging of 'race' has created an illusion of freedom insofar as the 'new' South Africa has failed to provide a normative foundation for addressing the possibility of social cohesion and national unity from the perspective of historical justice. In this article, I seek to demonstrate that Alexander's critique of racial capitalism is still of significance and relevance today for those seeking to overcome 'the legacy of apartheid'.

Introduction

Neville Alexander passed away on August 27, 2012 at the age of 75, after a brief struggle with cancer. The news of his passing was met with great sadness by many South Africans, especially those who had had the privilege at some stage in their lives to rub shoulders with this truly remarkable man, a gentle giant who, over many years, displayed an impressive capacity for intellectual independence in addition to the more 'human' qualities of compassion, integrity and humility.

In his numerous writings and speeches over the years, Alexander invariably sought to challenge South Africans to embrace their cultural diversity from the perspective of a common national identity, beyond the historically divisive ideologies of ‘race’ and class – or ‘racial capitalism’ – as he preferred to call it. His courageous and uncompromising stand against ‘racial capitalism’ as the foundation of white economic power and privilege, on the one hand, and the systemic exploitation and impoverishment of (cheap) black labour, on the other hand, led to his involvement in revolutionary efforts to overthrow the apartheid regime (by violent means if necessary), and eventually to his arrest and ten years imprisonment on Robben Island (1964-74).

Upon his release from Robben Island, Alexander was placed under house arrest for a period of five years (as was standard procedure then) in order to restrict his movements and contact with other activists engaged in the liberation struggle. It was during the time of his house arrest that Alexander was presented with the rare opportunity of meeting the one person who, more than any other activist – he believed – shared his moral-political vision of national unity, namely, Steve Biko.

The circumstances of Biko’s visit to Cape Town, as well as his brutal murder at the hands of the security police of the apartheid regime shortly after his return to King William’s Town in the Eastern Cape, have been well documented (Mangcu 2012: 247-63). It is common knowledge today that Biko (at great risk to his own life) violated a banning order on August 16, 1977 that restricted his movements to the district of King William’s Town, when he decided to visit friends and colleagues in Cape Town. The purpose of his visit was two-fold: (firstly) to address the Western Cape branch of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) on an internal dispute stemming from ‘position papers that the movement had developed as the basis for the discussions with ANC and the PAC’ (Mangcu 249); and (secondly), to set up a meeting with Alexander in order to discuss the possibility of cooperation between the Unity Movement and BCM on a plan to combine the ‘liberation armed movements in exile [into] ... a single united liberation army that would be complemented and “represented” by the BPC [Black People’s Convention] as the legitimate voice of the oppressed inside the country’ (Alexander 2013: 30).

The meeting never materialised. Acting on instructions from his colleagues, Alexander declined the opportunity to meet with Biko, citing the problems

that the BCM was experiencing in Cape Town at the time, as well as the fact that he had not received an official mandate from his colleagues to meet with Biko (Mangcu 2012: 254-5). Alexander often recalled the circumstances surrounding his failure to meet Biko as ‘one of the most tragic moments of [his] life’ (quoted in Mangcu 2012: 255). In paying tribute to Biko on the occasion of the commemoration of the Black Consciousness leader’s brutal murder at the hands of apartheid security police, Alexander reflected on the legacy of the Biko generation as follows:

Today, as we commemorate the death of one of the most charismatic individuals of our struggle against colonialism, apartheid and capitalism, it is essential that we recall [the] valiant efforts of the BCM to return not merely to the African source of *ubuntu* as a means of undermining the rampant individualism and destructive competition that are inherent in the capitalist system, but more generally to all the springs of a true humanity. (2013: 34)

From the moral-political perspective of ‘a true humanity’, Alexander’s engagement with the problem of racial capitalism has in the past resulted in continual conflict not only with the apartheid regime, but also with the leaders of the more popular liberation movements of South Africa, most notably the African National Congress (ANC), given the ideological tendency of the post-apartheid state to employ categories of ‘race’ as the key to their basic position, analysis and understanding of South African political and economic history. According to Shaun Whittaker:

