Dialogical narratives:
Reading Neville Alexander's writings

by

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Declaration

I declare that “Dialogical narratives: Reading Neville Alexander’s writings” is my own work and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been acknowledged by means of references, where these exist in hard copy or in the electronic media.

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SIGNATURE

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to five women with whom I have had the pleasure of spending time:

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Abstract

This thesis is a transdisciplinary study of leading South African Marxist intellectual, political activist and sociologist of language Neville Edward Alexander's written work in English. It is an attempt to explore the "dialogical narratives" as a proposition in my assessment of his work and it is also a description of a method he employs to arrive at his own political and literary compositions. In tracking his formation as a political subject and an activist, Alexander's and other writers' interpretations of his meetings with and his stories about people are explored. His writings cover the spectrum of politics, education and language, and he employed a *political economy* approach in all his written expositions. The study argues that he had an exceptional ability to "argue against himself" because he was a dialectical reasoner and because he embraced the political and sociological toolkit of *historical materialism* as the philosophical matrix of his work.

Key words: Marxism, existentialism, historical materialism, dialectics, dialogical self, subjectivities, reform, revolution, national question, language question, war of manoeuvre, war of position

Acronyms and initialisms

AAC	All-African Convention
ANC	African National Congress
Apdusa	African People's Democratic Union of Southern Africa
Azapo	Azanian People's Organisation
BCM	Black Consciousness Movement
CAL	Cape Action League
Cosatu	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CPSA	Communist Party of South Africa
CPSU	Cape Peninsula Students' Union
Cusa	Council of Unions of South Africa
Fosatu	Federation of South African Trade Unions
Hewsa	Health, Education and Welfare Society of South Africa
Langtag	Language Plan Task Group
NEUM	Non-European Unity Movement
NFC	National Forum Committee
NLF	National Liberation Front
NLP	National Language Project
Nusas	National Union of South African Students
PAC	Pan Africanist Congress (of Azania)
PanSALB	Pan South African Language Board
Praesa	Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa
SACP	South African Communist Party
Saso	South African Students' Organisation
UDF	United Democratic Front
WLP	Workers List Party
Wosa	Workers Organisation for Socialist Action
YCCC	Yu Chi Chan Club

CHAPTER ONE

Framing the narratives

Introduction

In this chapter a motivation and a methodological frame for the study are presented. This motivation and this methodology attempt to locate the study on Neville Alexander in largely historical, political and sociological terms, and they are supported by assertions on the study's aims and scope, its assumptions, its limitations and its delimitations. The study principally leans on, and is explicitly oriented towards a transdisciplinary approach to social science and to the humanities, navigating especially between and across the disciplines of history, sociology, language, politics, economics, and the occasionally contested "disciplines" of ideology and cultural studies.

Rationale for the study

This study is an outcome of intense conversations that I[1] have had with Alexander between the years 1981 and 1985, of chance meetings with the man from 1987 to 2011, and of efforts at reconciliation and co-operation with him in 2012. It is also an outcome of self-inspired studies I have undertaken over thirty years on the sociology of language (Derrida 1967 (published in 2001 by Routledge Classics); Alexander 1985; 1989; Groys 2009), the national question in South Africa (No Sizwe 1979; Simons and Simons 1983) and elsewhere (Löwy 1981; Chatterjee 1986), ideology and truth (Žižek 1989; 2006; Nietzsche 1996), the historical construction and "archaeology" of knowledge (Foucault 1972), and some philosophical tenets that point to the construction of a new world (Badiou 2012a; Alexander 2013).

[1] I have used the personal pronoun, "I", throughout this thesis. In part, this is to assert my support for the feminist and existentialist position that the "personal is political". A common practice in academic writing is to "depersonalise" the text. I find the arguments in support of this common practice erroneous because they tend to be based on the assumption that the notion of "objectivity" is best served through the non-use of the "I" in written academic text. I question the notion of objectivity in social science. This thesis deals with human agency and subjecthood, and a part of my argument in this study on Alexander is to problematize human agency and therefore subjecthood.

The study hopes to offer a dialogical narration of Alexander's writings, and it attempts to place in historical context the dilemmas of historical materialism and the ambiguities of dialectical reasoning that are, I argue, at the root of Alexander's approach to the practices of reading, writing and political activism.

I have called this thesis "Dialogical narratives: Reading Neville Alexander's writings" for reasons that hinge on the adjective, "dialogical". The first set of reasons relates to me, and the second to Alexander.

For the first set, I know too little about Lacanian theory to even attempt a sustained argument about the *ego* and the *id*, or the "I" and the "me". Instead, my route to and my comfort in attempting to explain the reasoning behind my use of the adjective, dialogical, is guided by Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht's suppositional aphorism, "If there are obstacles the shortest line between two points may well be a crooked line" (Brecht, cited in Chatterjee 1986: vii). This crooked line has a few signposts. One signpost is the constant and timeless intellectual pursuit for an understanding of truth. There are no easy definitions of truth and as the thesis unfolds, I may be in a better position to decide whether the signpost leads to a place anywhere near the next signpost, which is that my understanding of people is limited. It is likely that my understanding of people and what motivates them is probably sexist, and undeniably classist. This leads to a subsidiary signpost called doubt. These signposts may introduce further obstacles, and many more crooked lines.

In reconstructing the arguments and propositions that Alexander has put up for public discussion and debate, I am attempting to place myself "in his shoes". What I have to work with are his corpus of writings in English and my understanding of the discursive engagements making up the material that influences his approach to his writing table, his pen, his paper and his computer. My journey to understand Alexander's writings has, however, been made easier by Leon Trotsky's notion of the refraction of ideologies and philosophies.

In his critique of "national socialism" and the rise of the fascist state in Germany, Trotsky (1933: n.p.) writes:

> Naïve minds think that the office of kingship lodges in the king himself, in his ermine cloak and his crown, in his flesh and bones. As a matter of fact, the office of kingship is an

> interrelation between people. The king is only king because the interests and prejudices of millions of people are *refracted* [my italics] through this person.

Trotsky's truth is his own, and it is informed by recollecting his experiences of his role in the introduction and implementation of communism in Russia, from his life in exile to his central role in supporting Vladimir Lenin and the Bolshevik Party in challenging the Tsarist regime and then overthrowing the transitional bourgeois-democratic government in 1917. My use of the notion of refraction is premised on the idea that Alexander is "constituted" both in relation to other people and in relation to his own interests and his own agency. My proposition is that his changing stations in life are expressions of his changing relations with people and their cumulative knowledge and experiences, and of his self-inspired and determined will to creatively and actively engage his environment through his writings.

For the second cluster of reasons about my use of the adjective, "dialogical", in the title of the thesis, I am on shakier ground because my explanations depart from the original formulators of the concept. I borrow the term from the reported inspirers of "dialogical self" theory, psychologist William James and Russian Marxist literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin[2] (Laing 1978: 38). I would like to suture to their definitions the concepts "dialectics", "reasoning" and "logic". In my opinion, the original concept remains somewhat stuck in binary interpretations about the I and the self. Instead, I argue that dialectics, reasoning and logic, the *prime numbers* of philosophical reflections, imply multiple interpretations.

In his early years as an activist and a Marxist revolutionary, Alexander's writings tended towards *binary* interpretations, although later on he refined his sense of ambiguities, even liminalities, in his everyday practices of reading, writing and reflecting. He was dialectically engaged with himself, often arguing against himself, with his reading and with his writing. His logic was as ordered and as chaotic, in the best philosophical sense that chaos implies, as his refined sensitivity to people. Alexander's dialogues with himself and with the people who

[2] Mikhail Bakhtin was a Russian Marxist literary critic who insisted on the "primacy of context over text", or what he called heteroglossia – a dense confluence and constellation of different views or "voices" encapsulated in the written word. His work was about constructing a Marxist theory of language that found its home in subsequent studies on the "sociology of language", and in approaches that Alexander used in his writings. For Bakhtin and for other theorists at the start of the Soviet era (including Bolshevik theorist Nikolai Bukharin, a leading intellectual in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) after the successful overthrow of the transitional government in 1917, language was considered a product of history and class struggle: "Within the microcosm of the word is embedded the macrocosm of history" (Bukharin, quoted in Laing 1978: 37).

made up his immediate and extended environment, are difficult to capture when writing about his writings. His embrace of a philosophical method rooted in dialectical reasoning is equally difficult to capture when reflecting on his writings. These two elements seem to make up his literary story.

This study is an attempt to explore the "dialogical narratives" as a proposition in my assessment of his work and it is also a description of a method he employs to arrive at his own political and literary compositions.

While aspects of Alexander's life's history will be covered in this thesis, it is not a biography[3] of the man, and neither is it a political assessment of his work. It is an attempt to understand the writings of an extraordinary man living in an "ordinary country" (Alexander 2002) and whose evolving written output was grounded in the works of some of the most influential men and women[4] in humanity's relatively short-lived presence on this planet.

Alongside this rationale for doing the study is that, increasingly, dominant South African historiography, with few exceptions and not unlike elsewhere in the world, is being narrated and told by the political victors over apartheid. Much of the official history of the liberation struggle against apartheid has been, and is being written as if the African National Congress and its allies (the former Communist Party of South Africa and now the South African Communist Party, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu), the South African National Civics Organisation, and more recently since the 1980s, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and its affiliates), are, while not the only agents of change, the celebrated midwives of a post-apartheid "democracy" and therefore the carriers of historical truth. The thesis presents alternative views about the path to democracy and it critically reflects on Alexander's theoretical, written and activist contributions.

Aim and problem statement

The main aim of the research is to develop a dialectical interpretation of Alexander's writings on history, especially his embrace of the philosophical and sociological underpinnings of

[3] Crain Soudien, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (transformation) at the University of Cape Town and the principal supervisor of this doctoral study, is writing a biography of Alexander.

[4] Alexander grounded his writings in the works of Isaac Bangani Tabata, Ben Kies, Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Copernicus, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci.

historical materialism; on politics, especially the organizational constraints imposed on human agency, and how his agency impacted the political and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that, at different moments, gave expression to his thoughts; and on sociolinguistics, especially his analysis of multilingualism and the efforts he made to put the language question on the political agendas of both NGOs and the democratic government of South Africa, ever since he specifically started to write about the language question in the mid-1980s. In capturing some of the key debates about these issues, I put up for public discussion the historical, political and ideological sets of influences embedded in his writings.

In seeking to answer the questions, "Who is Neville Alexander?" and "How can one 'read' his writings?", I record views and analyses of the changing historical, intellectual, ideological, cultural and political-economic environment in which Alexander has operated. Alongside this, I interrogate selected sources of inspiration that have influenced the man. By doing so, I intend to place in relief the key arguments that point to possible answers to the subsidiary questions, "What does he represent?" and "What can we learn from his writings?".

To answer the principal and subsidiary questions posited in this problem statement, I sketch a typology of the cultural, political and economic contours of three lines of sociological enquiry. These three lines are: the dialectics of class and "race"; the dialectics of nation-building; and the dialectics of individual human agency, class position and/or determination – the dialectics of his ontology. In other words, I interrogate what in sociological parlance has been reduced to a contestation between "culturalism" and "structuralism" (see, for example, Cross 1999).

The constitutional provisions of the post-1994 democratic South African state allow for an upgrading of African languages to match the "high status" functions enjoyed by English and Afrikaans in education, the legal professions and in parliamentary debates. Alexander served as chairman of the Language Plan Task Group in 1995 and in 1996, which was initiated by the government, to develop a language plan for the country. He proposed language and educational policies that go "beyond" mainstream and government-initiated proposals.

The principal research assumption of this thesis is that he was acutely aware of the limitations of a social-democratic state, but he persisted in proposing language and educational alternatives that may or may not have been taken up by the governing authorities. A

problematic suggested by this persistence can be found in two interrelated questions: is there a need to analyse concepts that are destined to be ignored or rejected by officialdom; and, how does one measure the efficacy of concepts because official resistance to their adoption means that they have not been translated into government policy? I take the unambiguous view that it is in the interest of scholarship and humanity to investigate Alexander's theses.

Key concepts and published works of Alexander

I worked with Alexander in the early 1980s at the South African Committee for Higher Education (Sached) in Cape Town, where he served as Sached's regional director. At the time, I found his arguments about "race", education and multilingualism compelling and his visions about engaged intellectuals and a new world order seductive. His only published work in English was *One Azania, one nation* (1979), in which he developed an alternative and, I argue, an indigenous Marxist interpretation of the "national question" in South Africa. This theoretical work, which is a central work and to which I return several times in the thesis, was prefigured by his interpretation of Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto* (see, for example, Struik 1971), and by his discussions with Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela about "race" and nationalism in the 1960s on Robben Island, where he spent ten years as a political prisoner for alleged conspiracy to overthrow the apartheid state through armed struggle.

His subsequent writings focused mainly on sociolinguistics and therefore the language question. These include *Sow the wind* (1985), *Language policy and national unity in South Africa/Azania* (1989), *Education and the struggle for national liberation* (1990), *Some are more equal than others* (1993), *An ordinary country: Issues in the transition from apartheid to democracy* (2002), *Thoughts on the new South Africa* (2012), and *Language policy and promoting the culture of peace* (2014).

In the latter part of the 1990s, Alexander also served as deputy chairman of the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB), and as chairman of the Language Plan Task Group (Langtag) under the then Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Ben Ngubane. This advisory group to Ngubane developed a language plan for a democratic South Africa, and recommended that the nine African languages be used in "high-status" functions where English and, to a lesser extent, Afrikaans had enjoyed and still continue to enjoy hegemonic status.

Alexander's view is that a democratic and peaceful resolution of the language question would go a long way to prevent possible genocidal conflicts, not only locally but also internationally. In the latter years of his life, Alexander was a member of the Academy of African Languages (Acalan), the official language unit of the African Union, and participated in developing strategies to prevent the "linguistic genocide" (Skutnabb-Kangas 2009) of indigenous languages.

While the political and sociological "juries" may still be out on the efficacy of Alexander's policy proposals on language planning, language use and multilingualism, his contributions to political theory, to language activism and to what it means to be fully human, and not be boxed in by the shibboleths of language, gender and class, are difficult to dispute. His participation in Langtag, PanSALB and in Sached Trust, combined with his advocacy of multilingual approaches to the language question and his intimation of the potentially genocidal consequences of language hegemonies suggest views and positions on the evolving South African and global community that may well be windows into a different and a new concept of humanity and its future.

A note on methodology

Document analysis is the cornerstone of my research method. The major part of the research has been focused on reading and analysing books, articles, interviews, journals and magazines, papers delivered at conferences and speeches that were either written by Alexander, or written by other theorists, academics and political activists about the language question, the "structural milieu" and sociological "sites" and "moments" in which identities are formed and transformed. I argue that there persists a dialectic between writing outputs and historical context that shapes, and in turn is shaped by socially committed literary production.

In analysing the primary and secondary documentation that I use as the raw material for this study, I have selected appropriate passages, written by Alexander or by other people, that directly or sometimes indirectly relate to the specific topic under discussion in the thesis, or that relate to the headings of chapters or subheadings within chapters. These quotations contain the ideological codes and the sociological contours of a mental map that I have used to navigate through Alexander's evolution as a Marxist intellectual, as a political activist and

as a sociologist of language. In developing many of the propositions and arguments, I have followed a historical time line, tracking Alexander's thoughts and their mutations, and I have placed them in sociological and political context, but this has not been a consistent line of presentation.

The notion of "transdisciplinarity" is at the core of my approach to reading, which feeds the main intellectual activity for this thesis. I completed a master's dissertation on Alexander's thoughts about the language question. It was titled "The dance of an intellectual mandarin: A study of Neville Alexander's thoughts on the language question in South Africa" (Dollie 2011). This doctoral thesis is an effort to elaborate on aspects of the master's study and to offer for public debate and discussion a novel interpretation of how to "read" and contextualize his writings. I used a transdisciplinary approach in the master's, and in this study I navigate across the disciplines of history, sociology, linguistics, mathematical Set Theory and philosophy to offer a philosophical and historical frame for reading Alexander's writings and activism.

Throughout this thesis, I try to use a narrative that avoids, as far as possible, jargon. In many instances, I do not succeed. In my opinion, there is little intrinsic value in presenting complex arguments with complex words and complex arguments. While disciplinary reasoning, reading and writing are unavoidable and accepted choices in the Academy and in its various branches, there are compelling arguments to break the self-imposed logjam of jargon. Academic writing tends to be exclusive and it is directed, for the most part, at educated elites. My self-conscious decision to write in a simple way is because philosophy can be made understandable and can be presented in ways that enhance understandings and appreciations of complex human phenomena. Difficult as they are to describe simply, the moving and temporal snapshots that I have used to capture aspects of Alexander's work are cumulative moments or approximations of what I consider to be the key ideas that shaped his written work. In these snapshots or pictures of his thoughts and activities, I attempt to explain the spaces around the representation of these thoughts and actions by filling in the sociological, historical and political contexts around the snapshots presented through a selection of Alexander's and other people's writings and my own memory, and where these are appropriate for the topic under consideration.

I ground my interpretations of what could be multiple meanings of Alexander's literary work in some writings of Hegel (1977), writings about Hegel (see, for example, MacGregor 1984; Collins 2013), and in writings by Marx (1975; 1978; 1999), Lenin (1961; 1971; 1972; 1977), Luxemburg (1951; 1978; 1986), Gramsci (1971; 1996), and in the works of contemporary philosophers and progressive thinkers, intellectuals and political activists such as Boris Groys (2009), Alain Badiou (1989; 2004; 2011; 2012), Terry Eagleton (1986; 2010), Jean-Paul Sartre (1976; 2003), Fredric Jameson (2005), Slavoj Žižek (1989; 1997; 2006) and Louis Althusser (1971; 1977). My interpretations of Alexander's work also lean on the insights of non-Marxist thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994), Friedrich Nietzsche (1996) and Michel Foucault (1972).

My view is that these philosophers and theorists have not only substantively enriched humanity's understanding of what it means to be human, but they have also contributed to a better understanding of the dilemmas of historical materialism and the ambiguities of dialectical reasoning. While Alexander did not use the turns of phrases and the lexicon employed by, for example, Sartre, Badiou, Žižek and Jameson, I argue that he is very much a part of the intellectual, indeed Marxist, renaissance promoted by these writers and activists.

In this exploration of Alexander's writings, I would like to mention two cautionary notes I made to myself when I started writing up this thesis in May 2014, and I need to make one apology. My first caution is that I should try to make my explanations simple, especially when dealing with complex arguments involving discursive referencing. My second caution or reprimand to myself is that I must try not to uncritically lapse into my customary and often exhausting way of thinking and my own dialectical roots, and become overly argumentative and even pedantic.

Writers' styles are rarely intentionally designed to bore readers. They are, for the most part, intended to attract and seduce readers (Badiou 2012b). Thinking about thinking is said to be the daily bread and butter of philosophers, and "rethinking thinking" (Odora Hoppers and Richards 2011) is a demanding imperative that could motivate activist intellectuals and academics. But if this involves reams and mounds of paper, and the reader is still at a loss figuring out what the writers are trying to say, then the practice of philosophy is questionable and is socially inept and alienating. It then becomes the preserve of a few ideological

gatekeepers. Here, I share Vladimir Lenin's wish that the language of philosophy should be kept simple and understandable so that many people can benefit from its use, even though his own philosophical writing efforts, especially his polemical *Materialism and empirio-criticism* (Lenin 1972), do not leave much room for simplistic explanations.

My apology is somewhat circuitous, and it is directed at Alexander and at the people who view themselves as his protégés and the standard bearers of his thoughts and his practices. I am not a standard bearer of his thoughts, but I am a protégé. My 25-year estrangement[5] from his working life has meant that I was not, for some time, privy to substantial aspects of his evolution, the daily woof and warp of his thinking, his critical moments of elation and despair, and the perennial nuances and changes in his political and ideological positions.

The principal source material I have used to develop an argument about how to read his writing is his *written work*, some published and some handwritten or typed. I have also used published interviews with him, and unpublished transcripts of interviews done by historians and sociologists. A significant portion of his written work is in German. His doctoral thesis was written in German and was published under the title, *Studien zum Stilwandel in Dramatischen Werk Gerhart Hauptmanns* (Alexander 1964). This title can be roughly translated as *A study of style change in the dramatic work of Gerhart Hauptmann*.[6]

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[5] In 1986, I had an organizational and a political disagreement with the director of Jakob Marengo Tutorial College in Windhoek (Namibia), Ottilie Abrahams, who was Alexander's close political ally and friend. The disagreement was about the management of the college and I left the college in 1987. Alexander, who in 1984 had persuaded me to take up a teaching post at the college, did not speak or communicate with me for 25 years (from 1987 to 2012). In retrospect, and in mitigation of my somewhat impetuous decision to leave the college, I was young, radical and impulsive, and I regret the many missed opportunities to have engaged his thoughts and opinions during these years of separation from him. What further complicated my relationship with Alexander was that I became a member of the South African Communist Party (SACP), a political organization that Alexander was, at best, ambivalent about. Apart from its self-acknowledged Stalinist orientations, the SACP was regarded by the non-ANC socialists and non-SACP (formerly called the Communist Party of South Africa) Marxist or socialist theorists as a pro-nationalist organisation that had shed its socialist character through its alliance with the African National Congress. In part, this is true, but what attracted me to the SACP was its unerring and firm conviction about the armed struggle to overthrow apartheid, and the fact that it attracted, and had as members, some of the best socialist thinkers the country produced, including Ruth First, Harold Wolpe and Chris Hani. I withdrew from the party in 1999. While I did not have a conversation with Alexander about my membership, he was informed about my affiliation to the SACP.

[6] Gerhart Hauptmann (1862–1946) was a Silesian-born German dramatist, a playwright and a poet, who was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1912. Alexander wrote his doctoral study on "style change" in Hauptmann's dramatic work. Alexander's thesis was published in 1964 by J.B Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung und Carl Ernst Poeschel Verlag in Stuttgart. It has not been translated into English, and for the purposes of this thesis, I commissioned translations of selected paragraphs, especially Alexander's

I do not read German, so my study of his work focuses on his writings in English. This introduces a limitation to the study and it means that significant sections of his literary output (his correspondence, articles and essays in German, which are in his archive[7]) will not be used as source material in this study.

A note on disciplinary readings

The readings for the study span the disciplines and fields of philosophy, history, politics, economics, linguistics and education. My view is that artificial boundaries have been constructed to separate these disciplines. These boundaries have led to "silo-type" thinking in academic writing. While this accepted practice at tertiary institutions does have its advantages, most important of which is that it provides a useful schematic to characterize the principal influences that inform a writer's theoretical template, it tends to generate an exclusivity and a jargon, even a methodology, that lock out the codes of common sense communication outside the Academy.

This exclusivity and this jargon are, however, not without their advantages. As an interlocutor of my own history and politics, and as an interlocutor of Alexander's writings, I draw on readings and writings that place dialogical criticism at the centre of my interpretations of Alexander's works. The genre suggested here broaches queries and questions of historical context, self-criticism, and political implication. Within this paradigm, the person, the subject of interrogation, is seen in relation to a constantly changing context, and is also seen in relation to his or her subjectivity within the changing contexts. The texts I have chosen to use in Alexander's writings are historically and politically explicit, even though the political implications in his writings in the periods explored in this thesis are often implicit in the words and codes he uses to elaborate his positions. The reading project I have embarked upon is a finite venture because it is selective in its ferreting, and it proposes an interpretation of Alexander's writings that is largely historical and political, and sociological.

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references to Nietzsche. While the index specifies three references to Nietzsche, I only discovered two in the actual text.

[7] Alexander's archive, which is called The Neville Alexander Papers, is housed at the University of Cape Town's Jagger Library in a section called Special Collections. At the time of writing up this thesis in May 2014, the archivist, Andre Landman, estimated that about 10 per cent of the material submitted to the library by Karen Press, the literary executor of Alexander's estate, had been catalogued. In 2013 and 2014, I spent about two weeks in the archive.

My writings about Alexander's writings are a hybridized variation of writing style genres embedded in the works of Dominick LaCapra (1987) and Boris Groys (2009). While LaCapra's work is about the novel in history and in politics, his comments are also applicable to non-fiction story-telling and narratives:

> Especially noteworthy in the mutations of narrative has been a complex and varied exploration of repetitive temporality (often interpreted as 'spatial form'). Indeed, the modern novel has brought to a breaking point – the heterogeneous, polyphonous, and 'carnivalized' interaction of voices that Mikhail Bakhtin considered the criterion of the entire tradition of the novel as a self-contestatory and self-renewing genre. (LaCapra 1987: 9)

The cacophony of "voices" captured in my writings about Alexander's works is a clash of past and present messages and signs, or signifiers, that bring together in "carnivalized" or *carnivalesque* forms both interlocutors' (Alexander's and my own) interpretations of history and politics. At times, the varied "voices" speaking to the respective narratives converge and, at other times, they diverge. Despite this, the theme permeating this thesis is to establish the "'dialogical' connections between past and present through which historical understanding becomes linked to ethicopolitical concerns" (LaCapra 1987: 9–10).

I also place my writings and my interpretations of Alexander's English-language published works in the genre of writings suggested by Groys. As a language specialist on the philosophy of language as practised in the former Soviet Union and its latter day Russian capitalist incarnation, Groys argues that an understanding of the cessation of the communist project in China and in Russia must be anchored in an appreciation of the materialist dialectic. As an accompaniment to LaCapra's framing of the dialogical narratives needed to appreciate the historical context and political implication of the novel, Groys asserts that the transformation of the Soviet Union into a capitalist state is an affirmation of dialectical thinking and of dialectical processes, or what Alain Badiou has referred to in a different context as "fidelity to the revolutionary event" (Groys 2009: 112). The type of writing referred to here is a coded distillation of the synergy and the clash between what the Soviet and Chinese states have been and the principles that underpinned what these states have been, and what these states have become. Groys (2009: 112), paraphrasing Hegel, argues that thinking is defined by the "incessant alternation of thoughts", and it is this alternation that invariably results in a "fidelity to revolution" being equated with a "fidelity to infidelity".

The writing genre suggested by this paradox is a development of historical materialism in Groys's "kingdom of philosophy" and in his description and analysis of the role of language in recasting the "development" to capitalism in these states. Groys anchors his embrace of dialectical thinking in Hegel's and Kierkegaard's propositions:

> Hegel sought to introduce a logic – dialectic logic, to be precise – into this process of the alternation of thoughts, but we can agree with Kierkegaard that such logic is ultimately arbitrary. There is simply no unequivocal criterion for determining if a project or an ideology or a religion 'has outlived itself', 'is historically superseded'. We remain trapped in paradox and cannot merely rely on the course of time to resolve it for us. Metanoia remains ultimately groundless, purely performative, revolutionary. (Groys 2009: 113)

The administration and management of metanoia, of constant change, of stubborn endings, of novel beginnings and of new contestations, are embedded in styles of writing associated with contemporary philosophers Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, whose suggested import is about multiple meanings implied in *dialogical thinking* and *dialectical logic*.

Dialogical thinking is about lived experiences and memory. It is about confronting daily realities, or experiential encounters, and self-consciously embarking on journeys of thinking to provide a context to these experiences. It is about navigating through one's own and other people's interpretations of truth and knowledge, and incorporating different understandings or different lines of thinking into one's own narratives. It relies on self-reflection, especially when that reflection leads to better truths and a better understanding of complex human phenomena. My thinking about this concept is therefore roughly as follows: the mind captures images and stores them; these memories are prised or opened through daily and often unplanned prompts; the "events" in these images and memories stand out; these events are what we recall; they are the memories we have as human beings.

Dialectical logic, *as a subset of dialogical thinking*, is a philosophical abstraction that assists in organizing thoughts and writings. This particular kind of logic is not averse to contradiction and difference. Dialectical logic embraces contradiction and difference, changing mind-sets or metanoia. It goes some way in explaining Hegel's assertion that thinking is defined by an "incessant alternation of thoughts".

It is within this hybrid space suggested by LaCapra's dialogical thinking about reading and interpretation, and by Groys's embrace of a *self-critical historical materialism*, a materialist dialectical logic, that I navigate across the different academic disciplines outlined below.

In the discipline of philosophy, I explore the clash and synergy between selected variations of Marxism and French philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre's and Simone de Beauvoir's existentialism. Both approaches are germane in challenging conventional wisdoms of understanding humanity's essential nature. For Sartre, anguish is part of the human condition because, as a species, humanity is "condemned" to be free (Richards 2014) and therefore it has no essential nature. While existentialism tends to question whether humanity has an essential nature, and it concludes that it does not (Sartre 2003), Marxism tends to question the origins of goodness in human beings, arguing that the *materiality* of existence shapes human intentions. Both schools of thought are based on notions of radically changing existing power arrangements that regulate society.

The synergy between these schools of thought is the vision of a new reality primarily promoted by a radical intelligentsia, an engaged mandarin class of intellectuals or a "thinking elite". While Marxism employs techniques of social enquiry that deal with the interests and motivations of large groups of people, or social classes, the existential method and the framework focus in large part on the imperatives of the individual. In studying the written texts of Alexander, I maintain that public and private interests are at work in the development of his propositions.

I focus exclusively on secondary material that details the historical evolution of, and changes in the South African state, especially but not limited to the period of the 1970s to the present. I also provide insights about the influence of Western Marxism, Soviet Marxism, Stalinism and Trotskyism on the thinking of the generation (the 1950s to the present) of political and social activists who came to be associated with socialist discourse in South Africa. These are woven into the narrative on Alexander's evolving views and provide the "structural" and intellectual backdrop to his political and educational analyses.

On the terrain of politics and ideology, I lean principally on the writings of Marxist and social-democratic philosophers and theorists. Politics, I argue, needs to be understood not

only as institutions of state power, or as "state apparatuses" (Althusser 1971), but also as the civic agency encapsulated in civil society and citizenship (Gramsci 1971; Habermas 1984).

In the field of socio-economics and/or political economy, the works of Mandel (1970), Saul (2008), O'Meara (1975; 1997), Turok (1986; 1991), Nattrass (1990), Nolutshungu (1982), Mbeki (2009), Bond (2001), and the diverse range of articles in the *South African Labour Bulletin* and in the contemporary pro-government journal, *New Agenda*, and relevant government and non-governmental websites have been used as a theoretical backdrop to develop a picture of the South African political economy, and of Alexander's cryptic if not detailed assessment of capitalist development in the country.

In the fields of linguistics, education and politics, I sketch some main themes of sociolinguistics and political critique propounded by Jameson (1972), Groys (2009), and Chomsky (1988; 2006), and I compare these with Alexander's theses.

My readings are undergirded by Stuart Hall's (1977: 18) warning about "symptomatic reading" and "critical theoretical practice":

> It is one thing to read a text with one eye always on the matrix of conceptual premises, and propositions which generate it, gives it what theoretical coherence it possesses – and also helps us to identify its 'silences', its absences. 'Reading for absence' is certainly one of the principal foundations of critical theoretical practice. But it is quite another to operate a 'symptomatic reading' like a theoretical guillotine, beheading any concept which has the temerity to stray from the appointed path.

Hall, in the quotation above, is describing and criticizing French philosopher Louis Althusser's exegesis of Karl Marx's theoretical and intellectual history and writing legacy.[8] Hall is reflecting on intellectuals writing conceptual/intellectual histories of others. This thesis on Alexander critically reflects on approaches to reading. It also outlines a few conceptual challenges faced by authors of intellectual histories.

While a transdisciplinary approach implies the embrace of different ideas and techniques used across and between the disciplines that make up social and natural sciences, I have tilted

[8] A far less sympathetic critic of Althusser is E.P. Thompson (1978), whose polemical *The poverty of theory* lambasts the "ahistorical" structuralism of Althusser.

this study in favour of writings that capture conversations about history, culture, language, nation building and ideology.

The chapters attempt to capture the two "periods", or, in Alexander's terms, "two sociological moments" of his life's work: first, what I describe as Alexander's "war of manoeuvre" from 1954 to about 1988 (Alexander 1995); and second, his "war of position" from 1988 to his death in 2012. These are Gramscian notions (Gramsci 1971) used to describe political and ideological positions taken by resistance fighters against oppressive and hegemonic systems of government and governance. The first implies a confrontational orientation and the second implies a more strategic orientation and selective engagement with the regime in charge of the state that is being resisted.

Limitations and delimitations

The study mainly covers Alexander's writing output since 1979. In that year, Zed Press published his major work, *One Azania, one nation*. I have decided to use that year as the point of departure for this survey and analysis of Alexander's writings because, apart from pamphlets distributed by the Yu Chi Chan Club in the early 1960s and the articles he wrote as the editor of the student journal, *The Student*, in the late 1950s, and his doctoral study on Gerhart Hauptmann (written in German), I could not find any substantial body of academic written material that was published before 1979. This periodization of Alexander's work narrows the study to 30 years.

In some parts of the thesis, the narrative is anecdotal. If this, in social research, means that an assertion is questionable because it requires third party confirmation, then it is a limitation in this study. My unrecorded conversations with Alexander in the early 1980s are memorial snapshots in my mind about the conversations. They cannot be verified. These historical snapshots are my record, my "evidence" and my proof of a record shared by two people, not by three people or more.

While biographical details are covered selectively in the thesis, the study is not a biography of Alexander. It does not explore his private life as background or as an accompaniment to his development as a political and cultural activist. However, where pertinent and where

appropriate, specific people and their unique contributions to his formation as a Marxist intellectual are mentioned.

The notes on academic disciplines are selective and intentionally narrow to allow for a systematic reading of the conceptual issues that need to be addressed. The data are a conceptual, as opposed to an empirical, pool that draws on a very wide range of publications covering various fields in the social sciences. While the selected readings span several disciplines, I narrow their focus to written works that answer questions related to history, politics (nations and nation-building projects, power, individuals in history), economics (on South Africa's development as a capitalist state) and cultural studies.

The body of literature that has been used for the thesis is a selection of books, journals, articles, commentaries and interviews that I have read over 30 years. By far the bulk of this literature has been written by socialist or Marxist-inspired thinkers and practitioners. This bias in choosing the literature has been both intentional and fortuitous.

The volumes of literature generated by conservative, neoconservative or neoliberal intellectuals do not address, nor do they develop the social concerns that the Marxist and social-democratic writers are guided by. There are, however, two important works produced by these conservative and liberal anti-communist thinkers that warrant some commentary.

The anti-Marxism of Francis Fukuyama, whose ideological roots are in the neoconservative movements of the late 1960s despite or because of his postgraduate training for six months under French philosopher Roland Barthes and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, is but one manifestation of a disillusionment with communist experiments and bureaucratic socialism that came about as a result of the 1917 Russian revolution "against *Capital*" (see, for example, Gramsci 1971). Fukuyama is a former neoconservative who has written that liberal democracies may well be the ultimate form of government. Following Fukuyama's pessimistic or optimistic predictions, and these predictions tend to depend on ideological positions, globalization is unstoppable and market-driven economies are here to stay. While Fukuyama holds the view that "[n]o one has solved the problem of 'creating culture' – that is, of regenerating internalized moral values – as a matter of public policy" (Fukuyama 1992: 289), his flagship book, *The end of history and the last man* (1992), remains a messianic effort to justify the further spread and consolidation of a capitalist way of life.

Before Fukuyama, the virulent anti-communist positions of Karl Popper, whose dedication in his *The poverty of historicism* (Popper 1957) says "In memory of the countless men and women of all creeds or nations or races [sic] who fell victim to the fascist [sic] and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny", are another illustration of ideological positions antithetical to those of socialist or Marxist visionaries. The social, political and moral concerns generated by Marxist writers have been lumped by liberal and conservative advocates into an anti-Marxist philosophical catechism that suggests a predilection for pre-Marxist discourse preceding Hegel's early writings. In my opinion, what is redeemable about Popper's work is his promotion of an "open society" where the institutions of governance are under constant scrutiny through democratic recourse and "scientific" interrogation.

The views of Fukuyama and Popper are founded on a logic directed against the notion of a "command economy" implicit in the practices of actually existing communist states. While the premise of competition is at the root of their positions and their views of a "free market", Alexander, in his writings, opposed the notion of competition in his critiques of globalization and of latter day interpretations of capitalist expansion. Instead, Alexander has asserted that a humanitarian Marxism is based on egalitarian values and on the spirit of co-operation.

Fukuyama's and Popper's writings are an index for the key concepts of liberal democracy, the contemporary manifestation of which is globalized neoliberalism. Alexander opposed neoliberalism. This thesis on Alexander does not interrogate the contradictions or, to put it more generously, the complexities implied in the global order envisaged by these advocates of liberal thinking. Rather, the thesis achnowledges the theoretical role that these advocates of free marketeering have played in presenting alternatives to Marxist re-imaginations of humanity's past, present and future. The lack of a detailed analysis of their views is a limitation to this study. In mitigation of this absence of analysis in this thesis, I argue that my focus is not on the historical, political and philosophical precedents of Popper's and Fukuyama's imaginations, but on what I consider to be a presentation of some of the main lines of thought encoded in Alexander's imagination, and whose mind-set and motivations were very different to these men.

CHAPTER TWO

Imagination, “race”, nation and history

Introduction

South Africa’s racial-capitalist political, social and economic system was, in large part, planned and engineered by subordinating black people across southern Africa to the dictates of mining capital and a settler white rural bourgeoisie. The colonial, post-colonial and then white bourgeoisie settled for notions of their own superiority and of their place in the world as civilizers, and they viewed black people as inferior, and therefore not really human. It was not only convenient for them to invent notions of “races” making up the southern African polities, but it was also necessary for them to elaborate and to develop the idea that the human species comprises these so-called “races”. This division of people into black and white “races” was designed to serve predominantly economic and cultural imperatives. Under apartheid, from 1948, legislative and social measures were put in place to further subdivide black people into black Africans, Coloureds and Indians, with each population registration grouping awarded the somewhat nebulous status of a nation. “Race”, while still accepted as a valid sociological category, was transformed into “nation” by the politically dominant white ruling group, which extended its racial logic to further subdivide black “Africans” into subaltern nationalities such as Venda, Zulu, Xhosa, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana and Ndebele. This instrumentalization of people into different “race groups” was justified by the apartheid rulers through a churlish argument that language and biological differentiations were defining characteristics in determining “racial” differences. This was the apartheid rulers’ justification for their divide-and-rule strategy, or alternatively called their *Bantustan* strategy.

Alexander’s response to these notions of humanity and to the theoretical propositions that underpinned these notions of how society should be organized was complex, dialectical, pathfinding and confrontational. In a chapter titled “The Bantustan strategy” (No Sizwe 1979:

62–94), he asserts that apartheid was a political strategy. It was not an ideology. He writes (No Sizwe 1979: 63):

> The fact is that apartheid (and, therefore, Bantustans) is not an ideology. It is a political strategy derived from the primary mode of expression of the dominant ideology of the South African ruling classes, racism. It is a variant of and a development beyond previous political strategies; in certain respects it represented a departure from these strategies, all of which found expression through the prism of 'race'.

At this point in his development as a revolutionary Marxist in 1979, Alexander's embrace of historical materialism was rooted in political economy approaches. He argued that the dominant ideology of the ruling class in South Africa was an inherited colonial-inspired racism modified by an Afrikaner economic momentum that was buoyed by the need for cultural and social exclusivity, and the political strategy of apartheid was used by an Afrikaner bourgeoisie and a middle class in charge of the South African state to further balkanize the nation state.

The *problematique* suggested in the convergence of race and nation needed explanation. Alexander did so through employing the categories of class and colour-caste analysis, and his intention had both a sociological and a political intent. Not only was he keen to subvert the absurdities of race-based theories in the dominant discourses of sociology, but he was determined to change the way people thought in the liberation movement of which he was a significant part, and that was created to overthrow racist rule. His refutation of the sociological untruths propagated by racists was accompanied by a reasoned negation of the restrictive and obsolete presumptions about the concept of race held by his peers in the liberation movement. This dialogical interrogation has been a salient feature of Alexander's expositions for much of his adult life. He explains (No Sizwe 1979: 132–133):

> It is a measure of the inadequacy of the theoretical frameworks of the South African liberation movement that many organisations and individuals speak, write and act as though they accept the validity of 'race' as a biological entity. In 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., few political publicists seem to be able to write on their country without using the concept of 'race' …. *Yet, there is something fundamentally wrong in the*

> *assertion, based on impeccable scholarship, that all 'races' are equal* [italics in original]. There is something fundamentally wrong in accepting that the 'population groups' in South Africa are 'races' at all and that our difference with the ideologues of the 'Herrenvolk' is that we believe – on the basis of scientific investigation – that they are equal whereas they believe in the inferiority of the oppressed groups, an inferiority allegedly determined by their 'racial' descent. For just as the supposed inferiority or superiority of 'races' necessarily assumes the existence of groups of human beings called 'races', so does the assertion that 'races' are equal in their potential for development and the acquisition of skills.

For Alexander, the "pernicious phlogiston" of "race" needed to be put to rest, both as a concept guiding the strategy of apartheid and as a concept guiding the strategy of the liberation movement.

The above prefacing remarks are a window into his lived experience and into his writings as a theorist of historical materialism, as a writer of a new sociology and as a political activist whose theoretical centre piece came to be an unapologetic focus on the phenomenon of "race".

This chapter provides snapshots of Alexander's literary and organizational biography. It selectively tracks his political baptism in the Teachers' League of South Africa and the roles played by political activist Minnie Gool and by his friends, fellow students and comrades Ronnie Britten, Kenneth Abrahams, Archie Mafeje, among other people, in his transformation as a student of German and History to a scholar-activist of human drama and to a soldier-actor when he embraced the strategy of armed struggle to oppose and attempt to overthrow the apartheid regime. Especially significant in this period (late 1950s and early 1960s) of Alexander's life was his comradeship with Abrahams, who, through a series of interviews with Canadian-based historian Colin Leys, has provided valuable insights into understanding the context in which the turn to armed struggle became inevitable. It was also through Abrahams and his Namibian-born student activist partner, Ottilié Abrahams, that Alexander became involved in the embryonic groupings in Cape Town that later led to the formation of Swapo of Namibia.

The chapter attempts to capture, from Alexander's point of view, a few salient aspects of his experiences on Robben Island from 1964 to 1974, especially his unrecorded debates with

Nelson Mandela on African history and the national question in South Africa. It casts some light on Alexander's two-year "Socratic dialogue" with Mandela, and the subjectivities inherent in both men's perceptions of themselves as interlocutors of their own histories and their organizational responsibilities.

After his release from Robben Island in 1974, Alexander studied and re-acquainted himself with the classical Marxist texts he had read as a university student and as a political activist in the late 1950s and early 1960s. His conversations with Unity Movement theorists in Cape Town, with like-minded revolutionary student activists at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and at Tübingen University in Germany, and with Mandela on Robben Island had left etchings on his imagination that he was not prepared to gloss over. The notions of race, class and nation needed comprehensive sociological and political interrogation, and with the assistance of UCT-based radical sociologist and feminist scholar Ginny Volbrecht, Alexander prepared the theoretical groundwork for his 1979 book, *One Azania, one nation*.

What is of particular significance in the gestation of his 1979 book is that Alexander implicitly suggested the possibility of linking up with the black-consciousness movement and its leading activists. This alliance was placed on the back burner until 1983 when, alongside the Azanian People's Organisation and under the umbrella of the Cape Action League, he initiated the National Forum Committee.[1] In trying to understand Alexander's paradox, "while there is no such thing as race, racism exists", the chapter reflects on his political "testament" that was designed and written to provide local revolutionaries some theoretical pointers in order to develop a strategy to topple the apartheid-capitalist regime. His book, *One Azania, one nation*, went a long way in exploring the fundamental paradox of "race" and racism characterizing common sense views about the national question in South Africa. The chapter briefly reports on the subsequent launch of the National Forum Committee in June 1983 and the political dilemmas this formation encountered in its efforts to mobilize and represent the interests of the urban and rural poor in South Africa.

