

# Neville Alexander's Warning

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Things can fall apart very quickly. Our entire socio-historical fabric can unravel within a few weeks: it took less than a hundred days in Rwanda! ... in the words of the unforgettable lines in one of Dennis Brutus's poems, "from the shanties creaking iron-sheets / violence like a bug-infested rag is tossed / and fear is immanent". Once this happens, we will be faced with the phenomenon of the "failed state" and, as we all know, the road from there to some kind of sanity is a very long one. (Alexander 2013, 182)

In his life's work and struggles against racial capitalism both before and after apartheid, Neville Alexander warned against the spectre of racist, caste and religion-based genocide—not unlike that which was unleashed against the people of Bosnia or Rwanda and which now also haunts countries elsewhere, including in the treatment of those seeking refuge in Europe. Alexander argued persistently and even imploringly that the failure to resolve the national question and address the fault lines of class and spatial inequality, racism and patriarchy would lead to exactly the situation we now face in parts of South Africa. It is ever-present not only because of the underlying failure to address its origins in the racist forms of greed and capital accumulation that are so deep in our history, but also in the unthinking racist language and ideas used by politicians, sections of the uncritical media and others who ought to know better.

Prejudice and even racist attitudes remain prevalent in many parts of our society because of their deep and socially caustic roots and the continued ambivalence and cowardice of those in power who have failed to confront them head on; this is evidenced through the failure of our educational institutions where universities continue to describe their students and staff using the unmitigated categories of apartheid nomenclature without any reservation, and poorly trained media "analysts" and presenters who seem not to have a clue about what the effects of their continued use of the apartheid racial categories have meant and continue to mean. All of this is compounded by the profoundly ignorant tweets and posts that pervade social media as it continuously facilitates the manufacture of blinding ignorance and crass stupidity. The periodic

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xenophobic pogroms are a reminder to all of us that violent action against “the other” can be mobilised easily and rapidly through social media.

The present situation in South Africa has arisen from a combination of factors, both historical and current. These include the failure of a government, led by the African National Congress (ANC), to deal with those issues that affect the daily lives of the vast majority of the urban and rural population. Evidence of this failure can be drawn from the facts relating to stark and growing poverty and its consequences for hunger and food insecurity experienced by so many people, the rampant and increasing lack of jobs, especially for the young of our society, and the increasing insecurity of those who do have jobs, the chasm of wealth and income inequality that is widening especially since 1994, and the psychosocial effects of COVID-19—added to the trauma of pre-existing gender-based and other forms of violence that has sunk deep roots into the fabric of social life. Under these conditions, Neville Alexander was emphatic: “Suffice it to say that unless the Gini coefficient is tackled seriously, all talk of social cohesion and national unity is so much nonsense” (Alexander 2012, 36). The situation is exacerbated by the complete failure of the ANC-led state to intervene in and resolve its internal leadership struggles and compounded by elitist attitudes and aspirations to glamorous lifestyles amid the devastation of the townships and the former homelands, while the blight of corruption, fraud and outright theft continues to spread. These are hardly an example for unemployed and hungry citizens, who then resist and resort to violence against state institutions and mainly business interests often within their communities.

Perhaps the greatest underlying and historical factor in the build up to the present is the complicity of the ANC leadership and its allies in furthering apartheid’s structural and deeply entrenched characteristics through the adoption of a raft of fiscal, monetary, social and economic policies that continue to deliberately and perniciously undermine the lives of the poor and socially marginalised majority of the population. These policies privilege a tiny social minority by pursuing objectives promoted in the interests of corporate capital and its agents through the furtherance of anti-poor, racist, gendered and class-based ideology and insistence on the continuation and elaboration of these dystopian policies. The present state of affairs would not exist in a society where social and economic resources are used for the good of the citizenry as a whole, where the political leadership is not itself engulfed in unconscionable looting of public resources. What we witness at this moment is unlikely to be prevalent in a society where the basic rights securing the conditions of life of the vast majority are respected and secured even if they are not met fully.

What has also re-emerged is *race talk* and with it the spectre of racist violence and conflict. This talk and its effects are fostered both by uncritical parts of the public media, which is hugely influential in shaping society’s views and discussions about questions of “race” and “ethnicity”, but also by what is going on in the social media, in government speak and regrettably even in institutions of education. What do we mean?

We do not doubt that “race consciousness” is deeply entrenched in our society and lies sometimes at the forefront of social interactions. There is no question that there is a deep and enduring reservoir of racist prejudices, ideas about hierarchy and other bigoted ideas that have struck deep roots in our society. In fact, the idea of “races” exists; it seems to be a “fact of life” despite all the knowledge we have about the nonsense of “biological race” as a scientific category of human difference. So, in effect it has been constructed.