[Alexander] appeared to have been consistently harassed. At Matthew Goniwe’s funeral in Cradock, for example, Alexander was directly threatened that he would be dealt with for writing so critically about the ANC by a well-known leader of that political organization in the Western Cape today. The irony of this happening in Alexander’s hometown is truly remarkable. Soon after the formation of the Anti-Privatisation Forum in July 2000, as another illustration, the modest Alexander family home in Lotusriver [Cape Town] was fire-bombed twice and the family was compelled to put in place prison-like security measures. Who petrol-bombed the house and turned it into another prison? This was a constant pattern as, in the run-up to the ‘94 elections, the administrator of WOSA was car-jacked and, on a separate occasion, her car was tampered with in an attempt to cause an accident. (2013: 1)

In Alexander’s view, ‘race’ is but a structural creation and consequence of the (white) capitalist system in South Africa; hence his constant criticism

of the ANC-led government's blind faith in a neoliberal economic approach as the panacea for the problems of poverty, unemployment and socio-economic inequality. He believed, furthermore, that the ANC leaders' acceptance and articulation of 'race' in essentialist terms, borrowed from the lexicon of the apartheid era, still seriously undermines efforts today to establish a common South African national identity as the basis for the creation of a 'new' South Africa. Moreover, the 'de-racialisation' (or 're-racialisation'?) of the post-apartheid social and political landscape continues to obscure and distort the systemic nature of the simultaneous creation of poverty and wealth in South Africa, given the general reluctance by political leaders (in the past and the present) to acknowledge the historical subordination of the state to the primary interests of the owners of capital.

While in the past capitalism in colonial-apartheid South Africa provided the material conditions for the introduction and institutionalisation of 'race', today – in post-apartheid South Africa – the project of a 'de-racialised' black middle-class has been introduced as a counter-thrust to the historical legacy of white (racial) capitalism and white privilege. To this end, the ANC-led government has pledged its allegiance to the economic fundamentalism of the American neoliberal model of the 'free market system' in a globally integrated (capitalist) world order (Terreblanche 2012: 64-6). The ANC leaders' willingness to 'compromise' with their former oppressors, while seen as a 'political miracle' by many people across the world, has certainly ensured that the material-systemic conditions underlying the unethical practice of human exploitation in the past have remained intact as the enabling (structural) conditions for the (im)possibility of the 'new' South Africa.

It is perhaps fitting to mention that Alexander passed away a mere 11 days after the eruption of the tragic events in the mining area of Marikana, just outside Rustenburg in the Northwest Province, where armed police opened fire on striking miners employed by Lonmin Mining Company, killing 44 of them and wounding at least 78 others. The wildcat strike action, which had started some six days earlier when 3000 workers walked off the job in protest against the Lonmin Mine bosses' lack of response to their demands for a better wage and better working conditions, has served to reinforce a central theme of Alexander's political-philosophical engagement with both the apartheid and post-apartheid state, namely, the inseparable (albeit historically contingent) link between colour ('race') and class, as the foundation of oppression in South Africa. Alexander has been at pains to remind us that in the South African historical context, the call for justice requires that we

duly acknowledge and recognise the extent to which ‘race’ has been used (and continues to be used) to serve the economic interests of a privileged few at the expense of the majority. As he puts it:

This racially divided working class has constituted, and continues to constitute, the single most difficult sociological and political problem of South Africa. Every single debate, every new attempt at analyzing ‘the way forward’ has this stubborn fact of history as its inarticulate premise. Understanding ‘the relationship between class and colour’ is the South African conundrum par excellence. (Alexander 2002: 34)

In this paper, I seek to reflect briefly on the implications and possibility of Alexander’s moral-political vision of a unified South Africa, free of the legacy of racial capitalism.