Marxism-Leninism was Alexander's guiding ideology in the 1970s. Following in the footsteps of his predecessors in pursuing this ideology, Alexander returned to the

[1] Alexander's political and organizational affiliations and proclivities are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 in this thesis.

fundamental proposition within the paradigm and asserted the centrality of the role of "class" in his ideological-strategic calculations about envisaged change in South Africa. The chapter proffers an outline of a conversation about the role of the black working class and its presumed revolutionary and evolving consciousness. Alexander had asserted in his *One, Azania, one nation* that this section of South Africa's proletariat would lead the social revolution against racial capitalism. To date (in 2015), this has not happened. I suggest in this chapter pointers as to why this leadership had not occurred, and why, instead, a "middle class"[2] leadership, or, to put it differently, a black elite had taken over the content and the direction of the national liberation struggle.

Two key concepts, the "war of manoeuvre" and the "war of position", have been borrowed from Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's work, to describe two contiguous and overlapping periods in Alexander's political life. An elucidation of the roles of key individuals and of the principal ideological codes and written contours in his transformation from a revolutionary activist adopting a "war of manoeuvre" to an activist adopting a "war of position" against apartheid-capitalism, or in his words, against "racial capitalism", is offered in this chapter. While not mutually exclusive, these two ideas from Gramsci are the pegs on which my interpretation of the Alexander canvas has been hung. This chapter is an effort to outline the main elements making up these warrior postures or positions of war. By making use of Bakhtin's dialogical method, I explore the idea that Alexander's "politics of engagement" (Soudien 2013) with people suggests that he consciously "danced" (Dollie 2011) his way through the dense social and political milieu of South African Left thinking and the struggles against apartheid and capitalism.

Literary and organizational-biographical sketch of Alexander

Alexander died of lung cancer on 27 August 2012. He wrote numerous books and political and scholarly articles, which have been published in refereed journals and by organizations with which he has been associated. In *One Azania, one nation* (1979), Alexander sets out his philosophical and political template for much of his subsequent writings. *Sow the wind*

[2] While "classical Marxism" defines classes in relation to ownership of the means of production and their function in the production and distribution of commodities, my use of class includes their interests and evolving consciousness in relation to political power. The changing nature of capitalist production and its re-inventions has meant that linear definitions of class need rethinking.

(1985) is a collection of his speeches between the years 1980 and 1984. The short but powerful essay titled *Language policy and national unity in South Africa/Azania* (1989) is a theoretical-strategic intervention by Alexander to critically look at the language question, and is arguably the first written codification of his multilingual policy proposals. In *Education and the struggle for national liberation in South Africa* (1990), his speeches and essays address the relationship between education and national liberation. A year before South Africa's democratic elections, Alexander's *Some are more equal than others* (1993) is an analytical and a polemical assessment of the events and political circumstances that coalesced to produce the negotiated compromise and eventual ANC electoral victory in 1994. His *Robben Island dossier* was published in 1994 but was written after his release from Robben Island in 1974. The dossier is a "report to the international community" on relationships and conditions prisoners experienced on the island. His *South Africa: Which road to freedom?* (1994) was published in the United States with assistance from his colleagues in the socialist movement there. In *An ordinary country: Issues in the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa* (2002), Alexander explores and critiques the "rainbow nation" that was politically constructed by the ruling ANC incumbents. His *Thoughts on the new South Africa* (2013) is an outline of people who, and movements that influenced him, and, in this book, he returns to some of the principal political and educational ideas that permeated his corpus of writings.

Alexander was born in October 1936 in Cradock in the Eastern Cape to Dimbiti Bisho, a school teacher, and to David James Alexander, a carpenter. His formal schooling years were spent at the Holy Rosary Convent in Cradock where he matriculated in 1952. The University of Cape Town was his next stop, where he spent six years, obtaining a Bachelor of Arts, a Bachelor of Arts Honours and a Master of Arts in German. At university, he joined the Non-European Unity Movement's affiliate, the Teachers' League of South Africa in 1953 as a student associate, and was a founding member of the Cape Peninsula Students' Union in 1957. He accepted a scholarship to attend the University of Tübingen in Germany in 1958 and complete his doctorate "on style change in the dramatic work of Gerhart Hauptmann".

In Germany, Alexander was active in radical student politics and joined the student wing of the German Social Democratic Party. After his return to South Africa in July 1961, he joined

the African People's Democratic Union of Southern Africa (Apdusa) and was expelled from this political organization for insisting that the political option of armed struggle had to be studied and pursued as a viable option to achieve power in South Africa. He formed a study group called the Yu Chi Chan Club, which in Mandarin means guerrilla warfare or armed struggle. This club was disbanded in 1962 and was replaced by the National Liberation Front.

He was arrested by the apartheid authorities in 1963, and was put on trial and convicted of "conspiracy to commit sabotage". He spent the next ten years (1964–1974) on Robben Island. After his release from Robben Island, Alexander was banned from political activity and ordinary human association for five years, which he spent in the working class and lower middle class suburb of Lotus River in Cape Town. Between 1975 and 1979, he focused on his writings and developed the outlines for what came to be his philosophical and political template, *One Azania, one nation* (1979).

He became the regional director of Sached Trust, an educational non-governmental organization, in 1981 and he was instrumental in gathering left-wing people at the National Forum's launch in 1983. This gathering produced the socialist-inspired "Azanian Manifesto", which is a set of demands and injunctions calling for a socialist state in South Africa. Alexander is widely acknowledged as the author of this document. As a politically inspired educationist and sociolinguist, Alexander formed the National Language Project and was a prime mover in the establishment of Khanya College, an institution that was created to act as a bridging organization for black students en route to university study. In 1990, he initiated another political organization, the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action, and used this to form a platform called the Workers List Party for an election campaign in 1994.

In 1995 he was appointed by the new South African Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology to chair a Language Plan Task Group (Langtag), and was also appointed as vice-chairman of the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) and functioned in this capacity until 1998. For the period between 2000 and 2002, Alexander was appointed by the Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, as the convenor of a panel to explore and make recommendations on language for higher education in the country. He then served as a member of the Western Cape Language Committee up until 2005.

He pioneered proposals for a multilingual society for the better part of 25 years, and was based at the University of Cape Town-housed Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa since 1992, where he was the director. In 2008 he was awarded the prestigious Linguapax Prize for his work on multilingualism.

At the time of his death, he was working on two books. These are *Thoughts on the new South Africa*, which was published in 2013, and *Language policy and the promotion of peace*, published in 2014.

In search of a constituency

My view is that Marxists are both a united and a divided group of people. They are people who are inspired to write, speak and act on behalf of class and social interests they perceive to be universal and humane. In the world of words, they are presumably committed to literary endeavours that enhance a better understanding of humanity's conflicts. Marxists are a politically inspired educated elite, associated with some or other shade or variation of Marxism's incarnations and reincarnations over two hundred years of its evolution. For the most part, people who view themselves as Marxists invoke the theoretical legacies of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to support their changing views of the world. They tend to view Marxism as a maturing and a developing grid through which to view and to reflect on political, economic and cultural practices.

This thesis is primarily written for Marxist intellectuals who are engaged practitioners of their respective crafts as dialectical reasoners. The study is also written for non-Marxists, social democrats and ambivalent socialists, especially those who do not subscribe to the belief that the slippery god of money, Mammon, is here to stay. These two groups of people, not unlike Jean-Paul Sartre, may or may not be immune to the idea that Marxism is an analytical and a conceptual tool "in its infancy"[3].

[3] The Chilean-based philosopher and advocate of "rethinking thinking", Howard Richards, in his article titled "Unbounded organisation and the future of socialism" (Richards 2013: 229), invokes French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's assertion that Marxism is still in its infancy. Richards' essay on aspects of Alexander's life and

Alexander considered himself a revolutionary Marxist (No Sizwe 1979). He drew his literary and political inspiration from philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli and Georg Wilhelm Hegel, political theorists and economists Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, revolutionary activists and leaders Vladimir Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky, Antonio Gramsci, Samora Machel and Amilcar Cabral, and South African "struggle icons" Livie Mqotsi, Minnie Gool, Isaac Bangani Tabata, Ben Kies, Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela. He might have disagreed with some categorical assertions and political positions of these thinkers, but he was fed by their insights into the human condition.

Alexander's corpus of writing suggests an ambivalent relationship with the Academy, criticizing its principals for their often self-imposed and elitist distance from people outside their class positions, and, at the same time, embracing the Academy's mission to provide platforms for methodological rigour, for debates and contestations, and for its self-proclaimed and yet often ambiguous role in refining thinking.

I argue in this study that he seamlessly, if not without difficulty, straddled the two "worlds" that fed him: his academic engagements and writing commitments; and his participation in the practical realities of "civil society" and of political mobilisation. For much of his adult life, he settled with combining the two worlds, mostly successfully and sometimes not successfully.

This tension between the Academy and politically inspired civil society is the subsoil of the discontent at the root of Alexander's Marxism and his Marxian eclecticism. His adult life, from about 17 to 75 years old, can be roughly marked by two phrases borrowed from Gramsci (1971). In the theatre of war, according to Gramsci, there are two methods that can be used by antagonistic actors in challenging hegemonies. These become central in determining the outcomes of the human drama called war. While both methods or postures are part of a continuum and are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they diverge and they converge. Gramsci calls these postures, in the best sense of the dramatic noun, the "war of manoeuvre" and the "war of position".

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work posits the question whether Alexander's life's work is a "contribution to a revolution that is still happening". His essay is a commentary on and a tribute to Alexander after his death on 27 August 2012.

The first of these postures ordinarily implies a frontal assault against an oppressive state, and the second a strategic engagement to eventually take comprehensive command of the political, military, cultural and civil institutions that run societies. Alexander's post-secondary school life has been a war of manoeuvre and a war of position, mostly intersecting and sometimes diverging. I argue that he was a radical participant in the making of history throughout the years of his "war of manoeuvre" (from about 1954 to about 1988) and also throughout the years of his "war of position" (from about 1988 to 2012).

Imagination and Alexander's "war of manoeuvre"

Alexander's life started out in Cradock in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. His formal primary and secondary schooling was in this semi-rural village where Xhosa, Afrikaans and English were the languages of communication and study. He was introduced to German at the Holy Rosary Convent, and on completion of his secondary schooling he left Cradock for the Western Cape to pursue his tertiary studies in German and History at the University of Cape Town (UCT). While at UCT in 1953, as indicated earlier, he became a student associate of the Teachers' League of South Africa (TLSA), an affiliate of the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM). He describes his induction into his first political association and his impressions of one of the "few people [who] have had such a lasting impact on my life as the late Mrs Fredericks [Minnie Gool]":

> As an immature 16–17-year-old student at the University of Cape Town, a 'country bumpkin' from Cradock in the Eastern Cape whose command of the English language was always somewhat suspect, these character traits constituted a kind of comfort zone for me. 'Nurse' [Minnie Gool was a qualified nursing sister, a midwife, and a political activist], as the people of District Six invariably referred to her, was always prepared to listen to our naïve stories of glory and disappointment. (Alexander 2013: 17)

For the youthful Alexander, Gool's "flaming passion, her inspiring activism and unerring, penetrating and single-minded, almost visionary, focus on the task to be accomplished, her seemingly bottomless generosity and hospitality, and her capacity for genuine love for people" were his "comfort zone" (Alexander 2013: 17). Among the political principals whom he surrounded himself with and on whom he relied for advice and direction, Gool stood out

as "a kind of mother figure to the youth in the 'Tabata'[4] faction of the NEUM during the later 1950s and early 1960s" (Alexander 2013: 17).

With Minnie Gool's support and inspiration, Alexander, Ronnie Britten, Kenneth Abrahams, Archie Mafeje and Carl Brecker became founding members of the Cape Peninsula Students' Union (CPSU) and they launched their newsletter, *The Student*, in 1957. Alexander was not only a political activist, as Gool was, and the first editor of *The Student*, he was also an emerging commentator on human drama. He explains Gool's dramatic penchant (Alexander 2013: 18):

> She had much of her brother Goolam Gool's penchant for the dramatic, even the melodramatic, and this impressed us as youngsters no end …. The high point of this trajectory was undoubtedly the day we took over the streets of District Six with a procession that had as its theme the Great French Revolution, ending with the showing of the inspiring Soviet film *Trio Ballets* in the National Theatre in William Street. It was one of the first and also one of the most successful demonstrations of the power of cultural agitation in the mode of Bertolt Brecht and the Expressionists of the 1930s in Germany …. And Mrs Fredericks [Minnie Gool] was the coordinating brain and heart behind this great spectacle, *an event that has remained with me as one of the epiphanies of my life* [my italics].

Alexander, in this passage, could well have been describing himself and his evolving imagination. He proceeded to complete a doctorate on style change in the dramatic work of Gerhart Hauptmann[5]. The embrace of the dramatic and the pursuit of cultural activism became his lodestars, and he did so, at the time, with the sensibilities and constraints of political organization and a distinctive flair for expressionism rarely found in what I call

[4] Isaac Bangani Tabata was one of the main theorists in the NEUM, alongside Ben Kies. He, together with Jane Gool, saw themselves as heirs to the NEUM and formed another political organisation, the African People's Democratic Union of Southern Africa (Apdusa), which Alexander joined, but from which he was subsequently expelled for insisting that the armed struggle was a viable option to oppose the apartheid regime. On Tabata's history, Ciraj Rassool's impressive biography/doctoral thesis (2004) is useful because it adumbrates the complex relationships that fed and made up significant parts of Tabata's subjectivities and political positions. Rassool asserts Minnie Gool's role in a footnote (Rassool 2004: 413): "After all, it was Minnie Gool who first met Tabata in the Lieberman Institute in Hanover Street, District Six, and introduced him to her sister Jane and her brother, Goolam."

[5] Alexander's initial doctoral proposal was to study the works of Bertolt Brecht, but Brecht's books were banned in South Africa. He explains that the next "best" was Hauptmann: "So even though I wanted to work on Brecht, my professor in Cape Town, Professor Rosteutscher, partly for ideological reasons but also because of the banning, he said, 'Look, it's not going to be fertile, it won't work because you won't have access to the material.' The next 'best' was Hauptmann, as a socialist" (Alexander, interview in Busch *et al*. 2014: 59).

“soldier-actors” of social revolutions. His punctuality, his sense of other people’s time and space, arose out of his respect for people, their interests and their time, and this particular characteristic became a signature trait of Alexander in his dealings with people, despite the Kafka-esque horror of the 1950s and subsequent decades of apartheid in South Africa.

The German Marxist playwright, Bertolt Brecht, became a central figure in Alexander’s musings and intellectual journeys, and he would subsequently and continually cite Brecht’s plays, messages and metaphors in his writings.

In part, his tangencies with Minnie Gool introduced the building blocks for an eclectic and a dramatic imagination to take shape, combining politics, economics, culture, philosophy, language and drama. The “lasting impact” and the dramatic epiphany he experienced through his mentorship with Gool, and through her subjectivities, preferences and political orientations – which, in turn, were fed by Tabata, her sisters, Jane Gool and Cissie Gool, and her circles of friends – and by Alexander’s friends and comrades including Kenneth Abrahams, Ottilié Abrahams, Ali Fataar, Archie Mafeje, Gwen Wilcox, were an initial expression of the multiple configurations of impacts and epiphanies that Alexander was to experience after this fate-filled and life-shaping decade of the 1950s.

Self-willed, determined and disciplined, Alexander proceeded to interrogate not only the South African liberation struggle, but also to study the Namibian one, actively engaging political migrant Andreas Shipanga and student-teacher Ottilié Schimming (Abrahams).

Kenneth Abrahams (1990), another founding member and first president of the Cape Peninsula Students’ Union, recalls that about 50 Namibian “escapees from the migrant labour system [in Namibia]” converged in Cape Town, and Alexander and he met some in this group, including Shipanga and Andimba Toivo ya Toivo[6], who was also a founding member

[6] Ottilié Abrahams is a Windhoek-born Namibian woman who studied in Cape Town in the 1950s. She became intimately involved with the leadership of Swapo and Apdusa. She married Kenneth Abrahams, a medical doctor who was a founding member of Alexander’s Yu Chi Chan Club, and who, with Ottilié, fled South Africa in the early 1960s to live a short but frenetic life in Zambia and then in Sweden. After the Abrahams’s return to Namibia in the 1970s, they started the Khomasdal Burgersvereniging (the Khomasdal Civic Organisation) in Windhoek. Close friends and political allies of Alexander, they set up the Jakob Marengo Tutorial College in 1985. This college was to honour the legacy of the Namibian anti-colonial resistance fighter, Jakob Marengo, and Ottilié was the college’s first director. They remained life-long friends and political allies of Alexander. Alexander and Kenneth Abrahams met Andreas Shipanga and Andimba Toivo ya Toivo through Ottilié in Cape Town in the latter half of the 1950s. Ya Toivo became an integral part of the political leadership of Swapo in

of the Ovamboland People's Organisation in 1957, which later transformed into the South West African People's Organisation (Swapo) of Namibia, "in a barber's shop in Sea Point".

In an interview with historian Colin Leys[7], Abrahams says he met the Namibian migrants through his contacts with Ottilié Schimming (whom he later married), her brother and other Namibian students who were studying at UCT:

> And that brings me to the other strand of my political life …. And they [the Namibian students] took me to meet this group of Namibian migrants, one would say escapees from the migrant labour system – who had also come to Cape Town. People like ya Toivo, Shipanga, and about 50 others. Now they had come to South Africa in various ways, and they sort of drifted to Cape Town. That in itself was quite a story. So through the Namibian students I met the Namibian workers who congregated in Greenpoint in Cape Town. One of them, Timothy … worked in a barber's shop in Greenpoint. And they congregated in the back room of the barbershop.

Southern Africa, not just South Africa, presented itself as the extended social landscape upon which Alexander and his circle of associates, friends, comrades, fellow students and revolutionaries cast their gaze. By 1960, the question of the armed struggle against the apartheid government was prominent in his and his group's thinking. Abrahams (1990) gives the following account:

> Now as you know 1960 was the year of Sharpeville. When Sharpeville happened, many of us in Apdusa, Neville Alexander, myself and several others, raised the question of the appropriateness or otherwise of the armed struggle in South Africa and Southern Africa. At that stage we raised it for serious discussion. We did not come to any specific conclusion, we did not say we must have an armed struggle. But as you know in '60 it was the subject of very vigorous discussion in all radical circles – well, in all political circles. As you know, in '60 we had the State of Emergency, and the banning of the ANC and the PAC [Pan-Africanist Congress], and then subsequently the formation of Umkonto we Siswe [Umkhonto we Sizwe,

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exile where he served as secretary-general between 1984 and 1991, and Shipanga formed a new political organisation in the 1970s called Swapo Democrats (Swapo D) after serving in various representative capacities for Swapo in African countries from about 1964 to 1969.

[7] These quotations are from a typed photocopied transcript of interviews conducted by socialist historian Colin Leys with Kenneth Abrahams in Windhoek during the month of August 1990. I have a copy of this transcript, which was sent electronically to me by Kenneth and Ottilié Abrahams's son, Rudi Abrahams.

> the armed wing of the ANC started by Nelson Mandela], and then subsequently the opening up of the armed struggle by them blowing up telephone booths and so on.

Alexander had just returned from his studies in Germany where he had joined the Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund (SDS), the student wing of the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD, the Social Democratic Party of Germany), and where he had met students from Algeria's overtly socialist Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), supporting their armed struggle against French colonialism. Abrahams (1990) recalls:

> Neville Alexander had been abroad in Germany and returned round about 1960 and he had contact there not only with the SPD [SDS], what did they call them, the Students for a Democratic Society I think, in Germany, but had also had contact with students from Algeria and had worked with them in some kind of supportive role in Germany, raising funds and doing other things like helping students who didn't have passports and things like that. Because of his contact with, what did they call them, the FLN (of Algeria?), he had the most direct contact of any of us with people who had been involved in the armed struggle. And he also raised this at meetings of what was then Soya [Students of Young Africa], which was the youth section of, speaking very broadly, Apdusa. And we were astonished to find that Tabata and others just refused to allow any discussion whatsoever. They said that even discussing the armed struggle was too dangerous and could get us into trouble, so they put a total ban on any discussion. It led at that time to both Alexander and myself being suspended from Soya.

Buoyed by the successful armed revolutions of China in 1949 and of Cuba in 1959, and spurred on by the growing anti-colonial insurgencies in Africa and in South Africa, Alexander had formed a reading group, which was called the Yu Chi Chan Club. The YCCC later changed into the National Liberation Front, and in 1964 Alexander and his group[8] were convicted of conspiracy to commit sabotage against the South African state. He spent the next ten years (1964–1974) on Robben Island.

As a member of Alexander's inner political circle, Abrahams had allegedly written[9] a political pamphlet on violence and the armed struggle, a copy of which was found by the

[8] The eleven people who were indicted were Neville Edward Alexander, Don John William Davis, Marcus Solomon, Elizabeth van der Heyden, Fikile Charles Bam, Lionel Basil Davis, Ian Leslie van der Heyden, Dulcie Evon September, Dorothy Hazel Alexander, Doris van der Heyden and Gordon Frederick Hendricks.

[9] The pamphlet, which was titled "The conquest of power in South Africa", is reprinted in Allison Drew's (1997) *South Africa's radical tradition, Volume 2*, which she edited. While not explicitly stated, the pamphlet,

South African security police and which was submitted as state evidence in the trial. The idea of revolution through armed struggle was attractive and, since increasing numbers of ordinary people across the globe were embracing its necessity and efficacy in fighting and in disorganising oppression and exploitation, Alexander and his southern African group of Marxist-inspired revolutionaries were keen and willing to, at the very least, consider the possibility of taking up arms against an intransigent apartheid state.

In his own defence and in defence of the National Liberation Front's decision to consider the possibility of armed struggle, Alexander elected to submit an unsworn statement in a petition handed in to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court in 1965 after his conviction:

> I would like to elaborate on my own attitude towards violence, as this question has come to be embarrassingly important in this case. Firstly, I have philosophical objections to the use of violence by man against man [sic] …. Violence as an element of policy in social affairs corrodes the moral fibre of individuals as well as of the State; while in politics it might bring quick results it never brings lasting results unless there are negative ones …. While being against violence as a matter of policy I have always accepted, of course, that there are times in the affairs of man when violence is essential for the very survival of the human race. (The Neville Alexander Papers, Appendix E in Court Records: 264–265)

This appeal/petition was rejected by the Appellate Division. Robert Langston (1965), the executive secretary of the Alexander Defense Committee[10], reports:

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according to Drew, was written by Alexander. Since Kenneth Abrahams was already out of the country, his name was mentioned by Alexander in his testimony against the charges levelled at him and his comrades in the National Liberation Front. This tactical decision, which also came about on the advice of their lawyers at the trial, taken by Alexander and his co-defendants was a ruse. I suspect that the "internal", as in non-explicit or non-public, argument used by the defendants in mentioning Abrahams's name was roughly as follows. Since authorship of any document even suggesting an armed struggle against the apartheid state could imply life imprisonment or worse, as in the death penalty, and since Abrahams had already left South Africa at that point, there was little threat of the state security apparatus being able to use this to convict Abrahams, unless the state was able to detain him and bring him to trial. It seems as if a decision was taken by NLF trialists to put the "blame" of authorship on Kenneth Abrahams since he was already in exile. Moreover, in private conversations and in interviews with Alexander and other convicted members of the NLF, it has been alleged that the lawyers had advised their clients "to cite K. Abrahams as the author of the key documents as he was already outside the country and presumably safe from arrest".

[10] The US-based Wisconsin Historical Society houses three microfilms of correspondence, clippings, promotional material and files on the Alexander Defense Committee chapters in the United States, Canada and Europe. This collection of materials, which is called the Alexander Defense Committee Records 1962 to 1971, can be retrieved from the website, http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/wiarchives.uw-whs-micr0768

> On March 25, 1965, the Appellate Division of the South African Supreme Court rejected the appeals of Dr. Neville Alexander and his ten comrades. Arrested in July 1963 and indicted under the 'Sabotage Law,' the Eleven were convicted on April 15, 1964 and sentenced to prison terms ranging from five to ten years.

Alexander was aware of Carl von Clausewitz's description of war as "politics by other means"[11]. Already in the 1950s, politics, for Alexander, was as much about political organization as it was about cultural mobilisation. The political organization of signs and symbols to which lay people, or ordinary people, related was as significant as the political organization implied in statecraft where combinations of social class representatives are in charge of the state.

The NLF's appeal was about the need to turn to violence when people's daily lives are threatened, undermined and brutalised, especially when policies and programmes of an oppressive state result in deaths of people opposing illegitimate political authority. The "very survival of the human race" is a key phrase in this statement of his to the Appellate Division. For Alexander, the "human race" is not a concept to be used lightly. While his view of the human race includes all classes or castes of people, he used it interchangeably with the

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(accessed 1 June 2014). On its website, it describes its history as follows: "The Alexander Defense Committee (ADC) was an international organization which was established to protest South African apartheid and to assist South African political prisoners and their families. The event that spurred the formation of the ADC was the arrest in July 1963 in Cape Town of Dr. Neville Alexander, a young black literary scholar with a degree from Tubingen University in West Germany, and ten other South Africans. Among them were Alexander's sister Dorothy, a teacher, and Fikele [Fikile] Bam, a law student. All were charged with the crime of opposition to the government and its policy of apartheid, and with membership in the National Liberation Front. After a trial in November 1963, Alexander and four other defendants were sentenced to ten years in the notorious Robben Island prison. Protest against the treatment of Alexander and the others first began in Germany, among Alexander's friends from his university days. Franz J. T. Lee, a fellow South African student, conducted a drive that collected over 5000 signatures on a petition presented to the United Nations. In September 1964, the Alexander Defense Committee was formed in London."

[11] Carl von Clausewitz was a German military general (1780–1831) whose treatise, *On war* (posthumously published in 1932 by his wife, Marie von Clausewitz), is said to have influenced Mao Zedong's strategy of a "people's war" in the 1930s and the 1940s. My reading of Clausewitz is that he employed some of Hegel's reflective assertions on dialectical thinking and that he somewhat roughly applied these to his theory of war as a political, social and military phenomenon, but the side he chose was invariably his army in conquest. Clausewitz's overarching message is that a "defensive" position in war is likely to be the stronger position. Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin and Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci developed more comprehensive political and psychological insights into the nature of war, and linked all wars to their class characters. Marxist thinkers such as Lenin and Gramsci attempted to answer a fundamental humanitarian question: "In whose [class] interests are wars waged?"

"people", and as an evolving and committed organic intellectual[12] (Gramsci 1971) of the urban and rural proletariat, he meant the oppressed and exploited people, whose *lived experience* of oppression and exploitation is the incubator of his own truths. This lived experience was the substrate in which he grounded his philosophy, his ideological positions and his political proclivities. Out of this lived experience, an imagination was beginning to take shape which included the notion of a "people's war" along the lines described by Mao Zedong (1938). Any form of collaboration or co-operation with the instruments of oppressive rule was to be rejected.

While the apartheid state was setting the limits of its offensive against the governed, the oppressed people, or in the language of the time the "disenfranchised people" needed to organize their terms of engagement in the war, and these excluded any dilution of antagonism towards the perceived enemy. A policy of non-collaboration[13] with the enemy came to be a fundamental pillar in Alexander's arsenal and in his embrace of a "war of manoeuvre".

The "country bumpkin" (Alexander 2013: 18) from Cradock took up his position on the side of the oppressed, and he was to remain there for the rest of his life. Shifting tactically and strategically to accommodate new possibilities opened by changes in the "balance of forces",

[12] For Gramsci, organic intellectuals are thinkers who serve either the interests of the working class or those of the bourgeoisie. Alexander's class origins are in the slave (his grandmother, Bisho Jarsa, was an Ethiopian slave), artisanal (his father was a carpenter) and teaching (his mother was a teacher) lines of descent.

[13] While the historical record is ambiguous about the authorship of this policy of non-collaboration, there is adequate oral testimony to make an assumption that Non-European Unity Movement theorists, such as Ben Kies and Isaac Bangani Tabata, were the principal formulators of this "policy of non-collaboration" with the institutions of the pre-1948 and post-1948 South African state (see, for example, NEUM 1945; 1946; 1951). As a political tactic and strategy to isolate collaborators and assert its distance from the machinations of statecraft and therefore "Herrenvolk" positions, the Unity Movement's almost dogged attachment to this policy had considerable weight in Alexander's thinking as a young and radical activist. As an isolationist political strategy, it worked well, but its philosophical constructs are somewhat less secure. My view is that this was a strategy/policy of *negation*, and while its dialectical roots are well considered and thought through, the intended object of liberation becomes defined by the obverse of the subjects who are called upon to execute this policy. Their view of the world, it could be argued, is defined not by what they want, but what they do not want. When viewed in this light, a policy of non-collaboration does not suggest a positive view of a future; it only has a negative view of the status quo that it is directed at. A policy of non-collaboration was based on an either-or problematic, a binary problematic, that has been a part of Marxist thinking and abstractions in the 1920s and the 1930s, especially after the usurpation of power by Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union and the bureaucratic degeneration that took place in that country after Lenin's death in 1924 and Trotsky's banishment from Soviet politics in the late 1920s and the 1930s. The Unity Movement saw itself as a torch bearer of Trotsky's political positions and it attracted people who identified with Trotsky's Left Opposition politics (the local incarnations were the Lenin Club, the Workers' Party of South Africa, the Spartacus Club, the Anti-Coloured Affairs Department (the Anti-CAD)).

Alexander's militant and confrontational mind-set drew its images from a theatre of war against racism, ignorance, poverty, capitalism and, in his later years, against globalized capitalism and neoliberalism[14].

"Race", nation and Alexander's paradox

The Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM or Unity Movement), arguably more clearly than any other political organization in South Africa, developed a concept of non-racialism that theoretically precluded the belief in the existence of "races" making up humanity.[15] Unambiguously locating his theses on "race" in the conceptual strides made by Unity Movement thinkers and strategists of the 1940s and the 1950s, Alexander's paradox, "while there is no such thing as race, there is the reality of racism" (Alexander 1985), became one of his seminal contributions to sociological and political theory. Alexander's association and mentorship with Minnie Gool, I.B. Tabata, Livie Mqotsi and, at a distance, with Ben Kies, introduced the young academic and revolutionary activist to ways of thinking that not only challenged the presumed and superimposed truths of National Party[16] rule, but also his own

[14] The studies on globalization done by Patrick Bond (2000; 2001) and on the ANC by Dale McKinley (1997) are cited in Alexander's works. Bond is a Marxist theorist, political commentator and social activist. He has written extensively on globalization, apartheid debt, access to free and affordable water, and has served as an adviser in developing the democratic government's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). Dale McKinley is a former member and a critic of the South African Communist Party who has become intimately involved in South African social movements spearheading anti-privatization campaigns.

[15] There is need for critical assessment, it must be noted, of how much the Unity Movement itself advanced the theoretical debate around non-racialism.

[16] The National Party came into power in 1948 and since then it was the exclusive governing party in South Africa until 1994 when the African National Congress took over the reins of political authority. For a majestic analysis of the rise of Afrikanerdom, ideology and class politics, Dan O'Meara's work, *Volks-kapitalisme*, is an essential read. I have liberally paraphrased this work, the periodisation laid out by Nicole Nattrass and Sampie Terreblanche (1990), and the pathfinding studies done by South African Marxist thinkers Harold Wolpe (1971; 1972) and Martin Legassick (1985; 1994; 2010) about the country's political economy. These revisionist studies, in my opinion, represent some of the pioneering distillations of a history "from below" in this doctoral study on Alexander. While I have not met many of these writers, I am deeply indebted to them for the radical and substantial contributions they have made to revising South African historiography. I share O'Meara's sentiment about Wolpe that he was not only one of the architects of the new South Africa, but as he did in his critiques of apartheid, he would have critiqued the democratic order in the same way that he did with the apartheid regime. In a fitting tribute to Wolpe three years after the democratic transition in 1994, O'Meara (1997) wrote: "His work quite literally reshaped the way in which vast numbers of people saw apartheid South Africa, and in doing so, made a huge contribution to doing away with it. I also have few doubts that were he still alive, he would also be among the leading analysts of the process of transformation in this country since April 1994. The new South Africa cries out for the kind of rigorous critical analysis to which Harold subjected

views, acquired positions and truths about politics and power. In this conflicted and conflictual political movement (Roux[17] 1964; Hirson n.d.), the NEUM and its re-invented incarnation in the late 1950s, Apdusa, which was led by Tabata, Alexander graduated to what I call the wonders and dilemmas of historical materialism, and the ambiguities of dialectical reasoning. In a country defined by its rulers as an apartheid state, and whose ideologues premised their social policies and programmes on the notion of the superiority of white people over black people, Alexander began his intellectual journey armed with essential humanitarian and analytical tools of his mentors.

In questioning the very notion of "race", whose acceptance as a biological fact was the baseline grid through which both the National Party government and major sections of the liberation movement viewed the fractured and disparate South Africa, Alexander came to identify the beacons of analysis in his "horizons" (Groys 2009), which precluded notions of consensus (Habermas 1984) with the perceived enemy, the apartheid-capitalist state.

In the 1979 rendition of the national question in South Africa, Alexander composed his political testament, *One Azania, one nation*, to challenge the theory of nationalities promoted by the apartheid government, and embraced by the nationalists within the ANC. I call this book his political testament because, in this seminal study of the national question, Alexander identifies the key combination of classes and a guiding ideology that, he believes, should usher in a socialist polity. The ideological and organizational manifestations that were created subsequently, reflecting the strategic alliance of classes, are incidental to his familiarity with and political understanding of Lenin's book, *What is to be done?*[18] Without prescribing the

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the old, apartheid, South Africa." This was said by O'Meara in an address at the inaugural conference of the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust.

[17] Edward (Eddie) Roux was a South African communist and the author of the book, *Time longer than rope*, in which he derisively describes the Trotskyist movement in South Africa as fractious. Roux asserts that Trotskyists had a "tendency to split". The political principals of the Unity Movement, including Tabata and Kies, were reticent in describing themselves as Trotskyists, but they did invoke the authority of the former Russian revolutionary's writings where they thought it was appropriate. Sympathetic historians of Trotskyist tendencies have also described the NEUM as Trotskyist (see, for example, Baruch Hirson's essay, "The Trotskyist groups in South Africa, 1932–1948" (1994)).

[18] As the leading Bolshevik in Russia's exiled socialist movement, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin wrote a book, *What is to be done?*, in 1902. He argued that the "trade union consciousness" of workers requires interventionist consciousness-raising political programmes to ensure that the class-in-itself transforms into a class-for-itself to challenge the political authorities for power. For this to happen, he advocated that a political organization, a political party, be created as a "vanguard party", whose leadership should comprise the "most conscious" or the "most advanced" representatives of this working class.

exact organizational forms these should take, Alexander attempted to answer the theoretical and conceptual concerns for the South African context, and opened up novel theoretical avenues to explore.

In his *One Azania, one nation*, he reflects on and places into relief the inadequacies of the liberation movement's interpretation of the genealogy of racism and its ideological consequences. He composes arguments, wrote sentences, developed alternative ways of thinking, argued against himself, agreeing in parts with and arguing against the Unity Movement's and the ANC's concepts of race, against the governing National Party's opportunistic implementation of its utility as a sociopolitical tool of manipulation, and against the academic industry of "ethnic group theory" whose launch pad was the United States. Alexander's describes attempts to replace race-based theories with notions of "ethnicity" as useless and misleading (No Sizwe 1979: 137):

> In the 1940s Montagu and others suggested the term 'ethnic group' to describe human breeding populations however they might have originated. They did this because the idea of 'race' had become so repugnant to them that they wanted to find some euphemism 'as a means of avoiding the word, yet retaining its meaning!' As Montagu explains, the term 'ethnic group' leaves the matter of exact characterisation open; it raises issues rather than just begging the question, as the category 'race' does. Only their point of departure was genetic; the term 'ethnic group' did not indicate more than the fact that the group concerned had for some natural, social or cultural reason come to constitute a (temporary) breeding population. However, precisely because of the Humpty Dumpty character of the term, which can be made (and has been) to mean virtually anything, it is at best useless, at worst misleading.

The obsession with race in the thinking of National Party ideologues led to the growth of another, albeit a small but a powerful grouping at Afrikaans universities that was united in their roll-out of *Volkekunde* ("People Studies", or more accurately in their own and rather narrow interpretation, "race" or "ethnic" studies).

Alexander started experimenting with the first stirrings of his dialogical narrative on "race", nation, class and language that he sustained and modified throughout his activist and academic life. In his acknowledgement of the importance of Unity Movement ideas in the "furnace" of thinking that later led to his assertions about the political need to build a single South African nation, he cites from a document, *A declaration to the people of South Africa*

from the Non-European Unity Movement, published in 1951 (NEUM, cited in No Sizwe 1979: 56):

> Who constitutes the South African nation? The answer to this question is as simple as it would be in any other country. The nation consists of people who were born in South Africa and who have no other country but South Africa as their mother-land. They may be born with a black skin or with a brown one, a yellow one or a white one; they may be male or female; they may be young, middle-aged or of an advanced aged; they may be short or tall, fat or lean; they may be long-headed or round-headed, straight-haired or curly-haired; they may have long noses or broad noses; Swahili, Arabic or Jewish, they may be Christians, Mohammedans, Buddhists, or of any other faith …. All that is required for a people to be a nation is community of interests, love of their country, pride in being citizens of their country.

While Alexander questioned the nationalism implicit in this statement of political intent, the essential egalitarian spirit attracted him.

The Unity Movement sought to build a single South African nation out of the polyglot or multilingual society made up of different "nationalities", whose fluid boundaries and delineations were not adequately defined, except for commonalities reflected in language use and religious affiliations. While not explicit, a historical materialist approach is implied in these words of the Unity Movement theorists who penned the 1951 declaration. And while not explicitly referred to in these theorists' writings, the works on the "national question" by Vladimir Lenin (Lenin 1977: 243–251) and Leon Trotsky (2008) were the base texts that these theorists used to construct their views. In part, Unity Movement writings were directed against Joseph Stalin's (n.d.) writings on nations.

It was only much later on that the specifically "class content" of, and the communicative role of language in nation building and national liberation were to be developed explicitly by Alexander in his chapters, "The movement for national liberation" and "Elements of the theory of the nation" in *One Azania, one nation* (No Sizwe 1979: 95–131, 132–164).

For Unity Movement strategists, political oppression and its negation were the glue to bind the oppressed people in their quest for national liberation. For Alexander, the eradication of oppression *and* the fight against exploitation, which translated as the simultaneous struggle against racism and capitalism, were dialectical nodes for the black working class and the

radicalised layers of the middle class to *lead* the social revolution of a polyglot community of interests in a combined war of "manoeuvre" and "position" against oppression *and* exploitation.

By 2015, this has not happened. Instead, it could be argued that the political representatives of a mainly complacent and increasingly anti-socialist black elite and of largely white capital are in charge of the state, and these people are steering the negotiated political revolution of 1994. To understand at least some of the contours of Alexander's evolving arguments, an extended theoretical detour on history and his "war of position" might be appropriate.

History and Alexander's "war of position"

In the years leading up to Alexander's embrace of the armed struggle in 1961, that is, in the 1940s and the 1950s, the restrained and understated lexicon of liberation politics represented the outer rim of different worlds that people experienced under the roll-out of apartheid and its systemic ideological predecessor, racism. With the exception of literature produced by theorists aligned to the Communist Party of South Africa, explicit references to Marxism and revolution were judiciously avoided and an overt anti-capitalist vocabulary was absent from the statements, declarations and documentation of political organizations representing the interests of oppressed people. For these organizations, defiance to apartheid rule through non-violent protests was, to a large extent, politically initiated and co-ordinated by activists aligned to the African National Congress and the Non-European Unity Movement. The ANC organized the oppressed people through racially defined structures while the Unity Movement pursued its defiance to apartheid rule through "non-racial" structures, despite its federalism (see, for example, No Sizwe's discussion about this in his *One Azania, one Nation* (1979: 54–57)).[19]

[19] For the ANC, the South African population comprised, and still continues to comprise, different "national groups" or different "races", which, according to its literature, are made up of "Africans", "Coloureds", "Indians" and "Whites". The ANC's overarching organizational structure, which was and is also descriptively called the Congress Alliance, represented these groups in the following ways: Africans were represented by the African National Congress, Coloureds by the South African Coloured People's Organisation, Indians by the South African Indian Congress and Whites by the Congress of Democrats. Only black Africans were allowed to serve on the Executive of the ANC. My view is that the Unity Movement, theoretically, did not promote an organizational structure representative of these different population registration groups. However, while it

Alexander, from 1953 to about 1958, was locked into the turmoil of words fomented in the structures of non-racial politics in the Unity Movement. The movement's *political policy of non-collaboration*, which meant a refusal to take part in state structures designed by pre-apartheid and apartheid rulers, came to dominate the conceptual universes of young and old people alike, and Alexander was not immune to this line of thinking. Non-collaboration translated into confrontational intellectual postures towards the state and all its instruments of governance, coercion and repression. It could be argued that his embrace of the armed struggle in the early 1960s and his later embrace of the possibility of mass insurrectionary tactics in the early and mid-1980s were extensions of his interpretation of this Unity Movement policy of non-collaboration. While the policy of non-collaboration was a confrontational posture of passive resistance to apartheid rule, Alexander's use of it included a commitment to violently oppose the racist state. This novel interpretation of the policy had its roots in Alexander's understanding of history, of critical pedagogy and of historical materialism, and to which I now turn.

In the introductory chapter to his translated work on German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, Douglas Smith (1996: ix) asserts that Nietzsche, in constructing his arguments about the genealogy of morals, says there are

> three uses of history – the antiquarian, the monumental, and the critical. While antiquarian history seeks to preserve the past and monumental history wishes to emulate it, critical history aims to liberate the present from its claims …. Nietzsche in the early 1870s was, in a sense, advocating a new historicism to replace the old, and it is this new historicism which was to become the genealogy of morals, with its renewed commitment to the themes of forgetting and memory and the physiological imagery of health and sickness.

The anti-socialist and anti-Marxist positions implied by Nietzsche's views on "critical history" may have sat uncomfortably with Alexander, but the implication of contestation and of an anti-establishment invective suggested in the use of the concept is what was attractive. Instead, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's "critical pedagogy" is what gripped Alexander's

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had a federal structure, it operated as a *de facto* "unitary" structure to self-consciously disaggregate the superimposed and state-inspired legislated "racial" boundaries between Africans, Coloureds, Indians and Whites imposed by apartheid strategists. Yet, within the structures of the Unity Movement, it is disputable whether its cadres actually practised the envisaged "non-racialism" to effectively undermine the common sense and hegemonic racial thinking that seemed to have permeated South Africa's oppressed communities.

imagination. Alexander's approach to history, historical construction, memory and historiography, is both an affirmation of an activist's existential imperative to act in the present, in the "here and now", and in doing so liberate the present from official history's claims to truth, and it is a radical departure from an apparently circular use of dialectical thinking suggested in Nietzsche's nihilism. Alexander's approach was anchored in the historical materialism to which he was introduced in his formative years of political and organizational training.

Dispensing with an antiquarian approach and resisting the temptations of the monumental approach to history, Alexander's critical pedagogy, which was not dissimilar to the messages outlined in philosopher Freire's *The pedagogy of the oppressed* (1968), has sought to make the exceptional unexceptional, and he often achieved this through emphasizing the unexceptional as opposed to the exceptional.[20]

He recalls the learning method used by the political prisoners on Robben Island (Alexander, interview in Busch, Busch and Press 2014: 86):

> Mainly at work, people would stand together, and in the lime quarry with pick and shovel. The person who was talking would obviously appear to be resting, and talk or lecture or ask questions. It was a very *dialogical* [my italics] method. I always say that we discovered the Freirian method long before we read Paulo Freire[21]. Because we were forced to – we couldn't make notes.

Each person on Robben Island, including every warder, was a repository of knowledge, a carrier a past experiences and a messenger of political affiliations. In the absence of note taking, intellectual engagements with knowledge and its production meant extensive use of memory and the reconstruction in words of that memory. An engagement with what has been said before by the individual's previous mentors and the presumed truths of prior learning meant an interrogation of oneself and one's own presumed truths. The "dialogical method"

[20] Soudien (2013a) recalls that Alexander drove a Toyota car, that his dress code excluded wearing ties and that he refused to "cash in" his Voyager "miles" he accrued through the frequent flights he took to attend meetings and conferences.