The use of “race” as a concept is often associated with social hierarchy, prejudice, discriminatory practice and stereotypical depictions of members of society. Neville Alexander rejected the concept of “race” as a biological entity, not only because of its reliance on phenotypical attributes, but because of the dangers inherent in racial (and racist) descriptions, and because the concept is so “pregnant with confusion” and so given to opportunist usages in the political, economic and ideological domains. He sought a new vocabulary about the usage of “race”, arguing especially that there is no logical reason for inferring the reality of “race” from the fact of racial prejudice (Alexander 2013, 116); so while racism and racial capitalism are real, “race”, other than being a social construct, is not.

Liberal and neoliberal literature tells us that there are human races that are fundamentally (even biologically) different; that some people are better than or cleverer, more athletic or musical or “civilised” than others; that there are “us” and “them”; that there are many others who are “not like us”; that they have unrecognisably different “cultures”, traditions and “habits”; and that there are vastly different “communities” based on their “ethnicities” and other such seemingly distinguishing characteristics. Entire communities have been painted with some or other negative characteristic; they have been stereotyped, and these stereotypes (ways of naming) have become common even though they are completely wrong. And these ways of naming are, as we have seen, carried over to ways of naming people who are not born in South Africa.

These prejudices and false ideas—because that’s what they are—have etched deep and seemingly ineradicable (immutable?) differences between human beings. Yet, we ask, is it really so difficult to understand the origin and source of all of these completely untenable and wrong ideas? Are we blind to the depth of the effects the social system of apartheid—built on the prior foundations of colonial segregation, slavery and conquest—has left in all societies that suffer from the blight of racist prejudice and violence? And can we not see also how little the post-apartheid government and the leading political parties in the state have understood the depth of this issue or chosen to avoid its complex nature, beyond the bland and hypocritical pronouncements about their alleged “non-racialism”?

For Alexander:

We have to see to it that the entrenched inherited racial identities that disfigured the popular consciousness of colonial and apartheid South Africa are changed and eventually eradicated. This is not an easy task, and we will not succeed completely in

the next few generations. However, it must be the goal of all creative and thinking people in this country to ensure that labels such as “black”, “white”, “coloured” and “Indian” become irrelevant as a means of identifying groups of people in the new South Africa. (Alexander 2013, 187)

Most South Africans continue to believe in these racial categories, because they have been conditioned to accept them as real. They continue to see the world through glasses that are tinted by the outdated concept of “race”. More than 60 years ago, “race” was called “man’s most dangerous myth”. After the transatlantic slave trade in an earlier period and in Nazi Germany, Yugoslavia, Rwanda and in so many other places during the last century, nobody can doubt that “race” is indeed one of the matches that can burn down all the most brilliant achievements of the human spirit.

We know, although we do not teach this systematically, if at all, in our education institutions, that human societies all over the world have been built on the ideas and practices of cooperation and community for thousands of years. Communities made up of a wide diversity of languages, religions, social habits, traditions and superficial characteristics such as colour, or human pigmentation, have come together to form cohesive nation states and lived in relative harmony for thousands of years; have developed collective and binding cultures respecting one another’s differences, and showing how difference is not a barrier to social solidarity and harmony. That is how nearly every nation state that exists today was built since they did not exist as such always. Complex societies have been built not by focusing on their differences but on what is common to all human beings—the ability to co-exist respectfully and to share the common good of all.

This is not to deny the reality of occasional conflict almost entirely attributable to greed and the accumulation of property, the manipulation of social interests in ways that entrench social privilege and its accompanying systems of power—such as those accompanying the unconscionable practices of patriarchy, slavery, colonial plunder, dispossession, violence and the destruction of the planet. The imperialist wars of the 20th century and those unleashed on the global poor and their communities at present are examples of just such greed and power in which post-colonial elites and their regimes are directly complicit.

A long-awaited urgent task has to be accomplished in South Africa and other societies. It concerns a concerted effort to get rid of racist prejudice of all kinds and together with it patriarchal and gendered, status-bound and class-based attitudes. If that is not dealt with, the potential for continued social conflict will remain ever-present. Institutions of education (public and private), the media of every stripe, social movements and trade unions, religious-cultural and community organisations of every kind must deal with these issues because the government is simply unable to do what it must to foster the real possibilities for building the ideas, practices and covenants of nationhood. It has no idea of how to draw on the deep reservoirs of collaboration, collective knowledge, integrative ideas, respectfulness and the ethical precepts derived from the struggles

against oppressive and exploitative systems—to reflect on and create a society of genuine and lasting humanity. On this too can be built the foundations of a truly democratic, caring, responsive and accountable political and social system here and elsewhere.

## Note

A shortened version of this commentary appeared in the social justice publication, *New Frame*, on the 27th of July 2021.

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