Racial capitalism in perspective

The debate on racial capitalism has on many occasions served as a frame of reference for Alexander’s critical engagement with the apartheid and post-apartheid states. In his major work, *One Azania, One Nation*, written under the pseudonym ‘No Sizwe’, Alexander (1979:29) focuses on the phenomenon of racial capitalism in order to highlight the ‘race problem’ from the historical perspective of the ‘white capitalist ruling class backed by metropolitan capital and defended by white wage-earners of all varieties’. Alexander sees the demystification of ‘race’ as a first step in the process of economic restructuring, a process which ought to acknowledge the historical legacy of social inequality while resisting, at the same time, the need to redress this legacy through the historical prism of ‘race’. He writes:

In a country like South Africa, where social relations have for generations been treated as ‘race relations’, the need to arrive at a practically illuminating description of the character of these relations, ie the *real* (socio-economic) basis of social inequality and the *real* (ideological) forms in which it is expressed, cannot be evaded by those who take upon themselves, or on to whom is thrust, the political responsibility for planning the post-apartheid, post-colour bar society now evolving there. (Alexander 1979: 4, italics in original)

Implicit in Alexander’s attempt to reveal the ‘real’ nature of socio-economic inequality, is a direct appeal to all South Africans to come to terms with (or deal with) the legacy of racial capitalism from the perspective of the oppressed black majority as a basic condition of historical justice in South Africa.

The term ‘racial capitalism’ came into prominence in the 1970s when a

debate – on the question of the role of capitalism in supporting the racial order of apartheid South Africa – was conducted between Marxist revisionists, on the one hand, and Anglophone liberal scholars, on the other. That debate is still relevant today insofar as scholars, activists, political leaders and ‘ordinary’ people have grappled with the question of whether capitalism, in spite of its complicity in upholding the racial order of white domination and privilege, can still provide a realistic framework for redressing the legacy of poverty as a consequence of ‘racial’ inequality. Whereas in the past, the debate was more focused on the functional necessity of ‘race’ (in the form of cheap black labour) for the growth and development of capitalism in South Africa, ‘Today the question for capitalism is... whether it can bring racial equality, and social justice more generally, to a society of deep ethnic and class disparities’ (Glaser 2001: 32). In spite of the shift of emphasis, however, the debate still proceeds as if ‘there is no alternative’ to the neo-liberal agenda of economic growth and development as the only path to global integration for ‘developing nations’ such as post-apartheid South Africa (Alexander 2002: 49).

In the liberal–radical debate of the 1970s, the liberals argued that (ideally) the economic structures of capitalism should operate independently of state intervention. Basic to this argument is a fundamental assumption of (1) state neutrality and (2) the possibility of a structural division between the operation of the political sphere, on the hand, and that of the economic sphere, on the other. More importantly, the liberals believed that the ‘colour-blind’ logic of capitalism – if left to its own devices – would eventually undermine and destroy all forms of ‘race-thinking’, racial prejudice and racial discrimination, and replace these ‘social aberrations’ with new forms of social interaction, based on the (‘rational’) economic principles and values of enlightened self-interest as the normative foundation of a ‘free’ market system available (in theory) to all South Africans. Implicit in the liberal paradigm is a modernist conception of ‘progress’ in term of which all forms of (pre-modern) backwardness and primitiveness could be transformed by modern science and technology into new forms of (western) rationality as the precondition for the economic freedom and prosperity of the ‘new’ post-racialised autonomous, bourgeois individual in South Africa. Despite their ideological commitment to the logic of a colour-blind market system as the functional antidote to the scourge of racism, the defenders of the liberal paradigm never wavered, however, in their view of a “[dual] economy”...in which whites and blacks were neatly cordoned off into a relatively wealthy

“modern” sector and a poor or “traditional” sector respectively’ (13). From the liberal perspective, historical justice is best left to the ‘invisible hand’ of the free market of capitalist system.

The Marxists, on the hand, argued that apartheid in South Africa was a direct consequence of capitalism. According to the Marxist view, the imperatives of capitalism required the ready availability of a cheap black labour force to ensure the successful operation of a white capitalist economic system, especially in the mining and the agricultural industries (Glaser 2001: 33). In their view, the colonial-apartheid state was essentially a modern capitalist state whose need for cheap labour was so great that the captains of the mining and agricultural industries had no hesitation in destroying the pre-colonial economic infrastructure of the indigenous African peasantry by dispossessing them of their land, thereby forcing Africans to abandon their more ‘traditional’ form of labour in order to seek out more ‘modern’ forms of employment as ‘formal’ wage-earners within the white capitalist system. In this regard, MB Ramose’s comments on the implications of the enforced capitalist formalisation of black employment – through land dispossession – are worth noting:

The close connection between land and life [has] meant that by losing land to the conqueror, the African thereby lost a vital resource to life. This loss was aggravated by the fact that, by virtue of the so-called right of conquest, the African was compelled to enter into the money economy. Thus the so-called right of conquest introduced an abrupt and radical change in the life of the African. From the condition of relative peace and reasonable certainty to satisfy the basic necessities of life, the African was suddenly plunged into poverty. There was no longer the reasonable certainty to meet the basic necessities of life unless money was available....In this way, the African’s right to life – the inalienable right to subsistence – was violated. (Ramose 2002: 2)

Arguing from a similar perspective, Sampie Terreblanche (2002: 5-8) does well to remind us of the potential threat of social conflict posed by those who are inclined to dismiss the ‘special relationship between [white] power, land and labour’ in South Africa, and who consequently seek to trivialise the historical fact that the ‘benefits’ of modern capitalist South Africa have had their origin in a systemic infrastructure of white domination as a direct consequence of colonial conquest and apartheid rule. As he puts it:

But what these whites fail to realise is that these ‘benefits’ are ‘contaminated’, because they were largely accumulated by means of systemic exploitation. It is rather hypocritical of whites to claim these

benefits with greedy self-righteousness but decline any responsibility (directly or indirectly) for the evil of colonialism and its consequences. In as much as these problems have resulted not only from whites' obsession with power and entrenched privileges but from their short-sightedness, greed and reductionist individualism, white South Africans ought to realise that they cannot be effectively addressed without a willingness to make substantial sacrifices – materially and symbolically – as part of an open commitment to the restoration of social justice. (Terreblanche 2002: 5)

The capitulation by ANC-led negotiators during the early 1990s to the National Party's insistence that the capitalist system remains intact as the economic foundation of the 'new' South Africa (together with assurances that 'the economic means of production' would remain in the hands of the private sector) have ensured, however, that the material base of racial capitalism continues to flourish in the 'new' South Africa for the privileged few. Instead of restructuring the apartheid economy to meet the needs of the black majority, the leaders of the post-apartheid state have chosen the option of a formal constitutional democracy, on the one hand, and the capitalist system of its former oppressors, on the other, as the foundation of the post-apartheid South Africa. The perpetuation of the economic foundations of former colonial-apartheid regimes through the creation of an elite black middle class carefully integrated into the ranks of the former apartheid-created white middle class elite, although lending some credibility to the ideal of 'non-racialism' as the moral foundation of the 'new' South Africa, has only succeeded in causing great resentment and disillusionment among the black majority who are presently excluded from benefitting from the current neoliberal project of black economic empowerment.

From Alexander's perspective, the transition to the 'new South Africa' represents a victory for the bourgeoisie, with the possibility of a social revolution, aimed at the creation of a post-capitalist order – that serves the interests of all South Africans – becoming increasingly unlikely. As he puts it:

Ownership and control of the commanding heights of the economy ... have remained substantially in the same hands as during the heyday of apartheid. It is perfectly justifiable to say that what we used to call the apartheid capitalist system has simply given way to the post-apartheid capitalist system. The jargon of those who make the decisions has changed (everyone has become 'non-racial' and 'anti-racist'), a few thousand black middle class people have boarded the gravy train and are

being wooed into the ranks of the established (white) elite, but the nature of the state remained fundamentally unchanged. (Alexander 2002: 64)

The ANC-led project of a de-racialised economy has contributed significantly to an autonomous sense of individualism, accomplishment and success among the new black elite and middle class, which has found expression in lavish forms of lifestyle and extravagant patterns of consumption in the face of rising levels of poverty, unemployment and socio-economic inequality. According to Deborah Posel:

[It] was ANC policies... that had fostered and embraced the rapid growth of a black elite and middle class in the post-apartheid period, as one of the most striking signs of the erasure of the racist regime of the past. While this trend had been seeded in preceding decades, the statutory de-racialization of economic activity, along with policies of affirmative action, boosted the existing momentum for upward mobility. And since 2003, with the passage of the Black Economic Empowerment Act, new opportunities have been created for a rapid reallocation of wealth to black entrepreneurs, albeit to a small group of beneficiaries. (Posel 2010: 159)