[21] Because Freire's works were banned in South Africa at the time, it is highly unlikely that Alexander read Freire on the island. I suspect that he was able to get hold of the Brazilian's writings after his release in 1974, but the exact year of his readings of Freire is difficult to confirm.

employed by Alexander and his fellow political prisoners meant an interrogation of, and a confrontation with organizational and personal truths.

The most profound acts, for Alexander, are often to be found in the most trivial acts that ordinary people engage in. At the same time, he was averse to exceptionalism of any kind, and he eschewed the tendencies of people to award him exceptional, or exclusive, status.

In his view of history, he is simply following in the footsteps, the traditions and thought patterns of his philosophical predecessors, who include Plato, Aristotle, Hegel and Marx, and he grapples with a formalistic adherence to the presumed determinative role of the economy, arguing, often against himself, that politics and ideology are equally determinative in forming nations and societies.

For No Sizwe, which is the pseudonym Alexander used in 1979, history is a living force and its chroniclers are either participants in the making of history or fellow travellers in its recording. Two quotations from his *One Azania, one nation* are relevant here. In the first quotation (No Sizwe 1979: 7), he locates his study of the national question:

> Although this work is conceived of as a contribution to the theoretical analysis of the South African social formation, it is necessary to stress that the approach is a *historical* [italics in original] one. The vacuity of bourgeois sociology, which approaches social phenomena with so-called operational definitions, is a mere obfuscation which itself serves the political purpose of confusing and debilitating the radical intelligentsia. I adopt, therefore, an *historical materialist approach* [my italics] which explains social development by examining the interconnections between the determinative economic structure of the social formation and the ideological and political elements that co-determine, at the secondary level, the particular forms in which the class relationships become manifest under given historical circumstances.

In the second quotation, he cites and concurs with Trotsky's views about writers and readers (Trotsky, cited in No Sizwe 1979: 7):

> [The author] stands as a historian upon the same viewpoint upon which he stood as a participant in the events. The reader, of course, is not obliged to share the political views of the author, which the latter on his side has no reason to conceal. But the reader does have the right to demand that an historical work should not be the defence of a political position, but an internally well-founded portrayal of the actual process of the revolution ….

Marxist historian Isaac Deutscher (1963: 219), the author of a majestic trilogy on Trotsky, says that the Russian revolutionary fought his battles "within the revolution's threatened city" (Deutscher, cited in Dollie 2011: 125):

> All banished men brood over their past; but only a few, very few, conquer the future … it would not be quite right to say that as historian he [Trotsky] combined extreme partisanship with rigorous objectivity. He had no need to combine them; they were the heat and light of his work, and as heat and light belonged to each other He scorned the 'impartiality' and 'conciliatory justice' of the scholar who pretends 'to stand on the wall of a threatened city and behold at the same time the besiegers and the besieged'. His place was … within the revolution's threatened city.

Like Trotsky, Alexander pondered, argued and wrote in his revolution's threatened city. While contemporary Marxist philosopher Alain Badiou (2009) dismisses historical materialism in his critique of "grand narrative"[22] theory, and argues instead for a *dialectical materialism* or a *materialist dialectic* to take root (see, for example, Slavoj Žižek's (2011: 181–243) powerful chapter titled "Bargaining" in his book, *Living in the end times*), Alexander, his comrades and his peers were determined to place their notions of history, their historical materialism, at the centre of their critiques of the economy, politics and ideology.

Alexander embraced and worked within the limitations of "grand narrative" theory, and through the intellectual tensions he encountered in straddling the demands of the Academy and those of political and cultural mobilization, he collapsed some of the rather fine distinctions that Žižek (2011) and Badiou (1989) insist upon in their studies on the philosophy underpinning notions of historical materialism.

[22] In the disciplines associated with the humanities and social sciences, the term "grand narrative" is often used pejoratively. Alternatively called an "emancipatory narrative" by its reported originator, Jean-François Lyotard, the meta theory implied "some kind of interconnection between events, an inner connection between events related to one another, a succession of social systems, the gradual development of social conditions, and so on – in other words, is able in some way to *make sense of* history. More particularly, when pronounced as it usually is, with a sneer, the 'grand narrative', the 'narrative of emancipation' is all those conceptions which try to make sense of history, rather than just isolated events in history, concepts like 'class struggle', socialism and capitalism, productive forces and so on" (see, for example, the definition given in the *Encyclopaedia of Marxism*, which can be retrieved from https://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/g/r.htm (accessed 2 June 2014)). Apart from the fact that the narrative on the "grand narrative" theory is itself a grand narrative, the critique is directed at the presumed gaps in classical Marxist analyses of postmodern societies, where the growth of computer technology and the shift away from industrial societies have meant that *access* to knowledge production and circulation has become a critical lever of power.

In Alexander's enumeration of his historical materialist approach to national and nationalist movements, he states that definitions of the "the nation" cannot be valid for all time. Nations are specific to epochs, and are therefore temporal phenomena:

> Indeed it was only after a long detour involving the thorough study of national and nationalist movements that I myself reached my present position which is – stated simply – that it is impossible to give a definition valid for all time and place of what a nation is; all that the theorist can do is to define what the nation is in a given historical context. Such definition does not involve the enumeration of indispensable or essential features of a nation, but rather the explanation of the social content which characterises the particular national movement …. It [the national question] is eminently a *historical* question, a question that requires an examination of the *specific set of circumstances* (No Sizwe 1979: 165, 167).

The historical materialism that he employs to theorize about the formation of a new South African nation is rooted political struggle. Alexander seems to assert that nations, as well as his thinking about nations, have been forged through political contestations and popular protests:

> [I]f my exposition has revealed nothing else, it has shown that nations are not inevitable, god-given entities that will manifest themselves in some specific form at any given time. The nation, its physical limits and its social content, is determined in political struggle (No Sizwe 1979: 175).

Alexander's historical materialism, which he often used as a substitute concept for his interpretation of Marxism and his promotion of dialectical thinking in his later "war of position", had many of the elements of Hegelian idealism (see, for example, Žižek 2006: 94–123) that Georg Lukács (1978) adhered to, and equally much of the revolutionary passion that inspired Antonio Gramsci's counter-hegemonic strategies of war against "capitalist barbarism".

Alexander had a communist ideal[23] not dissimilar to the founders and practitioners of Marxism, Marx and Engels, who drew their inspiration from Hegel's *Phenomenology* (Hegel 1977) and *Philosophy of Right* (Hegel 1967). The notion of work and the idea of a social

[23] I borrow this notion of a communist ideal from the book titled *The communist ideal in Hegel and Marx* by David MacGregor (1984).

individual, what Marx describes as the "dialectics of labour" (MacGregor 1984: 19–20), are vital constructs in Hegel's and Marx's thought:

> The dialectics of labour, in Hegel's view, expresses and constitutes an essential linkage between the individual and society. Work and practical action are the *means*, the locus of the particular, through which the individual realizes his or her capabilities and becomes identical with the social or the universal …. Hegel's concern with the role of the individual is shared by Marx, although Marx's social theory is usually construed exclusively as a theory of class and class struggle .... The dialectics of labour and the concept of the social individual are vital components of Hegel's social and political thought, just as they are in that of Marx.

Alexander's political mission, which included developing an understanding of subjectivities and of objectivities, especially about the black working class and its role in South Africa's state of racial capitalism[24] and its perceived leadership in nation-building efforts, has not yet been realised.

Howard Richards (2012), the Chilean-based socialist philosopher and legal scholar, gave the following advice to me in my quest to understand Alexander's sense of subjectivities. His insights into Alexander's political and historical thinking have been significant referents in, and have led to multiple epiphanies in my interpretation of Alexander's work:

> To anchor your work on Neville [Alexander] you have to ask why subjectivities were important to him. *I think the answer would be that Neville wanted the black working class to lead the revolution and it did not do so* [my italics]. It was not subjectively what it was objectively. Here a key language is that it was a class in itself but not a class for itself. With this problematic you have to start with Gramsci. You have to go back to Hegel for the in itself

[24] The origins of the concept of "racial capitalism" are difficult to establish, but many theoreticians have written extensively about the "co-determination" between "race" and class, especially in analyses of anti-colonial struggles (see, for example, Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism: The making of the black radical tradition* (1983), and Partha Chatterjee's *Nationalist thought and the colonial world – a derivative discourse* (1986)). Alexander, arguably more than any other theorist and revolutionary writer in South Africa, drew the stubborn link between the trajectories of capitalism and of racism. Alexander argued, in my opinion correctly, that "race" and "class" cannot be separated in the South African context. The ideological motive for apartheid was coterminous with the economic imperatives for capitalist development. In his view, there was a confluence between economic centres of power and racially exclusive silos of white privilege and black oppression. This view he shared with other writers such as former South African Communist Party member Harold Wolpe, and with South African Marxist thinker Martin Legassick, who, together with Rob Petersen and Paula Ensor, was a founding member of the Marxist Workers' Tendency in the African National Congress (while a detailed history of this political current in the ANC is not comprehensively covered in Legassick (1994), he does allude to its origins and its development).

> for itself distinction. You have to work with Sartre, not just his late work *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (which really is about how a revolutionary subjectivity is formed, which I think is Neville's question) but his earlier work on being in itself and being for itself. You could add Therborn. Foucault said that people misunderstood his work as centred on power, when really it was centred on the formation of subjects. If you put Foucault on the list you would confront my thesis that the aim of Foucault's work was precisely to prevent revolution, the opposite of Gramsci and Sartre. Foucault once said in so many words (I think it was at Sartre's funeral) that his aim was to destroy Sartre's synthesis of existentialism and Marxism. Is this getting too far from Neville? A question would be whether post modernism and neoliberalism have so completely overwhelmed collective senses of subjectivity that there is now no revolution possible. David Harvey's answer is that the dull pressure of material necessity will eventually lead to a revival of Marxism. The logical conclusion for such a work would be to reflect on the possibility of a mass revolutionary subjectivity in South Africa today.

These words were written in 2012 by Richards. His advice has profound resonance with me because, in substantial parts, it not only guides my own literary and intellectual dispositions, but it provides penetrating insights into ways of understanding Alexander's politically inspired mission(s) captured in his written work in English. In my opinion, Richards is deeply and intensely *historical* without being *historicist*, suggesting an overview of Alexander's approach to subjectivities that covers about two centuries of critical contributions in the theoretical pantheon of Marxism and its critics, from Hegel to Michel Foucault to David Harvey. His advice is also a window into his later essay (Richards 2013) on aspects of Alexander's life and work.

For Richards, in his appreciation of the works of Gramsci and Alexander, the overarching question would seem to be how a *revolutionary subjectivity* is formed. For classical Marxists, and for Hegelian idealists, the materiality of productive activity characterizing working class life is one pillar that ought to give rise to an anti-status quo consciousness. Although not necessarily a positive functionality, they argue that, through the physical engagement in the production of goods and services, the working class is the most likely class of people to want to overturn exploitative systems. The instrumentalism implicit in this view of working class responses to capitalism, or for that matter to socialism, is mitigated by the class's engagement in the relations of production, and therefore the power arrangements that govern workers'

relationships with the products they produce and with the lack in ownership of the products they produce.

French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu (1992; 2000; 2005) is, at best, sceptical about the revolutionary potential of the working class and argues against Gramsci's notion of an "organic intellectual". Bourdieu argues for engagements in "symbolic fields", which do not detract from the contested truth that Gramsci and Alexander advocate. Both Alexander and Gramsci seem to posit the view that the "dull pressures of material necessity" cannot but impact on the sharpening of contradictions in society, and the potential to revolutionize a consciousness that emerges from this *habitus*[25] (Bourdieu 1992) can be shaped through political and civil organizations.

In the South African case, Alexander argues, the reality of racism and the reality of commodity production, especially since the advent of deep-level mining in the 1870s, mean that the black working class has been at the coalface of oppression and exploitation, and has held the key to an evolving, even revolutionary consciousness to simultaneously challenge the state, as the guardians and legislative implementers of privatized wealth, and the owners of the means of production (capital), for power over the fate of the raw materials taken out of (as in mining) or from (as in agriculture) the earth. As a class, or at least a significant and majority section of the working class, black workers have the potential and capacity to simultaneously develop a consciousness to oppose the economic limits set by capitalist production and reproduction, and develop a political consciousness to determine new limits. The symbiotic, or less generously the parasitic relationship between "race" and class is the matrix in which the political economy of "racial capitalism" evolved. Here, the hope of revolutionary activists is to be part of a working class movement to transform its status as a class-in-itself into a class-for-itself, and, if Richards is correct in his preliminary and very useful commentaries on Alexander, then the black working class in South Africa has indeed failed in its *historical*, or even *historic* mission to effect and lead a social revolution.

[25] French philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty and especially Pierre Bourdieu have reframed and re-introduced the original Aristotelian concept of *habitus*. According to Wikipedia (accessed 9 December 2014), Bourdieu describes *habitus* as "[s]ystems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them".

It was, however, his experiences on Robben Island, especially his discussions firstly with SACP stalwart Walter Sisulu and then with ANC leader Nelson Mandela on the national question that instilled in Alexander some key thoughts about a shift away from an essentially Eurocentric perspective about what constitutes nationhood, the role of class and the African reality of racism. Soudien (2013: 169–170) argues that the "form" the debate took is important because of the "self-consciousness of its interlocutors". Mandela thought Alexander to be "wrong-headed" and who introduced a "sour note" into a memorial service for Chief Albert Luthuli (Mandela 1995: 425–426) on Robben Island. The 28-year-old Alexander had entered the prison community in 1964 with "deep suspicions regarding the intellectual competence of the Congress [ANC] leaders. They [Mandela and Alexander] had to create conditions for listening to each other, which came close to breaking down several times during the engagement" (Soudien 2013). What was compelling though for both these men is that they were instructed by their respective political organizations (Alexander by the National Liberation Front, and Mandela by the ANC) to explain to each other "how their structures had arrived at their respective political positions". Soudien (2013: 170) continues:

> The discussion proceeded comfortably until the question of 'race' surfaced. Mandela's position was that 'race' was a matter of biology and nature. Alexander … held that 'race' was a social construction …. Each had brought to the table the prevailing view of his discursive community and the men had to confront the fact that they came from completely different worlds. The moment was important because it came to provide a basis for formulating the rules for dialogue around political difference. Alexander … suggests that it generated the 'greatest lesson of all … that we were finally able to say that on my assumptions I have to end there, I understand on your assumptions you have to end somewhere else'.

For Soudien (2013: 170), the "lesson" was of great importance for non-Communist Party socialists on Robben Island:

> While they remained critical of African nationalism they came to understand the importance of what they called the 'lived reality' of living in a racialised space, of being 'African', 'coloured' in South Africa and the necessity to develop an inclusive 'African' view of the future of the country. *This meant revisiting their Eurocentric view of social cohesion and the construction of the nation which had its dominant foundations in ideas of class* [my italics].

The discussions with Sisulu and then with Mandela took place in the lime quarry where prisoners spent most of their daily working lives, and in the room set aside for table tennis on the island. Desai (2012: 106–107) reveals that "Alexander's discussions with Mandela made him realise his lack of knowledge of African history". Desai quotes Alexander:

> We presented what we [Mandela and Alexander] thought to one another, or responded to questions, so there was a Socratic dialogue which took place over a few hours, at most two to three hours a day, per week …. What we [Alexander and other National Liberation Front members] knew about African history, was really the history of Europeans in Africa. And, as a result, he [Mandela] influenced me to begin a serious study of African history.

Alexander had come to realize that the overarching imperative to build social cohesion lay not in the "reification of biology, but in the capacity of people to understand their cultural differences. Learning one another's languages would be the way these cultural differences could be accessed" (Soudien 2013: 170). In important ways, and at the same time leaning on his understanding of his forebears' insights in the Unity Movement and Apdusa, Alexander's conversations with Mandela on Robben Island resulted in major shifts in his appreciation of the dialectics of class and "race", the dialectics of nation building, and the dialectics of individual human agency, class position and class determination. Alexander also started to develop a growing appreciation of the "power of languages" and the "language of power", or what Therborn (1980) later juxtaposed as the "power of ideology" and the "ideology of power". Alexander was to interrogate and comment on this juxtaposition for much of his later life.

These conversations with the future president of a democratic South Africa were precedents in his evolving indigenization of Marxism. They could be seen, alongside his readings of Marx and Lenin, as his primordial intellectual encounters to develop his thesis on colour-caste[26] systems and their political and ideological consequences. His *One Azania, one nation*

[26] In opposing the theories of National Party ideologues and those of the dominant trends in the liberation movement, Alexander has proposed that South Africa's officially designated population registration groups (Africans, Coloureds, Indians and Whites) be treated as colour-castes. He writes (1979: 141): "It is my central thesis that the officially classified population registration groups in South Africa are colour-castes and that it is of pivotal political importance to treat them as such …. Since I maintain further that the colour-caste characterisation is *only* tenable on the assumption that the castes articulate with the fundamental class structure of the social formation, the crucial relationship between caste and class will be given special attention."

(1979) was both a decisive break with the inadequacies in the theories propounded by intellectuals of the dominant political trends in the liberation movement, and a new beginning in the conceptualization of language as a medium of communication to understand and manage cultural differences.

Prison life for political activists in the South Africa of the 1960s meant complete separation from their families, friends and partners. For the leaders of different political organizations, who were kept in B-section on Robben Island, it also meant extended periods of intense existential reflection. Notwithstanding his disagreements with Mandela and with the rest of the ANC's High Command, Alexander's status as a teacher and as an intellectual among the prison community was enhanced not only by his abilities to engage the High Command in argument, but also by his decision to register for and eventually complete an Honours degree in History through correspondence courses at the University of South Africa (Unisa).

For the curious and experimental Alexander, studies through Unisa opened up a new avenue to explore, and he did so with the eagerness of a fresh student, despite already having a doctorate in German. The carefully composed, handwritten and respectful letters[27] he wrote to his lecturers, M. Boucher, C.F.J. Muller, B.J. Liebenberg and M.C. van Zyl, between the years 1966 and 1969, are testimony to an active mind, a respectful person and a political activist whose political mission remained the overthrow of a racist regime but whose intellect was self-consciously attuned to work within the parameters set by his prison warders and the government that sent him to prison. Restricted in his correspondence by the uneducated and brutish censorship from prison guards, he created a platform and a vehicle through which he could communicate and have conversations with the world outside his prison walls, and explore his passion for history, literature and writing. His command of the English language and his writing style, even in pursuing the purely administrative details of his courses at Unisa, set him apart from the established expectations his lecturers were accustomed to. The

[27] In 2011, I assisted Ashwin Desai, who was then completing his book, *Reading revolution: Shakespeare on Robben Island* (2012), in accessing documents on Alexander. I was granted access to the academic file on Alexander by the History Department at Unisa. The file contains his academic record, his registration details, letters to his lecturers, and the letters written to him by his lecturers. I requested that all the documents be scanned, and, at Alexander's request, these were sent to him in the early part of 2012. Karen Press, Alexander's literary executor, has an electronic record of all the documents. I have requested that these be deposited in Alexander's archive at the University of Cape Town.

following are two paragraphs taken from Liebenberg's correspondence in 1966 and 1968, respectively, with Alexander:

> I am greatly impressed by the standard of the work you have submitted thus far. Allow me again to offer my congratulations to you on the allround [sic] excellence of your essay on Ranke.
>
> I am glad to learn that you have decided to write Part I of the examination in February 1969. You should have done so in February 1968. Why don't you write the whole honours examination, i.e. all five papers, next February. A student of your calibre should not find that difficult. (Liebenberg 1966; 1968)

With the exception of one essay, Alexander had achieved distinctions in all the essays he submitted during his studies at Unisa. His average mark was exceptional (one essay was given 95 per cent).

In prison, Alexander was able to create for himself a learning environment, sometimes belligerently engaging the principals of political organizations he considered, not without a dose of arrogance and self-importance, intellectually wanting, and straddling the *lived experience* of prison life and the demands of the Academy, questioning, through his essays for Unisa, the official constructs of history and their validity. He managed to get access to books and literature such as "Schiller and all the classical German stuff" and "history, particularly the history of the Russian Revolution, Ricarda Huch's seminal study of the 1848 revolutions, stuff that even outside, you know, I would have had difficulty finding" (Alexander, quoted in Desai 2012: 105).

By force of circumstance, writing to his lecturers at Unisa was his second act[28] of writing to the "enemy", who, in this instance, were the teachers at an unapologetically pro-apartheid higher education institution. In the 1960s, Unisa was run by Afrikaner men who reported, in the first and last instance, to their paymasters, the apartheid government, and whose complicity in the ideological construction and implementation of apartheid ought to be the subject of another thesis. The fact that the lecturers were sympathetic to his requests and queries (both Floors van Jaarsveld and Ben Liebenberg were positively lyrical in their praise

[28] His first act of writing to the "enemy" was the petition he submitted to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court in 1965.

for his achievements and for the essays he submitted to the History Department) was incidental to Alexander's need then to re-engage the Academy, albeit on terms that were restrictive and were not of his own making.

His release from Robben Island in 1974 was immediately accompanied by a government-imposed five-year ban on meeting more than one person at a time, and on participating in any political activity. By then the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), alongside an incipient trade union movement of mainly black urban workers, had eclipsed the traditional roles played by the ANC, the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) of Azania, and what remained of the fractured Non-European Unity Movement in capturing popular consciousness of the mass of ordinary working class people. The might of the apartheid state was seemingly overwhelming, and then 1976 happened. In that year the state was intent on introducing Afrikaans as the medium of instruction and learning in black schools, and the response of the high school students was unambiguous. In what Baruch Hirson has aptly described as the *Year of fire, year of ash: The Soweto revolt: Roots of a revolution?* (1979), the students of Soweto took to the streets to protest against the imposition of Afrikaans into their learning environment, and the sustained mass uprisings that followed over the next 15 years were, in many different ways, lit by this spark.

In this new furnace of radical acts and ideas between the years 1975 and 1978 that arose out of direct and popular confrontations with the state and its instruments of coercion and repression, Alexander composed his *One Azania, one nation* (1979) under the *nom de guerre*, No Sizwe.

His imagination began to take on new challenges, parting company with the attachments to older, traditional and more established political movements, and seeking out different ways to challenge the state, and to put up for public discussion the theoretical restrictions and inadequacies imposed by recalcitrant and nationalistic sections of the liberation movement. He did so without explicitly incorporating Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's "war of position" in his analysis and in his propositions to engage the state in all its political, economic, ideological and cultural manifestations. Even though in his later writings he does refer to Gramsci's "war of position" in his propositions about educational policy and planning, Alexander did not explicitly describe his political positioning as one that

approximated this strategic orientation. In my view, and from about 1988 onwards, the descriptive phrase appropriately captures Alexander's antipathies towards the underlying capitalist imperatives that underpinned the apartheid system in South Africa.

Gramsci is not mentioned at all in Alexander's *One Azania, one nation*, and yet, the import of Alexander's political mission in the book was precisely to lay out a theoretical framework to comprehensively acquire the terrain of power so that ordinary people could benefit from its use. At the time, in the period 1975 to 1978, for Alexander, the quest was to suggest alternative political possibilities in mounting a strategic offensive to eventually occupy the "commanding heights" of the *political economy*[29] in South Africa. His approach to the national question in South Africa may well have been the conceptual starting blocks of an evolving "war of position" that was later to unfold in his political messages and

[29] The "political economy" approach to sociological and historical research and analyses was a template used by Marxist revisionists (following the broad framework established by Marx and Engels in the 1800s), especially in the 1970s and the 1980s in South Africa, and was not confined to the disciplines of History and Sociology. The template suggests that there is a necessary link between the economy and politics, and all historical snapshots or detailed analyses have to address both these "sites" of abstraction and practice in societies under interrogation. Belinda Bozzoli (1983) stands out among the leading proponents in the 1980s, and she extended this approach to include feminist interpretations of South African social studies. Of significance in my study of Alexander are also the insights and writings of Colin Bundy, William Beinart, Charles van Onselen, Ian Phimister, Terence Ranger, Brigitta Lau, Harold Wolpe, Frank Molteno, Martin Legassick and Tom Lodge. While he focused on South African socio-economic and political issues, Alexander drew his inspiration from the theoretical works and practices of Ernest Mandel, Samora Machel, Amilcar Cabral, Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky and poignantly, Bertolt Brecht. In my conversations with Alexander in the early 1980s, there was not only a suggestion of support for the revisionist South African-based thinkers and for the works of internationally acclaimed and recognized revolutionary thinkers, for their research methodologies and for their research foci, he actively encouraged me to read these writers. At the same time, Alexander was, however, deeply critical of another strand of Marxism (here, I recall my conversations with him in the early 1980s, especially his comments about Western Marxism's efforts at diluting revolutionary Marxism into a parliamentary opposition) that was beginning to take shape at liberal and English-language South African universities. A strand of this Marxism was disparagingly called the "structuralist school", or euphemistically called at the time "the Sussex school" of Althusserian/Poulantzian protégés, including South African academics David Kaplan (at the University of Cape Town) and Mike Morris (at the University of Natal), and trade unionist Dave Lewis in Cape Town, who drew their inspiration from the writings of French philosophers Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas, and whose key protagonists were based at the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom. In a refreshing article on the "moment of Western Marxism" in South Africa, Andrew Nash (1999) traces its origins to philosopher-trade unionist Rick Turner and looks at its mutations among especially radical white academics on South African campuses in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Nash concludes: "It was also an opportunity to transform the historical relationship of Marxist theory and working class politics, and overcome the division which allows a dialectical Marxism to flourish in the universities and journals, while working class politics are dominated by the managerialism of Soviet Marxism or social-democracy. The opportunity will not come again without developing an understanding, locally and internationally, of what was lost with the end of the moment of Western Marxism in South Africa" (Nash 1999: 79).

organizational commitments, and in his numerous literary and linguistic propositions and reflections.

A summary and tentative propositions

Alexander's encounters with the ideologues, closet Marxists and radical nationalists in the Unity Movement lasted eight years, from 1953 to 1961, three of which he spent in Germany completing a doctorate on the Silesian-born dramatist, Gerhart Hauptmann. During these years, his political imagination was widened and he developed an appreciation for drama and writing about human drama. As mentioned previously, his penchant for the dramatic was inspired by, among other people, Minnie Gool. It was also through his associate membership of the Teachers' League of South Africa that he learnt and refined his abilities to express himself in the English language, and continue his love for English and German literature that he was introduced to by the Catholic nuns at the school he attended in Cradock, the Holy Rosary Convent. Through the intellectual forums and small debating and reading clubs initiated and run by the Unity Movement in the 1950s, and through his studies at the University of Cape Town, he met Kenneth Abrahams, who came to play an instrumental role in his life, both in terms of the armed struggle in South Africa and in Alexander's role in drawing up the first constitution of the Ovamboland People's Organisation (OPO), which later became Swapo of Namibia.

The policy of non-collaboration developed by the principals of the Unity Movement impacted deeply on Alexander, but unlike his mentors, both in the Non-European Unity Movement and especially in the African People's Democratic Union of Southern Africa, which was founded and led by Isaac Bangani Tabata and Jane Gool, he translated this policy of non-collaboration into a "war of manoeuvre" against the apartheid state. He opted for the strategy of armed struggle to fight apartheid and capitalism, and was convicted by the apartheid state of "conspiracy to commit sabotage" in 1964. He spent ten years on Robben Island.

Armed with Marxist and essentially Eurocentric ideas about nationalism, Alexander entered the prison community in 1964. Here, he was introduced to the political thinking of radical nationalists such as Kwedi Mkalipi from the PAC and Nelson Mandela from the ANC, and the thinking of communists such as Walter Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada and Govan Mbeki. It was in this B-section of single cells that the idea of a Robben Island University was formed. For

Alexander, the experiences with his fellow inmates had multiple meanings, three of which stood out.

First, his debate with Mandela over the question of "race" and nationalism resulted in an acceptance of difference, but it also ensured a life-long estrangement and mistrust between the two men.

Second, the decision to turn the island into a centre of learning, or a "university" by the political prisoners, was accompanied by an adoption of a dialogical method of teaching that approximated Freire's approach to life-long learning. Alexander's island experiences also made him realize that he needed to communicate with others in their mother tongues if he was to have a significant impact as a teacher; and because the island housed and unintentionally brought together people who spoke many different languages in southern Africa (including Namibia), Alexander began to reflect on the language question and his lack of knowledge of particularly African history.

And third, the island also housed the range of political tendencies and movements that sought the overthrow of apartheid through violent means, that is, through armed struggles. For the majority of the politicized prisoner community on Robben Island, this meant that people were prepared to die for their beliefs and for their commitment to overthrow the apartheid state. Expectedly, the political prisoners on Robben Island were strong and determined individuals, and while embracing different ideologies, they were convinced of their own truths and of their lived experiences before they were imprisoned on the island, and a monumental shift in consciousness was required to entertain alternative or oppositional views. In his encounters with the different and diverse political tendencies on the island, Alexander was exposed to and started embracing a *non-sectarianism* that parted ways with the isolationist and exclusivist politics of Unity Movement thinking in the 1950s. Through these experiences, Alexander came to embrace a non-sectarianism that he tried to practise for much of his subsequent and post-prison political life, sometimes successfully and at other times not so successfully.

While he had entered the prison community in 1964 as a Marxist-Leninist, he exited this community with a more determined Marxism that was enriched by his experiences and confrontations with different truths on the island. The synergy with Mandela was about

fighting a common apartheid enemy, but this is where the political similarities between the two men ended. Mandela's insistence on racial categories and indeed his view of the world comprising different "races" did not sit well with Alexander. In prison this difference was treated as a *non-antagonistic* contradiction, but in reality it was indeed a fundamental difference of how a new world was being envisaged by two leaders of two political parties and political movements. While both men agreed on the political quest to have the franchise advocated in national liberation struggles, the content of socioeconomic change they envisaged was worlds apart. For Alexander, this meant that different organizational forms to the nationalist movements were to be built and new strategies for revolutionary activity were to be formulated. It is to these that I now turn.

CHAPTER THREE

Politics, organization, vanguardism and Marxism

Introduction

South African Marxist sociologist and newspaper columnist Ashwin Desai (2013) writes, not without a measure of both admiration and criticism, that Alexander found himself caught between "the stretch and the stitch" in his political and organizational choices after his release from Robben Island in 1974. Desai's sympathetic yet critical reflections on the influence of books on Alexander's life, "particularly the period spent on Robben Island", are pointers to a radical interpretation and re-interpretation of what Alexander read, and the political conclusions he drew from his readings. In his political and literary commentary on Alexander, Desai notes a "change in his style of writing and a possible re-orientation away from building a party, to one of encouraging localised people's power from below". There is much I agree with in Desai's remarks, and there are assumptions on Desai's part that I wish to elaborate and interrogate.

This chapter returns to, in different ways and from different "angles of vision" (Alexander 2014), Alexander's political baptism, and it tracks his interpretations of the writings of Lenin, Trotsky and later on in his literary career particularly Gramsci on political work and its representations in and through political organization.

For Alexander, a sound political strategy necessarily implies a sound theory. After 1979 and on completion of his initial studies on South Africa's national question, non-state and anti-state political forms of resistance came to occupy pride of place in his imagination. These forms of organization were to be created outside the delimitations of traditional movements such as the ANC and the Non-European Unity Movement. These forms also heralded and ushered in his alternative expositions on anti-state civil society organizations (or alternatively called non-governmental organizations) and non-traditionally aligned political formations. Alexander's view was that a political strategy simultaneously implies different organizational

forms of resistance to the politics of the state and to the popular status quo acceptance of traditional liberation organizations. The previous chapter laid out the theoretical constructs he leaned on to construct his political strategy and it summarized the key philosophical and ideological codes of a conceptual map in his evolving ontology. This chapter points to new interpretations of what *politics* might have meant for Alexander.

It starts by sketching the legislative framework that the nationalist movements against oppression, the African National Congress and the Unity Movement, confronted in the 1950s. In developing the theme of human agency and organizational imperatives, I look at notions of a "united front" in national liberation movements as opposed to, or in consonance with, the notions of a revolutionary vanguard party organized along Marxist-Leninist lines. This chapter hopes to throw some light on how Alexander viewed himself as a revolutionary subject participating in "inexorable historical processes" and his own decision-making in the acts of revolt and rebellion he participated in. Of significant concern for Alexander were the schisms that threatened a potentially united and class-conscious liberation movement.

Alexander drew the distinction between what he called *antagonistic* and *non-antagonistic* contradictions in his approach to unity in the national liberation movement. While this distinction was finely attuned to the specific South African situation, and was meant to promote an essential non-sectarianism, I suggest in this chapter that his interpretation of this distinction is historically specific, and that the multiple organizational tensions he encountered could have been avoided if he had the time and the inclination to interrogate, in more substantive ways, the question of difference and of agency between and among human beings. In the political formations in which he worked, such as Apdusa, the Yu Chi Chan Club, the National Liberation Front, the National Forum Committee and the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action, Alexander refined his understanding of the class content of *antagonistic* and *non-antagonistic contradictions*.

Up until about 1976, for Alexander, the "enemy" was apartheid and capitalism. The divide separating the apartheid rulers and the oppressed people was antagonistic. In general, differences among the oppressed people were treated by Alexander as though they were non-antagonistic. The convergence, however, between racial oppression and class exploitation in the development of the South African state meant that the class divide between the haves and

the have-nots suggested a refinement of the notion of antagonistic contradictions, particularly that it be reformulated to reflect the irreconcilability of class positions between workers and capitalists. While Alexander had a deep understanding of organizational theory, his role in organizations tended to be circumscribed by his intellectual interests and his proclivity for a managed consensus, focusing on policy and constitutional issues. He was not overly concerned with the internal alliances of and fissures among individuals populating the organizations in which he was, *de facto*, the leading intellectual participant (in the final chapter, "The imagination of a communist", I offer some explanation about what this has meant and the consequences that this might have had on Alexander's political structures).

Descriptive and analytical insights are provided in tracking his historical journey through the Non-European Unity Movement, in particular in the Teachers' League of South Africa, the African Democratic Union of Southern Africa (Apdusa), and the Yu Chi Chan Club, the National Liberation Front and the South West African People's Organisation (Swapo) of Namibia.

This chapter reflects on Alexander's activist and direction-giving roles in the Yu Chi Chan Club and the National Liberation Front, in the alliance with the Black Consciousness Movement through the National Forum Committee and in the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action. While the Yu Chi Chan Club was specifically created to discuss guerrilla warfare, the National Forum Committee and Wosa were politically initiated to challenge both apartheid and capitalist rule *without the support of an armed wing*.

The 1950s and 1960s

For the incumbent ideologues in the National Party government, the decade of the 1950s started with the enactment in parliament of the Orwellian *Suppression of Communism Act 1950* (South African Parliament 1950). The Act was created to declare the Communist Party of South Africa (later renamed the South African Communist Party) an illegal organization. In its definition of terms, it states:

> (ii) 'communism' means the doctrine of Marxian socialism as expounded by Lenin or Trotsky, the Third Communist International (the Comintern) or the Communist Information Bureau (the Cominform) or any related form of that doctrine expounded or advocated in the

> Union for the promotion of the fundamental principles of that doctrine and includes, in particular, any doctrine or scheme —
>
> (*a*) which aims at the establishment of a despotic system of government based on the dictatorship of the proletariat under which one political organization only is recognized and all other political organizations are suppressed or eliminated; or
>
> …
>
> (*c*) which aims at bringing about any political, industrial, social or economic change within the Union in accordance with the directions or under the guidance of or in co-operation with any foreign government or any foreign or international institution whose purpose or one of whose purposes (professed or otherwise) is to promote the establishment within the Union of any political, industrial, social or economic system identical with or similar to any system in operation in any country which has adopted a system of government such as is described in paragraph (*a*); or
>
> (*d*) which aims at the encouragement of feelings of hostility between the European and non-European races of the Union the consequences of which are calculated to further the achievement of any object referred to in paragraph *(a)* or *(b)* ….

In this remarkable piece of legislation in 1950, the state spelt out its position on communism and the threat it presumably posed as an alternative way of organizing a society. It also outlined its predilection for a harmonious co-existence of the "races" it perceived to be inhabiting the South African social and political space.

This piece of legislation contains many of the words, codes and phrases[1] that came to suggest Alexander's later choice of political and organizational vehicles, and to which I will return later in the study. However, a few initial remarks need to be made. First, after the 1948 electoral victory, the overtly racist National Party government was bent on establishing a Christian-based national state rooted in principles of submission to a deity, and the white man's god was the only one that mattered. On the part of state, this was an earnest and deliberate effort to exclude any secularism. This history has been tracked and adequately recorded by Marxist, liberal and pro-National Party theorists and thinkers (O'Meara 1983;

[1] These codes and phrases include "Marxian socialism", "expounded by Lenin and Trotsky", "dictatorship of the proletariat", "one political organization only is recognized", and "European and non-European races". I will attempt to outline Alexander's approach to these codes and put up for discussion a critique of his positions, especially his understanding of these in relation to the organizations in which he worked.

Nattrass and Terreblanche 1990; Krüger 1969). Second, the government targets specifically the Communist Party of South Africa as one of the biggest political and organizational threats to its rule, and through this ban on its legal activities it sought to limit the party's potential and popular influence. Third, it identifies Lenin and Trotsky as the main theorists in its interpretation of communism, or of Marxian socialism, and specifically refers to the "dictatorship of the proletariat" that both these revolutionaries were known to have been instrumental in establishing between the years 1917 and 1924 in the creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the world's first legally constituted socialist state. And fourth, it places a ban on any doctrine that encourages hostile feelings between the "European and non-European races" in the country.

The South African state was intent on eliminating, through every legal and political means, any possibility of opposition to its rule. Alexander entered organizational politics in 1953 when he joined the Teachers' League of South Africa, an affiliate of the Non-European Unity Movement, where the language of opposition and protest was modified and truncated to such an extent that the state could not accuse the membership of this cultural organization of promoting communism, or any doctrine that is inspired by foreigners. Marxism was considered to be a doctrine inspired by foreigners. The Unity Movement started using codes and concepts that were designed to obfuscate its real intentions, blot out any references to socialism or Marxism, and communicate in a language that was, for the most part, esoteric and often inaccessible. For much of its organizational life in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and indeed into the 1980s, the Unity Movement was unable to shake off the habit of speaking in Eurocentric terms and in inexplicably complicated ways, so much so that this political movement has been criticized for being too intellectual and rarefied. Baruch Hirson (n.d.) writes:

> Many of the leaders who were present at the birth of this movement [the NEUM in 1943] and steered it through its period of activity, were drawn from the pre-war Trotskyist groupings …. They tried to conceal their Marxist background, using a nationalist rhetoric and in the process became nationalist leaders. The concealment of their socialist philosophy left them with a false ideology that dominated the work they undertook, undermined their original vision and led them into unnecessary splits.

Alexander was not immune to this Unity Movement influence and its use of language, almost exclusively in English, in the 1950s. But Alexander was not going to be defined or limited by the "prison-house" of language, and he was to interpret the language used by the founders of "scientific socialism" differently from his mentors in the Unity Movement.

The united front and national liberation

In theory, the Unity Movement was an heir to attempts at uniting the oppressed people of South Africa. Its leading supporters and activists were drawn from the ranks of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), the Lenin Club of the 1930s, the Spartacus Club, the Workers' Party of South Africa, the Anti-Coloured Affairs Department movement, and the All-African Convention (AAC). With the exception of the CPSA, which was founded in 1921, these were groupings established in the 1930s and the 1940s as anti-Stalinist political formations whose politics coincided, in broad terms, with Leon Trotsky's advocacy of socialism, his critiques of the bureaucratization that took place in the Soviet Union after Joseph Stalin installed himself and his colleagues as the heir to Lenin's legacy after Lenin's death in 1924, his definition of the vanguard party and its perceived function in social revolutions, and his commentaries on especially the notion of "permanent revolution".

The African National Congress's Freedom Charter, drawn up in Kliptown in 1955, did not differ substantively from the Unity Movement's "minimum" political programme and its set of demands since 1943, which came to be known as the "Ten-Point Programme" (Non-European Unity Movement 1943; 1945; 1946; 1951). Both were public statements of political intent aimed at asserting a vision of a future South Africa that had a universal franchise, the right to an unqualified vote, as an essential pillar of democracy. In Marxian parlance, these two political programmes were "bourgeois-democratic" documents that did not explicitly posit the possibility of socialism. In brackets, it could be argued that the Freedom Charter was more "socialist" in its intent because of its clause asserting the nationalization[2] of major industries (and because of other clauses too), whereas the "Ten-Point Programme" was somewhat more straightforward in its advocacy for a democracy without racial domination.

[2] Nationalization was understood to mean state owned or belonging to the state, and therefore belonging to "the people". While commonly regarded as part of a Marxist diktat on how to run economies, nationalization strategies have also been used by avowed nationalists to ensure that the proceeds and profits generated by the nationalized industries remain within the nation-state and not relocated elsewhere, mostly to multinational corporations or foreign governments.

Both political movements came to be broad-based national movements rooted in the struggles of the oppressed, and while their political principles may well have coincided, they differed in their respective strategies to mobilize the oppressed. For the ANC, its nationalism was the sum of its understanding of "multiracialism", and therefore its understanding that Africans, coloureds, Indians and whites are different "races" of people who needed separate organizational forms to represent their interests. For the Unity Movement, its "non-racialism" meant "full equality of rights for all citizens, without distinction of race, colour and sex" (Non-European Unity Movement n.d.) and that all people were all part of the human race. Despite its federalism, its political principals, at least in theory, tried to organize its membership drives differently from those implemented by the ANC. To achieve the objectives of these different and yet similar declarations, political organization was considered key by the different strategists in these different sections of the liberation movement. It is now a matter of history that Nelson Mandela (1994) went abroad to garner support for, and initiate the formative groups that later coalesced into Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC.

For the strategists in Unity Movement circles, especially for Tabata in the late 1950s, the idea of forming a tightly knit, disciplined and politically conscious cadre of individuals was attractive. For Alexander, this Leninist reasoning about party political formation provided the impetus for his eventual expulsion from Apdusa.[3] While it is unclear whether discussions about a vanguard party actually took place within the structures of Apdusa and its student wing, the Students of Young Africa (Soya), what is indisputable is that Alexander and Abrahams had decided to discuss the option of armed struggle through the platforms of Apdusa, and this particular topic of conversation separated their group from the senior section of Apdusa led by Tabata, who, according to Abrahams (1990), "just refused to allow any discussion whatsoever". The Yu Chi Chan Club in 1961 was formed as a discussion club. It later changed into the National Liberation Front (NLF) in 1962, and Alexander and Abrahams started positing the possibility of overthrowing the apartheid regime through a combination of armed insurrectionary tactics in the cities and military mobilization in the

[3] While Tabata and his close associate and partner, Jane Gool, were circumspect in their references to Lenin and party political formations, and while I have not been able to find any written evidence about a "tightly knit" political formation, my conversations with Alexander in the early 1980s included discussions about revolutionary parties, and particularly the influence of Apdusa's principals on his (Alexander's) thinking.

countryside, employing techniques of organization not dissimilar to those suggested by Lenin (1902) in his *What is to be done?* and by Mao Zedong's (1932) pronouncements and theses on "people's war". A revolutionary vanguard party, adhering to the principles of democratic centralism[4], could well have been presupposed in the thinking behind the formation of Yu Chi Chan Club (YCCC), but this is difficult to confirm. However, in setting out the background to the verdict in the *State versus Alexander and others* (Historical Papers 2012) case, the presiding judge paraphrased and quoted from documents and pamphlets seized by the South African security police in their raids on the homes of Yu Chi Chan Club members, which confirmed the paramilitary and political nature of Alexander's grouping. The judge's verdict reads:

> In *Exhibit F 2* there appears under the heading – Report of the Executive Meeting held on 16th, 17th and 18th January, 1963, the following:
>
> 'I. Formation and Growth National Liberation Front:

[4] The idea of democratic centralism has been central in the thinking and culture of communist parties, socialist parties, workers parties and national liberation movements such as Mozambique's Frelimo (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique) and Angola's MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola) whose guiding ideology was based on Marxist-Leninist principles. The idea has its origins in Lenin's *What is to be done?* (1902), and it was written when the Russian revolutionary was in exile and under the intense scrutiny of the Tsarist security police. Democratic centralism was formulated by Lenin to allow maximum discussion and disagreement within the ranks of Russia's Social Democratic Party, the forerunner of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolshevik Party), of which he was the principal theoretician and leader. However, once an idea was presumably thoroughly discussed, Lenin argued, and a conclusion or a synthesis was reached, all members of the political party, including the members who disagreed, would carry out the resolutions that emerged from the deliberations. This organizing principle was seldom explicitly acknowledged in the South African liberation movement that included the ANC, the PAC of Azania and the NEUM, and yet all the principals of these organizations were party and privy to structures that were modelled along the lines of democratic centralism. Alexander and his group in the Yu Chi Chan Club could not be explicit about their use of this organizing principle, but in the records of his trial and those of his comrades, the "cell" structure of its formations and the way decisions were taken by the YCCC are reminiscent of the type of political structure Lenin had advocated. This way of organizing political parties, especially parties proclaiming allegiance to Marxism or to any one of its contemporary variations, has come under scrutiny. In what came to be a fundamental criticism of communist parties, the "democratic centralism" that Lenin advocated as an organizing principle for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was elevated by Joseph Stalin and his followers to an organizational decree that allows a single leader the power to determine the policies and the roll-out of organizational decisions. Critics and sympathizers of communism have argued that the "democratic centralism" of Lenin inevitably leads to a "bureaucratic centralism" because personal loyalties are developed and sustained with particular individuals in the organization's hierarchy, and loyalties to arguments and discussions become lost in the unavoidable fracas ordinarily associated with individuals and their personal interests. In this critique of centralism, the critics are probably right and new forms of organizations have mushroomed. The radical and socialist women's movements have been particularly vocal in their criticism of essentially "male-dominated" political structures and they have been marginally successful in campaigns for transparency and accountability in political work of mass-based and civic movements.