The material consequences of a de-racialised economy have been devastating for the majority of black South Africans, especially poor black women. Poverty, born of socio-economic inequality, is especially prevalent among women farm workers and women living in rural South Africa, the 'poorest of the poor' (Kehler 2001: 45). Joanna Kehler correctly points out that African rural women experience poverty differently to men, because:

- 1) African rural women's lack of access to resources and basic services are combined with unequal rights in family structures, as well as unequal access to family resources, such as land and livestock.
- 2) African rural women are not only poorer in society as a whole but also in their own families, and this explains why their level and kind of poverty is experienced differently and more intensely than that of men.
- 3) African rural women are not only burdened with multiple roles concerning productive and reproductive responsibilities, but are also subjected to discrimination and subjugation both in and out of their homes. (2001: 45)

The marginalisation and exclusion of black women from the 'new South African dream' have been nothing short of a socio-economic nightmare. In spite of constitutional assurances of gender equality, the socio-economic status of the majority black women is currently still inextricably rooted in a

patriarchal value-system where their status and role are determined predominantly by their reproductive and domestic functions in the home:

The prevailing cultural and social norms regard women as less 'valuable' members of society, which is not only reflected in the attitudes and behaviours they experience daily, but also within policy-making and legislative structures. Society and culture define women's social role primarily as the caregiver and caretaker and in relation to women's 'reproductive function', whereas men are regarded as the 'breadwinners' and are defined by their productive role. Alongside this division of responsibilities within social structures goes the prevailing belief that women's contributions to the sustainability of the family are much less 'valuable' than men's. (Kehler 2001:44)

Although the problem of poverty (and therefore, class) has indeed transcended 'race' in post-apartheid South Africa as the major category of social division, 'race' and class still impacts heavily in the lives of the majority of black South Africans. In addition to class and 'race', the category of gender – and the problem of gender inequality – certainly provides the 'new' South Africa with one of its greatest challenges. From an analytic perspective, researchers are generally inclined to see each of these categories in isolation; it must always be born in mind, however, that the problems of 'race', class and gender are inextricably interrelated and grounded in socio-economic conditions of inequality, poverty, discrimination and unemployment.

In spite of the negative condition referred to above, we should be prepared to acknowledge that the commitment by the post-apartheid regime to a constitutional democracy has in certain respects also introduced some positive changes. From a psychological point of view, it has given black people the formal-constitutional assurance that they finally 'belong' and that the humiliating system of racial discrimination based on white supremacy is finally a thing of the past. The new constitution has also given black people the assurance that they now have rights, the violation of which can be challenged in a court of law. Finally, it has given black people hope that they will someday overcome their present economic hardships and eventually enter the promised land of the 'new' South Africa.

From the perspective of historical justice, however, the plight of the formerly oppressed may be viewed as situation of 'justice deferred' insofar as the historical memory of the people historically colonised and oppressed still testifies to past violations (in various forms) of their fundamental right

to life. In this context, the experience of European colonial conquest and land dispossession in the service of racial capitalism has certainly contributed significantly to the destruction of African indigenous economic systems, where the value-system of *Ubuntu*-ethics – based on communitarian values of interdependence and cooperation – have provided the moral foundation of the pre-colonial African community (Wiredu 2002: 287-96). Historical memory and the sense of historical justice deriving from it are linked to a deep sense of moral injury that has its roots in the experience of colonial conquest, segregation and apartheid. In this regard, Ramose's reflections on the historical sense of 'justice deferred' of the pre-colonial indigenous peoples of South Africa are worth noting:

They continue to regard themselves as the rightful heirs of the land of their forebears despite the 1994 transition to the 'new' South Africa. The more than three centuries long history of subjugation, exploitation and oppression in the exercise of the questionable 'right of conquest' cannot be erased from the memory of the conquered peoples merely by the prospect of a new constitutional dispensation intent upon the obliteration of such a memory...the passage of time does not cancel an injustice nor does it change it into justice. (2012: 23)

While 'ordinary' South Africans are urged at present to wait patiently for the benefits of the neoliberal macro-economic system to 'trickle down' to them, they are constantly confronted with the challenge of reconciling their collective historical memory of past injustices with an increasing sense of vulnerability in the face of seemingly unstoppable life-threatening social pathologies that arise in various situations of abject poverty. These social pathologies include (amongst others) violent crime, the scourge of drug abuse that threatens to destroy families and communities, exposure to premature death either in the form of preventable illnesses or HIV/AIDS – with little hope of escaping the vicious cycle of poverty in a society where selfish individualism and material consumerism represent the 'highest good'. In this regard, Alexander maintains:

Only an inveterate denialist or a fool would maintain that the new South Africa as a political and social entity is not currently facing one of its deepest crisis...Our real concerns are the palpable signs of social breakdown all around us; the ever more blatant examples of greed and corruption involving public figures, who are expected to be the role models for our youth; the unspeakable abuse of children, of the aged and of women; the smug dishonesty, indiscipline and slothfulness of those who are paid to render public services; the lack of respect for life-

preserving rules, such as those of the road; the unthinkable violence in so many communities, unknown even in conditions of conventional warfare; the boundary-crossing abuse of all manner of drugs in all layers of society; the massive number of deaths caused by AIDS; the trashing of the public health system; in short, the general mayhem and apparently suicidal chaos that ordinary people experience in their daily lives. These things are our everyday reality. (Alexander 2013: 39-40)

Given the 'general mayhem' and 'deep crisis' facing the lives of ordinary people, Alexander is at pains to challenge the efforts of those who constantly and dogmatically defend South Africa's current status in the world on the basis of questionable claims of South African exceptionalism and the attendant rhetoric of political miracles and rainbow multiculturalism. Given the fundamentally unchanged nature of the capitalist foundation of the post-apartheid state and its desire for integration into the 'free' market of the neoliberal global economy, given the sheer complexity and diverse nature of the many challenges confronting the leaders of the new South African liberal democracy (Alexander 2002: 7-8), one cannot but wonder how much longer the voices of historical memory can still be ignored as an authentic source of justice.

The question of a socialist alternative

The demise of the former Soviet Union and the disintegration of its Eastern European socialist satellite states have lent credence today to Western euphoria in the celebration of capitalism as the only realistic option for developing nations such as post-apartheid South Africa. In the face of the seemingly unstoppable and irreversible nature of Western neoliberal economic globalisation the question of a socialist alternative seems to have lost all credibility as more and more post-colonial states have looked to their former colonial masters for direction and assistance on the path to economic growth and development.

Much has been written on the transition talks of the early 1990s between the ANC-led negotiators and those of the former National Party of the apartheid regime, and of the compromises that were made at the time, especially on the economic front in favour of 'Big Business' (Bond 2000, Marais 2001, Terreblanche 2002). In the years leading up to the transition to the 'new' South Africa, Alexander never had cause to doubt the universal appeal and validity of a socialist state as the logical political successor to colonial-apartheid rule in South Africa. The envisaged socialist state would be based on a common vision of unity for the liberated South Africa,

grounded in a common national (South African) identity, with the interests of the working class providing the normative foundation of the ‘new’ South Africa. As he put it, ‘The working class ... has become the leading class in the nation and is about to constitute itself as the nation of South Africa’ (Alexander 1979: 180). Towards the end of his life, however, Alexander succumbed to serious doubts on the question of a socialist alternative as former leaders, freedom fighters and intellectuals of the Left yielded to pressure during the transition talks to give formal assurances to their former oppressors that the ‘free’ market system would remain intact in the ‘new’ South Africa.