1. The Y.C.C.C. was formed in April 1962 with a membership of 5.
2. The aim of the club is to introduce the idea and the techniques of armed insurrection into the national liberatory struggle in South Africa.
3. The name by which our nation-wide organisation is to be known is the National Liberatory [Liberation] Front ….

II. Our relationship with Local and Overseas Organisations:

Note: (a) the N.L.F. is a para-military organisation – its aims are both military and political.

(b) we accept into our organisation all those who are trustworthy and convinced opponents of the Herrenvolk Government and accept the policy of armed insurrection.'

Again, these "Minutes", and on the advice of the lawyers representing Alexander and other trialists, have been attributed to Kenneth Abrahams. While there is speculation about the authorship of some pamphlets, and the writing up of the above sections of the "Minutes" published in *Liberation Volume 1 Number 1*, the official mouthpiece of the National Liberation Front, Alexander's hand in drafting the documents is difficult to challenge.[5] Authorship was "blamed" on Abrahams, which he has not contested, but the strategic decision to adopt the armed struggle as a policy was both Alexander's and Abrahams's assessment of what "needs to be done" to oppose apartheid. According to the judge, some members of the NLF objected to this formulation of the aims of the organization, and Abrahams, who was not at the trial and who had already fled the country, had apparently rephrased the aims of the organization. The verdict continues:

Dr. Abrahams … agreed to have as its aims and objects (a) the study of political matters and (b) the popularising of the united front in the liberatory movement.

These reformulated aims were then the diluted public expressions of the NLF's commitment to the armed struggle and guerrilla warfare against the apartheid state. A broad commitment to study political issues was combined with the desire to build unity, and pointedly a *united*

[5] In the political circles associated with the Unity Movement in the 1940s, the 1950s, the 1960s and the 1970s, anonymity of authorship was common practice. Two reasons were unofficially provided for this anonymity: first, the repression of political opposition meant that activists were under police surveillance, and while this may well have been true, Unity Movement theoreticians used this as a ruse to hide people's true identities; second, through not identifying the real names of people and by not attributing the authorship of documents to particular individuals, the Unity Movement implied that the documents published under its name were the result or the product of collective efforts.

front, a concept that Alexander returns to in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was the guise for him and his comrades to build a paramilitary organization, perhaps even along the lines of a vanguard party. Here, I suspect, the "soldier-actor" was convinced that a "people's war", a "long march", was inevitable, combining political objectives with strategies of war. Together with Marcus Solomon, Elizabeth van der Heyden and Fikile Charles Bam, Alexander had developed a Leninist position on party political formations, with an embrace of the need to embark on the armed struggle.

His incarceration meant that he was removed from society and that he was unable to provide continuity for the ideas he and Abrahams had canvassed through the YCCC and the NLF. While the ideas of armed units persisted and were developed by other armed sections in the broader liberation movement at the time, Alexander's initial thoughts about professionalizing the defensive armed positions of the oppressed did not come to fruition. The decision and the call to arms were not, as Alexander later self-critically suggested and not without his inimitable sense of humour, "an accident waiting to happen" (University of California Press n.d.; also in Villa-Vicencio 1996):

> We were very inexperienced, very green. We had no mature or older people to caution us against certain excesses. We had no military tradition, no conspiracy tradition, no knowledge of secret work. We learned from scratch; literally from encyclopedias. We were an accident waiting to happen! Some of us were arrested and went to prison. Some of our people went into exile, one or two were killed and our structures were destroyed.

Instead, the contradictions and ambiguities of national liberation were beginning to gather momentum.

For Alexander and his fellow Marxists, the idea of national liberation was not only about achieving independence from colonial and foreign rule, it was also directed at achieving political freedoms denied by indigenous oppressors. In the South African case, the quest for national liberation was also a quest for national unification, and it was directed against a governing white Afrikaner bloc of people, representing a growing Afrikaner bourgeoisie, and white middle class and working class interests. At the same time, in this quest for national unification, I argue that nations, while they may have a national identity or at least have

identifiable national symbols, need to be destroyed or at least transcended if an internationalism is indeed an objective in the Marxian quest[6].

Alexander was well-versed in Lenin's (1971) and Marx's (1970) views on nations. Through the pamphlets and brochures produced by the NLF, he presented an outline of his initial thoughts on how to build a national identity. Since petitions and written declarations were not going to force the white ruling elites to change and grant full citizenships to the black people they governed, Alexander and his cohorts came to the conclusion that the armed struggle would be the only way to tip the proverbial scales in favour of the oppressed. Building a nation through the "barrel of a gun" was not only a necessary option to engage the enemy, but the only option, and the bourgeois-democratic limits and horizons[7] of Apdusa and of the NEUM, the undisguised nationalism of the African National Congress and the Africanism of the PAC of Azania were simply not broad enough to shoulder the *historic* mission of urban workers and rural proletarians or peasants, Alexander and the NLF argued.

In the early 1960s, Alexander, together with close comrades Kenneth Abrahams, Marcus Solomon and Fikile Bam, had created a discussion forum and then a liberation front, the YCCC and then the NLF, thoughtfully crafting its mandates, its policies and its organizational structure to reflect both their analysis of what needed to be done in relation to the politics of national liberation, and their deeply held beliefs about what it means to be human. Their sense of humanity was characterized by their struggles for the right to vote for a government, the right to live in peace with one's neighbours, the right to love and to be loved by people without the absurd Hitlerian restrictions of presumed racial superiorities, and

[6] One of the paradoxes of classical Marxism is that its adherents advocate an internationalism and simultaneously they posit a theory of anti-colonial or radical nationalism. This conflictual or contradictory position has deep roots in Marxist theory, starting with Marx himself. However, the pioneering works of Benedict Anderson (1983; 1991; 2006) and the appeals and speeches of Samora Machel (n.d., as referenced in No Sizwe 1979) and of Amilcar Cabral (2008) attest to an expanding body of literature and thought that questions the formalistic and often restrictive definitions of nationalism and nationhood advocated by Marx, Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin.

[7] These bourgeois limits have their origins in the Cromwellian bourgeois-democratic revolution in the 17th century and the French revolution of the 18th century. The attainment of a universal franchise was an end in itself, and these revolutions sought to dislodge aristocratic rule, and put in charge of the state the emerging organized owners of capital who were not averse to employing labour to make a profit. E.P. Thompson's *The making of the English working class* (1991), Karl Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* (1999) and E.J. Hobsbawm's *The age of revolution 1789–1848* (1977) capture both the brutality and wonder of early capitalist development.

the right to have unfettered access to basic human amenities such as water, food and decent sanitation.

Despite the small constituencies in which he moved and promoted his thoughts, Alexander's belief in the eventual popular acceptance of his visions of the future was not at issue. For him, the organization implied in the belief that "the people" would eventually accept his visions was to be a *political structure*, and he stuck to this for much of his adult life, weaving unwittingly between notions of a "liberation movement" and notions of a "liberation organization" and/or a "political party". But, I argue, movements and organizations develop lives of their own, and often debilitating dramas of their own[8].

Incarceration, however, meant practically suspending the realities of both "movement" and "organization" in his life, or, to put it differently, these concepts took on different meanings on Robben Island. While loyalties to political organizations (the ANC, Apdusa, the NLF, the PAC) were accepted and presupposed in the communications among political prisoners, the complex clusters of affiliations and loyalties that Robben Island political prisoners had brought with them to the island meant that new alignments were necessary and imperative to parry and cope with the lived experience of Alexander's new and imposed community of fellow prisoners. Presumed and understood loyalties were implicit in the way political prisoners addressed one another, and there was a defined line of division between political prisoners and common criminals who were kept in F-section on the island.

The political prisoners were on Robben Island because they opposed apartheid. Some were trained guerrillas and others were political commissars or activists who initiated and supported the armed struggle against the apartheid state. In more ways than one, they were united against one enemy even though they differed in their analyses of South African society and the organizational methods that were to be used to overthrow apartheid.

It was on the island that Alexander was introduced to and came to appreciate the value of *non-sectarianism* in a national liberation movement, but, at the same time, he was also a

[8] I elaborate on this in my assessment of his approach to conflicts in political organization, and especially on the management of *difference* within political organizations whose self-proclaimed and guiding philosophy is lodged in the writings of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky and Gramsci.

product of the interminable and often debilitating fights and conflicts that characterized much of his earlier political experiences in Apdusa[9].

His position was a reluctant but a necessary embrace of political and humanitarian non-sectarianism that only effectively unfolded much later on in his political work, but whose seeds were planted in his experiences of multiple political tendencies and the need to work together with these tendencies on Robben Island. He understood that relationships were, in the first instance, about people, and that one's station in life is fundamentally determined through and by other people, what South African cleric Desmond Tutu has aptly described as "ubuntu", and what Alexander has embraced without its "folklorist content" (Alexander 2013).

Robben Island, despite or even because of its brutality, provided Alexander with lessons that he has carried with him and that he has incorporated into his visions of a new South Africa. He says (Alexander 1996: 14):

> To get to grips with oneself and to take other people seriously, necessarily involves relationships. Robben Island was a kind of hot house where things happened with intensity. Some deep personal relations were forged there, and some serious and deeply-based differences emerged. In that kind of situation it was necessary to learn to say: 'I am sorry' or to say, 'I was wrong' without feeling humiliated. That is something one has to learn, it does not come naturally. It has to do with the Napoleonic thing: 'You can only command if you can obey'. Truth, honesty and integrity must be the measure of all debate and all relationships – against these we must judge ourselves in the same way that we expect others to be measured by them.

[9] Robin Kayser provides a sympathetic account of Apdusa's origins in a dissertation titled "Land and liberty! The Unity movement and the land question, 1933–1976" (Kayser n.d.: 114–144). In Kayser's view, the "core leadership" of the Non-European Unity Movement, which included Tabata and Jane Gool, wanted the movement to engage popular mass action and take the "qualitative leap" into revolutionary activity: "The origin of APDUSA is traceable to the convergence of a number of factors in the late 1950s / early 1960s. One factor that prompted the creation of APDUSA was the organisational split that occurred within the NEUM in 1958. The split occurred when a faction within the NEUM grouped around Ben Kies and Hosea Jaffe, largely located in the Anti-CAD broke away from the Tabata group, organised mainly in the AAC and ASC. This split was fundamentally the resolution to a struggle that had raged in the NEUM from the mid-1950s. The Kies-Jaffe group, intimidated by the brutality of the Apartheid government, wanted to withdraw from mass political struggle. The Tabata group, however, were determined to press on with organising the oppressed population and believed the time had come to take a 'qualitative leap' into revolutionary activity" (Kayser n.d.: 115).

The 1970s: "Azanian moments" and *One Azania, one nation*

In 1974 Alexander emerged from Robben Island a changed man, less dogmatic but still a convinced Marxist. On the one hand, the proximities and close associations with his fellow inmates in B-section on the island had instilled in the 38-year-old activist intellectual a desire to study African history, to study languages, to study specific anti-colonial struggles, and to embrace an appreciation of "antagonistic" and "non-antagonistic" contradictions, both in South African society and in its liberation movement. On the other hand, his encounters with Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela had not resulted in an embrace of Congress (African National Congress) political positions. He was less severe in his responses to working with other political traditions, and his focus transmogrified into an orientation towards the advocacy of a national liberation movement and the need to build a *united front.*

A new look at Marxist theory as applied to South African society and a reinterpretation of the "class analysis" needed to lay the foundations of a radical social theory for the lead actors in the revolution being planned and "spontaneously" unfolding in what he considered to be a South African cauldron, and potentially new alliances and regroupings were beckoning.

In the 1970s Marxist and liberal scholarship on South Africa's economic, political and educational "sites" of struggle shared a common home. Their philosophical lines of enquiry emanated mainly from white English-language universities. The "white universities" included the University of Cape Town where the academic space was shared by Marxists such as Dave Kaplan, Ian Phimister and the free enterprise warriors such as Brian Kantor and Robert Schrire; the University of Natal where liberal economist Jill Nattrass rubbed academic shoulders with radical left-wing sociologist Fatima Meer, Marxists Mike Morris and Yunus Carrim; and the University of Witwatersrand where Marxist historians Belinda Bozzoli and Charles van Onselen, radical politics lecturer Sheila Meintjies, left-wing educationist Linda Chisholm and left-wing historian Tom Lodge, were in perennial intellectual disputes. The Marxists, together with historians Shula Marks, Stanley Trapido and William Beinart, initiated what came to be the "revisionist school of Marxist history" in South Africa. They framed the ideological propositions for a "history from below" within the Academy.

Even though he was put under house arrest in 1974, the "banned"[10] Alexander was keen to regroup, analyse and capture the momentous events of the 1970s, especially the strategic possibilities opened up through the student struggles and uprisings of 1976 and 1977.[11]

Many years later, in a chapter titled "Azanian moments and meanings", he reflects on the genesis of these new alignments (Alexander 2013: 25):

> In the early 1950s, a short pamphlet by the Chinese Communist Party leader Li Shao-chi, entitled *How to Handle Contradictions among the People*, was very popular in radical circles and it had a strong influence on my own thinking. *Its thrust was that it is essential to recognise whether specific contradictions are antagonistic or non-antagonistic* [my italics], since this will determine one's strategy and tactics. This is the reason why it was possible for the political groups and organisations of which I was a member to work closely at many different levels with the BCM [Black Consciousness Movement].
>
> When we emerged from Robben Island in April 1974, we had no knowledge at all of the BCM. Though under house arrest, which was the fate of all released political prisoners at the time, we immediately set about regrouping, and contacted those of our organisation or persuasion who had survived the waves of repression of the early 1960s, in order to arrive at an understanding of the political dynamics in the country at a time when Frelimo in Mozambique and the MPLA in Angola were rapidly liberating these former Portuguese colonies in southern Africa, and having a tangible influence on people's spirits and their willingness to engage politically …. Like other graduates of Robben Island University from diverse political backgrounds, we began engaging these activists, many of whom had approached us to join them in the study of political theory and South African and African history …. All of us knew that we differed on grounds of philosophical orientation and

[10] The apartheid government released Alexander from prison in 1974. His movements were proscribed and he was allowed to be in the company of only one person at any time. He was also not allowed to pursue any political activity for five years. Effectively, the ex-political prisoner remained a "charge of the state" until 1979, when the banning order was lifted.

[11] In some of my readings in his archive at the University of Cape Town, I came across some newspaper clippings and popular pamphlets relating to this period. I have, also, my recollections of the time and they tend to correspond with Alexander's primary source material. Even though the period was under-reported for the oppressed people, popular perceptions of a growing anti-establishment political awareness were beginning to take root. He saw himself contributing to an expanding and exploding radicalism and he was intent on exploring theoretical works to refine liberation theory and propose alliances and platforms to advance the cause of his interpretation of socialism.

> political strategy, but it was on our common understanding of the need for a *united front* [my italics] that made us explore together the possibilities of joint action.

For Alexander and his close associates, including socialist lawyer Fikile Bam, who later became a Land Commissioner in the post-1994 democratic government, how to resolve contradictions was a key to unlocking the wonders of dialectical reasoning and was a pillar in their approach to analyse societies using the techniques of historical materialism. These "Azanian moments" were, for Alexander, critical to his embrace of the social movement that buoyed black consciousness activists, and they go a considerable distance in explaining the reasons behind his decision to work closely with these people in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. Despite the differences in philosophy and political positions, Alexander was intent on ironing out the *non-antagonistic* contradictions with the BCM and its leading proponents, Steve Biko and Peter Jones[12], and later Saths Cooper and Lybon Mabasa. This involved developing a common political vision and implementing a joint programme of action.

But his own history in the Unity Movement was snapping at his heels, and he succumbed to the very sectarianism he had learnt to oppose on Robben Island. Not surprisingly, and not through lack of trying, Alexander's explicit appeals to the Congress Movement, as the ANC was called, fell on mute and suspicious ears. The ANC and the South African Communist

[12] Steve Bantu Biko is the acknowledged leader and theoretician of the Black Consciousness Movement and its different incarnations in the 1970s and the 1980s. In 1968, Biko had split from the National Union of South African Students (Nusas) and formed the South African Students Organisation (Saso). These were the initial stirrings of the Black Consciousness Movement that came to dominate especially black university student thinking in the 1970s. Peter Jones was a Western Cape black consciousness activist and a close political ally and confidant of Biko. For a description of this movement and its self-awareness programmes, see Motlhabi (1984), and for an analysis of the then emerging class positions of the BCM, see Nolutshungu (1982). Alexander never met Biko, and in reflecting on his "Azanian moments", Alexander (2013: 23) writes: "I never met Steve Biko, even though I had ample opportunity to do so at one of the turning points in contemporary South African history." The "ample opportunity" was one of the most unfortunate sagas in Alexander's non-relationship with Biko and his association with the BCM. Biko, accompanied by Peter Jones, had apparently travelled from the Eastern Cape to meet with Alexander at his home in Lotus River. He waited outside in a car and when he realized that Alexander was not going to meet him, he travelled back to King Williamstown in the Eastern Cape, and he was intercepted by the South African security police en route. Biko had apparently wanted to discuss the formation of a united front to oppose the apartheid regime, which would have included the existing armed wings of the ANC and the PAC. Alexander says that he did not meet Biko because he had no mandate from the National Liberation Front to do so, and for security reasons. This explanation given by Alexander has been criticized by some people who were close to Biko at the time. I do not have a position on this because I have neither discussed it with Alexander nor have I discussed it with the people who have voiced their criticism of Alexander's decision not to see Biko.

Party[13] were suspicious of Alexander's moves to create a united front, and the main theoreticians in the Congress Movement cautiously tracked Alexander's and the BCM's efforts at national unification, and then consciously decided not to be included in their proposed realignments. The Congress leadership had already decided that an internal, mass-based movement was on the cards, and threw their weight behind the United Democratic Front (UDF), which was launched in August 1983, soon after Alexander's Cape Action League, the BCM (principally the Azanian People's Organisation) and the Council of Unions of South Africa launched their National Forum Committee (NFC).

One Azania, one nation in 1979 became the theoretical line of divide between Alexander and the BCM on the one hand, and the range of Congress groupings that coalesced later on in the UDF on the other. Alexander's search for a broader constituency to receive and work with his thoughts about the national question was partly found in the movement generated by black consciousness activists and a few circles of independent Marxists formed out of the multiple working class struggles initiated by an increasingly organized trade union movement of the 1970s. While this intended marriage between Alexander's Marxism, what Pallo Jordan[14]

[13] While not explicitly mentioning Alexander by name, the ANC and the SACP criticized the emergence of the "ultra-left" or the re-emergence of the Trotskyists inside the liberation movement. Apart from the fact that Alexander was *not* a Trotskyist, the references in their mouthpieces, *Mayibuye* (from the mid-1980s, this journal was edited by Peter Mayibuye, the pseudonym that former government spokesperson Joel Netshitenzhe used in exile) and the *African Communist*, to describe political tendencies they considered to be a threat to their perceived political hegemony in the liberation struggle, contributed to the sectarian posturing and exclusivist groupings that evolved in the 1980s in South Africa. Alexander was a target of often virulent attacks and reckless character assassinations by the authors and editors of these journals. "Independent socialists" organizing in the left-wing trade union movement also came under the hostile scrutiny of the editors of these ANC and SACP journals. For additional insights into and commentary on the tensions marking some of the main trends in "black politics" in the 1970s and the 1980s, the works of Lodge and Nasson (1992), Seekings (2000) and Suttner (2004) are useful.

[14] There is a misconception about Alexander. He has been labelled a Trotskyist, or even less complementarily, an "ultra-leftist". Former prominent ANC theoretician and self-proclaimed socialist Pallo Jordan (1991) provided the following description of Alexander and the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action (Wosa): "Since the mid 1980's the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action (Wosa) led by Neville Alexander, has provided a political home for those Trotskyists operating outside the Charterist camp, while the so-called 'Marxist Workers' Tendency' has been the rallying point within it." My response to Jordan's claims is both anecdotal and historical. In my initial five years (1981 to 1985) of close encounters and then 25 years of occasional and chance meetings with the man, I have never heard Alexander once describe himself as a Trotskyist. On one occasion *en route* to the South African Committee for Higher Education (Sached), where we both worked in 1982/3, I said to him that I was becoming increasingly fascinated with Leon Trotsky's writings. I wanted Alexander to put a label on his philosophical inclinations and ideological choices, and my somewhat naïve intention was to elicit an explicit ideological response from Alexander. His response was unexpected. I suspect he decided to humour me instead and he laced his humour with the characteristic insights that I admired about him. He said: "I can't describe myself as a Trotskyist, but there's a lot of good in what Leon

(1991) has incorrectly described as Alexander's Trotskyism, and the radical nationalism of black consciousness activists has been the subject of debate and controversy within the non-ANC socialist movement in South Africa for many years, including unwarranted speculations about his political intent, what cannot be disputed is that the alliance between Alexander and the BC movement has had far-reaching political implications in the lives of many activists who came to align themselves with Alexander's positions. I was one of the people[15] who became a part of his Marxist groupings and I worked in the political "cells" created in the early 1980s.

Alexander's 1979 book came to be the base document for his subsequent political strategy and it was used as a source of ideas by some of the leading proponents of an alliance with the BCM. *One Azania, one nation* was Alexander's undisclosed and evolving political testament and it provided many key concepts that have influenced my imagination for a large part of my adult life. Among these ideas are his detailed and substantive refutation of the notion of "race" in constructing an image of humanity, his sociological interpretation of the nexus between class and "race", his experimentation with the notion of colour-caste (1979: 141) as an alternative way to describe the different population registration groups (Africans, Coloureds, Indians and Whites) in South Africa, and his understanding of the elements that make up a national liberation movement. While different political and civil organizations, founded on the concept of liberation, of the oppressed people made up Alexander's "national liberation movement" – and these included the ANC, the PAC, Azapo and the Unity Movement – he critically acknowledges the dominant role played by the ANC (2013: 3):

> There has been at work a mole of history of a special kind. It is a species of rodent that seems to be more myopic and blinkered than your common or garden mole. Whether intended or

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Trotsky had to say." His admiration for Trotsky's political *élan* was unquestionable, but he was not, as Jordan implies, a card-carrying advocate of Trotskyism, even though Alexander had met Leon Trotsky's wife, Natalia Sedova, in Paris in the early 1960s.

[15] In Cape Town, the younger people around Alexander at the time included Derrick Naidoo, Rita Edwards, Mercia Andrews, Ri'aad Dollie, Nicole (Nicky) van Driel, Ashley du Plooy, Fasiega Arendse, Pumezo Lupuwana, Brian Hotz, Maria van Driel, Cecil Prinsloo, Crain Soudien, Greg Hussey, Armien Abrahams, Amelia Abrahams, Venetia Naidoo and me. Marcus Solomon, who was jailed with Alexander for his involvement in the Yu Chi Chan Club and in the National Liberation Front in the early 1960s, was also connected to this group in Cape Town through the non-governmental anti-apartheid educational organization, Sached Trust, and Mandla Seleoane, who was and has remained critical of Alexander's political positions, was on the fringes. In Johannesburg, Salim Vally came to be a close ally and comrade and who, especially after the launch of the National Forum Committee in June 1983, worked alongside Alexander until he passed away in 2012.

> not, one of the most reprehensible outcomes of its burrowing and sniffing around has been the virtual blocking of all channels of memory that do not relate in one way or another to the historic activities of the Congress Movement. In order not to be understood, or more likely, misrepresented, it is essential that I make it clear that the struggle for national liberation in South Africa was, and is, a multifaceted process in which the African National Congress (ANC) and its allies came to play a dominant and even hegemonic role.

In *One Azania, one nation*, Alexander sets about discussing his own political reflexivities[16]. He composes a chronicle of ideas outlining a ruling class's theory of nationality, and counterposes this with a historical record and an interpretation of nationality as proposed by the leading theorists of national liberation and class emancipation. He does so as an actor in an unfolding revolution and as a political theorist who is charged with the onerous responsibility of providing accurate testimony of the course of events making up a historical record. In participating in the making of history, he analyses what that history is, using the tools, the cross-referencing and the checking techniques employed in the Academy to ensure that his written words are able to withstand the expected academic and political interrogation required of, and implicit in sound research practices.

Alexander's expressed political and educational mission was to challenge the theories of nationalities proposed by National Party ideologues, and to expose the fault lines of the theories of nation building in South African national liberation movements. He discovered that, in this bifurcated survey of the national question in South Africa, the acceptance of "race" as a biological fact is prevalent in both the ruling class's and oppressed classes' common sense understanding of humanity, and he set about refuting the claim that the divisions in humanity can be attributed to a conventional wisdom that shades of colour imply different genetic or racial origins. Instead, he argued that the different population registration groups need to be viewed as "colour-castes" whose genealogies need to be tracked alongside their formation as classes. He argued that any attempt to separate the *political economy* into

[16] My discussion of Alexander's "reflexivities" is not limited to a binary interpretation of causes and effects. I extend the formalistic definition of reflexivity by including reflections of the "self" and putting into sharp contrast one's own beliefs alongside and against those of the organization(s) to which one belongs. In Alexander's case, while he acknowledged the need for a negation or a destruction of status quo views about the nation, he also identified the areas of theoretical concern within the liberation movement's understanding of the theory of nationality, and he was prepared to discuss these. In many of his elaborate arguments, he often, and I suspect wittingly and sometimes unwittingly, argues against himself and against the intellectual traditions that fed him.

two branches could be catastrophic, and he urged theorists to view it as a single discipline and a single practice.

Politically, Alexander was keen to develop a *strategy* of revolution that was based on a sound *theory* of society whose main features were marked by "colour and class" (Legassick 1985; Simons 1983). Alexander writes (No Sizwe 1979: 3):

> Strategy necessarily implies a theory. At a certain point, however, it becomes necessary for the very implementation of a strategy that the theory behind it be articulated explicitly. This book has tried to do precisely this because I felt that this point has been reached by the movement for national liberation in South Africa. It becomes daily more obvious that, unless this theoretical-historical task is initiated, the movement must continue to suffer one strategic defeat after another.

For the most part, he succeeded in positing a different way to view and to analyse society, but his propositions fell on deaf or unresponsive ears, or they became hidden in the interstices of left-wing sociological theory. Their silence in the world of the Academy poses the fundamental question of accessibility and education.

Alexander wrote the book with at least the partial knowledge that it would not be read by many people. Political elites in the liberation movement would undoubtedly study the work, and sociologists may have been tempted to read it.[17] He clearly wanted to influence the thinking of the main strategists in the liberation movement, but he did so didactically, and certainly polemically, with a mind-set that was uncompromising in its critique of the radical nationalisms of the ANC, the PAC and the Unity Movement. If his intention was to build a constituency around his ideas, he has succeeded only in very limited ways, and perceptions about his contributions to revolutionary activism have ranged from an acknowledgement of his theoretical abilities to a benign acceptance of his struggle credentials and a distant tolerance of his views.

What then drove Alexander to write this book?

[17] Among the critics of No Sizwe's book was the anti-colonial and political theorist Ambalavaner Sivanandan whose "Race, class and caste in South Africa: An open letter to No Sizwe" (Sivanandan 1981) provided a critical assessment of the race-class problematic.

The answers to this question are not straightforward. The publicly expressed rationale has been stated by Alexander himself[18], and for the historical record, it is still a part of the story that needs to be told. My view is that he was genuinely concerned about the divisions in the liberation movement, and he was convinced that the traditional movements, mostly the ANC, were leading the country's oppressed people into a negotiated "class compromise".

Working within the structures of the ANC or within those of the SACP was not an option for Alexander. Moreover, he viewed the student whirlwind of 1976 to 1978 as a turning point in the unfolding revolution in South Africa, and he set out, in his 1979 rendition of the national question, the key political co-ordinates he thought should guide the thinking of the leading strategists and activists in the impending social revolution. *One Azania, one nation* was not simply a negation of dominant theories of nationalities, but a proposition as to how to go about building a new nation, problematical as this concept may well have been for Alexander.

The 1980s: The National Forum Committee

As a direct result of the mass insurgencies of the 1970s, especially the student uprisings in 1976, the racist utopia envisaged by the National Party's forebears was threatened. Reform of the system of racial capitalism had become unavoidable. To this end, the apartheid government was keen to expand the system of exclusive franchise awarded to white people to those they perceived and classified to be Coloureds and Indians. The Wiehahn-Riekert[19] report of 1979 opened the way for the National Party to introduce legislation that eventually resulted in the so-called Koornhof Bills and the creation of a President's Council. These moves on the part of the state were aimed at creating a buffer layer of middle class appointees among the oppressed people, a class of political collaborators that would make its policies more palatable to middle class and working class black people.

[18] On the back cover of *One Azania, one nation*, he mentions his experiences on Robben Island and alludes to his role in the liberation struggle: "[On Robben Island] I was able to discuss with people who by word and deed have influenced the form and content of the National Question in South Africa. My abiding passion is the unity of the oppressed people. When I contemplate the recent history of Southern Africa, I consider it the duty of every revolutionary to give continuous attention to the question of national unity of the black working class and their class allies."

[19] The Wiehahn Commission was created by the apartheid government after the waves of strikes in 1973 and and the Soweto uprising of 1976. The commission recommended that black trade unions be legally recognized and that statutory job reservation be abolished.

In 1981 in Cape Town, Alexander was appointed Western Cape director of the South African Committee for Higher Education[20] (Sached), a non-governmental organization (NGO). He was also a part-time lecturer in sociology at the University of Cape Town, and he was registered for a doctorate in sociology, which he did not subsequently complete because of the pressures of Sached work that he had taken on (The Neville Alexander Papers 1980–1981).

As a public educational organization, Sached attracted students, high school teachers and mostly left-wing university academics to its modest Mowbray office in Cape Town. Alexander turned it into a centre of political agitation, scholarly research and activist thinking. Alongside his strategic and public function in Sached, which he inherited from the previous director, Lindy Wilson, he participated in the political underground and started multiple Marxist reading groups, whose collective brief was to debate and create platforms and programmes of action to understand the contradictions of South African society. He steered these groups to oppose the apartheid regime. In these reading groups, literature about political organization, about the armed struggle, about the "nature" of the revolutionary movement and what it means to be on the side of oppressed people, was the bread and butter of the political activism initiated by him.

Participation in these reading groups meant a firm commitment to the overthrow of the apartheid state, and while the armed struggle was not ever discussed in minute detail, there was a conspiratorial acceptance that it was one of the methods to be used in the fight against oppression and exploitation. Through Sached and through the underground political cells and reading groups, Alexander expanded his range of political influence and his networks of resistance among young and old alike.[21] At this point, in 1981 and 1982, he had modified his position on the armed struggle. While not publicly opposing its significance as a propaganda

[20] The South African Committee for Higher Education (Sached) was formed in 1959 in response to the apartheid government's decision to pass legislation formally barring black students entry to white universities. The legislation was *The Extension of University Education Act*.

[21] My recollection is that as young people around Alexander, while we danced to the tunes and rhythms of Bob Marley and Peter Tosh, and while we desperately tried to fit in with the soft sounds of the jazz artists in Cape Town, we lived our lives as political animals. Alexander trained and urged us in these reading groups to be circumspect about what we said in public about our political affiliations, even though this did not always work out in smooth ways. He also urged us not to smoke marijuana, and in this exhortation he was singularly unsuccessful. Our principal enemy was the apartheid-capitalist state but we also made many enemies outside our immediate circles, and the Congress youth were particularly antagonistic towards the "Azanian tendency" of which we were a part.

tool in opposing the excesses of the apartheid state, he started focusing on the "internal" and mass insurrectionary tactics of civil protest suggested by Gramsci (1971) and Luxemburg (1986). His logic seems to suggest that the armed struggle, despite its marginal successes in South Africa, could only have been a complementary and subordinate revolutionary tactic to the civic struggles of ordinary people, ever since it "failed" to overthrow the apartheid state (Alexander 1993: 46–47):

> The armed struggle that was launched in 1961 by the forces of liberation against the apartheid-capitalist system has failed insofar as it ever was its military objective to overthrow the South African state …. As part of an ensemble of political tactics formulated, or sometimes arrived at, by the liberation movement, however, the armed struggle had definite successes in that it forced the ruling class generally and the NP [National Party] government in particular into accepting the need to reform the system by restructuring the economy and the society within certain definite limits.

Alexander turned to exploring the potential of mass insurrectionary politics. The Cape Action League, an alliance of mainly civic and youth organizations, was formed after the Disorderly Bills Action Committee was created in August 1982 to oppose the creation of a president's council and the Koornhof Bills. The League brought together activists from the black consciousness movement, socialist groupings and initially from the mainly independent and pro-Charterist trade union movement. Alongside these moves in the Western Cape, the Azanian People's Organisation (Azapo) sent a delegation to tour the country to assess the political situation. After a number of meetings with the Cape Action League, of which Alexander was the main mover and theoretician, the Azapo delegation, including Saths Cooper and Lybon Mabasa, agreed to ask the organization's general council to "consider launching a national campaign against these proposals and bills" (Alexander 1994: 200). Alexander continues:

> These discussions [between the Cape Action League and Azapo] were the seed from which the national forum grew. The Azapo general council resolved to create a committee which would call a national forum together in order to take stock of the situation of the oppressed people of South Africa and to give coherent direction to the people's struggle in view of the 'reformist' moves of the Botha regime. In the course of the next two months, prominent individuals, who represented significant or influential constituencies among the oppressed,

> were invited to constitute the national forum committee. In light of subsequent developments, it is pertinent to recall that men who later played a decisive role in the United Democratic Front (UDF), such as Bishop Tutu and Reverend Boesak, were willing and enthusiastic founding members of the NFC [National Forum Committee]. (Alexander 1994: 200)

The National Forum Committee was formed in June 1983. It brought together radical middle class political groupings such as Azapo, the overtly socialist-leaning Cape Action League, explicitly socialist organizations such as Action Youth, and trade union activists from the Council of Unions of South Africa. The forum folded after the elections for a tricameral parliament were held in August 1984.

Alexander's interest in the black consciousness movement was political. Presumably, he had identified that the whirlwind stoking the fires of popular dissent in the 1970s, especially the student revolts, had the markings of a potentially revolutionary and radical intelligentsia, a potentially anti-capitalist middle class that would throw its lot in with the black working class if or when a challenge for state power arose. My view is that Alexander had these strategic calculations in mind when he mobilized his Marxist groups and the Cape Action League in Cape Town to support the launch of the National Forum Committee in 1983. Alexander and the leadership of Azapo, especially Cooper and Mabasa, decided that the new constitutional dispensation of the National Party government to include "Coloureds" and "Indians" in a "tricameral" arrangement was an enterprise doomed to fail and a good rallying point to mobilize the oppressed people.

For the leading political principals in the National Forum Committee, especially for Alexander, non-racialism and the struggle for socialism were combined. He rejected the four-nation propositions in the Freedom Charter because he did not accept "race" as a valid biological entity. Alexander was not going to embrace a Charterist position and he was intent on criticizing ANC-aligned structures or movements that persisted in categorizing people as though they belonged to different races. The National Forum Committee drew up its own manifesto, which it called the Azanian Manifesto, and which, for activists aligned with the forum and other activists outside the ANC-endorsed UDF, came to be a different "charter". Alexander is widely acknowledged as the principal author of the Azanian Manifesto. It has all the signature concepts that Alexander believed in (The National Forum 1983):

> Our struggle for national liberation is directed at the system of racial capitalism which holds the people of Azania in bondage for the benefit of a small minority of white capitalists and their allies, the white workers and the reactionary sections of the middle classes. The struggle against apartheid, therefore, is no more than the point of departure for our liberatory efforts. Only the eradication of the system of racial capitalism can put an end to apartheid …. It is the historic task of the black working class and its organisations to mobilise the urban and rural poor together with the radical sections of the middle classes in order to put an end to the system of oppression and exploitation by the white ruling class.

This manifesto, despite its self-evident ideological bias and its potential appeal to black workers and the revolutionary intelligentsia, never came to "grip the masses" as Groys (2009) explains in his interpretation of dialectical materialism. The National Forum Committee, despite its clarity of vision and its unambiguous articulation of purpose, did not grow beyond the gripping rhetoric of its founding activists and ideologues. Dollie (2011: 136) summarizes the forum's political intent and Alexander's role:

> On the one hand, the philosophy of liberation came to be poignantly expressed in its founding manifesto, but its discourse was locked in interminable warps with itself over the increasing popularity that the UDF enjoyed and the mass base that this ANC-aligned formation was able to muster. On the other hand, the political leadership that Alexander injected into the National Forum was, for the most part, unchallenged and lasted not more than three years. The staggered demise of the National Forum was as much about the increasing power of the ANC in exile and its local cohorts, as it was a signal to non-ANC-aligned radicals to rethink their own political affiliations. The international community of big powers (the US, Britain, West Germany, the Soviet Union) had by then already concurred that apartheid needed to be replaced by a democratically elected government, and the ANC, despite its own internal contradictions and tensions about socialism, was the party of choice.

For Alexander and the rest of the NF leadership, the forum was to be a "united front" of people's organizations whose explicit aim was to ignite a popular movement for socialism. Its impact was, however, minimal and Alexander has pointed to the "fatal flaw in the make-up" of the National Forum Committee. He provides a list of possible explanations for its demise (Alexander 1994b: 203–204):

> Its weaknesses, are, in retrospect, all too obvious.

- It was a forum, not a movement, much less an organisation. Consistent, disciplined implementation of its resolutions by all its many components could not be effected, with the result that very often contradictory tactics and slogans were implemented.
- The different political tendencies united in the national forum could not converge because of mutual suspicion and rigid agendas ….
- It failed to win the support of the larger trade unions and of the churches ….
- …. Foreign funding was virtually closed to the national forum because of its radical stance.
- With the advent of the UDF, with its mass base and its access to financial resources, any hope that the national forum would capture the imagination of the masses in towns and in the country was dispelled. Inevitably, the pressure applied from the charterists led to the disintegration of the national forum.

He concludes nevertheless: "Besides the catalytic role played by the national forum in 1983, it inaugurated a vitally important tradition of mass organisation among the left opposition which may still transform the face of South Africa."

For the National Forum Committee and its allies in 1983 and 1984, the lack of funds to mobilize people countrywide, to have paid organizers, to run community-based programmes, to organize the symbols and insignia of resistance such as political funerals, large-scale pamphleteering and to bankroll sustained strikes against capital, made it difficult for the forum to gain a significant foothold in popular consciousness. His efforts at creating a united front of popular organizations had foundered and the gathering momentum of the UDF's social activism had elbowed out Alexander's chance to place socialism firmly on the agenda of political change. But this apparent failure to build a constituency around his ideas (Desai 2013) was a multi-edged sword. It meant a return to the essential socialist values of liberation, to the Academy, to a different type of political vanguardism and to the jettisoning of tactical and strategic alliances with radical nationalists. Alexander had indeed built a constituency around his ideas, but it was too small, too under-resourced and too fractured to pose a threat to the ANC's increasing dominance in the liberation movement.

With the benefit of hindsight and the advantage of historical reflection, it could be argued that, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Alexander was part of a historical moment that was punctured by the fact that Mandela and other ANC radicals and leaders were still in prison or

in exile. The traditional movements were making marginal inroads into steering popular consciousness, the armed struggle was picking up momentum in its propaganda, and the military might of the apartheid regime was being challenged in the streets of the country's black townships. In addition, the internal forces of liberation were as divided as ever and were without a united front. At least in theory, this type of sociological and political moment lent itself to a leadership vacuum that needed to be filled. Alexander had the intellectual tools and the political integrity to fill this hiatus in mass revolutionary opposition to the apartheid regime, but a complex personal history and an equally complex political trajectory combined with a considered contempt for "tail-ending mass struggles"[22] produced at least some of the limitations that prevented his accession to a mass leadership position. Alexander could not and would not abandon his Marxist principles and collapse his positions into a pro-Charterist movement. He could not become a "Charterist". The historical moment of chance was lost on the man because Alexander was conflicted about political ambition, and particularly about the "role of the individual in history"[23].

Returning to a different source: The dilemmas of a Wosa moment

By the mid-1980s, and alongside his overt political work, Alexander initiated discussions in 1984 and 1985, through the platforms and the networks he created and inherited from Sached Trust, to create Khanya College, a bridging college for black students *en route* to university study. He also became the executive secretary of the Health, Education and Welfare Society

[22] In the political circles around Alexander at the time (late 1970s and early 1980s), this notion of "tail-ending" was used to criticize the acquiescence of activists who threw their support behind all the struggles of the masses, regardless of their presumed intent. It was argued that, because the overt and confrontational struggles involved people "on the ground", these should be supported. For the non-Charterists in Cape Town, spontaneous revolts of the masses were treated with suspicion. These revolts were often dismissed as senseless acts by mostly intellectuals aligned with either small Unity Movement groupings or independent Marxists.

[23] In the Marxist "cells" that Alexander started in 1981 and 1982, a key and widely circulated document was British historian E.H.Carr's *What is history?* (1961). This essay was a response to Oxford-based academic and liberal individualist Isaiah Berlin's thoughts about the role of the individual in history, the role that "chance", or what Sartre (1976), Žižek (1989) and Badiou (1989; 2011) have referred to in different contexts as "contingency", plays in determining historical events. Berlin had accused Carr of being a "determinist" who dismisses the "accidental" in history and who relies on "vast impersonal forces" to shape historical changes. Carr responded to Berlin and dismissed the former Russian philosopher's understanding of history as a "parlour game", a "counterfactual" account and a "might-have-been" school of thought. Carr locates the individual in the context of a socio-economic and political milieu, and sees the individual as a "product of his or her time", whereas Berlin argues that this view of individuals as mere repositories of history's laws invariably leads to a type of historical determinism.

of South Africa (Hewsa) in 1986, a trust set up to channel funding to community-based organizations.

At the end of the 1980s, the ANC and the South African government had initiated "talks about talks", the preparatory moves that later resulted in the South African negotiated settlement and the ANC's electoral victory in 1994. The Workers Organisation for Socialist Action (Wosa) was formed in April 1990 to be "the voice of the urban and rural poor" (Alexander, cited in University of California Press 1996). Since Wosa, whose political principles he was advocating when he was writing in 1992 and 1993, was the last political organization to which he had committed himself and of which he remained a member until his death in 2012, it would be germane and useful to paraphrase and to review parts of his *Some are more equal than others: Essays on the transition in South Africa* (Alexander 1993), a booklet of six speeches, whose framing coincided with the activities of Workers' List Party that was created by Wosa to participate in the 1994 elections, delivered by Alexander in the years 1992 and 1993. It contains some penetrating insights into his Marxist and anti-Stalinist interpretation of the South African struggle for liberation. This was his narrative about how the "class compromise" of the negotiations between the years 1989 and 1992 came about, and it captures his philosophical angles of vision, and his record of the historical precedents and backdrop against which the negotiations took place.

It may also be useful to sketch as background Alexander's self-consciousness about his role as a public intellectual and a writer. When Alexander addressed his very different audiences, whom did he represent? *What* he said to these very different audiences is not difficult to report. I ask this question because Alexander was a political philosopher whose "mission", especially in his Yu Chi Chan Club, was to discuss and propagandize views, including armed struggle, to oppose an oppressive state. What was his understanding of his constituency, the people he addressed and the people he had managed to persuade to support his ideas?

An evolving understanding of an audience, a constituency, can be traced back to the first political pamphlet Alexander wrote in 1954, called "The role of the teacher in society". He reflects on this "accomplishment" (Alexander, quoted in Busch *et al*. 2014: 52):

> It was the very first time that I was using any language for very practical political purposes, as opposed to ordinary conversation or interaction – where I was trying to influence in a

> practical way masses of people. The power and the sense of accomplishment that it gave me was [were] very important. I came to understand instinctively, but definitely consciously, the power of language. Later on, when I had to form the students' movement and became an orator, a speaker at meetings, I was clear how to use language, and why. Never just as oratorical flourishes, but more because you really wanted to persuade people and influence their way of seeing things.

Here, navigating along Bertolt Brecht's crooked lines (Brecht, cited in Chatterjee 1986) means asking the subsidiary questions: was he representing himself; was he representing an organization or a coalition of organizations; was he representing the muses of history? Was he a speaker only at the instant of speaking, and was he a writer only at the instant of writing? I am not in a position to directly answer these questions in this thesis. However, I suspect the answers to these questions would reside somewhere in a conceptual universe generated in the clash and overlap between notions of human agency and the dull pressures of organizational imperatives.

In part, my answers to these subsidiary questions are guided by Roland Barthes's essay, "The death of an author", and Michel Foucault's essay, "What is an author?" (see Woolfrey 2008). For Barthes, the author exists only at the instant of writing, and Foucault has argued that a text or a speech has meaning because of itself, and not because of the writer. These post-structuralists, and arguably most "structuralist" thinkers[24] before them, assert that written texts can be understood on their own, and writers are incidental. Foucault, while he recognizes the writer as a historical institution, goes further and asserts that "it is language which speaks, not the author" (Woolfrey 2008). I am also guided in these answers by Stuart Hall's (1977: 18) incisive warning about critical theoretical practice. Hall's message, in his critique of Althusser's (1977) exegesis of Marx's writings, is that the researcher should avoid the deliberate search for "silences" or "absences" in published works.

[24] Alexander's *One Azania, one nation* in 1979 excludes references to the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas. This decision on Alexander's part suggests an ambivalence, if not a rejection, of the value of their political messages. There can be little doubt that he knew about these people because in conversations with me in Cape Town in the early 1980s, he did refer to these structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers, and he was less than complimentary about them. What seemed to have been particularly irksome for Alexander is the "relative autonomy" that especially Foucault and Barthes award to language: this autonomy is an echo of, and reflects a finessing of a theoretical continuum started by Althusser in his work on ideology and ideological state apparatuses. Later on in his writings about the language question and ideological formations, Alexander does briefly speak to Althusser's work, which I sketchily refer to in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

I was a participant at many meetings in the early 1980s where Alexander spoke. His acute awareness of himself, of his audience and of the possible interpretations of what he said at these meetings, and his expansive creativity in the instant of speaking and writing could be viewed, as I came to view them, as an existential intersection between the "here and now" and what could be tentatively called the "dialogical glue" that binds his spoken and written reflections with his actions. He reflects on his transition from writing to speaking to an audience in the following way (Busch *et al*. 2014: 52):

> [W]hen you are writing you are conversing with a target audience. You've always got a target audience in mind and how they are responding, and your argument is shaped by that. I became aware of this sort of internal dialogue that is going on when you are writing.

My view is that an understanding of a person's writings and oratory is rarely the province of one person; instead, it is the product of many people, and this is how I have approached Alexander's booklet of speeches, *Some are more equal than others*, and it involves the discursive referencing embedded in the words he employs to assert his views.

At the beginning in his "Preface", Alexander (1993: 1) states that, from a philosophical point of view, his essays in the booklet are "attempts to understand the often agonising relationship between human choice and inexorable historical processes". Here, he is reiterating his citation of Leon Trotsky's view (No Sizwe 1979) that it is possible to be involved as a political activist "making one's contribution to the shaping of our society at the same time as one adopts the historian's distance from the actual sites of struggle". It points to an appreciation of a tension between human agency, what motivates a person in his or her choices in writing and involvement, and the flow of history. As in most of his writings, this is not an unusual opening remark for him. It is often stated in different ways, and it is self-consciously intended to capture an audience, whether it is a listener or a reader. He takes the side of the oppressed, and his position is to support the struggles of the dominated classes to alter the terms of that domination in their favour. While history, for him, moves in "inexorable" ways, in "objective" ways, there is a subjectivity that drives human beings in their decisions to either participate in the making of that history, or they remain silent, he argues.

A few words about the concept of ideology might help to better situate Alexander. Ideological positioning is a signature trait of Alexander's writings. Definitions of ideology have changed over time, as Nussbaum and Brown explain (1987: 21), ranging from the "'false consciousness' [concept] (Marx), the 'manifestation of intimate contradictions by which society is lacerated' (Gramsci), the representation of our imaginary, lived relation to the real (Althusser), or an effect of the multiple forces that fashion an object (Eagleton)". Ideologies serve implicit political purposes. With Alexander, his intention is explicit, and his ideological position is profoundly simple: the development of a secular pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire 1968) is essential to liberate humanity from the barbarism of capitalism and the insanities of racism.

The first essay in his book, *Some are more equal than others*, deals with "The politics of national and institutional transformation". All the essays in his book were a published version of speeches delivered to different audiences over the two years immediately preceding the publication of the book. The opening essay forms part of a debate (Alexander 1988; Gerwel 1992; Soudien 2013) he had with Jakes Gerwel, the former vice-chancellor of the University of Western Cape who became the director-general in Nelson Mandela's presidential office. In response to Gerwel's view that the negotiations would bring about a programme of long-term and fundamental transformation in the institutions built by the apartheid government, Alexander crafts an argument, based on "four pillars of consensus", against Gerwel's "premature judgment" that negotiations with the apartheid regime will channel the struggle "to dismantle the apartheid system into the very institutions [such as universities] which constitute that system" (Alexander 1993: 4–5). These four pillars are:

- The ruling classes in South Africa have to reform the racial capitalist system. In its apartheid form, it had become a counter-productive burden since at least the 'seventies [1970s].
- The apartheid state has not been overthrown or smashed, as we had set out to do in the 'sixties. This is the reason for all the voguish talk about us having 'to engage the state'.
- The system of racial capitalism, given the 'new world order' and the hegemonic consolidation of reformist strategies among formerly anti-apartheid social forces, will persist in a changed form in the short to medium term. Class alliances as well as the legitimating discourse of the system will change. In general, the movement will be from 'race' to class even if for the

majority of the black people and for some white people the realities of life will either not change at all or will become considerably worse.

- The potential for social conflict will be enhanced in the short term.

These pillars are a fundamental part of the theoretical grid he used to locate and view the negotiations and the "transition" to majority rule, which took place between the apartheid government of F.W. de Klerk and the ANC as the lead actor of the liberation movement, between the years 1988 and 1992. Alexander had by then moved far away from the debilitating restrictions of the Unity Movement's "policy of non-collaboration" and entered a contested space of Left intellectualism and theoretical engagement with the limits and possibilities that had opened up through the negotiations. His position was that the "reform from above" initiated by the De Klerk government and agreed to by the lead negotiators of the ANC would not result in "people's power" from below. Instead, it would create the illusion of power because being "in office" does not translate into being "in power". While spaces may exist in the institutions of higher learning to shift the power discourse in favour of the oppressed and exploited through social programmes of empowerment, and while the administration of these institutions may end up in the hands of legitimate representatives of the oppressed, the terms of domination have been determined by people who have a clear and unambiguous capitalist agenda, and these terms remain intact. While not mentioned explicitly in this essay, Alexander's analysis is reminiscent of Rosa Luxemburg's assessment of parliamentarism, reform and revolution (Luxemburg 1978; 1986) at the turn of the 20th century in Germany, and it explicitly leans on the works of the New Left in their struggles for "counter universities" in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Germany. Alexander asserts that "until and unless you have state power, there are definite limits beyond which the ruling class will not let you go. Moreover, the dangers of co-option are omnipresent."

Jakes Gerwel, who was mounting his arguments from a Left and reformist perspective, was attempting to place bourgeois ideology and its institutions on the defensive in the "transition to democracy". For Alexander, the constraints imposed by a racial capitalist system through its reform packages "from above" limit the manoeuvrability of popular dissent within these elite tertiary institutions of learning. Until the economic and social system falls, Alexander seems to be arguing, the institutions and their new crops of managers will remain reproductive agents of capitalism, and while miniscule opportunities may be opened up for a

socialist agenda to be introduced, it is not likely that these opportunities and explorations will have large-scale institutional impact. In my view, and it is a limited view of his psychological processes, Alexander had an essential mistrust for institutional cultures, and of the command systems that make these institutions work.

And yet, beginning with the experiences in the Yu Chi Chan Club in 1961 and 1962, he was forced to settle with a command system. Guerrilla war is a command system subject to a political authority, and the culture it produces can be implosive (Debray 1975; 1977). Here, Debray's distinction between Cuba's "vanguard war", led by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, as opposed to Mao's "people's war" is an important contribution to a theory of revolutionary war. Alexander was compelled to make life-and-death decisions and be a part of a command system in his and his group's revolutionary war against apartheid. He struggled with ensuring that the commands he issued would filter through to all people he had a relationship with. This, I think, was part of his dialogical tension. A refined sense of organization clashed with an equally refined sense of a democratic or, in his terms, a socialist culture.

By 1993, Alexander had fully incorporated Gramsci's (1971) "war of position" into his propositions and his analysis of South African society. Frontal assaults against the institutions of the state had to be supported alongside other strategies and tactics to take command of state power and capture the ideological and political institutions that ensured and reproduced capitalist rule. For Alexander, even in periods of subjugation and in the absence of the blunt instrument of democratic elections, the terms of engagement still needed to be decided by the oppressed people themselves and not through politically constructed and state-determined portals of negotiation.

His second essay deals with "Africa and the new world order". The speech was first presented at the Humboldt Colloquium in Cotonou (Benin) in July 1992. Despite being one of the many by-products of "colonial-imperialist conquest and of world capitalist exploitation on a grand scale", the fate of the imagination of Africa is placed in the hands of the oppressed (Alexander 1993: 15):

> To be precise: Africa is in the first instance the result of the resistance of the peoples of the continent to the inhuman process of 'the expansion of Europe'. It is particularly because of the Atlantic Slave Trade, which another British historian, Reginald Coupland, correctly

> labelled 'the greatest crime in history', and because of the fact that the peoples of Africa and of the African diaspora have been the main victims of racism in the world that a coherent sense of being African evolved.

In the radical narratives challenging the conventional wisdoms of colonial story-telling, the historical assumption that Columbus "discovered the Americas" has been turned on its head (Said 1975; Amin 1976; Callinicos 1980; Löwy 1981; Marks 1986; Amin 1991; Nussbaum 2003; Jameson 2005). In fact, proponents of these radical narratives assert, not without irony and hints of sarcasm, that the natives of the Americas "discovered Columbus" when the Italian colonizer-explorer landed on their shores. In much the same way, Alexander is asserting that the very notion of being African rests in the struggles of the people of Africa opposing colonial impositions and colonial rule, and not in the image of Africa as told by the colonial narrators. He shifts the terms of the debate about being African to their human source, which is the incubator of his own truths: the *lived experience* of ordinary people in their struggles to survive. At the same time, Alexander acknowledges the global configurations of power in which his notion of an African and the continent is given an expanded context. In a unipolar world with the United States as the lead and only military enforcer, the three trading blocs dominating the transnational exchange of goods and services, namely, the American, the European and the Asian trading blocs, still face the basic dilemmas of "the restructured world economic system". He quotes Brand (Brand 1991: 158, cited in Alexander 1993: 17):

> Like empires that preceded them, the regional trade blocs of the new economic world order may divide into a handful of protectionist superstates. If by the new political world order we mean increased American hegemony disguised as international co-operation, we may come to know the new economic world order as regional hegemony disguised as free trade.

Alexander proposes a new world economic order with Africa as a centre-piece feature in the global arrangement. He acknowledges the pernicious and interventionist roles played by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Bretton Woods institutions, and he maintains that Africa remains divided by glaring class divisions, and increasingly parasitic and self-interested middle classes. The dependency syndrome has not been replaced by an assured political will to change.

Alexander's exhortation is that the continent should be a nuclear-free zone. He argues that the governments of Africa, mired in inherited and in new debt with the World Bank and the IMF, should be using their vast foreign exchange potential to set a new path towards a new world order, and here he is in agreement with the recommendations made by Egyptian Marxist Samir Amin (Amin 1991) who optimistically recommends that African states should *delink* from the international cycles of debt payments and repayments. Alexander (1993: 24–25) paraphrases Amin's position:

> In a nutshell, he [Amin] maintains that democracy under capitalism is impossible in the periphery of the world system. This is the reason why capitalist expansion has brought about not the socialist revolutions expected by Marx and others to break out in the advanced capitalist countries, but, rather, 'anti-capitalist' revolutions 'provoked by the polarisation inherent in world capitalist expansion with socially intolerable consequences for the peoples of the peripheries and semi-peripheries of the system. The strategic aims of those revolutions entail delinking from the logic of worldwide capitalist expansion.'

Alexander's interest is in the link between "radical democracy" and "delinking". Piece-meal African solutions are not going to resolve this link. Individual nation-states are self-interested entities and they do not hold much potential in collapsing their own power and social structures to replace the political elites. Here, and while Alexander does not refer to it, Nolutshungu's (1982) insightful prediction of the political destiny of nationalist movements is pertinent. The overarching message Nolutshungu advances is that nationalist movements, such as the black consciousness movement he was analysing in his 1982 work, lay the groundwork for an "elite accommodation" because they are not directed at overturning capitalist relations of production and reproduction. Alexander's focus in this essay is a reflection on Africa's potential, and here, he was deeply aware of the audience at this Humboldt Colloquium held in Cotonou. It is the first and only essay in his corpus of writings I have read that contains only a passing reference to class formations and the debilitating stranglehold of middle class values that continue to plague Africa's development.

His third essay deals with "Negotiations and the struggle for socialism in South Africa" and was prepared for the Ruth First Memorial Colloquium on the Possibilities of Radical Transformation in Southern Africa after Negotiations: Theory and Policy, which was held at the University of the Western Cape in 1992. This is Alexander's elaborate and detailed

assessment of the range of political forces that came together to produce the negotiated compromises, and he concludes his essay with alternatives to negotiations. Unambiguously and with unapologetic affinity, he refers to German revolutionary Marxist Rosa Luxemburg's critique (Luxemburg 1978) of the reformist strategies employed by Eduard Bernstein in his embrace of an evolutionary socialism at the turn of the 20th century in Germany, and Alexander uses her insights as a peg to describe the unfolding negotiations that were taking place in South Africa before the country's 1994 democratic elections.

Alexander begins his argument by laying out the four phases of the liberation struggle. He describes these phases as the Lazarus period (1910 to 1945), the period of protest and defiance (1946 to 1960), the period of silence (1960 to 1976), and the period of armed propaganda and revolutionary mass action (16 June 1976 to 2 February 1990). With the exception of the first phase and the first part of the second phase up until around 1953 when he joined his first political association (the NEUM's Teachers' League of South Africa) as a student associate, his essay is a historical record of his direct and active engagement with the political ideas and concepts that he was exposed to and came to grapple with. At the same time, the essay provides significant chronological and historically changing snapshots of his interpretations, or in Althusserian terms "representations", of the main lines of thoughts and programmes implemented by different organizations and movements he believed made up the "liberation movement", and in which he was an active participant.

The essay is an ideological interpretation and a study of a political terrain in which the changing actors in the liberation movement played out their roles, as subjects and as agents of change, and as players acting out the political imperatives imposed by "inexorable historical processes" (Alexander 1993: 1). It provides insights into how Alexander viewed the subjective interests that move people and the interests that are presumably implied in their class positions, and the complex interplay between these two sets of interests.

The first "Lazarus period" (1910 to 1945), which, for Alexander (1993: 31), "depended at bottom on begging for crumbs that fell from the tables of the rich and the powerful", can also be interpreted to mean a period of "re-awakening". Lazarus is a character mythologized in biblical terms as a beggar; a different Lazarus was also one of Jesus's "re-awakenings". Alexander's reference is that of the life of the beggar, rather than a mythical recreation of

resuscitation or re-awakening.[25] The overarching political thrust of this period, for Alexander, is that the leaders of the oppressed in South Africa were "promoting the interests of the tiny mission elite, of the would-be black middle class" and "could never lead a struggle for liberation that would embrace all the oppressed and exploited people" (Alexander 1993: 33).

Even though the second period of protest and defiance (1946 to 1960) did not result in any basic difference in the direction of the struggle against apartheid and segregation, Alexander asserts that "it began to include ideas of democratic organisation, of political programme and mass action" (Alexander 1993: 33). Alongside the mass action programmes initiated by the ANC Youth League, and often against the Africanism or the African nationalism of its proponents, the Unity Movement "fashioned the tools of non-collaboration, the boycott as a weapon of struggle, of non-racialism and of the programme for nothing less than full democratic rights for all". One of his mentors, Isaac Tabata, had written a book during this period and it was titled *The awakening of a people*, and in which the call for "Non-European" unity was made. The book was printed and circulated in 1950 (later published by Spokesman Books in 1974), and for this period of protest and defiance, Tabata's book was a trenchant and insightful historical account of the political moves on the part of the oppressed to get full democratic rights granted. But the Unity Movement, despite its smart and far-sighted leadership, started to show signs of a political snobbishness, indeed a contempt for mass struggles. Alexander puts it differently and argues generously that the "tragedy of the Unity Movement was that it failed, after 1948, to involve itself consistently in the mass protest and defiance campaigns of this period" (Alexander 1993: 34). He continues:

> Its leaders became paralysed by the fear of brutal repression at the hands of the neo-nazi storm troopers of the apartheid regime. They acted, in effect, on the basis of 'the perfect moment' when everything would magically come together and the oppressed people of South Africa would 'rid themselves of the scourge of white domination'. As this simply was a fantasy, it meant that – after 1948 – the Unity Movement was unable to test its ideas in the

[25] Alexander wanted to be a priest after not being able to enrol for a medical degree because he did not study mathematics at secondary school. He became his own "mathematician" after this. While, for much of his adult life and later reflections, he had no need for a God hypothesis (University of California n.d.; Villa-Vicencio 1996), he retained the lyrical and expansive imagery and metaphors of biblical referencing and citations, and he used these without irony or mockery. For him, using these references was an acknowledgment of allegorical suggestion and truth, and here, Plato's "allegory of the cave" is an important pointer in understanding Alexander's mind-set.

> fire of mass action. In so doing, they gave the historical advantage to the other main stream of the struggle for national liberation. This is the current of Africanism or African nationalism pioneered as a systematic programme and ideology by the ANC Youth League …. Africanism was the mirror image of Afrikaner nationalism.

Alexander spent about five years in these structures of intellectually challenging, but exclusivist politics of the Unity Movement (1953 to 1958) before he left for Germany to study at Tübingen University, and on his return to South Africa in 1961, he put to the test his Apdusa membership by raising the question of the armed struggle.

His third period deals with "the years of silence" from 1960 to 1976. This period coincides with his imprisonment on Robben Island between the years 1964 and 1974, and with his year of incarceration during his trial. It also coincides with the trials and conviction of leading members of the ANC, the PAC and Apdusa. Barring one faction in the Unity Movement led by Ben Kies, the rest of the liberation movement and its constituent organizations had turned to armed struggle in the face of five decades of passive resistance, petitions and non-collaboration and boycotts. For the most part, the turn to arms was unavoidable and was a continuation of "*politics* by other means" (Clausewitz n.d.), or what Alexander refers to as "*policies* [my italics] by other means" (1993: 38). The ANC's Umkhonto we Sizwe and its armed propaganda in opposing the apartheid state stole a march on all other efforts at guerrilla war by other armed sections of the liberation movement, partly because of its political alliance with the South African Communist Party that opened doors to the Soviet Union (then also called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the USSR) and its allied states.[26] These years of silence were, however, broken by a new crop of intellectuals and student leaders. According to Alexander (1993: 41), Steve Biko, Barney Pityana, Mamphela Ramphele, Peter Jones and Saths Cooper

> hoisted the university generations of the late 'sixties/early 'seventies to heights that made it possible for the whole of the oppressed people to visualise a new and a better future in spite

[26] Among the many publications, articles and books about the rise of the ANC as a national liberation movement and especially the influence of the SACP on the international configurations of alliance politics the ANC had entered, Stephen Ellis's (2012) work stands out. Ellis elaborates on how important the SACP was in the leadership of the ANC, especially its links with the former Soviet Union and the Republic of China. For a more "official" survey of the ANC's international linkages in the period before 1994, the Thabo Mbeki-inspired South African Democratic Education Trust's (SADET 2008) *Road to democracy in South Africa, Volume 3, International solidarity* is useful.

> of the all-embracing repression and omnipresence of the police state …. In a nutshell, we can say that the BCM revived the hope and the energies of the oppressed people, gave them for the first time the idea that practical alternatives to the racist state and made it possible for the youth especially to understand how the cultural revolution was an integral and a decisive part of the struggle for the total liberation of the black people.

For Alexander (1993: 42), the essential radical nationalism and insistence on a black exclusivism in its membership needed "to grow beyond itself, deepen and enrich its theory of South African society and root itself in the struggles of the working people at the point of production" if it was to become a "truly liberatory idea and practice". These critiques of the black consciousness movement, compelling as these turned out to be, however, were not sufficient to prevent Alexander and his Cape Action League from entering into a strategic alliance, short-lived as it was, with the BC movement through the National Forum Committee in 1983. These differences with the BC movement were some of the *non-antagonistic contradictions* that Alexander was trying to work through and build into his political strategy of alliance politics and his understanding of the content of a "united front".

His fourth period deals with armed propaganda and revolutionary mass action (June 1976 to February 1990). For Alexander, the Soweto generation of 1976 "galvanised the 'parent movements'" (1994: 42). In particular, the ANC was fed by radicalized young people who had fought running battles against the military state, becoming soldiers of a revolution in the making. Civil society and the international anti-apartheid community of activists stepped up the propaganda campaign to isolate the apartheid state and get it to capitulate to the democratic demands and wishes of the disenfranchised majority in the country. From about 1976 to 1985, the South African liberation struggle "belonged" to the internal mass democratic movement. The black consciousness movement had eclipsed the exiled and "parent" movements such as the ANC, the PAC and the SACP. Alternative literature flooded the closed and protected doors of communication and exchange among an expanding left-wing intelligentsia. There was a growing consciousness and confidence in the revolutionary movement as a whole about its independence from "traditional" movements. These traditional movements had historically captured the popular imagination through their propaganda of armed struggle, their promotion of non-racialism and their opposition to the apartheid state. At the same time, there was also a growing uneasiness in the political

movement of the oppressed and in the multi-movement affiliations that were being promoted by the UDF and the National Forum Committee. Whether one was a "Charterist", a "BC type" or an "ultra-leftist" became one's passport to secret gathering and meetings.[27]

In Cape Town and its environs, the political movement for liberation coalesced around certain individuals and "programmes". For the ANC and the rest of the Charterists, Oscar Mpetha was an icon, Johnny Issel and Trevor Manuel were key organizers, and Theresa Solomon held her own counsel in Mitchells Plain. For the BC movement, Peter Jones was a black knight in Paarl. For a civic-based socialist alternative to the Charterists in the Cape, Alexander had considerable pull. For the Trotskyists in the ANC, who called themselves the Marxist Workers' Tendency, Zackie Achmat and Jack Lewis were instrumental. For the NEUM or the New Unity Movement and its crop of teachers, Richard Dudley had taken over the mantle of leadership from Ben Kies, and a later minister in Mandela's and Mbeki's cabinets, Dullah Omar, was dismantling his Unity Movement history to link up with the ANC and the United Democratic Front. On the fringes of the New Unity Movement, Dawood Parker drew intellectuals and students to his South Peninsula Educational Fellowship, which held occasional meetings in Newlands to discuss political issues. There was a richness to the ebb and flow of information among the diverse political tendencies and groupings that made up liberation politics at the time, and all activists represented, even though some may not even have read the documents, some or other political programme.

Despite Alexander's somewhat sanguine, almost bullish reading of this intense period of military propaganda and revolutionary mass action, the period was a hot bed of political sectarianism, infighting and internal strife. It was also a time when everything and anything of left-wing persuasion had to be consumed and spoken about in conspiratorial voices. Among the range of political choices on offer to young activists and budding socialist-

[27] Terms such as "Charterists" or "Congressites", "BC types" and "ultra-leftists" were liberally bandied about by different and, I might add, competing factions of the liberation movement in the late 1970s and the 1980s. They were loose terms used by political principals who occupied positions of considerable authority and influence among especially younger people, and they were used to pigeon-hole individuals and groupings, and the intention was to identify allies and isolate enemies. "Charterists" or "Congressites" supported the ANC's leading role in the national liberation movement and viewed the Freedom Charter, drawn up in 1955, as their guiding declaration of political intent. "BC types" were those who broadly followed the politics of Steve Bantu Biko and who insisted on black exclusivism in political formations. The ultra-leftists were three groups of people: those who opposed nationalism in any form and who insisted on the leading role of the working class (these people were mostly based in the trade union movement); those who were unapologetic Trotskyists; and those who were part of an Azanian tendency (mostly concentrated around Alexander).

inspired intellectuals, Alexander's intellectual magnetism and erudition were compelling. The power of the idea was still seductive. Despite not having a substantial mass base or constituency, it was his insistence on cogent reasoning and lyrical argument that captured my imagination.

These four periods were the backdrop to his 1993 commentaries on the negotiations that took place between the ANC and the National Party government between the years 1990 and 1993. In April 1990, Alexander and his political group were convinced that the ANC was not going to deliver on the democratic demands and socialist ideals captured and refined over the four periods of resistance, armed struggles and mass revolutionary actions, and they launched a new political organization, the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action (Wosa), to be the militant voice of the urban and rural poor.

This is what I have called the "Wosa moment": an accumulation of individually and collectively driven personal and class interests that coalesced in the event of its launch. By then, in 1990, Alexander had fully incorporated Gramsci's "war of position" (1971) into his political strategy. This involved a complex mix of military metaphor, ideological positing, political-strategic calculations and the brutal realities of wars and armies. Alexander asks the question: "Can the forces of liberation push beyond the capitalist system in the present conjuncture, one feature of which is precisely that the repressive state apparatuses are almost wholly intact?" His answer is, paradoxically, in the affirmative. But, he insists that two socio-political conditions need to be realised, and that, in the short term, they are highly improbable (1993: 46–47):

> The first of these, is the escalation of mass action to the point where what propagandists have aptly described as the 'Leipzig option' becomes possible. In essence, this means that the armed might of the state is neutralised by the very magnitude of peaceful resistance, strengthened by the occupation of strategic points and the gradual erosion of the *esprit de corps* of the standing army. A prior condition for the realisation of this option, however, is the commitment by the state authorities to a humanistic ethos that prevents them from unleashing the kinds of massacres that have characterised 20th century South African history with such sickening regularity from Bulhoek to Boipatong …. Today, because of the changing class ('racial') composition of the armed forces, the changed character of the dominant strata of the ruling class, and because of the changed global balance of forces that makes a *white* ruling

> group expendable if a black elite is available for the more efficient management of the capitalist system in a black majority situation, we can rely at the very least on dividing the armed forces in an insurrectionary situation in a manner that could spell disaster for the ruling class.

The "Leipzig option" is always a possibility, even if it is a remote possibility. The increasing distance between the "haves" and the "have nots" in the post-1994 political arrangement in South Africa could result in the country's defence forces siding with large-scale mass insurrectionary protests.

Alexander's politics, however, cannot be easily reduced to the organizations to which he belonged and neither can it be reduced to his participation in organizations that either formally employed him or with which he worked either as an associate or as a member. As a revolutionary Marxist, he found the organizational discipline implied in institutional cultures, such as political formations, important and in part desirable, but not necessarily comforting. As a dialectical reasoner, he often questioned his own assumptions and came to conclusions that were new, different and challenging. In his archive, I came across the following letter he wrote to the "C.C." (this means either Central Committee or Coordinating Committee) of Wosa (Alexander 1991), and because it deals with many of the issues I have taken up in this study of his writings, I wish to quote extensively from it. It was written in response to a letter of resignation, which I have not read, by the organization's first secretary, Jean Pease:

> *Before I touch on some of the issues raised in her letter of resignation by cde. [comrade] Pease, I should like to dwell on two fundamental propositions that have guided all my thought and action since at least 1981 ….*
>
> *The first of these propositions* is that we made the correct decision in 1982/83 when those of us who were discussing (and caucusing under conditions of illegality) on these matters agreed to promote openly and publicly an independent *socialist* alternative to the existing nationalist (Charterist and Africanist) currents in the liberation movement ….
>
> On the strategic-tactical question of whether to work inside or outside the nationalist currents, there was never any doubt in my mind. Although I only arrived at the formulation much later, it was intuitively clear to me that the nationalist movements (of which the Unity Movement represented an ultra-left aspect) were in essence an amalgam of anti-colonial, petty-bourgeois nationalist and social-democratic welfarist elements. One should always be willing to work

> with them on the basis of tactical alliances. In this regard, I rejected in practice the escapist, ultra-left practice of the Unity Movement of demonising other nationalist organisations as 'enemy agencies'. However, the hegemonic position of black (usually 'African') nationalism precluded any entrist strategy. All those Marxist currents that have opted for such a strategy have ended up reinforcing petty-bourgeois nationalism ….
>
> [I]t is extremely important that we be very clear in our minds that our goal is a socialist world, as defined by Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky and many others and that our political methods and organisational ethos have to be informed by this very fact ….
>
> This brings me to the *second fundamental proposition*. This is simply the fact that there is no single perfectly correct variant of Marxism. Its corollary is that nobody alive today has any blueprint for socialism. This simple but terribly threatening insight will save our organisation from many needless and useless exercises in self-flagellation …. [N]o single individual, party or group has the monopoly on 'truth' and wisdom … [and] within the broad camp of historical materialism, *I am an unashamed and unreconstructed eclectic* [my italics].

With these words written in New Haven in the United States in 1991, Alexander draws a conceptual map of his understanding of the psycho-social and political imperatives that should be driving revolutionaries in their struggles for a better world. His efforts at trying to resolve *non-antagonistic* contradictions within a political organization of his choice and of his making did not come to pass.

A summary and tentative propositions

Desai (2013) says that Alexander, after his release from Robben Island, was caught between a "stretch and a stitch" about his political and organizational choices. In part, this is confirmed by Alexander's decision to write his *One Azania, one nation* (1979) as a *theoretical exposition* of both the nature of the South African apartheid-capitalist state and the lack of unity in the liberation movement. In this book, he posits a *new strategy* to overthrow the state. As a historical materialist, that is, as a Marxist, Alexander sought to establish alliances with potentially pro-socialist radical nationalists within the broader liberation movement. The organizational form that this alliance was to take was the *united front*. Alexander sought to exclude any association with fractions of capital, and here he included small black capital and big white capital. He actively sought the support of the black and white radical intelligentsia,

intellectual groupings such as black students, teachers, lecturers at universities and non-governmental activists, who, in his opinion, were prepared to "throw their lot in" with the "life-and-death" struggles of the black working class, which he believed was the only South African collective grouping willing to and capable of overturning the mode and relations of capitalist production. Alexander also had to rethink the forms of his own political organization, the National Liberation Front, which was effectively defunct. Would this alliance with radical nationalists be a multi-organizational platform or would it be a loose coalition of individuals coming together to fight the system? In the early 1980s, Alexander had formed the Cape Action League as a broad civic movement in the Western Cape and he used this as a base from which to negotiate the terms of the envisaged alliances with the Azanian People's Organisation (Azapo) and with individuals who were then linked to the Council of Unions of South Africa (Cusa). Azapo was an overt black consciousness political grouping formed in 1978 and Cusa's principals were, for the most part, inspired by black consciousness ideology. These negotiations were uneven and not straightforward, and they culminated in the launch of the National Forum Committee in June 1983. Very soon afterwards, in August 1983, the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed as the localized "internal wing" of the exiled ANC, which was still banned by the apartheid government at the time. Explicitly organized as a loose coalition of anti-apartheid coalition of "racial groups" supporting the ANC's Freedom Charter, the UDF came to be the "popular front" that Alexander predicted it would become and against which he had tried to organize an alternative "united front". The National Forum effectively folded after 1984 and the UDF came to dominate popular protests for the remainder of the decade.

Key considerations during this period (1974 to about 1984) of Alexander's life were his evolving positions on national liberation movements, vanguard parties and the armed struggle. The ANC was, for Alexander, a part of the liberation movement, it was not *the* liberation movement. It was the only political organization, because of its alliance with the South African Communist Party, that had the support of the Soviet Union to build a sizable infrastructure for armed struggle and armed propaganda against the South African state. Alexander had been critical of the armed wing of the ANC's Umkhonto we Sizwe's performance on the ground, and he became increasingly uneasy about the efficacy of isolated armed units launching sporadic attacks against the symbolic institutions of the state. This

unease about the armed struggle had been also reinforced by his conversations with Mandela on Robben Island, and Mandela's view that the armed struggle was not about overthrowing the state but about forcing the state to the negotiating table. While he was not averse to the armed struggle, he started developing positions that pointed more towards mass insurrectionary strategies of popular protest, civil disobedience and general strikes.

Between the years 1984 and 1989, Alexander focused on building non-governmental organizations such as Khanya College and the National Language Project (NLP)[28]. By 1990, the momentum of negotiations about an envisaged "negotiated settlement" between the ANC and the National Party had picked up. The choices for the broader Left in South Africa were to support the negotiations for black majority rule and therefore engage the terms of reforming the system of *racial capitalism* to a *non-racial capitalism*, to stay outside the negotiating process and continue the struggle against apartheid capitalism as militant groupings, or to enter the framework of negotiations and create explicit socialist and alternative platforms to mobilize and capture popular interests. Alexander opted for the latter and, together with his comrades, he formed the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action in 1990. On the one hand, this organization sought to bring together non-ANC-aligned Marxists and socialists. On the other hand, it sought to represent the interests of the rural and urban poor. Noble as its intentions were, Wosa neither succeeded in forging a unity of the Left, nor did it effectively succeed in attracting the poor to its fold. The ideological proclivities, ambitions, psychological, personal motivations and clashing personalities of Marxist-Leninists, Trotskyists and other tendencies were too fractious to allow for a unified approach and an alternative Left platform to the nationalist offensive planned by the ANC. Wosa's fate, sealed by the failure of the Workers List Party to gain a single parliamentary seat in the 1994 election, was uncertain. Alexander was deeply affected by the inability of his Wosa team to engage in "comradely ways" and, in my speculative view, he started withdrawing from party-organizational work and the culture embedded in the unavoidable authoritarian tendencies in vanguardism and Marxist-Leninist organizational forms.

[28] Initial conversations about establishing Khanya College took place in Sached Trust in 1983 and in 1984. A record of these meetings is presumably in Sached Trust's uncatalogued archive at the University of Witwatersrand. For a perspective on the framework of the NLP, Alexander's (1989a) booklet on language policy carries the official position of the NLP.

Considerations of building the nation “through the barrel of a gun” – which was a considered option in the short life of the reading group, Yu Chi Chan Club, in 1961 – were not Alexander’s preferred choice, and around the mid-1980s, he re-embraced concerns and issues he thought were equally significant, if not more strategically vital than the armed struggle, namely education and language.

Chapter Four

The languages of power and the power of languages[1]

Introduction

From about 1985, Alexander specifically wrote about the language question, both as part of his research and investigations into the function of language in communicative action (see, for example, Habermas 1984), and as part of his ongoing and revised deliberations about the national question in South Africa. For Alexander, the language and national questions have a symbiotic and a dialectical relationship, and both questions are linked to conversations about humanity's quest for unity. Moreover, both questions cannot be delinked from the economy. In a reprint of his article on post-apartheid education, Alexander quotes Halliday and Martin's (1993) proposition (Alexander, in Foundation for Human Rights 2012: 71):

> The history of humanity is not only a history of socioeconomic activity, it is also a history of semiotic activity.

Put differently, the history of humanity is not only a history of class struggles, but also a history of how humanity's multilingual groups, or the polyglot of humanity, came to be constituted, officially and unofficially, through the evolution, the destruction and the efforts at reconstitution and standardization of languages. This chapter throws some light on Alexander's approach to language hegemonies and the political and economic imperatives driving these hegemonies. It tracks his initial confrontations in the 1950s with these issues in the Non-European Unity Movement and in the ANC, and his discovery of and synergy with Jacob Nhlapo's 1944 recommendation that language clusters Sotho and Nguni be standardized. It provides insights and analyses of the colonial origins and capitalist mutations of the particular type of language hegemony that South Africans face with English and Afrikaans as the lead languages of communication in "high-status" functions.

[1] The title of this chapter is a variation of the book title, *Interviews with Neville Alexander: The power of languages against the language of power* (2014), edited by Brigitta Busch, Lucijan Busch and Karen Press. While the reference in the book's subtitle is to English as the language of power, my reference is to the hegemonic linguistic status of English and Afrikaans in the South African context.

While English, and to a lesser extent Afrikaans, is the language of power in South Africa, its paradoxical ascendancy is traced to the development of capitalism and also to its central role in the "language of liberation" rhetoric employed not only by the traditional liberation movements but also by the students of Soweto in 1976 who opposed the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. Of particular significance has been the role played by the South African black middle class in its promotion of English as the country's *lingua franca*, and the chapter critically reflects on this.

In explaining the Nhlapo-Alexander hypothesis about the standardization of African languages, this chapter seeks to locate the language question in a broader global context, what Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) has described as *heteroglossia*, the "context over the text". In addition, I make the proposition, along the lines described by Boris Groys (2009), that the economy is driven by *numbers* whereas politics is driven by language, or *words*.

The power of the word

Alexander rarely used italics in his writings to emphasize an aspect of his arguments or of his assertions. When he did, he did so sparingly. What he tended to emphasize was not a word, a phrase or a sentence, but the sentence as a composition. And yet, each word, each phrase or each clause making up his sentences was a considered item of his imagination. He tended to weigh up the multiple meanings of words and concepts, and in his conceptual language laboratory, a daily task for Alexander was to write down, in cursive, his thoughts, and hand these writings over to his long-serving and loyal secretary, Venetia Naidoo, who would type his words on to A4 sheets and who would hand these sheets back to Alexander for his approval before they were sent or handed to other people.

As the internet developed, and electronic mail (email) shattered the world of delayed communications, of letter writing and of faxes, Alexander modified this physical engagement with his handwritten words and acquainted himself in the direct communication with the world outside and beyond his desk. He did so without abandoning his essential love for his transmogrified quill and the words formed by the electronic ink flowing from his poised and proverbial pen.

His detailed, intense and changing relationships with his words, and the words of other people who informed him, are a result of an affinity he had developed for *reading* and *listening* at the Holy Rosary Convent in Cradock, at the informal and the intellectually challenging "political school" of the Unity Movement and of Apdusa, at his and his fellow political inmates' "Robben Island University", and at the civic coalface of struggle against apartheid-capitalism, or against what he prefers to call racial capitalism.

The acknowledged sages of the world, from Plato, Copernicus, Machiavelli, Marx and Gramsci to Luxemburg and Brecht, had had their say about the world and the human condition, and they had had their say in their own words and in their own images. Their thoughts resonated with Alexander, but he also wanted to have his say about the world in his own words, and because of his training in collegial thinking in the Unity Movement, in the Yu Chi Chan Club and on Robben Island, his words about the world were accompanied by an acknowledgment of, and engagement with the thoughts of the people who were struggling alongside him in his quests to understand the world, and of the people who had lived before him.

This pursuit of creating a world in his own image and in the image of those around him, and in the words of the vocabulary he had acquired in English and German, took many turns and detours in his life. One such turn was when he left South Africa to study in Germany in 1958. In Germany, he joined the student wing of the Social Democratic Party. One of the iconic revolutionary theorists in Alexander's life, Rosa Luxemburg, had been a member of this party at the turn of the twentieth century. A new environment meant different influences and experiences, but his self-willed and disciplined training, both as a student at the University of Cape Town and through his mentorship with Minnie Gool and Isaac Tabata, meant that he saw himself as part of a collective, a group of many people, and that his individuality could only be realized through his interactions with others.

Unlike Columbus's euphemistically described voyages of discovery, which turned out to be great maritime treks to acquire distant lands and subjugate indigenes to the dictates of foreign powers, Alexander's quest was to enter a community of ideas and deeds to liberate minds and bodies from bondage. He wanted to do so locally and globally. He wanted to understand the

world *with*, and not necessarily *through*, the eyes of others, and he interpreted their struggles and their efforts at interpreting the world in their images.

When he wrote, he experimented with an expanding vocabulary in English and German. He was keen on developing arguments so that his readers or his listeners were better able to understand what he was trying to say, and not be disempowered or threatened by the complexity of his arguments. While the whole sentence was often more elegant than the total of words, phrases and clauses making up the sentence, his approach to his writing compositions involved his *meta* theory of writing and his *micro* understanding of the elements that make writing possible.

He wrote to advance the causes and the interests of oppressed and exploited people. The detailed attention he gave to the words and to the composition of his sentences was no different from the attention he gave to his politics, his sense of history and his development as an organic intellectual.

In his formative political training in the Unity Movement between 1953 and 1958, English was placed at the forefront of all the languages of communication. Its political principals insisted on the "correct" grammar, spelling, syntax and everyday use of the language. The standards and the norms were, for the most part, imported from the *Oxford Dictionary*, and reading English books and magazines was encouraged. I suspect that this exclusive use of the English language sat comfortably and uncomfortably with Alexander, the "country bumpkin from Cradock in the Eastern Cape whose command of the English language was always somewhat suspect" (Alexander 2013: 17).

Moreover, his interest in German was already established when he entered the didactic schools of the Unity Movement, where teaching and learning were revered and encouraged. English, for the Unity Movement theorists, was advocated as the *lingua franca* of the national liberation movement, and the only major language of communication that was spoken widely enough to open up communication channels across linguistic groups in South Africa and globally.

Alexander (1989a: 35–36) captures a polemical debate that took place in the NEUM's journal in the years 1956 to 1958, which was called the *Educational Journal*, on the use of English.

He describes the debate as "flowery, often verbose and incurably Eurocentric" (Alexander 1989a: 36). On the one side was a "Stalinist" position, which was written under a pseudonym, V.E. Rylate, positing the idea of a global dispensation or world order in which a few "major languages would become the main means of communication". On the other side was a "Leninist" position, which was posited by A.C. Jordan (his real name). Jordan, according to Alexander, asserts that all languages are equal as "means of communication and as bearers of culture and, therefore, entitled to equal rights and state support in a democratic culture" (Alexander 1989a: 36). He cites Rylate's "useful sociological generalisations" (Rylate, cited in Alexander 1989a: 36):

> [O]n the whole, the people's overwhelming and decided preference for English as medium over Afrikaans or 'Bantu' … is a reflection of their deep-felt need for a modern, highly cultured, nationally unified and democratic state as members of a modern world, and of the vast and hemmed-in and untapped human talents capable of building such a state on the basis of the natural resources and technological achievements and possibilities of the century.