Alexander was realistic enough to appreciate the fact that the emergence and consolidation of neo-liberalism in post-apartheid South Africa (in keeping with globalising trends across the world) would make it ‘extremely difficult for a new “hegemonic project” of the left to be realized’ (Alexander 2002: 170). In spite of the capitulation of former anti-apartheid socialist and Marxist leaders, as well as the co-option of many of the leaders of the formerly progressive black trade unions into a collective programme of capitalist reform, Alexander steadfastly maintained, however, that the capitalist system cannot be reformed from within the parliamentary structures of government given the fact that capitalism is, by definition, about the competitive accumulation of wealth and the aggressive pursuit of profit – to the disregard of the needs of ‘ordinary’ people. In this regard, Alexander has often quoted a famous argument by Rosa Luxemburg to explain his own position. According to Luxemburg, the

‘program [of revisionism] becomes not the realization of socialism, but the reform of capitalism: not the suppression of the system of wage labour, but the diminution of exploitation, that is, the suppression of the abuses of capitalism, instead of the suppression of capitalism itself.’ (quoted in Alexander 2002: 75)

For Alexander, it is the general acknowledgement of structurally induced poverty as a problem of class (and not of ‘race’) that ought to inform the moral consciousness of all South Africans. Alexander has in recent times redefined the moral compass of his revolutionary stance of worker liberation in order to address the plight and the needs of those who struggle at the margins of South African society, outside and beyond the formal systemic reach of ‘free’ market-driven employment; the unemployed and the unemployable – the impoverished people living in the backyards of the South African political-economic landscape. For him, the suffering that is

most objectively conveyed in post-apartheid South Africa is that of the poor whose plight cannot, in his opinion, be meaningfully addressed or meaningfully improved within the neoliberal institutions of global capitalism. From this perspective, Alexander's political philosophy is a philosophy of liberation reminiscent of the liberation philosophies/theologies of Latin American scholars such as Gustavo Gutiérrez for whom 'the preferential option for the poor' should also be a categorical imperative in the struggle for social justice and freedom (Gutiérrez 1974: xxv). According to Gutiérrez (164), material poverty is a 'subhuman situation ... Concretely, to be poor means to die of hunger, to be illiterate, to be exploited by others, not to know that you are being exploited, not to know that you are a person'.

By choosing to make a preferential option for the middle class instead of the poor, however, the post-apartheid state has clearly undermined the possibility of national unity and solidarity in a socialist context. Although the preferential option for the middle class has seriously undermined the immediate possibility of a socialist alternative, Alexander continued to believe that progressive and radical change would ultimately depend on whether the poor can still be inspired to fulfill their historic mission as the legitimate inheritors of the 'new' South Africa. He therefore claims:

Today, black and white middle class ... has formed what in effect is an alliance against the labouring poor. The crudeness and brutal frankness of this unholy alliance are breathtaking but, in an unintended way, progressive, since thereby South Africans will eventually be forced away from race-centered politics of black (or African) nationalism to the centrality of class politics. (Alexander 2002: 68-69)

In his pursuit of a socialist alternative, Alexander often had cause to fear that post-apartheid South Africa could potentially disintegrate and degenerate into a dystopia (or a 'global desert') of ethnic-'racial' conflict and violence if the quest for national unity and identity is trivialised and reduced exclusively to the cultural rhetoric of rainbow nationalism (Alexander 2002: 154). He often warned against the dangers of ethnic chauvinism, especially with the creation of a black middle class of politically connected 'insiders' who invoke the rainbow politics of separate 'cultural-racial' identities (within a context of black entitlement) as the building blocks of the 'new' South Africa. In spite of his many doubts regarding the neoliberal project of the post-apartheid state, however, Alexander was realistic enough to acknowledge that the formal introduction of the principles of liberal democracy would ensure that the 'possibility of a reversion to white supremacist

minority government on the territory of South Africa became virtually nil' (Alexander 2002: 155). He has urged all South Africans to accept (at least for the foreseeable future) the 'continuity, coherence and stability of the present ... [political-economic order]...minus its racial faultline' (2002:154). His characterisation of post-apartheid South as an 'ordinary' country clearly reveals an almost stoic acceptance of the hegemony of neo-liberalism capitalism both locally and internationally as the unsurpassable horizon (at least for the foreseeable future) that will determine the extent and the nature of change in South Africa.