However, for Alexander, Rylate got stuck in the "quicksands of mere rhetoric", whereas Jordan, who was versed in the studies of language, came to "unassailable conclusions" (Jordan, cited in Alexander 1989a: 37):

> In order to achieve their purpose, the rulers must exploit the universally accepted educational principle that the best way to impart knowledge is to use the pupil's own mother-tongue. As educationists, we cannot reject this principle. But as democrats, we reject the idea of a 'Bantu community' or 'Coloured community', and if the given mother-tongue is in such a state that it cannot take the child beyond the confines of the supposed 'own community', then we must insist that while the child continues to receive training in the use of his own mother-tongue, he should as early as possible receive instruction through a language that will ensure him a place in a world community.

While these debates raged on in the rather erudite pages of the *Educational Journal*, and conducted by the antagonists with such ferocity that they eventually degenerated into point-scoring exercises, a far more significant development had already taken place within the ranks of the African National Congress. Jacob Nhlapo, a teacher who was the headmaster at the Wilberforce Institute and who was a member of the ANC, had written a pamphlet in 1944 titled "Bantu Babel: Will the Bantu languages live?". This pamphlet prefigured and laid out

the initial policy propositions Alexander was to suggest many years later. According to Alexander (1989a: 32), Nhlapo was "one of the first South Africans to approach the question of language and national unity from a perspective that was not Anglocentric or elitist". Nhlapo (Nhlapo, cited in Alexander 1989a: 33), who was for Alexander the "voice of the future", wrote in 1944:

> English ought to be made the African 'Esperanto' while the question of the African Babel of tongues is being cleared up. Even when we have been able to make Nguni and Sotho the two mother languages – if ever we do manage to do this – English will still be the African 'Esperanto'. Even if we do not manage to build one joint Bantu language or two, English will still be the answer to the question of the many Bantu tongues as it has been in America, where nations from all parts of Europe found themselves living together.

This position was briefly debated but not systematically developed or taken up in the ANC. Alexander reports (1989a: 34) that, in the pages of the ANC's *Liberation* magazine in 1953 and 1954, Nhlapo's proposal that the spoken varieties of Nguni and Sotho language clusters be standardized in written form was met, firstly, by an "Africanist" response advocating the use of Swahili as Africa's lingua franca, and, secondly, by opposition from a member of the banned Communist Party of South Africa, Alan Doyle, who stressed the importance of the mother tongues of different language groups. Alexander's view is that these different positions opposing Nhlapo's initial propositions in the ANC were inadequate because they failed to acknowledge the "power of language planning as an instrument of social policy" (Alexander 1989a: 35) in the African and in the South African contexts.

Nhlapo's insight about the need to standardize, in written form, the Nguni and the Sotho clusters of languages came to grip Alexander's imagination, and has led to the "Nhlapo-Alexander hypothesis" in language policy proposals, debates and discussions. It is to the background and to the political context of this hypothesis that I now turn.

The languages of power in South Africa

The process leading to the eventual demotion of British capital to parliamentary and successive small oppositional roles for non-Afrikaner white people started in 1948 with the National Party (NP) electoral victory. English, as the dominant spoken and written language in the affairs of state, did not suffer the same fate. Buoyed by the class alliance between white

working class and white middle class people in its electoral victory at the polls, the new and unapologetic NP-led white state had two main political concerns. Firstly, it needed to "Afrikanerise" the state bureaucracy. Secondly, it needed to secure the physical and cultural separation and isolation of black people so that whites, particularly Afrikaans-speaking whites, could develop as a nation[2] as ordained by their deity.

In the formative years of implementing apartheid, D.J. du Toit, an Afrikaner who was charged with the responsibility of developing policies for black education, spelt out the racist assumptions underpinning the worldview of the post-1948 apartheid planners (Du Toit, cited in and translated by Cross 1999: 73–74):

> Ostensibly the natives will be absorbed by our culture, but in fact they will, by obtaining participation in our lives, *kaffirize* our whole social and political life …. The past shows us that … the whites who have sunk to the level of the *kaffirs* also *interbreed* with them. Differentiation, as it has been applied up to the present, results in assimilation by the natives. In principle and in practice we cannot accept assimilation. The only alternative is total segregation.

This fear of integration permeated the thinking of Afrikaner strategists before and after their 1948 electoral victory. It was a fear of integration that led to the ruling party's Bantustan policies, the so-called homelands' policies, to its genocidal efforts at forcibly removing black people from urban areas to remote rural compounds, and to its eventual "Total War" strategy to prevent a "communist takeover". In 1948, the apartheid state inherited the 1925 promulgation of English and Afrikaans as the official languages to communicate and assert its rule. Where Bantu languages were spoken, these were to be confined to the expanding townships and informal settlements of black dwellers that developed alongside and in the metropoles of the major cities such as Cape Town, Johannesburg, East London, Bloemfontein and Durban, or in rural settings where black people's "own cultures" could be developed.

[2] The ideologues and scribes of apartheid wrote, spoke and behaved as if the "Afrikaner nation" existed before its passage to political power and control over the geographical boundaries of a nation-state. At some level in the imagination of a people bounded by language and, to a large extent, religion, this belief in nationhood may well have been real, but it fails to deal with the dilemmas associated with fractious class interests and ideological differences. The historical works specifically on the rise of Afrikaner nationalism by Dan O'Meara (1984) and more generally on the nation as an "imagined community" by Benedict Anderson (1983) point to radically different interpretations from those advanced by apartheid ideologues and pro-National Party thinkers such as D.W. Kruger (1969) and D.J. du Toit in the citation above.

But Afrikaans-Dutch, or Afrikaans-Hollands, does not have the illustrious history that Afrikaner apartheid ideologues have suggested. Instead, the process of language acquisition and use was rudimentary, straightforward and rather simple, as Alexander (1989a) explains in his book, *Language policy and national unity in South Africa/Azania*.

Alexander writes that before the colonizers – first the Dutch through the Dutch East India Company and then the British – arrived on the shores of southern Africa, the languages spoken in the region were Bantu[3] derivatives. During their first years of landing, the Dutch used local linguists Autshomoa, Krotoa and Doman as interpreters. This was costly and the colonists had little interest to understand the local languages. Ever mindful of the need to reduce costs, the Dutch company decreed that "natives should learn our language, rather than we theirs" (cited in Alexander 1989a: 12–13). Company policy shifted from limited trade to one of "erratic colonisation", and the "demand for labour led to a dramatic change in the nature and quality of communication between the Dutch colonists and the indigenous groups". The Khoisan languages were brushed aside as the colonists invented themselves as "free burghers [free citizens]". Soon afterwards, Afrikaans-Hollands became the language of trade, politics, religion, education and social intercourse between "white and non-white" in the Western Cape. Alongside this, East Indian slaves at the Cape developed their own variety of Afrikaans-Hollands, which later came to be known as Bokaapse Afrikaans. By the end of the seventeenth century, the Cape's inhabitants were versed in Afrikaans-Hollands.

As for the English colonists at the beginning of the nineteenth century, after Khoisan speakers had discovered the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century and the Dutch in 1652 roaming the sandy shores of the Cape, the Anglicization policies of the British overlords and governors did not percolate into indigenized variations, but, as Alexander (1989a: 15–16) points out:

> British imperialism wanted to ensure that the ruling elite as well as the new generations of colonists were indoctrinated by means of English literature and manners into a uniform loyalty to the British Crown. Just like the Dutch before them, who had tried to minimise the

[3] There are about 250 languages making up the family of Bantu languages spoken in central, southeast and southern Africa. Most indigenously spoken languages in southern Africa have been traced back to Cameroun, with Swahili the most widely spoken. A further breakdown of languages is provided by Rajend Mesthrie (1995: xv) who contends that the major families of languages in South Africa are Khoesan, Niger-Kordofanian and Indo-European. The Bantu group belongs to the Niger-Kordofanian family.

> influence of Portuguese, they were intent on ensuring at worst a secondary role, at best no role at all for Dutch.

The British were in charge of the Cape Colony. Their jingoist language policy meant that English became

> the language of public discourse among Whites while Afrikaans/Dutch was pushed into the private and religious spheres. That is to say, speaking generally, English was the language of the courts, central and local government offices, the schools, newspapers, etc., while Afrikaans and Dutch were spoken mainly in the home and in church respectively. The rise of Afrikaner nationalism and the struggles between Boer and Briton in the wake of the mineral discoveries gradually led to an attitude of rejection towards English as a language among colonists of Dutch descent. (Alexander 1989a: 16)

While conflicting imperial ambitions drove the increasing divisions between the English newcomers and the now settled Dutch colonists, the role of the missionaries was, for Alexander, far more "decisive" in nineteenth century southern Africa. Alexander (1989) writes that the linking theme for all missionary societies operating in the subcontinent during this period was "to scatter the seeds of civilization and extending British interests, British influence and the British Empire". This Christianization of the African people was the "strategic thrust" to provide the "savage tribes" a superimposed confidence in the colonial government. Alexander remarks that in the schools set up by these missionaries, a tiny English-knowing black middle class was nurtured, and a working class was trained to be "a docile and efficient labour force which should accept European religious and political authority and social superiority". The majority of the missionaries were from England, but some came from France, Switzerland and Germany. With slight variations in emphases because of their linguistic and national origins, the overarching mission of the missionaries was "to spread the knowledge of English among African people" and to produce a crop of black preachers and teachers, the mission elite. Alexander (1989a: 18–19) elaborates on his view that the missionaries were acting unambiguously in the interests of the colonial powers:

> Although literacy in the Nguni and Sotho languages became the possession of only a handful of African people, it has to be stressed that the missionaries became invaluable agents of colonial rule in that they helped to train a core of people who could spread the knowledge of the Bible among the colonised people and when necessary could act as interpreters in courts

> and in other government institutions. Again it must be stressed that in most cases the missionaries were only or primarily concerned with evangelisation. But because of their position on the side of the ruling class, it was impossible to expect that they would do anything to undermine the system. Indeed, they inevitably facilitated the conquest, dispossession and subjugation of the indigenous people.

Some missionaries had learnt the local languages and some became adept at writing down indigenous languages, translating passages from the Bible. Their overriding mission was to provide ancillary support to the colonial regimes.

In this formative period of English promotion in southern Africa, the British colonial language policy tolerated primary schooling in indigenous languages and insisted on English-medium instruction in the Anglocentric curriculum for the small mission elite. Alexander (1989a: 20) argues that, for the colonized people, "this meant that English language and cultural traits acquired an economic and social value that was treasured above all else while their own languages and many of their cultural traits were devalued and often despised".

With only slight variations and amendments in policy, this English domination persisted well into the twentieth century in all the British colonies of southern Africa, including the transition period from 1910 to when the Afrikaner National Party took over the reins of political authority in 1948. But the changing political fortunes in the English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking white settler groups combined with growing dissension among white Afrikaners about English domination in the polities of the subcontinent meant that either resistance or acquiescence to English hegemony was inevitable.

In 1949, the National Party government appointed the Eiselen Commission to inquire into and to compile a report on all aspects of "native education". The commission's recommendations laid the groundwork for the *Bantu Education Act No. 47 of 1953* (SAHO n.d.; Kros 2010). Alexander cites and concurs with Wilson and Thompson's (1971) assessment of the Afrikaners' educational policy designed for black people: "The anti-assimilationist and anti-urban aim of the policy was quite explicit. The emphasis on vernacular instruction was to be the main instrument to promote separateness." Rooted in what Alexander calls German Romanticism of the eighteenth century, especially from

Fichtean and neo-Fichtean idealism[4] about the "dignity of each and every human being and their right to promote their own language and culture", the *Bantu Education Act* was one of a raft of legislative interventions[5] by Hendrik Verwoerd, who was the minister of native affairs under the D.F. Malan-led and then under the J.G Strijdom-led National Party government until 1958 when Verwoerd himself became prime minister.

Under the euphemistically called separate development policies, the apartheid rulers were intent on breaking up the country into "self-governing units". Their language policy continued along the established and tested lines of British colonial policy but "with the substitution of Afrikaans for English as the language of domination and social accommodation" (Alexander 1989a: 21). Where Afrikaans could not be imposed as the language of domination, it was promoted "on a basis of equality with English in all spheres and facets of life".

The language of liberation and the paradox of English

For much of the early part of the twentieth century, the language question featured less prominently within the ranks of the liberation movement. When the question did arise, it was considered more as part of a broader struggle for universal franchise, and as part of a quest for nationhood and national unity among the oppressed people.

Abdullah Abdurahman, arguably one of the more articulate voices of the urban "Coloured" elite in Cape Town, and a leader of the African People's Organisation, is quoted by Alexander (Abdurahman, cited in Alexander 1989a: 29):

> The question naturally arises which is to be the official language. Shall it be the degraded forms of a literary language, a vulgar patois; or shall it be that language which Macaulay says is 'In force, in richness, in aptitude for all the highest purposes of the poet, the philosopher, and the orator inferior to the tongue of Greece alone?' Shall it be the language of the

[4] Johann Gottlieb Fichte was an eighteenth century German philosopher who became a leading figure in German idealism. Developing the propositions of self-awareness and self-consciousness of another German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, Fichte's ideas were embraced by both left-wing and right-wing ideologues.
[5] Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd was prime minister of South Africa from 1958 to 1966. Before this he was the Minister of Native Affairs in D.F. Malan's cabinet. Verwoerd pushed through legislation that came to be pillars of the apartheid state. These include the *Population Registration Act 1950*, the *Group Areas Act 1950*, the *Reservation of Separate Amenities Act 1953*, and *the Bantu Education Act 1953*. In the late 1920s, Verwoerd had studied in Germany.

> ‘Kombuis’ [Kitchen] or the language of Tennyson? Shall it be the Taal [Afrikaans] or English? …. Now this problem of language concerns our people and I think it should be the aim of all our members to seek to cultivate the English tongue wherever and whenever practicable or possible.

In this presidential address to the African People’s Organisation in 1912, Abdurahman’s preference for English was unambiguous, and not surprisingly, it resonated well with the other elite black groups as well. The mission-educated elite of black resistance was following through on one of the linguistic conditions for eventual assimilation into the British Empire and foreign domination.

For the African National Congress and the Communist Party of South Africa, systematic efforts to cultivate English were small and erratic. In the 1930s and 1940s, only the Communist Party of South Africa actively promoted night-school classes in English among the workers on the Witwatersrand and in the Western Cape (Roux 1964). Alexander (1989a) records that it was in the Communist Party that the first serious attention was given to the position of indigenous African languages spoken in South Africa. In 1932, Moses Kotane, before he became the general secretary of the Communist Party, is reported to have said (Kotane, cited in Alexander 1989a: 31–32):

> The language question would form one of the main difficulties. There is no one language which is sufficiently known and spoken by a majority of the people in Africa. Zulu is spoken mainly in Natal, Xhosa in the Eastern Cape; Sotho in Basutoland, and in some parts of the Free State, Tswana in Bechuanaland, western and north-western Transvaal, as are Sepedi, Tshivenda and Shangaan in the eastern and northern Transvaal. Neither English nor Afrikaans is widely spoken among Africans. So, while in each republic or national area everything would be conducted in the language of its people, there still remains the problem of the official national language to be solved. Nevertheless, this could be settled by the common consent of all.

While these words were not translated into policy, they summed up the language position of the ANC and the Communist Party for decades after they were first uttered by Kotane. What was being asserted was a respectful embrace of indigenous languages, and an equally respectful embrace of African novelist and thinker Chinua Achebe’s “fatalistic logic” of the English language’s hegemonic status in the national and the African continental discourse.

For the Unity Movement, the relationship of English to other spoken languages was also addressed in the 1950s. Despite the often vitriolic and at times highly personalized polemics of the contending parties in the debate, two key issues are of consequence to the understanding of the language question. Firstly, and in tune with the broader liberation movement at the time, there was an acceptance of the unchallenged position of English as the language of communication globally. Secondly, while there was an acceptance of the indigenous languages as the actually existing means of communication and carriers of culture among ordinary folk, local people were not in a position to challenge the hegemonic status of English.

The black consciousness movement (Malan 1997) in the early 1970s was not overtly concerned with the language question, but the momentum it set up and the events of Soweto 1976 were instrumental in defining the liberation movement's approach to English and Afrikaans as the main contenders for acceptance among the educated black elites of the oppressed majority. A paradox of South African liberation history is that black students in 1976 rejected Afrikaans. The students were adamant that the "language of the oppressor", Afrikaans, was not going to be frog-marched down their throats, and yet, at the same time, they accepted and demanded that English be the language of instruction at black schools. They rejected the language of their current oppressor, only to demand the continued use of the language of a former colonizer.

For the black trade union movement, missionary-educated Clements Kadalie, who formed the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU) in 1919, was opposed to political trade unionism and sought to achieve workers' rights through shop-floor negotiations.[6] Since its inception, the trade union movement in South Africa elected to do its business through the medium of English, from the exiled voices of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu) to the militant incarnations of union activism of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu), the National Council of Trade Unions (Nactu) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu). While the development of trade unionism has been recorded and

[6] There are conflicting views about Kadalie. Salomon (1971), on the one hand, provides a critical review of Kadalie's autobiography titled *My life and the I.C.U.: The autobiography of a trade unionist in South Africa*. On the other, Rhoda Kadalie (2001), the former political activist, is more positive about her grandfather: "My father never talks about Clements, I think he was disappointed in him as a father, though he sometimes tells me that I'm a chip off the old block because of my activism."

reported on elsewhere and while the synergies between trade unionism and the national liberation movement have been widely commented on and analysed, the overtly political positions advocated by successive leaderships of the various trade union federations have generally followed, with some exceptions, those taken by the leaderships of the political movements to which they were aligned or which the trade unions supported (Karis and Carter 1972; Lewis 1984). Broadly speaking, Fosatu was an independent federation, Nactu (or its predecessor, the Council of Unions of South Africa (Cusa)) was aligned with the BC movement, and Sactu and Cosatu came to be alliance "partners" of the ANC. Without exception, the leaderships of all trade union federations conducted their official and public business in English.

Elsewhere on the African continent, national liberation movements and anti-colonial struggles were challenging imposed authority and foreign domination, and notions of national liberation were rarely put forward without considerations of the language question. In 1970, Amilcar Cabral, one of Africa's foremost liberation theorists and practitioners, had little doubt about the "progressive assimilation" of native populations. According to Cabral (Vambe and Zegeye 2007: 171–176), the colonial powers either physically annihilate indigenous populations or they seek to "harmonise economic and political domination of these with their cultural personality". This harmonization is hedged about with a military shield, and the colonial state acts both as enforcer and as policeman in the cultural life of a subjugated people. In defining a national culture for liberation, Cabral insists that the movements for change must be able "to conserve the positive cultural values of every social group" to strive for a confluence of these values in the "stream of struggle", which is a metaphor that Alexander has also used in his description of national unification and multilingualism. While Cabral was writing about Guinea Bissau, the implication is equally applicable for the South African case. Allowing indigenous languages to be used in daily discussion and in the formative years of formal instruction in schools does not necessarily negate the overarching language(s) of power and its (their) role in developing hierarchies of domination and subjugation. At a primary level, allowing the use of indigenous language may also limit the scale of the dominant discourses in the polity, especially those discourses fundamental to the reproduction of the capitalist system, Cabral argues.

Even though Cabral does not explicitly present a detailed analysis of the language question in Guinea Bissau and the Cape Verde Islands in his writings, he refers to the language groups in his country. He spoke and wrote in Portuguese and English, and in his literary works, his focus on reclaiming history includes an interpretation of cultural reflections about the language question. He not only confirms that language is a carrier of culture, but he asserts its centrality in resistance to colonialism and to the assimilation of indigenous cultures and languages into western variations of democracy.

Further south, the liberation movements of Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Namibia were moving towards governing their countries. As in Guinea Bissau, the Portuguese were given their marching orders in Angola and Mozambique. While the language question was inextricably part of the national question and the movement for national liberation in Angola and Mozambique, the language questions in Zimbabwe and in Namibia have a direct bearing on the South African variation because of the hegemonic status of English in both these countries.

Alexander paraphrases Emmanuel Ngara, who posits two policy options in the then Southern Rhodesia and whose analysis of the Zimbabwean language question inspired Alexander's 1989 booklet on language policy. For Alexander (1989a: 41), Ngara proposes:

(a) That there be three languages in Zimbabwe: Shona, Ndebele and English. That Shona and Ndebele be called national languages and that both be accorded official status. That English be the language of international communication and the prime medium of higher education.

(b) That there be one national language in Zimbabwe, Shona, the majority language of the nation, the language of Zimbabwe culture of the past, the language of the Mutapa emperors. That the national language be the main vehicle for the development of national culture. That English be an official language of international communication and the prime medium of higher education for as long as the people of Zimbabwe find it necessary to use it.

Alexander writes that independent Zimbabwe "in fact adopted a modified version of the first option". He refers to Kathleen Heugh's study (1987) on the underlying "ideologies of language medium policies in multilingual societies" to support his view that English was thought to be the "linking language of national unity in spite of its colonialist origins". In fact, Alexander writes, after 1984 parents in Zimbabwe could choose "to have their children

taught in English, Shona or Ndebele for the first three years of schooling, after which English became the only means of instruction". Heugh concludes that Zimbabwe followed the same "familiar route" that other ex-colonial countries had travelled in the first decade of independence (Heugh, cited in Alexander 1989a: 42):

> What we have witnessed thus far in the early years after independence is a familiar pattern where English is selected as a language of wider communication and also one which acts as a unifying bond where intense rivalries exist between major groups within that newly independent state …. [A]fter the initial language policy has been made, adjustments are gradually made to give greater emphasis to indigenous languages.

Heugh says the trend in Zimbabwe was then towards bilingualism because of a "growing sense of pride" in the indigenous languages. Independence in 1980 not only brought about a pride in local languages, but a commitment, at least in terms of policy, to develop the written standards of Shona and Ndebele, and to have either of the two local languages occupy a status alongside English in national communications.

In Namibia, the language question was different. English and Afrikaans – the two official languages of its colonial occupier, South Africa – occupied pride of place in the hierarchy of instructional media. There were ten spoken languages. In a 1970 census (cited in Swapo 1981), over 53 per cent of the population spoke Ovambo (there are eight Ovambo dialects of which Ndonga and Kwanyama have a written standard), 0.8 per cent spoke English, and 29.2 per cent spoke Afrikaans. Herero speakers accounted for 7.6 per cent and German was spoken by 2 per cent. Alexander argues that the South West African People's Organisation (Swapo) had already decided before independence in 1990 that English should be the official language of Namibia. He quotes Hage Geingob, who was the director of the United Nations Institute for Namibia in Lusaka in the 1980s and who later became the prime minister of an independent Namibia under a Swapo government, to support his view (Alexander 1989a: 44):

> In spite of the difficulties inherent in the task of implementing English as the official language for Namibia, the Namibian people will rise to the occasion. This decision, however, does not imply that the indigenous languages are being dismissed. Local languages have a vital role to play in society and there will be a need for an overall multilingual language policy, both long-term and short-term, in which various languages are institutionalized to their greatest advantage.

In Zimbabwe and in Namibia, and despite the growing "sense of pride" in indigenous languages that Heugh mentions in the afterglow of political freedoms accompanying the inauguration of a new democratic dispensation, English as the hegemonic language of communication has come to be accepted by political principals and by leading academics. In South Africa, the black middle classes that form the backbone of the post-1994 political order in South Africa have also acquiesced to this hegemony.

There are at least 25 languages spoken in South Africa. In 1980, the mostly widely spoken languages were Zulu and Xhosa, which, according to the census data of that year, had 6.05 million and 2.87 million speakers, respectively. English and Afrikaans had 2.58 million and 1.76 million. North Sotho and South Sotho had a combined total 4.29 million speakers (Census table reprinted in Alexander 1989b: 7). These figures are dramatically increased by Schuring (cited in Mesthrie 1995: xvii) in 1990: Zulu: 8.5 million speakers; Xhosa: 6.9 million; North Sotho: 3.4 million; South Sotho: 2.7 million; Afrikaans: 6.2 million; English: 3.4 million.

Mesthrie (1995: xvii) provides the following overview:

> A present-day functional profile of the languages of South Africa would show a hierarchy, however, with English dominant in commerce, higher education, industry and now in government; and Afrikaans dominant, until recently, in the civil service and government, and in the police, army and navy. African languages have not, however, been silent in public life. They are used as media of instruction in primary schools catering for African pupils, sometimes unofficially even after the switch-over to English by the fifth year of schooling.

The apartheid language policy and Christian National Education, which was the official policy of the National Party government, dictated that African languages were separated through "lexical and other corpus-planning manoeuvres" (Alexander 1997). These languages were kept at a level, or were relegated to what Alexander calls "Ausbau-languages", which means that even though the different strands or varieties of a particular language cluster, such as Nguni or Sotho, could well have been developed into a written standard form, they were deliberately kept apart to systematically underdevelop them, despite the apartheid rulers' public pronouncements that they were in fact modernizing the indigenous languages.

South Africa's rulers before 1994 were intent on balkanizing even further the presumed ethnicities or "nations" that they were busy constructing. Their Bantustan policies were an economic failure, and their efforts to herd people into different geographical units defined by their supposed ethnic origins or their spoken languages were unmanageable.

On the other hand, the political leaders of the oppressed people were almost "incurably Anglocentric" (Alexander 1985; 1989) and not only opposed Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in black schools since 1976, but insisted instead that English be used because it represented the "language of liberation" as evidenced in other African countries where liberation movements successfully defeated colonialism. In Alexander's assessment of the hegemonic role of English, this subordination to English by the essentially middle class leaderships of the ANC, the PAC, the Black Consciousness Movement, the Unity Movement and also by the independent Marxists including those who were involved in the black trade union movement, was because it "was the only language that could compete with Afrikaans as a means to power". It was the "only means to international communication and the world at the disposal of South Africa's elites" (Alexander 1997). What seems to have been absent from the thinking of the political leadership of the majority of black people was the historical precedent set by Afrikaners in their cultural and economic movement[7] to oppose the imposition of English at the turn of the twentieth century, and through this movement create a social cohesion in which African languages could incubate and grow in written forms.

For Alexander, the political leaderships of the oppressed people had no intention to denigrate African languages, but they also lacked the political will to "develop, modernise and spread the knowledge of the indigenous languages both for the intrinsic empowering value of such an exercise and as an explicit strategy of cultural-political resistance". In a rare and self-effacing way, Alexander admits that the language question has turned into "yet another crisis for our people … of our own making". He sketches the complex interplay between economic imperatives and the "high status languages" (Alexander 1997: 82–92):

[7] The now infamous and extensively researched *taalbeweging* (language movement), which has been exhaustively narrated and commented on by Afrikaner nationalist historians and cultural commissars, was part of and provided an impetus to an organized resistance to English domination in the cultural life of Afrikaners, and which resulted in the eventual equality of status awarded to Afrikaans as an official language, alongside English, in 1925. On the origins and the morphological structures of the language, Roberge's (1995) study is pertinent. On the sociolinguistic and political implications of the economic vehicles used by Afrikaners to accompany their rise to a language power, O'Meara's (1983) analyses and critiques are essential reading.

> In a nutshell, the crisis is characterised by the fact that the vast majority of our people do not at present have a sufficient command of the high status languages (English and Afrikaans) so that they can compete for well paid jobs and prestigious career options on a basis of equality with the 20% of the population who do have the requisite language skills. On the other hand, the language resources that the majority do have (most of the metropolitan and urban population can speak with high proficiency at least two – often radically different – African languages), are not validated in the market place. In other words, the indigenous languages are not accorded a status such that knowing them is of material benefit or social benefit to the speaker outside the relevant speech community itself.

Alexander concurs with Cameroonian scholar Beban Sammy Chumbow, who has argued forcefully for the development and modernization of the indigenous languages in Africa. Chumbow asserts that "greater access to education, optimal utilisation of human resources, diffusion of innovations in appropriate technology" require a re-examination of national language policies so that the "foreign language of wider communication is used along with the indigenous languages of wider communication so as to optimize the linguistic resources of the nation and maximize the use of Science and Technology and Research and Development in the service of national development" (cited in Alexander 1997). Chumbow recognizes that modernizing indigenous languages is not an easy task. It is "fraught" with problems and difficulties whose roots are to be found in multilingualism and "multi-ethnicities" in Africa. Language planning, says Chumbow, to "provide solutions to identified language-related and language-dependent problems" can be done. Especially for the future of science and technology, he concludes, it is imperative that the empowerment of people through the democratization of access to knowledge takes place.

Alexander has been determined about the need to teach people in their home languages. In South Africa where a minimum of at least two languages are spoken by the population, and which is a *de facto* multilingual country, the former colonial[8] language (English) should be one of the "package of languages to be learned". He cites sociologist Kwesi Kwaa Prah who maintains that the educational policies of post-colonial African governments that neglected

[8] Afrikaans, on the other hand, is regarded as an indigenous, or at best a naturalized language even though its origins lie in the lexical and morphological structures of colonial Dutch diction. It has been "creolised" by Afrikaners, and by the Khoisan and the Malay populations of the Western Cape.

the modernization and development of home languages are one of the reasons for the "abysmal failure of all economic programmes on the continent".

Alexander contends that a systematic focus on language development is critical to a liberated society. He considers a democratic language policy to be vital for such a society to be imagined and brought into force, and he takes as his point of departure the events of 1976 to suggest a process of "language planning from below". He also says somewhat ambitiously that the formation of the National Language Project (NLP), which he initiated in 1986, heralded a new beginning of a more co-ordinated advocacy process for a new language dispensation.

Before 1994, language policies had served colonial, sectional and capitalist interests in South Africa. The "new South Africa" adopted new principles, which are deeply grounded in social democracy, fairness and justice, and these are spelt out in the country's Constitution. A new language policy emerged out of this new constitutional dispensation, and in May 1996, the country's Constitutional Assembly, which was charged with the responsibility of drawing up the new constitution, adopted what perhaps can be described as one of the most progressive frameworks of language dispensation the African continent has ever seen. Alexander (1997: 82–92) writes that the Constitutional Assembly adopted a constitution that provides for

- the promotion of multilingualism;
- the provision of interpreting and translation services;
- the equal treatment of languages spoken in South Africa;
- the development and modernisation of the African languages;
- the officialisation of 11 of the languages spoken in South Africa, namely: Afrikaans, English, Ndebele, Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, Swati, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa; Zulu;
- a Pan-South African Language Board (PANSALB) to act as a kind of language ombudsman regarding not only the 11 official languages but also Khoi, Nama, sign language, and a number of other languages used either for religious or communal purposes;
- the prohibition of the use of any language for the purpose of discrimination, exploitation and oppression.

The linguist and academic, Nkonko Kamwangamalu (2004: 198–199), writes:

> The population of South Africa is not only multiracial but it is also multilingual. It is estimated that about 25 languages are spoken within South Africa's borders. Of these, 11 have been accorded official status …. All official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably (The Constitution, 1996, Chapter 1, Section 6(2)).

In an otherwise informative and clearly argued article, Kamwangamalu appears stuck in a pluralist-liberal paradigm, describing the composition of South Africa's population groups in "multiracial"[9] terms. Despite this, his purview of language not only encompasses the simple and profound decision by the democratic government to opt for 11 official languages, but it also includes comments about the *de facto* domination of English as the lead language in market and national communications. In confirming Mesthrie's (1995) overview of English domination, Kamwangamalu (2004: 243) writes:

> As far as the market forces are concerned, there is no sustained demand for multilingual skills in the African languages for academic, economic, administrative and employment purposes. The lack of this demand has ensured that English and to some extent Afrikaans remain central to virtually all the higher domains of language use. As Verhoef (1998: 192) remarks, the demand for multilingual skills in the African languages would contribute towards raising the status of these languages and change the way in which the languages are perceived by the different language communities …. [B]lack South Africans have ambivalent attitudes towards their own languages: they value the languages highly only as symbols of ethnolinguistic identity and as vehicles for intergenerational transmission of indigenous cultures and traditions; but they prefer English for all the higher-level functions and for personal upward mobility (see Slabbert, 1994; Verhoef, 1998; Virasamy, 1997).

Kamwangamalu argues there are additional factors inhibiting the policy implementation of African languages. The legacy of apartheid, which has left an indelible mark on the status of these languages, is one such factor. In addition to this legacy, he lists "elite closure" as a reference to linguistic divergence that was created "as a result of using a language which is only known to or preferred by the elite, in this case English", as well as "linguicism", which is an ideology of the dominant or ruling class where English and Afrikaans are given a "higher social status than the indigenous languages".

[9] The term "multiracialism" is premised on the notion that many "races" exist in South Africa, and goes against Alexander's sociological paradox, "while there is no such thing as 'race', racism exists".

In the 1996 Census and the 2001 Census (Stats SA 1996; 2001), the languages spoken by most South Africans are Zulu, Xhosa and Afrikaans. In a comparative study published on its website, Statistics South Africa (Stats SA, cited in Dollie 2011: 113) narrates the order of language preferences:

> The most frequently spoken first home languages in both census years [1996 and 2001] was isiZulu. It was spoken by 9,2 million people in 1996, increasing to 10,7 million in 2001. This was followed by isiXhosa, spoken by 7,2 million in 1996 and 7,9 million in 2001. The third most frequently spoken first home language was Afrikaans, spoken by 5,8 million in 1996, increasing to 6,0 million in 2001. The least frequently spoken first home language, of the eleven official languages of South Africa, was isiNdebele, spoken by 587 000 in 1996, increasing to 712 000 in 2001. The nine official indigenous African languages were spoken as first home languages by 76,5% of the population at the time of Census '96, increasing to 77,9% at the time of Census 2001. Afrikaans and English together were spoken as first home languages by 23,1 of the population in 1996, decreasing to 21,5% in 2001.

Stats SA says the ranking order of the different first home languages remained the same in 1996 and in 2001.

In his study, Kamwangamalu (2004: 259) states that Afrikaans is the only language that "could present a challenge to the hegemony of English in all the higher domains, except diplomacy". As the third most spoken home language, Afrikaans has just over 6 million speakers, but in a population of just under 45 million in 2001, these people account for only 13.3 per cent of the population. The census data also suggest that 23 per cent of South Africans spoke English and Afrikaans as home languages, which means that less than 10 per cent of the population actually conversed in English in their homes. Despite this, English remains the *de facto* means of official communication in all state departments, and the *lingua franca* of most of the country's business principals.

Kamwangamalu (2004: 257) says the spoken languages in South Africa co-exist in a "hierarchical, three-tier, trilingual system, one in which English is at the top, Afrikaans in the middle, and the African languages at the bottom". He describes this as "asymmetrical multilingualism" because English has more prestige than others, and he concludes that there is a "mismatch" between the state's multilingual policy and practice.

Alexander approaches the issue of English language domination, and the hegemonic status of English, differently. His view is that it can be seen through a range of lenses, but the "kaleidoscope" of class and power seems the most compelling. In a more strident tone, and in a more critical commentary on the emergence of the post-1994 "middle-class language policy", Alexander's (1997: 82–92) critique is undisguised:

> The seduction of an English-only or an English-mainly policy comes from both economic and ideological sources. On the surface, it appears to people who already have proficiency in English (the world language) that the most economical language policy consists of encouraging or even compelling everybody to learn English even at the expense of their first languages. Such a policy, it is believed, will cost much less than a policy of multilingualism which involves, among other things, thousands of translators and interpreters. Ideologically, those who are proficient in English are in possession of invaluable cultural capital; the sky is the limit for them as far as high-paying jobs and career options are concerned in a context of poverty and inequality. Such unspoken, perhaps even unconscious, pressures are decisive in the emergence of a *middle-class language policy* [my italics].

This position, which Alexander has been developing, refining and advocating since the publication of his *One Azania, one nation in* 1979, is not dissimilar to Sam Nolutshungu's (1982: 116–146, 147–187) critique of the black consciousness movement. Nolutshungu's critique is that the class interests and class values that drove the nationalist leaderships, including the vanguard of the BC movement, could be accommodated within a de-racialised post-apartheid capitalist state. As it turns out in 2014, this "elite accommodation" of black political managers is now an established and an accepted fact in the former silos of white privilege, power and access to resources.

For Alexander, the "middle-class" language policy of the post-apartheid state is both an expression of the will of the politically dominant elite and a chosen, self-conscious tool that is driven by the politically and ideologically inspired gatekeepers of the market economy or of the misnomer called the "free market". English is the chosen language because there is a coincidence of interests between the politically dominant middle class black people and owners of capital, and these interests are not necessarily confined to the motives of profit but also to the perceived and real benefits provided in the reproduction of the capitalist system.

While the financially well-endowed Chinese[10] (China 2011; The Economist 2011) and other east Asian polyglot empires have not only expressed an interest in investing their not inconsiderable dollar reserves on the African continent, with the corollary that there might be an infusion of different languages with which to "play in the market", for the foreseeable future, English, as the international and the national lexicon of power, will remain dominant in the corridors of economic and political decision-making.

The black middle class and the language of power

Former trade unionist and former journalist Moeletsi Mbeki (2009) asserts that South Africa had three elite groupings after the Anglo-Boer war at the turn of the twentieth century. He calls these the English commercial elite, the Afrikaner elite and the African elite. Mbeki (2009: 45) writes the old African aristocratic elite that "had ruled African societies and led the resistance to colonisation was physically annihilated by the British in the nineteenth century". The African elite at the turn of the twentieth century was "new". It comprised "acculturated and Christianised elites that had arisen in the Cape and the colonies, promoted first by the missionaries and later by the British government as valuable allies" to suppress the "tribes".

The origins of the black middle class can be traced back to the 1830s, says Mbeki (2009: 55), when the British realised "they could not crush the Xhosa without forming alliances with other African tribes". To this end, the British turned the indigenous leaders into military allies. Mbeki (2009: 55–56) reports:

> The British introduced their black allies to the ways of the modern capitalist world at the time. They transformed them into peasant farmers and acquainted them with Western religion, writing, modern medicine, Western clothing, modern citizenship and electoral politics …. Out of this peasantry emerged South Africa's African middle class – Christian, missionary educated, Anglophile, liberal, pro-capitalist and attuned to parliamentary democracy, which was introduced by the British in the Cape Colony in the 1850s. The African middle class was soon joined, in particular, by the freed Malay and other slaves, many of whom became independent entrepreneurs after the abolition of slavery in 1834–38. During the last quarter of

[10] Unlike the only remaining superpower, the United States of America, in the world today, China does not run its financial global arrangements on debt, but on a considerable surplus of dollars. In 2011, China's foreign reserves were estimated at US$3.04 trillion.

> the nineteenth century the former peasant and former slave middle class was joined by free Indians who had paid their way to South Africa and worked as independent merchants, teachers and doctors. The most famous of these was Cambridge-educated Mohandas Gandhi [Gandhi was in fact educated at Inns of Court in London, and he studied law].

Through the churches, through productive participation in the semi-skilled and skilled professions, and through non-governmental organizations, a black middle class began to evolve, and "remained the torchbearer of democracy in South Africa for 100 years while its nineteenth-century partners, the British imperialists, had swapped democracy for super profits from diamonds and gold" (Mbeki 2009: 57). It was this pool of people from which the "democratic leadership" of the country emerged:

> In 1994, it emerged as a powerful black elite that controlled significant institutions, such as the South African Council of Churches and the Catholic Bishops Conference. It provided political leadership to the formidable trade union movements of Cosatu and the National Congress of Trade Unions (Nactu). It was thus seen at home and abroad – by South African big business, by foreign investors and by the British and Americans – as the natural replacement for the floundering Afrikaner elite that had ruled the country since 1907, although, unlike that elite, it still had very little economic power. (Mbeki 2009: 57)

Mbeki explains the three ideological characteristics of the black elite. The "first ideology" developed in the mid-nineteenth century as British liberalism, "which promoted the sanctity of private property, freedom of speech and association and elected government" (Mbeki 2009: 58). Grafted on to this liberalism, the "second ideology" was an African nationalism, which

> arose initially in response to attempts by mining companies to dispossess African peasants in order to drive them to the diamond and gold mines as cheap, unskilled manual labour …. African nationalism in South Africa dovetailed with liberalism in that it also promoted individual entrepreneurship. (Mbeki 2009: 58)

For the "third ideology", social democracy entered the mind-set of the black elite in the second half of the twentieth century through the "influence of the South African Communist Party, the Soviet and Chinese communist parties and the social democratic parties of Western Europe" (Mbeki 2009: 60). Mbeki adds that these variations of social democracy were based

on “statist economic models”, and not on socialism. The advocates of this variation of social democracy wanted to break the power of white-owned corporations so that the black elite could enter the world of business. Mbeki quotes Nelson Mandela’s explanation of the ANC’s Freedom Charter before the future president capitulated to the interests of international capital:

> The charter strikes a fatal blow at the financial and gold mining monopolies that have for centuries plundered the country and condemned its people to servitude. The breaking up and democratisation of these monopolies will open up fresh fields for the development of a prosperous non-European bourgeois class. (Mandela, quoted in Mbeki 2009: 61)

Mbeki sums up his interpretation of the black elite in a remarkably trenchant paragraph on the post-1994 democratically elected government’s policy of Black Economic Empowerment:

> Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) has not, however, proved to be the fatal blow to South Africa’s oligarchs that Nelson Mandela and black nationalists of his era once envisioned. In fact, it strikes a fatal blow against the emergence of black entrepreneurship by creating a small class of unproductive but wealthy black crony capitalists made up of ANC politicians, some retired others not, who have become strong allies of the economic oligarchy that is, ironically, the caretaker of South Africa’s de-industrialisation. (Mbeki 2009: 61)

In 2007, South Africa’s black middle class had grown from 2 million people to about 2.6 million, an increase of 30 per cent over the previous year’s estimates. Its spending power rose from R130 billion to R180 billion. In 2010 terms, this means that the middle class, which was estimated at over 3 million people, made up 6 per cent of the population of just under 50 million. This growing stratum of black people represents a wage earning class, and fractions of the class, which includes lawyers, doctors, technicians, judges, teachers, sportsmen and sportswomen, academics, and arguably its most politically powerful layer, the state bureaucracy whose count is pegged at about 1 million people. It is this group of skilled and semi-skilled people that has become the willing and acquiescent foot soldiers to disseminate and reproduce the cultural and ideological values of the ANC and other nationalist political groupings such as Azapo and the PAC, both of which have thrown their lot in with the post-1994 political regime. But it is also this group or social class or fraction of a class that has remained second in charge in determining economic priorities, despite its characterization as

being the “most important economic grouping” (University of Cape Town/Unilever Institute of Strategic Marketing and TNS Research Surveys 2007).

This layer of people has had access to public and private English-language schools or English-medium schools, and has become the much-maligned “black Englishmen” of the twenty-first century, which Alexander (1989: 18) cites and which has been pejoratively referred to as the new crop of “radical black activists”. The children of this middle class attend either privately funded or “good” government schools in middle class areas and suburbs. In the private schools, over 70 per cent of children are black. The Department of Education’s Country Report (2011: 1) provides a detailed breakdown of learner figures:

> The current scope of school education is indicated by the following summary data. Overall, in 2009, the schooling system in South Africa has over 12 million learners enrolled in more than 25 000 schools with over 400 000 educators teaching in South African schools. Like in other countries, the schooling system comprises of public and independent sectors. More than 11 million learners were enrolled in 24 699 ordinary schools …. While 393 447 learners attended 1 207 independent ordinary schools, and were taught by 25 230 educators.

While relatively small in comparison with the rest of the population, the political power that this middle class group of people wields on the cultural life of the country is evidently decisive. It is this group of people that insists on the continuation and reinforcement of English as the language of instruction in primary, secondary and tertiary schooling. This group is both the unstated opposition facing South African language planners in implementing multilingualism in formal schooling, and, if won over to the side of the poor, it can also presumably be the main mover behind any efforts at ensuring that multilingualism is implemented by the state.

The power of languages and the Nhlapo-Alexander proposition

Alexander’s leitmotif has been the political sphere of human relationships, human thought, human communication and human action. For Alexander, as a self-professed and yet reluctant “sociologist of language” and a political activist, the domain of culture occupied pride of place in his thinking. His studies of the national question and the language question have suggested an overarching interest in the clash of politics, and the ambiguities embedded in relationships that signify and that capture ongoing conflicts between the “state” and the

“people”. In this regard, he stands in long line of Marxist theoreticians who, while emphasizing the centrality of economics in their analyses of societies, have also emphasized the defining role of political motivations in their deliberations.