As a normative counter-thrust to the hegemonic order of neoliberal capitalism, Alexander has always clung, however, to the hope that the working class poor, the unemployed, the socially marginalised and excluded majority, inspired by the 'movement of history' (2002:166), will somehow provide a non-racial socialist platform for the transformation of the present bourgeois liberal-democratic post-apartheid South African state into social-democratic post-capitalist South African state of national unity. In this regard, political realism and objectivity have given way to the intuitive inspiration of prophetic vision when he writes:

For the very first time in South African history, [the workers'] struggles are being fought without the slightest reference to 'race' or colour. They are conceptualized and executed in purely class terms and they involve workers and their families from across the ethnic and colour spectrum. Their demands and aspirations are formulated and articulated clearly and unambiguously as demands and aspirations of workers who are opposed to the bosses and to what they unambiguously call the government of the bosses. There can be no doubt that these struggles, even if they are defeated in the short term, herald a period of heightened *class struggle* ... [When] the present compromised leadership is replaced, as it is bound to be, by a more militant, work-oriented generation, the struggles in South Africa will assume a character and a significance, which few, similarly caused movements in other countries have, or can have, at present. (2002:166-167, italics in original)

Whether the present workers' struggles in South Africa can with any degree of certainty be associated with a socialist, progressive alternative remains for now an open question. Given Alexander's own acknowledgement of the seemingly unstoppable neoliberal project of global capitalism, one could perhaps be more correct in assuming that the 'struggles of the poor' in South Africa are the spontaneous manifestations of a collective desire to be included among those who are at present feeding at the table of capitalist

wealth, opportunity and privilege. Instead of the cry for a socialist alternative, the ‘struggles’ could therefore just as easily be interpreted as the ‘rational’ responses of the disaffected masses to the economic and social pathologies of a capitalist system that at present is not working in their favor. As already mentioned, for Alexander, it is the possibility of national unity, based on the needs of the working class and the poor, that holds the key to a socialist alternative, but as Andrew Nash correctly argues:

By focusing on the national question, socialism can be explained as a coherent response to a broad range of social problems, not only those that relate directly to the working class. But in the context in which Alexander is writing today – in which the left has been decisively defeated – within the movement – to give priority to the question of national unity ‘regardless of the class character of the leadership’ is effectively to commit yourself to creating national unity under the leadership of the capitalist class. (2003: 165-6)

Given the structural resilience of the neoliberal capitalist system to contain the problems of poverty, unemployment and inequality within various policies and programs of ‘poverty alleviation’ (that at present are more likely to offer social grants than meaningful employment for the majority of ‘ordinary’ South Africans), the continued hope that the benefits of black economic empowerment will ‘trickle down’ to the poor calls into question the socialist credentials of those who will have us believe that another world is possible. Alexander, nevertheless, urges us to seek out forms of struggle and resistance that take seriously the plight of the poor as an authentic source of revolutionary potential in South Africa – across the continents of Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and South America, and further afield – with a view to negating and transcending ‘the barbaric effects of neoliberal economic policies and practices’ across the world (Alexander 2002:171).

Conclusion

It is ironic that whereas in the past, advocates of liberal-capitalism argued for a colour-blind economy, based upon the principles of a free market system, as the answer to the problem of ‘race’ in apartheid South Africa, today, it is poverty that defines and demarcates a colour-blind economy for South Africa’s impoverished ‘wretched of the earth’. While the plight of the poor may be viewed as a major systemic consequence of neoliberal capitalism, the situation of the new black bourgeoisie could in turn be viewed as a ‘logical’ extension of white wealth and white privilege acting in concert with the neoliberal project of a de-racialised economy.

One of the most telling measures of identifying the substance and significance of the work of scholars such as Neville Alexander lies in the degree, not only of the relevance of their ideas, but also their willingness and courage to speak ‘in dialogue with’ (rather than ‘on behalf of’) those who – through the structural-historical conditions of injustice and poverty – have been rendered the least visible and the least audible in our society today. From this perspective, Alexander has certainly proved his worth. His basic position is reminiscent of that of Theodor Adorno who once declared, ‘The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed’ (Adorno 1973: 17-18). Neville Alexander’s voice will still be heard for years to come as an authentic voice of the poor and as an authentic source of justice.

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