Boris Groys, a sociolinguist and Marxist theoretician, provides a deceptively straightforward description of language, politics and economics in his assessment of the Soviet Union’s trajectory:

> The economy functions in the medium of money. It operates with numbers. Politics functions in the medium of language. It operates with words – with arguments, programmes and petitions, but also with commands, prohibitions, resolutions and decrees. The communist revolution is the transcription of society from the medium of money to the medium of language. It is a linguistic turn at the level of social praxis. (Groys 2009: xv)

For Groys, the capture of state power by Lenin and the Bolsheviks in the 1917 Russian social revolution was about securing political control to move the economy in non-market directions, and therefore away from commodity-based and profit-oriented production. It meant that a new philosophy about productive and human value could be set in motion, and in which the subordination of the economy to politics would be made explicit. But this cultural and attitudinal shift was achieved not without contradiction and conflict and, at least for Groys, it confirms the power of dialectical materialism.

Theoretically, the paradox of power in the former Soviet Union may be seen as a rough approximation of the ambivalence that Marxist theorists have in their understanding of language. Within the Marxist pantheon, it is an accepted fact that the dominant language in any society is always the language of the dominant class or of the combination of classes governing the political, economic and judicial configurations and cultural institutions. At the same time, Marxists are accustomed to acknowledge that when an idea “grips the masses”, it becomes a material force. Language, as the major transmitter of ideology, at least in the communist order that was installed in the Soviet Union, was used as a propaganda tool and was given the political space to develop as a social tool to carry out the messages or “signs”, as some language scholars (see, for example, Derrida 1978; Barnett 1998; Eco 2003; 2008) would prefer to call them, without language and its words being commodified. The concept of “commodification” is used here in the sense that Groys (2009: xvi, xx) employs it: “In

capitalism, the ultimate confirmation or refutation of human action is not linguistic but economic; it is expressed not with words but with numbers." For Groys, every statement becomes a commodity in capitalism.

It is, however, an entirely different matter how the dominant ideas led to the mass persecutions and intellectual tyranny that characterized many of Stalin's interpretations of Marxism. Language, under Stalin, primarily became a tool of communicating its repressive function to further legitimize the state's bureaucratic hold on power and to stifle political and cultural dissent. Despite this, I agree with Groys's (2009: 1–2) assertion that philosophy uses language to address

> the whole of language. But to think and address the *whole of language* [my italics] necessarily implies laying claim to the government of the society that speaks this language.

In his work on language and semiotics, Alexander's philosophy of language is both a detailed view of its function in communicative action (Habermas 1984), a view from below, as it is a detailed view of its function in *creating* and *reproducing* relationships of power, globally and within nation-states. He has attempted to address the "whole of language".

Alexander is in broad agreement with British-based Marxist political activist and thinker Alex Callinicos (1985), who dispenses with the notion of ideology as imaginary representations, false beliefs or illusions. A critique of ideology (Therborn 1980) is captured in the juxtaposition presented by Therborn's title of his book, *The ideology of power and the power of ideology*, which Alexander employs in his conceptual overview to the language question and which is captured in the subtitle of a recently published series of interviews with him (Busch *et al*. 2014), *The power of languages against the language of power*.

On this issue, according to Callinicos (1985: 136–153), Therborn insists that ideology is "discursive practices through which human beings live their relation to reality". Callinicos asserts that thought and language are interdependent, so the study of ideology "must involve an analysis of the systems of signs through which they are expressed".

In 1989, ten years after the publication of his *One Azania, one nation*, Alexander set out to outline his main propositions on the language question in South Africa. His booklet, *Language policy and national unity in South Africa/Azania* (1989a), is a summary of the

“colonial and neo-colonial policies” from 1652 to 1988, and an intellectual engagement with the language question as perceived and developed by the different organizations that made up the liberation movement. The essay provides a sketch of his theoretical framework and it outlines a set of proposals “towards a democratic language policy for a post-apartheid South Africa/Azania”, and it lays the basis for his active promotion of multilingual practices in nation-building exercises. Invoking the writings of Benedict Anderson (1983) on the evolution of nations and nation-states, Alexander (1989a: 47) states that the slogan, “one language, one culture”, is out of date, and that each language bearing a unique culture is “equally out of date”. He accepts that developments in communications and media have effectively “undermined ideas of separate and separable cultures which are produced by relatively isolated communities”. The National Language Project (NLP), an organization in which he was the main intellectual inspiration and in which he was the main policy formulator, advocated English as a “lingua franca/linking language”, but it also supported the idea that all languages in South Africa need to be promoted. Its proclaimed focus was to engage in “research into language projects which are being conducted or implemented by community and other non-government organisations” and to “facilitate co-operation among these groups in order to rationalise” resources and the training of personnel”. In his booklet, Alexander (1989a: 69–70) quotes the policy of the NLP:

> People need to communicate with one another through the languages spoken in the region in which they live. So, for example, if one lives in Natal, one needs to communicate through English and Zulu. If one lives in the Western Cape, one needs to communicate through the media of Afrikaans, English and Xhosa. Consequently, we believe that the groundwork for providing useful language courses and tutor-training programmes which are specifically geared toward a directly communicative approach should be undertaken without delay.

This non-governmental organization arose out of Alexander’s concern that the question of communication across language groups in nation-building exercises should reach into the homes of the urban and rural poor. At the level of policy formulation, his insights are organically rooted. However, the NLP never grew into a mass-based organization. In Alexander’s thoughts, it may have been a “spark to light a prairie fire”, an idea historically associated with Mao Zedong and his efforts to mobilize people in their multiple struggles in the pre-1949 Chinese countryside.

In an article titled “The language question” (1989b), Alexander asserts a different and complimentary view of the NLP. He describes the post-1976 period in local history as one of the most creative moments (Alexander 1989b: 5):

> In every sphere of life, people (men, women and children) were compelled to wrestle with alternatives to the superannuated practices of a racist society. In the sphere of language, countless smaller and larger projects were initiated by community and religious groups, service organisations, trade unions and private businesses independent of state support. Yet it was not until 1985 approximately, when the National Language Project was launched, that systematic, all-embracing strategizing and action on the language question began to be undertaken.

Small as it was, the NLP and Alexander did highlight the need for a political campaign, which was imperative in light of the international and national campaigns to force the apartheid government to accede to black majority rule. As the decade of the 1980s drew to a close, the terms of apartheid domination were set to change in a political overhaul that was intended to usher in a new political dispensation that effected the transfer of power to a triumphant black elite in the ANC. Language issues were pushed onto the back burner as the print and electronic media focused on possible democratic elections. The media hype combined with the sophisticated political machinery of the ANC, and the international support it had been able to muster, made the outcome of the elections in 1994 predictable.

The non-ANC Left had, for the most part, thrown its lot in with the cacophony of an inevitable and predictable ANC victory at the polls. The National Forum had folded as a cohesive and sustainable political voice of the oppressed in the mid-1980s. As I have already observed in another context, Alexander and his close associates and comrades decided to form another political organization, the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action (Wosa) in 1990.

Wosa was not able to attract a significant following and, after the elections in 1994, its election platform, the Workers List Party, did not feature as a player in politics. Alexander, by then, continued his work in education and language politics. His base had shifted to the University of Cape Town, where he had created the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (Praesa) and where he stayed until his retirement in early 2012.

In December 1995, a year and a half after the first democratic elections, Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology Ben Ngubane appointed Alexander as deputy chairman of the Pan-South African Language Board (PanSALB), which was established under the *Pan South African Language Board Act of 1995*. Its brief was two-fold. Firstly, it was established to "promote and develop the previously marginalised languages". Secondly, the Act was promulgated to create a Language Plan Task Group (Langtag), a policy advisory group to Ngubane. Alexander was appointed the chairman of Langtag. In a media release (Ngubane 1995: n.p.), Ngubane spelt out the rationale for the brief he gave to the advisory group:

> During the past months it has become clear that there is a definite tendency to unilingualism in our country. It has been argued that, although multilingualism is indeed a sociolinguistic reality in South Africa, it is invisible in the public service, in most public discourse and in the major mass media. It was also argued that the government has failed to secure a significant position for language matters within the national development plan.

Ngubane argued that there is a lack of tolerance for multilingualism and a growing criticism from "language stakeholders of the tendency to unilingualism in South Africa". He was carefully navigating his way through the perceptions of South Africa's emerging black economic elite in the government and in civil society. He self-consciously aligned his thoughts with the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) under Jay Naidoo, a former trade unionist and a former general secretary of Cosatu.

The Langtag group was required to develop a comprehensive language plan for a democratic South Africa. In the broader South African context at the time, and especially after the compromises reached in the negotiations that preceded the first democratic government, Ngubane was representing black middle class interests, and Alexander was intimately aware of the constraints within which the ANC and the government were working.

In his guidelines to the members of the subcommittees in Langtag, Alexander stressed that all members should "identify the needs and priorities with regard to the realisation of the constitutional principles pertaining to the language question in South Africa and the implementation of the policies that derive from these principles" (South African Government Information Service 1996). The subcommittees were tasked with making recommendations on the development of African languages, language equity, language in education,

equitability and widespread language services, special needs of minority groups, language as an economic resource, and literacy.

Langtag submitted its summary of the final report to Ngubane on 8 August 1996, seven months after it was formed. In a remarkably short turnaround time, Langtag presented its report on a comprehensive overhaul of the language question to the minister and unveiled its plan for "equal status for South Africa's 11 official languages".

The report recommends that the nine African languages be used in high-status functions such as "parliamentary debates … and for domestic business transactions". It suggests the formulation of guidelines that could be used for "public servants to use languages other than English (and to some extent Afrikaans) in national, provincial and local government forums on a regular basis". For its part, the government could not match the speed of delivery with which this report was produced. Beukes, who was a member of Alexander's Langtag team[11], reports seven years later in 2004:

> A small Language Policy Advisory Panel consisting of experts and a representative of the Pan South African Language Board was appointed by the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology to draft a language policy and plan, drawing on the framework provided by the LANGTAG Report. In a remarkably short period of time, this body of experts, in collaboration with the Government's language planning agency, The National Language Service, produced the first draft of the Language Policy and Plan for South Africa and the South African Languages Draft Bill. In 2003, nine years into democracy, the Cabinet finally approved the National Language Policy Framework (NLPF). The NLPF is designed as a

[11] The main committee of the Langtag team included Alexander, who was the Director of the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (Praesa) at the University of Cape Town; Anne-Marie Beukes, of the State Language Services of the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology; Qedusizi Buthelezi, who taught in the Department of Applied English Language Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand; Khethiwe Mboweni-Marais, a director of Afrophone, a translation and interpreting company specialising in the African languages; C.T. Msimang, who was the head of the Department of African Languages at Unisa; A.C. Nkabinde, a linguist who was the project leader of the Zulu Dictionary Project at the University of Zululand. Nkabinde was also the chairperson of the Language Subcommittee of the SABC Board; Gerard Schuring, the Head of the Unit for African Languages at the HSRC; Victor Webb, of the Department of Afrikaans at the University of Pretoria. Webb was also a director of LiCCA (an international language planning research programme), the chairperson of the Linguistics Society of Southern Africa (LSSA) and the author of several publications on language planning.

> package that will eventually consist of a Policy Statement, an Implementation Plan, the South African Languages Act and the South African Practitioners' Council Act. (DAC [Department of Arts and Culture] 2003b: 5)

Alexander's endeavours to have "plans on the board" and soon afterwards "off the board" took nine years to be drafted eventually into a Bill. By 2003, Alexander had already left Langtag and PanSALB and had returned to his writing.

In an unusually upbeat "reference study" titled *Language educational policy, national and sub-national identities in South Africa* (Alexander 2003), he alludes to and distils some of his experiences as a language policy adviser to the government after 1994:

> After an extremely problematic start during the first seven years of the new Republic of South Africa, the language education policy appears to be on the road towards finding a definite direction. Although the gap between the constitutional and legislative position on the one hand, and the actual practices in the classrooms and lecture halls of the country on the country, remains very wide and often appears to be widening, the fact that these instruments exist is of the greatest significance. They represent democratic space for the legal and peaceful promotion of multilingualism and for mother tongue based bilingual education in South Africa …. Moreover, recent developments indicate that on the part of the state, there is a definite albeit problematic commitment to the constitutional provisions on language and language education. (Alexander 2003: 15)

Alexander's rationale for participating in Langtag and in PanSALB is to be found in the country's Constitution and the principles of equity and fairness contained in its provisions for multilingualism. PanSALB continued after Langtag had fulfilled its mandate, and had delivered its recommendations to Ngubane in August 1996. Alexander (2003: 17) comments that on paper

> the language infrastructure appears to be in place. However, as I have indicated, there are many practical problems as well as *lack of political will* [my italics] and strategic clarity in respect of the language dispensation.

While the country's constitutional provisions have been firmly in place since 1996, the interference and indeed the decision-making function of political leaders, their "lack of political will", have been persistent obstacles in the intended roll-out of Alexander's policy

proposals. As in all his other writings, Alexander returns to the political domain and the dilemmas embedded in the country's unresolved conundrums about power, "race", class and identities. He anchors his conclusion to his reference study (2003: 18) in the following way:

> For the foreseeable future, the question of ethnic identities remains an issue just below the political horizon. Except for the conservative white Afrikaans-speaking people – and for some Zulu-speaking people – the language question is not yet one around which major political mobilisations can be undertaken. Class issues are much more salient because the depredations of the macro-economic policy which the government appears to be totally committed to, and which has led to large-scale job losses, homelessness and general social diseases. Moreover, the relapse into racial identities that has taken place because of the implementation of affirmative action and black economic empowerment measures in both the public and private sectors, has caused the main debates on individual and collective identities to centre on 'race' rather than on language.

In his efforts to shift the terms of the implosive debates about "race" and ethnicities, Alexander (2003) concludes that a "multilingual habitus" has to be created to avoid the danger of ethnic fragmentation and widespread conflict based on language affiliations. This has been a consistent theme in his writings. In his book, *An ordinary country* (2002: 141, 161), he writes:

> No sense of national unity or of national consciousness will ever come about in South Africa until all South Africans treat the issue of 'race' as what it is, that is, a contingent biological factor over which the individual has no control or influence. The crippling effects of being born within a dark skin in a country where the hegemonic consciousness favours people of lighter hue have to be eliminated within the next generation or two if South Africa is ever to become a country in which significant advances of a civilising kind are to be made ….
>
> It is, therefore, a matter of some concern that the compromise in the Constitution of South Africa which led to the establishment of the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities of South Africa may inadvertently open the Pandora's box of ethnic, that is, tribal politics that has been one of the causes of the underdevelopment of many of the countries of post-colonial Africa.

Against this Pandora's box, the Nhlapo-Alexander hypothesis has to be seen. Arriving at a similar proposition, arguably from different intellectual histories and using very different

analytical tools, Jacob Nhlapo and Alexander have separately argued that the respective Nguni and Sotho clusters of languages need to be standardized in written form.

This has also come to be known as the "harmonisation proposal" (Janks and Makalela 2013: 220). Already in 1944, Nhlapo is reported to have written:

> Having agreed as to which are the chief Bantu languages in South Africa, we can also agree that the work of joining Bantu languages would chiefly have to do with these languages. From these tongues we can at first build up at least two languages. Zulu and Xhosa, together with the branches known as Ndebele, Swati, Baca, etc., are so much alike that, put together, they can make one good strong language called Nguni. In the same way, Pedi, Tswana, and Southern Sotho, together with Kxatla, Tlokwa, etc., are so much alike that joined together, they can make a good strong language called Sotho (Nhlapo, cited in Janks and Makalela 2013: 220).

In his acknowledgement of Nhlapo's "voice of the future" and its incorporation into his own language proposals, Alexander (1989: 32) writes:

> Essentially, Nhlapo proposed that the spoken varieties of Nguni and Sotho respectively be standardised in a written form as a first step to a possible standardised indigenous African language, in order to help to overcome tribal and ethnic divisions.

While recognizing, as Nhlapo did in 1944, that English would be Africa's and South Africa's Esperanto[12], Alexander has argued, through Langtag and through his National Language Project, that the hegemony of English could be challenged if material resources are placed at the disposal of practitioners of indigenous languages and if there are written standards through which the "languages of the people" and the "power of languages" are to be developed.

[12] Esperanto is a constructed language that originated in Belarus in the 1870s. It has been traced to Ludovic Lazarus Zamenhof, whose goal was to create a "politically neutral language" to assist international communications. The billionaire philanthropist, George Soros, is reportedly a user of Esperanto, which has been described on Wikipedia as "not genealogically related to any ethnic language and is a language lexically predominantly Romantic, morphologically intensively agglutinative, and to a certain degree isolating in character".

Alexander has asserted that a new democratic space was opened with the advent of a broad constitutional democracy in South Africa. He has acknowledged that the country's Constitution is one of the most progressive on the language question. He says:

> We have one of the most progressive constitutional arrangements ever in regard to the language question. Yet indications are that we are about to go the way of all neo-colonial flesh in this regard. (Alexander, cited in Kamwendo 2006: 63)

This neo-colonialism is expressed in the following way. While the country has eleven official languages, only English and Afrikaans enjoy "high status" and esteem. The "menu" of eleven languages effectively only has two that are being and will be "served" for consumption and digestion. In South African historiography, this is the status quo as it has been since 1925 when both English and Afrikaans were given equal and high status in the affairs of state.

Debating Alexander's proposals

Desai (2013: 181) eloquently places Alexander's political or organizational choices between a "stretch and a stitch". This metaphor can be extended and it can be argued that the weave carrying the stitch and the stretch is the body politic of community life and civil protest.

Alexander's antinomies, very much like Gramsci's antinomies about himself and his political concepts, were about the role of the "individual in history", the "organic intellectual", and the role of "objective" forces of history. He navigated his way between objectivities and subjectivities through his active participation in political organizations and civil-community structures. His tension with the Academy was profound and he seems to have been probing a simple but profound philosophical concern: "What role do I play in the world?" He read books, newspapers, journals, minutes of meetings, political-organizational pamphlets, detective novels, historical manuscripts, doctoral theses, and correspondence from friends, comrades and colleagues. From these readings, he composed his story of the world and of his desire to have political and civil structures in place to live a meaningful life in "an ordinary country".

Soudien (2013: 177), who was a part of Alexander's Marxist groupings in the early 1980s, forcefully asserts that Alexander's frustration about the debates he participated in was the intensity focused on an individual's way of life. In the language debate, it came down to

defending "one's language rights". Soudien (2013: 177) captures a consistent theme in Alexander's thinking:

> Alexander came to respect Mandela but could never accept his uncritical deference to the hegemony of racial thinking. In his strategic engagements around the united front and the language question, at issue, ultimately, *were the conditions for realising a full sense of one's humanity* [my italics]. He rejected the popular front because it depended on the reproduction of narrow class and racial interests …. It was argument – *better knowledge* – that had to be the basis of engagement.

In her abstract, Zubeida Desai (2013: 193) explains Alexander's maxim that languages develop through use "particularly in high domains such as education and the courts". Alexander was committed to "intellectualising" African languages. This intellectualisation meant a firm commitment to establishing written standards for the Nguni and the Sotho clusters of languages. Desai (2013: 204) concludes that "linguistic practices from below, regardless of how creative and innovative they are, cannot change the power dynamics in unequal societies such as South Africa".

Busch (2013: 213) explains Alexander's position that the arbitrary lines "drawn by missionaries" through language and the apartheid regime to justify the fragmentation and subjugation of black people, and therefore the social categories "invented" about ethnicities, are not god-given transhistorical entities, but a result of political and economic developments "in a historical moment" and are not "simply a question of 'particular rules of grammar and syntax'". Alexander "tirelessly emphasised the need to upgrade and strengthen the position of African languages by expanding them to all domains of public life, by intellectualising them for tertiary education" (Busch 2013: 217).

Janks and Makalela (2013: 227) point to the fact that "power and identity" continue to stand in the way of "Alexander's vision of linguistic and social transformation and the possibilities it opens for improved access to literacy and to the growth of writing and publishing in South African languages".

Richards (2013: 235), in his sensitively constructed appreciation of Alexander's work and life, presents a compelling argument that "humanity must free itself from the systemic imperatives of regimes of accumulation to survive". Richards recalls Alexander's appeal to

modernize and to intellectualize African languages, and he interrogates three of Alexander's proposals to building an "unbounded socialism". These are Alexander's grass-roots organizing at neighbourhood levels, his promotion of multilingualism and his advocacy of alternative education. For Richards, Alexander "blended" his own humanizing ideas with those of Paulo Freire. Richards writes (2013: 238):

> Freire tells his readers at the beginning of *Pedagogy* [*of the oppressed*] that the key problem is 'humanisation', while for us in our times a crucial issue is its opposite, 'dehumanisation', not as a philosophical possibility but as a concrete reality. A problem-posing, dialogic, humanising education is one that calls forth the human ontological vocation to join with others in changing the world, in creating culture. It is consciousness-raising (*concientiçao*).

Vawda (2013: 243) traces the "debates around questions of 'race', ethnic identities, colour-castes and class inequalities, and their interconnectedness under a system of capitalist production in South Africa through the lens of Neville Alexander's own writings". In his expansive assessment of Alexander's lens, Vawda writes that Alexander drew on the works of Leon Trotsky, Antonio Gramsci, Frantz Fanon, Samora Machel and Amilcar Cabral, and that Alexander had "shifted away from the restrictive binaries of an earlier Marxism".

Whittaker (2013) recalls the role played by Alexander in the formation of the South West African People's Organisation (Swapo) of Namibia. In his essay, Whittaker cites Kenneth Abrahams, a long-time comrade of Alexander and a founding member of the Yu Chi Chan Club in 1962:

> We met Neville [Alexander] for the first time in the 1950's when we were all members of the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), Society of Young Africa (SOYA) and NEF (an Educational Fellowship). We were members of the Cape Town branch of Swapo when it was still called OPO (Ovamboland People's Organization) and met at Timothy's Barbershop in Green Point as from 1958. This Branch was for a long time the most energetic Branch within Swapo …. The Branch included several people who rose to prominence within Swapo in later years including Herman Toivo ya Toivo, Hifikipunye (Lucas) Pohamba, Andreas Shipanga, Solomon Mifima, Peter Mueshianga, Peter Nanjembe, Louis Nelengani and Maxton Joseph.
>
> Of course Neville was connected from the beginning and he did not only give lectures and assist with the drawing up of the Swapo Constitution in 1960, but also helped with fundraising …. (Whittaker 2013: 264)

These eight authors have produced pertinent insights into Alexander's life's projects over five decades, ever since his encounters with Tabata, Sisulu and Mandela. They have crafted their perceptions of Alexander and put into words their memories and their assessments of his writings and of their encounters with him. They argue within and across the disciplines in which they received their formal tertiary training, and without exception they use a transdisciplinary approach to their readings of his writings. Not surprisingly, the disciplines are political sociology, education, linguistics, philosophy, law, anthropology and psychology. Alexander, for much of his writing and reading life, worked within the delimitations of a "political economy" approach, a "grand narrative" theory of change and a linguistic social-pychological frame to pursue his Gramscian "war of position" (Gramsci 1972).

He accepted Ngubane's 1995 invitation to serve on the Language Task Group (Langtag) because he wanted to place African languages firmly on the political and economic agenda of the new democratic state, and by so doing create the space for challenging the hegemony of English and, to a lesser extent, of Afrikaans.

His dilemma was that the post-1994 change from apartheid domination to "elite accommodation" (Nolutshungu 1982) came about as a result of political power arrangements and configurations of the mainly English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking educated elites. The social, national and language questions that he has raised through his work and through his activism have been partially met in theory and constitutionally by the custodians of power and history. The exercise of this power and the historical control of this power have been mediated through English as the dominant and hegemonic means of communication.

Chomsky poignantly remarks that history is owned by people who have been educated:

> History is owned by the educated classes. They are the people who are the custodians of history. They are the ones who are in universities and throughout the whole system of constructing, shaping and presenting to us the past as they want it to be seen. These are groups that are closely associated with power. They themselves have a high degree of privilege and access to power. They share class interests with those who control and in fact own the economic system. They are the cultural commissars of the system of domination and control that's very pervasive. (Chomsky, cited in Otero 1998: 624)

While Alexander may not have agreed with Chomsky's proclivities for and ambiguities about anarchism[13], it would be difficult to dispute Chomsky's views on history and power. The South African state is controlled by a sizable black elite, which is expanding through the removal and replacement of the largely white and Afrikaner bureaucracy that dominated the middle and upper layers of apartheid state power. The new black political elite now holds the reins of power, and through this power it controls the access, production and distribution of knowledge. This political power is being exercised through the willing participation and acquiescence of the economic managers.

To be able to generate the "political will" that Alexander refers to will require a change in the *relations of production*, which continue to favour the classes that own the means of production. Alexander parts company with the current crop of political managers and controllers of history. Whereas the government has no intention of altering the property clauses that underpin the social order in which it is governing, and thereby causing an overhaul in social relations underpinning the civic space in which society functions, Alexander is not wedded to a democracy that favours the reproduction of existing owners of capital.

In his book of essays on the transition to democracy in South Africa, titled *Some are more equal than others* (1993), which is also a range of advocacy positions developed by Alexander for the organizations to which he was aligned, he asserts his positions. On the change envisaged by the negotiating elites in the build-up to the 1994 elections, Alexander predicted that the "immediate future will be shaped by market-driven imperatives of the system manifest in the profit motive, the principle of achievement and the technical-vocational needs of commodification".

Alexander's proposals on the language question, which he started formulating in 1979 in his *One Azania, one nation*, which he developed in 1989 in his *Language policy and national unity in South Africa/Azania*, and which he codified in Langtag's 1996 report to the then

[13] In an interview with Peter Jay, Chomsky (1976) says: "Let me just say I don't really regard myself as an anarchist thinker. I'm a derivative fellow traveler [of anarchism], let's say. Anarchist thinkers have constantly referred to the American experience and to the ideal of Jeffersonian democracy very very favorably. You know, Jefferson's concept that the best government is the government that governs least, or Thoreau's addition to that, that the best government is the one that doesn't govern at all, is one that's often repeated by anarchist thinkers through modern times."

Minister of Arts, Science and Culture, Ben Ngubane, cannot be delinked or separated from his interpretations of the broader national and class questions, from his participation in political organizations, from his understanding of political power, and from his interrogations into the role of the Academy and the policy relationships between the Academy's principals and the new black emperors in charge of the state.

In this sense, Alexander has remained an active participant in the making of history. He has also remained a Marxist revolutionary committed to an anti-capitalist agenda. For the most part, and even though the government has promulgated into law in 2003 the main outlines of Alexander's language proposals, the practical implications of his recommendations have not been taken up by the government. It is not likely that they will be implemented in the short term.

In the long term, Alexander's position is not dissimilar to the strategic vision of Gramsci's "war of position", a central concept that Alexander has employed in setting out his vision on the language question in South Africa. A confrontational approach clearly has not worked with the political decision-makers and language planners in the government, and a reformulation of strategy may be necessary. This "war of position" is undergirded by notions of dominance and hegemony. Alexander and Bloch (Praesa 2004: 2) explain:

> [I]t is of utmost importance that we distinguish between the dominance of English, on the one hand, and the hegemony of English, on the other even though the two are necessarily connected. In our view, the dominance of English, which is driven by market forces – aided and abetted by British, U.S. and other pro-English agencies – is a phenomenon, the continuation of which is tied up with global political and economic developments that go beyond the specificities of cultural and linguistic dynamics. One of the most debilitating effects of hegemony is to make speakers of languages other than English – in this case – begin losing their faith in the value of their home languages …. If English stands at the top of the global linguistic pyramid, the indigenous languages of the African continent are to be found as close to the base as possible. In Africa, the disempowering effect of the hegemony of English has gone so far that we can be forgiven for seeing it as a kind of social pathology.

English is driven by market forces, not only in South Africa but globally. Globalization has ensured that the language of the market is the dominant language of the world. Alexander and

Bloch cite Tove Skuttnabb-Kangas's telling indictment that the fate suffered by indigenous languages is akin to a "linguistic genocide".

Yet, in South Africa, the democratic space opened by the 1994 elections has made it possible that this fate of indigenous languages has not yet been sealed by the local representatives of neoliberalism, the "free market" and capitalist expansion. It remains "contested terrain" upon which key "stakeholders" with vested interests will have to secure the turf of their linguistic preferences. What is, however, indisputable is that English has been accepted as *a* lingua franca, if not *the* lingua franca in South Africa. What is contested is whether there is sufficient space left to develop and to intellectualize home language clusters such as Nguni and Sotho. The appeals and the questions posed by Alexander and Langtag are whether political principals, mainly ANC representatives as the leading partners in the government, have the will to allocate adequate resources to ensure the standardization of these language clusters, and whether a political will exists to build lexicographic units at universities. If this is so, then home languages can be developed as a complementary addition to, and enjoy the same status as, English. Indications are that this will not happen.

What, then, is the future of multilingualism in South Africa?

The short answer is that Alexander's "war of position" on the language question is necessarily a very long-term commitment. Eighteen years after he and Langtag first reported to the minister in 1996 and after volumes of literature had been produced by him and his team, the government's political principals have begun to make small noises in their corridors of power about the need to embrace African languages. However, these voices have been too ineffectual to make a significant impact on the global cacophony that supports English as the only feasible language of communication. English has become the undisputed dominant and hegemonic language of the 20-year-old ANC government.

A summary and tentative propositions

Alexander's intention, in his 30-plus-year focus since around 1985 on the language question, was to address the philosophy of language as well as its practical use. In doing so, he had to address the "whole of language" (Groys 2009). This meant a detailed interrogation of the interests underpinning the government wielding the authority to implement language policy.

Through his studies on the colonial origins and historical evolution of the dominant languages in South Africa, English and Afrikaans, and through his analyses of the social and political need to communicate effectively with speakers of other languages, Alexander had proposed that eleven African languages be awarded high-status functions in official communication. This policy proposition was formulated in 1996 through the Language Plan Task Group appointed by then Minister Ben Ngubane in 1995. Legislation to this effect came into being in 2003.

The collegial thinking to which he had been privy in the Non-European Unity Movement of the 1950s, the Yu Chi Chan Club and the National Liberation Front in the 1960s, and his *lived experiences* on Robben Island between 1964 and 1974 where multiple languages were spoken by political prisoners and warders alike, was the soil to plant his advocacy seeds for a multilingualism that came to dominate many of his language policies and proposals over three decades.

The trajectory of his thinking suggested an inevitability that he would share Jacob Nhlapo's 1944 proposal to get, at the very least, the Nguni and Sotho language group clusters standardized in written forms. While the legislative and common sense jury is still out on this particular proposal by Nhlapo and Alexander, it remains a positive proposal and one which still requires a thorough financial and infrastructural audit before it can be put into practice. A problem in this proposal is the uncertain fate of the African languages spoken in South Africa that fall outside the two clusters, and it is this reason why many speakers of Bantu languages are still not convinced of its efficacy.

While he relied on the thoughts and propositions of many language activists, political analysts and theorists, and a very large body of thought located in the Marxist tradition on the language question, Alexander's words, in English, spoke *with* and not necessarily *through* the mouths of others. He indigenized complex theories about communication, nation building and social cohesion through research, reading, writing and then turned these words into practical lived realities through teaching and engaging in small groups of language activists.

His decision to serve on the post-1994 government language structures, the Language Plan Task Group (Langtag) where he served as chairman and the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) where he served as deputy chairman, raised a few eyebrows on the Left.

My view is that his decision was a complex one. It involved a historical appreciation of classical Marxism, Western Marxism and the postmodern tropes of radical assimilation. Put differently, his decision involved a register about reformist limitations and revolutionary possibilities that whirled about in his imagination. It also involved some of the unanswered questions, dilemmas and ambiguities about historical materialism and dialectical reasoning. It is to these that I now turn.

Chapter Five

The imagination of a communist[1]

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore Alexander's imagination, from his eclectic note-taking to the published versions of the articles and the books he wrote. My overarching proposition is captured in the title of this chapter, and I look at the principal elements that make up his imagination as a communist, as an oxymoronic Catholic-inspired atheist and as a Marxist revolutionary committed to overthrowing, or at the very least opposing late capitalism, which is alternatively called neoliberalism. I also suggest that his unique abilities as a dialectical reasoner made it possible for him to engage, and work through, compelling alternative truths to his own, and that he possessed an exceptional ability to argue against himself.

I have extensively used Busch *et al.*'s 2014 work, *Interviews with Neville Alexander*, as source material because, apart from its intrinsic value, it is the most up-to-date account of his actual words. The interviews are a tapestry of what Alexander was thinking in the latter years of his life.

[1] In this characterization of Alexander's imagination, I explore two thoughts. First, I wish to recover the humanitarian ethos and spirit originally envisaged in Marx and Engels's political vision as it was encoded in their *communist* manifesto. Alexander's written work draws on the political economy approaches developed by these classical Marxists. Marx and Engels's communist vision, as spelt out in their *Manifesto of the Communist Party* of 1848 and layered with all its contradictions, ambiguities and dilemmas, remains a beacon of hope for a utopia that is still realizable. Second, while the term "communist" is ordinarily associated with the ideological woofs and warps of the former Soviet Union and with the practices of self-declared communist parties, I argue that its meanings are not the monopoly of the Soviets and the communist parties. In this "return to the source", I am offering for public debate an alternative line of thinking about human emancipation, and Alexander stands in the league of 20th century philosophers and political activists such as Cabral, Machel, Gramsci, Luxemburg, Lenin, Mandel, Badiou and Žižek, among many others, who were not averse to a Marxist or a communist renaissance. Because the communist Soviet state and mainly Stalinist communist parties had appropriated the meanings of communism, I suspect that Alexander would not have described his imagination as "communist". This tension is not unique to Alexander. Badiou (see also Footnote 5 on page 153 and his explanation of the "communist hypothesis" on page 156 below) is similarly ambiguous and yet firmly convinced of the need to recover communism's humanitarian intent. Badiou argues, often in circuitous ways, that a re-imagination, or a rethinking, of a communist hypothesis can be both an affirmation and a negation of history. This chapter title suggests that there is a "communist ideal" (see, for example, MacGregor 1984) in Alexander's imagination, and it can be traced to Marxism's founders, Marx and Engels, and to their philosophical predecessor, Hegel.

The chapter is divided into four interlocking parts, ending with a summary and tentative concluding remarks. In the first part, "A *savant* taking notes", an effort is made to explain his "physical relationship" with his note-taking and his efforts at capturing conversations and meetings with people he met. It briefly discusses his unquestionably intimate and detailed understanding of Marxism and historical materialism, and it proposes that he was an eclectic Marxist, whose "paradigm" was shaped by many different philosophers and revolutionary activists. I argue that, for Alexander, his note-taking was both an experimental and a radical statement about his relationships with people and with what they said in meetings or in books they compiled.

In the second part, "From Socratic dialogues to a politics of engagement", his confrontational mind-set is hypothesized in his "Socratic dialogues" with Mandela on Robben Island. This mind-set, which he inherited from his forebears in the Non-European Unity Movement and in Apdusa, motivated Alexander as a young radical activist and as a leader of political groupings dedicated to the overthrow of apartheid-capitalism. The chapter provides a historical background to his dialogues with Mandela about South Africa's national question and the vexed question of "race". It explores the idea that the difference over "race" was a fundamental *antagonistic* contradiction, and not a *non-antagonistic* one, as the two men tried to suggest to other political prisoners at the time. I argue that, as the interlocutors of their own histories and their interpretations of the policies of their own organizations, Mandela and Alexander were bound to adopt confrontational postures. What was equally significant for the young Alexander, however, was that he realized his paucity of knowledge of African history and his own Eurocentrism.

In the third part, "The dilemmas of historical materialism", I explore four dilemmas that appear to stand out in the evolution of historical materialism, of Marxism, as a philosophical method. These four dilemmas are: first, the conflict between *the personal* and *the political* selves that we are as human beings; second, the difficult dialogue between Marxism and nationalism; third, the explosive revolts within Marxism following the revolution "against *Capital*" in 1917 and the establishment of the first communist state in the world; and fourth, the tension between an ecologically sound and humane approach and the political economy approach of classical Marxism. I suggest that all these dilemmas are embedded in Alexander's written works and that, at various times and in specific and identifiable moments

in his writing life, he addressed these, sometimes adequately and sometimes not so adequately.

In the fourth part, "Politics and engaging the dialectics of reform and revolution", I suggest that from about 1988 when he publicly engaged Jakes Gerwel about the character of a university, the implications of reformism and of revolution whirled about in Alexander's imagination for many years to come. Before the start of the "talks about talks" between the ANC and the apartheid National Party government, which more or less coincided with his debate with Gerwel, Alexander and the groupings associated with his line of thinking were unambiguous about the need to promote and participate in overthrowing the apartheid-capitalist state through violent insurrectionary means if necessary, and they argued that a negotiated settlement would compromise the class interests of black workers who, they believed, had the potential to be the motor of a change in social relations. The success of the negotiations, at least for capital and its allies, and the spaces for dissent and radical opposition opened up through the democratization of the South African state meant that Alexander and other militant revolutionaries were on the back foot in their revolutionary dreams and propositions, and they were compelled to rethink their strategies of opposition to an incipient democratic state led by the "realists" and the "moderates" in the ANC.

A *savant* taking notes

Alexander strived for excellence. He often accomplished what he set out to do in line with his own standards of excellence, and he did so through reading diligently. The carefully written preparatory notes, what I call his "study notes", in his archive (The Neville Alexander Papers n.d.) at the University of Cape Town attest to a disciplined producer of notes. They were stylishly done in cursive, they were sometimes carefully referenced, and they were unlike the "reporting notes" he took at meetings, which still had the characteristic slight Alexander tilt from the left to the right, his neatness and order, but clearly done in a rough, almost short-hand way.

He attended meetings of political activists, students, university councils, community forums, language forums, and he also had one-on-one meetings with friends, colleagues, comrades, lovers and former lovers. In the meetings he attended, he saw himself as a cadre of a social revolution in the making, as a listener to a historical record being composed, and as a lover of

life. He took notes at many of these meetings, and the words he selected as signifiers of the conversations in these meetings were either stored in his memory or they were written down. This was part of his activism, and he combined the responsibility of investigative journalism and accurate recording of what people said with the onerous demands of the Academy[2].

But this scholarly need to put down on paper what he saw and what he heard was not smooth and unfettered. After his release from Robben Island, Alexander took care that his notes and his documents were not again going to be used by the state to prosecute him and his comrades, and land him in jail for another ten years for "reading" and for making notes[3] about his and his comrades' war against capitalism and its local manifestation, apartheid-capitalism or, in his terms, racial capitalism. For at least fifteen years after his release from Robben Island in 1974, conditions for social and revolutionary activism did not favour transparencies, and with the apartheid state's security apparatus in full view and in full force, Alexander was circumspect in his recordings and in his note-taking. For the most part, he relied on his memory and his ability to recollect what was said in meetings and in conversations with people. These restrictions on his note-taking eased in the five-year period leading up to 1994, and after the first democratic elections, his handwritten notes came to be more detailed and expansive.

His way of life was a "politics of engagement" (Soudien 2013) with people, their interests and his interest in them. He listened to people's stories, and he wrote, in his own distinctive way, his stories about other people's stories. The academic achievements in *One Azania, one nation* (1979) are matched by his ability to engage conversationally in his posthumous *Thoughts on the new South Africa* (2013).

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[2] I have used the word "Academy" without explanation up to this point. In acknowledging its Platonic origins and its educational promise to explore "dialectics" in politics and rhetoric about 2 400 years ago, I use the concept as a collective noun and a metaphor to refer to the cultural and political "architecture" of post-secondary school education and training.

[3] Very early on in my association and comradeship with Alexander in the 1980s, I was asked not to take notes of the secret meetings I attended with him. Key strategic, tactical and political decisions were to be memorized, and the phone numbers of comrades were not to be written down. For the most part, I honoured his request, and yet, in retrospect, I have always wanted to capture in words the tone and the atmosphere of these meetings. These meetings were always held at someone's home, and not more than five or six people were present. Alexander was always upbeat, inquisitive and focused about what needed to be done. He always came prepared, and he applied the same ruling to himself (not to takes notes) as he requested others to do, whether it was discussing the underground of Sached work, or reading and analysing literature from the ANC, the PAC or his own writings about the struggle against the apartheid-capitalist regime.

Alexander was, in Soudien's (2013) terms, consistently in search of "better knowledge", and he was not going to give up his search for meaning and truth, and for the meanings of other people around him. Richards (2013) remarks that Alexander viewed Marxism as a paradigm. This is true. Alexander did view Marxism as a paradigm, as a *philosophy of practice*, and Alexander's Marxism was a self-professed (Alexander 1991) eclectic variety. Because philosophy is about affirming, developing and changing presumed universal truths, about good and evil (see, for example, Eagleton 2010), he shared Sartre's insistence on the need to constantly revise philosophy[4], but he also might have parted ways with Sartre's antinomies on philosophy's abstractions about everyday living.

Alexander's memories of his separate encounters with people, his recollections, his on-the-ground reporting notes, his short-hand notes, his detailed notes and his references, were stored in their respective *sets* or *subsets*[5], the multiple "projects"[6], in his imagination. He

[4] In an interview with his long-standing friend and companion, Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre makes the following remarks: "A philosophy is not something that is valid for the present moment; it is not something you write for your contemporaries. It speculates upon timeless realities, and since it speaks of eternity it will necessarily be overtaken and left behind by others" (Sartre, quoted in De Beauvoir 1984: 153).

[5] French communist philosopher Alain Badiou uses mathematical Set Theory as a template to construct his philosophical and communist positions (see, for example, Badiou 1989; 2011). Especially important, for Badiou, is the reality of the Null Set or alternatively called the Empty Set. It is the only subset that contains no elements, but is common to and is a subset of all sets, including itself. In sociological and political terms, this is difficult to explain. However, the notion of the Null Set goes some way in explaining the linkage and dissonance between Alexander's different "projects", or subsets, of his sociological, educational and political imagination. In philosophical terms, the closest approximation I can venture is that the Empty Set contains "everything and nothing", a type of universal template upon which and in which everything and its obverse, nothing, are inscribed. This essentially Nietzschean approach could be criticized for its lack of definition and for its juxtaposition of the Universal and Nothing, but it is a useful and an old way to understand how ideologies evolve through human subjects. In many different ways, the Empty Set is ideology, that *something*, which is there but which cannot be identified as discrete or as concrete lumps. If ideology (according to Therborn 1980) is indeed how a person discursively engages his or her environment, how he or she lives that reality, then the engagement with that reality brings together all of what that person is, but it cannot be isolated as an element or a discrete thing. Instead, it is a *lived experience*. The assumption here is that even a new-born infant is not necessarily a *tabula rasa*, and through the acquisition of language, its acculturation, the infant acquires characteristics through circumstance, contingency, from his or her environment and from the caregivers and teachers – apart from the parents' genetic or biological imprints incorporated in the DNA of the child. A *project* is both something new and something old. It is new because it contains nothing and all its elements are yet to be added, and it is old because projects are about people. Projects are implemented by people, who are needed to carry out the tasks required, and people are carriers of ideology and are interlocutors of the old. While Alexander did not self-consciously use mathematical set theory in his Marxist propositions, the scientist in him was pervasive throughout his adult life, ever since he was informed by the university authorities that he was not allowed to study medicine in 1953 at the University of Cape Town because he had completed his secondary schooling in Cradock without Mathematics as a subject in his year of matriculation.

[6] From his student days at the University of Cape Town and his editorship of *The Student*, Alexander participated in "projects". In 1985 he launched the National Language Project and in 1992 he started the

delved into each subset or each project with the rigour and accuracy of a social mathematician, a scientist, a determined and committed researcher and an experimenter; with the creative flair of the poet, the cultural creative; with a detailed understanding of power of the political activist; and with the emotional and psychological onslaughts of a maker and a carrier of passion. Badiou (1989; 2012a; 2012b) refers to these different roles as the *conditions* of philosophy. Alexander was a political philosopher in whose person the roles of *savant*, artist, political activist and lover overlapped and clashed in seamless ways.

Former ANC theoretician and self-proclaimed socialist Pallo Jordan (1991) has implied that Alexander's Marxism is in fact a "Trotskyism" and that the Alexander-initiated Workers Organisation for Socialist Action is a home for Trotskyists "outside the Congress Movement". Apart from the fact that this is a debatable and a less than accurate approximation of Alexander's political choices, it is far more significant to understand Alexander's relationship with Trotsky's ideas and with the people who, and organizations that, came to be associated with the Trotskyist tradition in South Africa and globally.[7] Whereas Pallo Jordan's own father, A.C. Jordan, was arguably a Trotskyist and expounded "Leninist" (Alexander 1989a) views on the language question in the debating journal of the Non-European Unity Movement, which was called the *Educational Journal*, Alexander did

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Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa. Alexander, in this description of his multiple educational and political projects, shares French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's understanding that meaning (and therefore "history") is an "ongoing, human construct. Sartre's work … remains alive only in our *projects* [my italics]" (Flynn 1984: 205). Alexander's works remain "alive" in his multiple projects, in the projects that people have created around his thoughts, in his writings and in the memories of people who have worked or socialized with him.

[7] In their introductory comments on Alexander, Drew and Binns (1992) write that Alexander's socialist education was international. As a doctoral student in Germany, Alexander became "actively involved in the Algerian Students' Movement and Algerian Trade Union Movement in support of the Algerian Revolution, and he made contact with Michel Pablo's tendency within the Fourth International, which gave primacy to the revolutionary potential of the colonial world" (Drew and Binns 1992: 251). This relationship with the Fourth International was to persist. While Alexander asserts, in the interview that follows Drew and Binns's introductory comments, that "Trotskyism is Marxism", this was not an uncritical embrace of Trotskyism. In response to the question, "To what extent has Trotskyism internationally influenced the thinking and practice of socialist militants in South Africa, historically and more recently?", Alexander (cited in Drew and Binns 1992: 263) responds: "My own impression – and I speak from my own subjective position – is that the credibility of Trotskyism as an organised political force in the world is very low in South Africa. The stigmatization of Trotskyism under Stalin and his immediate successors has affected people. There are very few of us, and I include myself amongst them, who have always resisted that kind of objection to Trotskyism and have made it quite clear that to us Trotskyism is Marxism, whatever else it might be." I read this to mean that Alexander was ambivalent about labels such as "Trotskyist". In my opinion, the ambiguity expressed in "whatever else it might be" suggests an affinity and a criticism of what Trotskyism was.

not consider himself a Trotskyist[8]. In his writings, however, Alexander consistently refers to the insights of Leon Trotsky and the valuable contributions this Marxist theorist and revolutionary activist had made to advance the causes of the oppressed and exploited people, not only in the Soviet Union but across the globe.

Within the paradigm of historical materialism, and employing the techniques of interrogation and investigation embedded in "political economy" approaches, Alexander composed his *Weltanschauung*. He often grappled with expanding his imagination beyond these "political economy" approaches and he accepted that new and other contemporary Marxist theorists had their own world views, which were not necessarily coterminous with his. However, his history bound him to ideology, his discursive engagements in the world, and to political economy approaches. For Alexander, his note-taking was both experimental and a radical statement about his relationships with people and with what they said in meetings or in books they compiled.

The remaining sections of this chapter are my efforts at trying to understand the dilemmas in his imagination. These efforts at comprehension are assisted by an eclectic selection of political activists, philosophers, dialectical reasoners and socialists.

From "Socratic dialogues" to a "politics of engagement"

The proposition that Alexander was a "communist priest" without the need "for a God hypothesis" (University of California n.d.; Villa-Vicencio 1996) and without ever being a member of the South African Communist Party may well be a contested description of his

[8] This is not to say that Alexander was averse to "Trotskyism" or that he was antagonistic towards its leading proponents. He had met Leon Trotsky's wife, Natalia Sedova, in Paris on one of his many travels across Europe. He had a friendship and a comradeship with the former editor-in-chief of IG Metall's magazine titled *metal* (IG Metall was arguably one of the strongest socialist-inclined trade unions in Germany), Jakob Moneta, who was a self-professed and committed Trotskyist. Alexander and the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action (see, for example, his detailed planning and handwritten notes on the envisaged programme of engagements scheduled for Ernest Mandel in Alexander's archive, The Neville Alexander Papers, housed at the University of Cape Town's Jagger Library) also hosted, in South Africa in 1992, the author of many insightful works on Marxism and on "late capitalism", the prolific writer and political commentator, Mandel. Mandel was a leading Trotskyist in the Fourth International. His works were extensively used and distributed as reference material in Alexander's Marxist reading and political "cells" in Cape Town in the early 1980s.

adult life. This proposition combines two different and often antagonistic sets and subsets of values, norms and approaches to living a conscious and an engaged life.

The communist part of the composite noun is easier to explain because he lived his life as a communist, even though he did so without the socio-political and economic communist infrastructure to support his life's choices in South Africa. In itself this was a challenge because the socio-political conditions for living the life of a communist were absent, and the infrastructure to live out his communist-inspired humanity militated against the practices of communism. These conditions also militated against the egalitarian practices of moving beyond commodified boundaries of needs, of capitalist consumerism, of overabundance, of private appropriation of "massive fortunes", to exploring the potentially life-enhancing, explosive and collective possibilities of free associations and experiences of individuals, words, wonder and desire.

Badiou (see, for example, his article in *New Left Review* 2008: n.p.; 2009) is forceful in his logic and explanation about the import of a communist hypothesis[9]:

> What is the communist hypothesis? In its generic sense, given in its canonic *Manifesto*, 'communist' means, first, that the logic of class – the fundamental subordination of labour to a dominant class, the arrangement that has persisted since Antiquity – is not inevitable; it can be overcome. The communist hypothesis is that a different collective organization is practicable, one that will eliminate the inequality of wealth and even the division of labour. The private appropriation of massive fortunes and their transmission by inheritance will disappear. The existence of a coercive state, separate from civil society, will no longer appear a necessity: a long process of reorganization based on a free association of producers will see it withering away.

Alexander explains this hypothesis in his own way. In his paraphrase and affirmation of André Gorz's words, he proposes a move to the *principle of sufficiency* as opposed to the

[9] Badiou's "communist hypothesis" has not gone unchallenged. Chris Cutrone (2010), for example, argues for a "Marxist hypothesis" as a response to Badiou (and Slavoj Žižek), and contends that a "very different set of historical periodizations, and hence a different history, focused on other developments, might be opposed to Badiou's. Counter to Badiou's 'communist hypothesis,' which reaches back to the origins of the state in the birth of civilization millennia ago, a 'Marxist hypothesis' would seek to grasp the history of the specifically modern society of capital, the different historical phases of capital as characterized by Marx's and other Marxists' accounts, beginning in the mid-19th century" (Cutrone 2010: n.p.).

principle of efficiency, "based on ecological economics" (Alexander, in Busch *et al*. 2014: 174).

The priest part is more difficult to explain because of religion's contradictory, ontological and ideological "lacerations" (Gramsci, paraphrased in Nussbaum 2003) over the course of his life. After completing his secondary schooling in Cradock, Alexander was refused entry to study medicine at the University of Cape Town because he had not done Mathematics as a senior subject in grades 11 and 12 at the Holy Rosary Convent. He recalls the choices available to him in 1953:

> Instead of mathematics at senior level [at the Holy Rosary Convent] we had German. So, by the time I eventually got to the University of Cape Town, after trying everything else to be able to do medicine, they [the university authorities] said, 'No, you can't do medicine, but we will gladly accept you for a BA.' So my second choice of profession was teacher, actually preacher, but then after a while, because of my atheism there was no way I could become a preacher – *I became a preacher of a different kind* [my italics]. (Alexander, cited in Busch *et al*. 2014: 38)

The title of his 1985 work, *Sow the wind*, is a derivative whose roots are in the biblical warning, "For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind"[10]. His context was the "sectarian and totalitarian hybris" disfiguring the ethos of the liberation struggle in the mid-1980s:

> The sectarian and totalitarian hybris [also hubris] that seduces some people who disagree with one's ideas to brand one immediately as 'an enemy of South Africa' or as 'an enemy of the people' is without any doubt the greatest danger to our liberation struggle. My appeal to such people is to allow history to decide the questions on which we disagree fundamentally. My appeal to them is to remember the words of the prophet, 'For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind'. (Alexander 1985: x)

This hubris has deep roots in the liberation groups that were formed against apartheid. Alexander (cited in Desai 2012: 106) reports that Fikile Bam, a member of the National Liberation Front, insisted that he continue his "dialogue" with Mandela, even though the

[10] Alexander (1985) explains his interpretation of this warning in the preface of his 1985 book, *Sow the wind*.

other members of the NLF were “not happy”. Alexander reconstructs the tonal aspects of the dialogue, and the postures adopted by himself and Mandela on Robben Island:

> We presented what we thought to one another, or responded to questions, so there was a Socratic dialogue which took place over a few hours, at most two or three hours a day, per week …. [I]t was *stamp en stoot* (full of posturing) at the beginning ….
>
> We learnt though to be quite tolerant, accept certain things and put them into brackets, come back to them later …. Eventually we agreed to disagree, I think would be the right thing to say. (Alexander, cited in Desai 2012: 106–107)

The dialogue was Socratic. Two mutually exclusive postures were adopted and put forward by these two men, and there was a Cartesian divide between Mandela’s advocacy of a political-organizational position (the ANC’s) and Alexander’s Unity Movement training on the vexed and potentially explosive question of “race” and the organizational positions he had developed in the Yu Chi Chan Club and the National Liberation Front.

Mandela had a position on “race” and the national question. This position was the ANC’s view that South African society is made up of four different “nations” (Africans, coloureds, Indians and whites). Its simplicity was also its appeal because it approximated popular consciousness. He argued that white people are a different “race” to black people, who are also made up of different “races” in South Africa, and these “races” are different “nations”. For Mandela in the 1960s, only “Africans” qualified as “black”.

Alexander opposed this view and asserted that there is a singularity to the genetic origins of the human species, a position he was to develop and hold for the rest of his life. This was the *lumpers’* (no-race theorists’) position in sociological and biological theory, as opposed to the *splitters’* (many-race theorists’) position.

Conceptually, his position was informed by an elite group of thinkers, many atheists, some religiously inspired, many convinced Marxists, his family, his friends and the lovers in his life. Some in these different groups of people may have seen themselves racially, but they saw themselves united in their beliefs to overthrow the apartheid government. They were not different “races”, for Alexander, but people with different interests and different ideas who came together to form an organization, which was about networks of people and their

political interests. As a scientist, he could not accept Mandela's view that humanity comprises different "races", and that different political organizations should be representing these different "races". For Alexander, there is one race and it is called the human race, and the subdivisions, or alternatively called subsets, of this human race are populated by classes and colour-castes of people speaking common and often different languages. How people live their engagements with reality – their ideologies – and their class interests were the differential categories he used to explain humanity's differences in his later writings.

Mandela and Alexander were two leadership figures of different liberation groupings on Robben Island. Mandela was older and more widely known in black communities. Alexander became intellectually stimulated through reading and activist work in political organizations, and he, like Mandela, sought the overthrow of apartheid through violent means. Here, it could be argued, the similarities between the two ended. Both men were interlocutors of their own histories and of their very different ideologies.

Mandela, and even though this changed after the ANC collapsed its federal and racially defined organizational structure, viewed himself as the leader of the black African people in South Africa, and Alexander viewed himself as a Marxist revolutionary representing the "urban and rural poor". Their agreement to disagree was an acceptance of a posture of tolerance, but one that was always going to be fraught with difficulty. The purities of principles were sacrificed on an altar of suspicious compromise, and these purities of principle had the potential to evolve antagonistically. Mandela and Alexander viewed humanity differently, and in the spirit of resolving their perceived *non-antagonistic contradictions*[11], Alexander and Mandela put their differences on the back burner.

[11] In the original Maoist sense of the term, *non-antagonistic contradictions* can be resolved through discussions and debate. In this interpretation of the term, political and ideological differences within classes are considered resolvable fissures. *Antagonistic contradictions* (see, for example, Makandal 2013) are not resolvable, and these are generated in the clashes of interests between the different classes of people, the peasantry and the landowners (in the case of China when Mao wrote about these different contradictions). In the 1960s on Robben Island, Alexander took care to describe his differences with Mandela as non-antagonistic. His audience was other political prisoners, and his concern was that the solidarity among prisoners needed to be retained despite the political and ideological differences he had with Mandela. My view is that Alexander's differences with Mandela evolved antagonistically, in part because of their different personalities, and perhaps more decisively, because of their attachments to their own organizations and the declarative assertions and policy positions developed in the ANC (for Mandela) and in the NLF (for Alexander). They could not agree on "race" and they could not agree on a vision for a new South Africa beyond the franchise.

The problem was that this was an *antagonistic* contradiction, and both Alexander and Mandela presumably knew this even though they did not explicitly state it. In the 1960s on Robben Island, Mandela was a lawyer, the acknowledged leader of the "African" people in the African National Congress, and Alexander was a revolutionary activist and a scholar of human drama, and both these men were the acknowledged and convicted leaders of incipient liberation organizations to overthrow apartheid. Mandela was a radical nationalist and Alexander was a convinced Marxist who was yet to develop a strategic position on radical nationalism in the anti-colonial and African contexts. Just over a decade later and after his "Socratic dialogue" with Mandela, Alexander laid out his refutation of the notion of "race" in *One Azania, one nation* (1979).

It was this dialogue with Mandela that precipitated Alexander's focus on specifically African history, the class and colour-caste content of the national question in South Africa, and the problematic suggested in the use, the development and the refinement of languages as the discursive intellectual media and props of human communication. For Alexander, this required reading about these issues.

My view is that reading accompanies and, more often than not, precedes writing. Reading meant, for Alexander, engaging the thoughts and words of an interlocutor who is not oneself. Exploring, through reading, another person's imagination is important in developing one's own imagination, Alexander said to me in 1982[12], fifteen years or so after his confrontational two-year "war of manoeuvre" with Mandela on Robben Island. Reading sociological and political texts meant participating in an intellectual gathering and in a clash between the accumulated thoughts the reader brings to the reading table and the thoughts of the writer whom one reads. It also meant engaging the "here and now" and being an intellectual participant in the daily struggles of ordinary people, and not a distant chronicler in the making of history.

[12] These conversations and meetings with Alexander in 1982 led to the creation of a political journal, *Free Azania*, and I was appointed its first editor. I was then ably assisted by Maria van Driel and Brian Hotz (now Brian Ashley) and as an editorial team, we developed Alexander's position to build a Marxist "Azanian tendency" in the liberation movement. This was our first "theoretical journal" and among the people who supported the initiative were Derrick Naidoo, Peter Meyer, Audrey Meyer and Pumezo Lupuwana. Van Driel and Hotz took over the editorship of the journal when I left for Namibia at the beginning of 1985.

Alexander read for multiple purposes. Mostly, he read because he loved reading. He enjoyed beautifully written texts and he wanted to understand the thoughts of other people grappling with the intellectual and political concerns he was dealing with, and he often and self-consciously divided writers into two: those who support a socialist vision and those who do not, at least in his early writings. This *for* and *against* binary was later modified in his unfolding "war of position" against racial capitalism and especially in his engagements with the social-democratic direction that the post-1994 state in South Africa had taken. It was this self-inspired will to read intensively and widely that intersected with his political and academic engagements, which gave him access to confront, often fortuitously and contingently, some of the dilemmas in Marxism.

The dilemmas of historical materialism

In its relatively short life span of just under two hundred years as a philosophical method to interrogate the practices and arrangements of power, and the genesis of these power arrangements, four dilemmas appear to stand out in the evolution of Marxism as a coalescence of philosophical, ideological and political systems of thought and *lived experiences*.

First, the dissonance and the synergy between the "personal" and the "political", the notions of the *dialogical political self*, are the least spoken about or popularized, but they came to feature prominently in pro-capitalist, Marxist, socialist and anarchist writings during the decades of the 1950s, the 1960s and the 1970s. With the publication of anti-establishment but pro-capitalist writers such as Gloria Steinem, and especially the works of French intellectual activist Simone de Beauvoir (1971), and socialist feminists Juliet Mitchell (1971) and Sheila Rowbotham (1972; 1973a; 1973b), a return to and a re-imagination of Freudian and of Lacanian theory, or, to put it differently, the tensions between the politics of human agency and what Alexander described as "inexorable historical processes", were predictable and were met with discomfort, tension and expected male opposition within the broad circles of the Left.

Second, the "difficult dialogue" (Munck 1986) between the perceived inevitabilities or even intended outcomes of nationalism, manifested in the forms of nation-states, and the base texts of classical Marxism has been talked about the most.

Third, the contradictory consequences and realities of what Rudolf Bahro (1978) has described as "actually existing socialism" and the global political consequences of the Lenin-led Russian revolution in 1917 "against *Capital*" (Gramsci 1971) have divided the international socialist or Marxist movement for close on to nine decades. The world's first communist state, according to Bahro, in which the experiment of a "dictatorship of the proletariat", not as "natural law" but as political necessity, was first violently and then legally constituted against the prescriptions of "classical Marxism". These prescriptions intoned that this dictatorship would only be possible once there had been sufficient industrialization and development in the productive forces and in the instruments of production – the factors of production – of a nation-state. While Bahro's assessment gained considerable traction in other pro-socialist but anti-Soviet rhetoric and in critical commentaries about the Soviet Union, it has not gone unchallenged. Socialist scholar Ralph Milliband (1979: n.p.) writes critically of Bahro's assessment:

> Bahro [begins] with a fundamental postulate, namely that socialism, in so far as it entails what he calls the 'overcoming of subalternity' and the free association of equal citizens, is incompatible with economic backwardness and the requirements of industrialization. He goes very far in suggesting that the incompatibility is complete. In the Russian case, he notes, it was inevitable that backwardness should 'levy an institutional tribute on the Bolsheviks' (p.90). Indeed, 'the more one tries to think through the stations of Soviet history … the harder it becomes to draw a limit short of even the most fearsome excesses, and to say that what falls on the other line was absolutely unavoidable' …. This is an 'economic determinism' pushed to extremes.

Despite the "economic determinism" suggested in Bahro's work, Alexander came to use his concept of "really existing socialism", which Bahro advanced "not without a measure of resignation" in his views on the dominant non-capitalist state formations in the polarized world order. Within the Marxist tradition, the communist political order grafted onto a "backward economy", which is in itself a disputed concept, by Russian Marxist revolutionaries after 1917 had radical consequences for especially the theorization of anti-

capitalist and anti-colonial struggles in the so-called Third World, and has led to multiple interpretations and revisions of the messages in Marxism. Ideologically and politically, it led to the acknowledged horrors of Stalinism; to the engaged, often polemical and divisive but undeniably passionate insights of Trotskyist groupings; to the strategies of a "people's war" of Maoism and of the Vietcong; to the "parliamentary roads to socialism" advocated by the proponents of Western Marxism; to the Marxist-Leninist variations of national liberation movements in their quests for political independence and the creation of autonomous nation-states; and, to the often esoteric but insightful ruminations of the principal proponents of structuralism and of post-structuralism. In many different and intellectually challenging ways, the 1917 Russian revolution "against *Capital*" spawned the intellectual revolts within Marxism's citadel.

And fourth, Marxism's founders and 20th century proponents have been accused of neglecting the environment and ecological factors. Sociologist and critical thinker Jacklyn Cock (2014: 112) says sociology has suffered from "disciplinary inertia":

> Until fairly recently Sociology neglected ecological factors. The reasons for this disciplinary inertia go back to Durkheim's insistence that 'social facts' must be explained by other 'social facts' (Cock 1994). Another expression of disciplinary inertia is that much of the recent writing under the rubric of Environmental Sociology rejected Marxism on the grounds that Marx and Engels ignored natural limits, were technological determinists, understood labour as the only source of value and promoted an anti-ecological industrialism. This perspective has now been thoroughly debunked (O'Connor 1998; Forster and Magdoff 2011; Forster 1999 and 2009; Burkett 2005).

This is an unfinished and a necessary debate, and while Alexander's scant references to the ecological question can, in part, be explained by his reliance on political economy approaches, his most recent work does allude to a recast of his conceptual net and includes the notion of *geocide*. At the same time, it might also be argued that the political economy approach implies that the stubborn laws of capital accumulation tend to quash efforts to preserve the biosphere. In an editors' note explaining the collection of articles he edited with Von Scheliha in 2012, the following assertions are made (Alexander and Von Scheliha 2014: ix–x):

> Each participant, from his or her particular geographical and disciplinary angle considered the many ways in which language policy (and planning) has caused and/or prevented conflict or how policy – de facto and de jure – is helping to maintain peace …. It is, of course, very much in tune with the *Zeitgeist* of a period of history where, so it would seem, human beings are bent on self-destruction and, even worse, *geocide* [my italics].

While these four dilemmas impacted directly and indirectly on Alexander's 1979 work and the subsequent ways he approached dialogue with the leading thinkers of the 1970s through to 2012, his eclectic approach to historical materialism made it easier for him to grapple with oppositional or contrary interpretations to his own evolving positions. In part, this could be attributed to the fact that Alexander was steeped in dialectical reasoning, and he could not ignore Perry Anderson's approach (Anderson, quoted in George 1999: n.p.) to classical and to post-classical Marxism:

> [C]lassical Marxism should be submitted to the same rigorous scrutiny and critical appraisal as the post-classical tradition that derived from it …. The study of classical Marxism today needs a combination of scholarly knowledge and sceptical honesty that it has not yet received. In the post-war epoch, the best and most original work in this field has usually taken the form of ingenious reinterpretations on one canonical text or author … often to refute conventional notions about another …. Today it is necessary to abandon this practice, and to proceed instead to scrutinise the credentials of the texts of classical Marxism themselves, without any prior assumption of their necessary coherence or correctness …. Marx could not remain so politically and theoretically central to the later twentieth century, if he had not at times been out of synchrony with the later nineteenth century in which he lived. His mistakes and omissions may be said to be typically the price of his foresights.

Marx's works remained central throughout Alexander's political and literary career, but this was a measured and critical centrality. As I mentioned previously, Alexander's *One Azania, one nation* (No Sizwe 1979) was a Marxist critique of the national question in South Africa, and it was grounded in the "political economy" approach of classical Marxism. It was conceived, written and published over the years 1976 to 1979. Alexander had just been released from Robben Island and he was "banned" by the South African government from living an ordinary life. In this book, he spelt out his affinities with historical materialism, his variation of Marxism, his commitment to an engaged intellectualism, and his understanding of how class struggles would unfold in South Africa. In light of the preoccupation with "race

thinking" in the South African polity, he also explored the notions of "race", of nationhood, of national liberation and of language. During this time, he had set himself an ideological and a political task to produce a document of substance to challenge the very notion of "race", which underpinned much of social science theory, and to put up for public discussion and debate the notion of colour-caste to describe South Africa's population registration groups.

Apart from the organizational-political questions that he wanted to address, his task was made more complex by the assistance of Marxist sociologist and feminist Ginny Volbrecht. Alexander describes Volbrecht's influence (Alexander, cited in Busch *et al*. 2014: 98):

> Through the work I was doing on the national question, I met one of my friends, Ginny Volbrecht. She was a lecturer in sociology at the University of Cape Town. She had been asked by other people to assist me with my research, because she could get the books more easily (I was banned, I couldn't go onto the university premises) and she had insight into the subject …. Through her I came to realise that I was a 'male chauvinist pig' (an 'MCP') and that my discourse was completely 'MCP'. And through her and also one or two other women I knew at that time I came to realise that when you wrote in English you actually had to change the way you expressed things. And this meant a change of mindset – a whole change of life, basically. Because we had been only men on the island, black men …. *And I changed my entire way of looking at the world* [my italics]. In terms of the influence of language on me, I can say that I became aware that European languages, in particular English but of course also Afrikaans and German, were steeped in the concepts of male domination.

For Alexander, "in a matter of months" and through his work with Volbrecht, he became a "radical feminist" and he adopted the ethos of the women's liberation movement[13]. He had discovered that his theoretical grid, his historical materialism and therefore his Marxism,

[13] His description of himself as a "radical feminist" was a generic affiliation with or an affectation towards socialist-inspired or Marxist-inspired feminism because, at the time (in the 1970s), the women's liberation movement was divided along competing and antagonistic ideological lines. There were radical, anarchist, socialist, Marxist and liberal pro-capitalist currents in the women's liberation movement. The "radical feminists" argued for separate organizations for women. They argued that the main conflict in societies is between men and women, and the sexual differences became manifest in political ways of organizing people and society. This view was opposed by the Marxist and socialist feminists, who viewed class as the main dividing line in societies, but they also insisted that the "personal is political", and they stressed individual human agency in political and organizational collectives. Alexander's description of himself is a somewhat loose characterization of his and Volbrecht's position, which was closer to a combination of "radical" and Marxist variations of feminism. Moreover, while Volbrecht may well have inspired an attitudinal shift in his approach to women's and feminist issues, this shift did not translate into written codes in his analysis of South Africa's national question in *One Azania, one nation*.

contained the implicit and often explicit sexism embedded in previous constructions of history, and in how history is portrayed through the eyes of men and the concepts of male domination, and he tried to change his way of looking at the world. Alexander's "feminism" came to evolve as a Marxist variety. It was an embrace of a new way of thinking about politics and especially about the role women play in creating, in sustaining and in parting with male-dominated cultural norms and ways of being in the world. The *machismo* of Robben Island and of the "big men" in his own National Liberation Front, in the Unity Movement, in the ANC, in the PAC and in the incipient Black Consciousness Movement had to be challenged and transcended.

Theoretically, with these tools of sociological and political analysis, he laid out his thesis on the national question in South Africa and his vision of an unfolding social revolution[14]. And yet, despite his self-proclaimed embrace of feminist principles, the *language of feminism* was absent from his analysis of the national question as outlined in his 1979 book.

Instead, Alexander traced the written genealogies of apartheid-capitalism, and he sketched the synergies and differences between apartheid ideologues and British settler sectionalist proponents. He also wanted to introduce new theoretical insights as the matrix for a new *strategy* of national liberation and class emancipation under the broad command of what he understood to be the legitimate representatives of South Africa's black working class and its allies in the radical intelligentsia.

By the late 1970s, Alexander had had a long association with the philosophical method of historical materialism, and he had assimilated its cornerstones into his evolving outlook since he came into contact with this Marxist method before his incarceration in 1963. This view of history involved an engaged intellectualism with the fractions or sections of social classes he perceived to be the motors of change against capitalism.

Following Karl Marx's eleventh thesis, which was first written in 1845, on German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, and in which Marx concluded, "Philosophers have hitherto

[14] This Marxist view on revolution can be summarized as follows: whereas a "political" revolution implies a change in government without transforming production and property relations, very much like what happened in 1994 in South Africa, a "social" revolution implies a radical change in the relations of production, in property relations, and it also implies a change in ideology of the government that emerges from this overhaul. For much of his adult life, Alexander was committed to this social revolution, this *fān shēn*, which in Mandarin means to "turn over" or to overhaul (see, for example, William Hinton's 1966 book titled *Fanshen*).

only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it" (Marx 1969), Alexander's political mission was to interpret the world and to radically change it. In all his writings, and especially through his study on the national question in South Africa, he approached sociological and political theory through this lens. But, like so many left-wing intellectuals and Marxist revolutionaries in his time, he remained cautious in applying the method to interrogate existential issues in his own life. The on-going angst of the self and the continuous search for meaning appear subliminally in his written texts, and when he did seek answers to such questions, they were to be found in the political work he was engaged in or in the struggles he was participating in.

Whereas Alexander focused on larger groups or classes of people and their concerns and interests in power arrangements in class struggles, the post-structuralists such as Badiou, Žižek and Jameson tend to combine their sociological cartographies and their political proclivities with analyses of the "architectures of personalities"[15] in the struggles and historical moments they reflect on. Alexander tended to suspect such thinkers as focusing too much on the "self" or the individual. While he acknowledged the intellectual strides accomplished by French psychologist and social theorist Jacques Lacan[16], he regarded any inclination or suggestion of the indulgent political self as an effort in self-promotion or self-aggrandisement. Alexander's Marxism, in this regard, was "classical" but limiting. And yet, his self-effacing reflections about his own life in his later writings and in interviews (Alexander 2013; Busch *et al*. 2014) point to an activist intellectual keen to locate the *political self* in the broader milieus in which he found himself before and during his imprisonment from 1963[17] to 1974, and after his release from Robben Island in 1974.

In part, Alexander's position was similar to that developed by British historian Edward Hallett Carr, whose *The history of Soviet Russia* (1959) is a monumental testimony to

[15] I am reluctant to mention a source of this concept. My generic reference is that it refers to a physical embodiment of a personality, and the way of being in the world. Alexander's way of being in the world was a physical engagement with words and a refined sense of the words that other people use. His way of life suggested an appreciation of the other, and this is what contributed to the "architecture" of his personality and the very strong presence he carried with him when he entered a room of people.

[16] Lacan's writings, and to a lesser extent, Louis Althusser's and Jean-Paul Sartre's works, are the self-acknowledged and base texts that especially Badiou and Žižek use in their theories.

[17] Alexander was detained by the apartheid security police in 1963. Together with ten other people, he was put on trial and eventually convicted in 1964 of "conspiracy to commit sabotage". He spent ten years on Robben Island from 1964 to 1974.

historical scholarship. Carr also wrote an equally compelling and influential essay, *What is history?* (Carr 1961), as a response to a debate with liberal academic and self-proclaimed individualist Isaiah Berlin. Carr and Berlin debated the role of the individual in history, the role that "chance" or contingency plays in determining historical events, and "historical inevitability" or what Alexander (No Sizwe 1979) describes as the "inexorable historical processes". Berlin had accused Carr of being a determinist who dismisses the "accidental" in history and who relies on "vast impersonal forces" that shape historical moments.[18] Carr responded in kind to Berlin and dismissed the former Russian's philosophy of history as a "parlour game", a "counterfactual account" and a "might-have-been" school of thought. Carr tended to place the individual in a socio-economic and political milieu, whereas Berlin argued that this view of individuals as the instruments of historical laws leads to a "determinism" and a world view without individual choice.

Alexander was never a politician in any dictionary meaning of the term, but politics was at the core of his writings. So was ethics. His intuition of what is right for society is what infused his elaborate and considered knowledge and views of the national question in society, and especially since 1985 and the launch of the National Language Project, the crucial role that language plays in building an expansive, rather than an implosive nationhood. While his Marxism made him suspicious of nationalism and its debilitating consequences in undermining class and global solidarities, he embraced the radical nationalists of the black consciousness movement who insisted on the assertion, "Black man [sic], you are on your own" (Malan 1997: 19). Apart from the sexist critique it was likely to generate, this assertion

[18] Michael Ignatieff's biographical account titled *Isaiah Berlin* (1998) provides insightful glances into Berlin's life and his intellectual preoccupations. Berlin's duel with Carr was one of many that he used to elaborate his liberal political principles. Ignatieff writes: "Replying to Carr was a challenge Berlin could not duck. In a series of letters to *The Listener*, as well as in private exchanges with Carr himself, Berlin insisted that Marxist theory put an almost exclusive emphasis on abstract socio-economic causation and neglected the importance of the ideas, beliefs and intentions of individuals" (1998: 236). Carr, on the other hand, was not a self-proclaimed Marxist even though Ignatieff described him as such. Carr's book, *What is history?*, was photocopied and circulated among young revolutionary activists in Alexander's Marxist groupings in the years 1982 to 1984. A central argument, for Carr, was to interrogate *how* history is perceived and written. In this short book, Carr presents a compelling argument for a history to be written "from below", that is, from the point of view of the oppressed and exploited, and from the point of view of the interlocutors who see themselves representing the interests of the poor. This view of historical research and of the actors making history coincides with Antonio Gramsci's notion of an "organic intellectual", which Alexander came to use in his propositions about the role of an individual in history. It also coincides with Jean-Paul Sartre's view, especially in his later writings, that writers need to be "committed", by which he meant active engagements in current struggles and concerns of working class people, if they wish to influence political and philosophical discussions.

fitted into Alexander's belief that the black working class, as a subset of black oppressed people in South Africa, held the key to unlock the revolutionary potential of society's class and colour contradictions. The nationalists in the ANC, the Africanists, held no such key, if one is to develop Alexander's logic. He used his store of knowledge and his "class analysis" to advocate for the unity of the oppressed and exploited people in South Africa, and repeatedly insisted that this unity must be forged by the black working class as the leading social group. He employed the political slogan, "One Azania, One Nation", as a stepping stone for a greater and a more inclusive unity of the oppressed, not only in South Africa but across the globe. And it is within the contest between an internationalism, the guiding principle of working class solidarities, and the restrictive and often xenophobic boundaries of efforts at national cohesion (nation-building efforts) that Alexander found himself. His *One Azania, one nation* proposed a strategy to overcome debilitating nationalisms, and a strategy to build a single South African/Azanian nation out of a polyglot of language groups whose interests coincide with those of the black proletariat. It is also within this clash that he faced his intractable political paradox: is there a need to build a nation if the logic of historical materialism means the transcendence, if not destruction, of nations?

The national question has been a central theme in Alexander's theoretical expositions, and it has also been one of the central political paradoxes of his writings, ever since the publication of *One Azania, one nation* in 1979. This persistent and stubborn dilemma in Alexander's historical materialism has its anomalous roots in the contradictory thoughts captured in two consecutive paragraphs from the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* about nation-states, national formations, national differences and internationalism written by Marx and Engels in 1848 (Marx and Engels 1975: 56–57):

> The working men [sic] have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got. Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself as the nation, it is, so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word.
>
> National differences and antagonisms between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto.

For the founders of "classical" Marxism, which refers to the corpus of works produced by Marx and Engels, a study of nationalism was uncharted territory and was an "anomaly" (Anderson 1983) because fighting for a nation-state goes against the idea and against an imagination of internationalism and class solidarities.

Previously, Hegel's unfortunate use of the concepts "historic" and "non-historic" peoples, or historic and "history-less" peoples (Hegel n.d.), which were incorporated by especially Engels in his elaboration on the function of the nation-state, did not make subsequent purviews of nationalism any easier in the mid-nineteenth century when Marx and Engels attempted to formulate their definitions. "The working men [sic] have no country", or, there is no need for a formal state with geographical boundaries, Marx and Engels asserted, and yet they persisted in calling on the proletariat to "constitute itself as the nation".

A utopia (Jameson 2005) was envisaged, and with the exception of the former Soviet Union in the initial period following its revolution in 1917, the Chinese experiment after 1949 and the guerrilla vanguard party-led Cuban revolution of 1959, few if any working class-led insurrections had led to the "proletarianization"[19] of a nation-state, or to a national consciousness that placed and advocated the paramountcy of working class interests and concerns. The experiences of the twentieth century and of the early part of the twenty-first century suggest the contrary (see, for example, George 1999; Žižek 2011). Not only has there been a lack of international working class solidarity, but there has been an increase in the number of nation-states and an increase in nationalist rhetoric – often deeply rooted in perceptions of ethnicities, language and religious interests – with groups other than the working classes "constituting" themselves as "nations".

Alexander wrote his 1979 book using a "political economy" approach. He did so using the schemas of other revolutionary theorists such as Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Mao, Cabral, Machel and Tabata. In theory, this meant that he employed a base-superstructure model (or, in his terms, a dialectical frame – the articulation between politics and economics – implicit in historical materialism) to develop an appreciation of the rise of capitalism and its

[19] In this context, I use the concept, "proletarianization", culturally and politically, rather than the accepted historical use, which ordinarily implies the "making of a working class" in the transitions from feudal to capitalist modes of production (see, for example, Thompson 1991). Also, for the making of the South African working class, Wolpe (1971; 1972; 1987) is useful.

different nationalisms in South Africa. In his view, politics (the superstructure) represents a field of command systems operating in synergy with or in contradiction to economics (the base), a field of productive activity generating imperatives and material needs that fed into the rationale driving nationalist movements such as the ANC, the PAC, the Unity Movement, the Black Consciousness Movement and Afrikaner opposition to British domination in the South African polity.

While the descriptive schema suggested in this base-superstructure model is debatable and contestable, it is cited as the matrix and the way of organizing thoughts that historical materialist thinkers, such as Alexander, use to approach the political economies of countries. He saw politics and economics as intersecting fields of human activity. As of 1979 he also had not yet read Antonio Gramsci's *Prison notebooks* (see, for example, Gramsci 1971; 1996), which Alexander later used in his references to and about ideology, the notion of hegemony, his "war of position", "organic intellectuals" and the problematic accompanying class leaderships and organizational conflicts.

In the late 1970s when Alexander's study on the national question in South Africa was published by Zed Press, and in the immediate decade following this, studies on anti-colonial struggles and national liberation movements coincided with trenchant post-colonial theorizations about the nation-state.

Alongside the "classical Marxist" books published and distributed by official government-funded media houses of "actually existing socialist countries" – the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) through Moscow-based Progress Publishers and China through Peking-based Foreign Languages Press – socialist-inclined and radical publishing groups and co-operatives such as Verso Books (which was formed in 1970 by the staff of New Left Books), Pathfinder Press and Zed Press (which was formed in 1977 and is the forerunner of Zed Books), actively sought out Marxist writers and thinkers from the so-called Third World. Verso Books attracted mainly the radical thinkers of the New Left of "Western Marxism", the structuralists and the post-structuralists, whereas the more traditional Marxists, who leaned principally on "political economy" approaches, gravitated towards Pathfinder Press and Zed Press. Among the seminal books published by Zed Press were the works of writers such as Alexander (1979), Swapo of Namibia (1981), De Bracança and Wallerstein (1982), Hanlon

(1984), Chatterjee (1986), Munck (1986) and Munslow (1986). Verso published books by writers such as Poulantzas (1978), Althusser (1979), Löwy (1981) and Anderson (1983).[20]

Alongside the acknowledged political preferences of left-inclined publishing houses, the international socialist movement was further divided by ideological orientations mainly emanating from the *for* and *against* intellectual lobbies directed at the Soviet Union and, to a lesser extent, at China. During this period, Alexander placed himself in, and was in turn fed by the writings predominantly generated by the stable of non-Soviet-inclined Marxist thinkers whose main publishing outlets were Pathfinder Press and Zed Press, and whose principal theoretical and practical concerns were about the conundrums posed by the *realpolitik* and *lived experiences* of Marxist-Leninist and revolutionary national projects, as in non-capitalist or anti-capitalist national liberation movements[21] on the one hand, and the evolution of an internationalism, which is considered to be both a principle of and a condition for Marxism's historical materialism to grow, on the other hand.

It was in this new publishing cauldron of Marxist regeneration and tensions that Benedict Anderson's book, *Imagined communities* (1983), and Gramsci's *Prison notebooks*[22] (1971) came to feature emphatically in Alexander's writings. Together, these two writers, for Alexander, opened new avenues and ways of exploring an "engaged intellectualism" and a revolutionary "praxis", the function of the intellectual in history, hegemonies, nationalism, the national question and its re-imagination, and especially the role of the print media and language in facilitating consensus about perceived cultural identities in nation-states. It also meant rethinking the party-political implications of Marxism and Leninism, and a growing

[20] There were many other publishing houses at the time. Among these, Pelican, Bookmarks and Paladin Books stood out as publishers of important works by Marxist writers and by revolutionaries such as Regis Debray (1975), Rosa Luxemburg (1986) and J.G. Merquior (1986), respectively. Oxford University Press also published significant collections from Marxist academics. In South Africa, alternative publishing house Ravan Press, which was started by anti-apartheid cleric Beyers Naude (who was also the head of the Christian Institute) and Peter Randall in 1972, did not engage the dilemmas of historical materialism in the international publishing community and did not align itself with any overt political tendency, but contributed to anti-apartheid thoughts being placed in the public domain. Another South African publishing house, Skotaville, which started in the mid-1980s, also published two of Alexander's works, *Sow the wind* (1985) and *Education and the struggle for national liberation in South Africa* (1990).

[21] In Africa, these included the envisaged national projects of the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) in Algeria, the PAIGC (Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde) in Guinea and Cape Verde, Frelimo (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique) in Mozambique, the MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola) in Angola, and Zanu-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front) in Zimbabwe.

[22] It is unclear when Alexander started to read Gramsci's writings. My guess is that he started his "Gramscian" journey around 1981 or 1982, perhaps earlier.

acceptance that the interests of workers and peasants can be represented by more than one political party in a nation-state or in national projects spearheading popular moves to build a nation-state. The former Marxist position that a communist or socialist party is the "sole and authentic representative" of "the people" was to be questioned and to be placed under the sociological microscope. While a national liberation movement may define itself as Marxist-Leninist, this does not necessarily translate into one political party, the anti-colonial theorists of the 1980s argued. Alexander had already embraced this position in his 1979 book on the national question in South Africa.

In his quest to understand the elements that make up the threads of social cohesion in a nation-state, and quite apart from the interests that presumably drive class solidarities, Alexander came to use some of Anderson's central concepts in his ongoing studies on the language and national questions for much of the 1980s and 1990s. In an article titled "Approaches to the national question in South Africa" (Alexander 1986), in explaining competing ideologies informing workers' different conceptions of the nation, he concurs with Anderson's analysis of the rise of print capitalism:

> A recent contribution by Benedict Anderson (1985 [a reprint of Anderson's 1983 work]) has helped to clarify this aspect of the study on nationalism very much. Anderson's central thesis is that the development and spread in Western Europe of 'print languages' (eg high German or standard English) in conjunction with capitalist relations of production replaced the juxtaposition of 'sacred languages' such as Latin to local or regional ideolects. This made possible a new kind of 'imagined community' qualitatively different from extant religious or dynastically centred 'communities'. The development of printing and its intimate connection with the invention of 'print languages' is the bridge between the development of capitalism and the origins of modern national consciousness. Anderson's book goes a long way to explaining the historical link in Europe between language and nationality …. The value of Anderson's contribution lies particularly in the fact that it enables us to concentrate on the nation as an ideological and [a] political construct. (Alexander 1986: 68–69)

While Alexander is critical of Anderson's "idealism", he acknowledges that Anderson's work posits new questions about collective or national imaginations, language and semiology. Alexander continues:

> For our purposes, the two most important terms in Anderson's thesis are the words 'imagined' and 'language' because they lead on directly to the examination of how national consciousness or national identity is generated. This examination, as we shall see, is in fact nothing other than the examination of the process of national unification or national unity. Here Anderson's work via the findings of semiology becomes important for the study and the solution of the national question in South Africa. (Alexander 1986: 69)

But the dilemmas of historical materialism were a stubborn reality. Within the pantheon of Marxist-Leninist conversations and discussions, they were elided rather than confronted (Anderson 1983: 13). The theoretical, political and strategic instabilities posed by the national question were not confined to the national projects of national liberation movements that had achieved independence from colonial rule. These instabilities meant taking a new look at what it meant to be a "nation", and the "elements of the theory of the nation" (No Sizwe 1979: 132–164).

In the South African case, Marxist proponents used notions of class and of colour (or "race") in tracking the development of capitalism, and, for Alexander, these notions came to be the pillars of his political strategy against continued capitalist rule, and for his assertion that the black proletariat should lead the unfolding social revolution. In his view, the interests of the black working class should dominate the orientation and the goals of the South African liberation movement. This wish on Alexander's part has not yet come to fruition, and it throws into sharp relief the apparently insurmountable problems associated with assumptions about revolutionary class consciousness; the instrumentalism implicit in some of Marx's, Lenin's and Stalin's theses on workers "constituting themselves as the nation" in nation-states; and in Lukács's uncritical embrace of the presumed and inherent revolutionary consciousness of the working class.

Crudely, and indeed roughly, these theorists argued that a revolutionary consciousness is inevitable because of the inhumane conditions workers are subjected to in a capitalist mode of production. The matrix of alienation generated by the separation between labour and its product is the presumed motor that drives a potential revolutionary consciousness, they seem to have argued.

Although Alexander was conscious of the tendency by Marxist theoreticians to valorize presumptions about revolutionary consciousness of workers as they go about their daily functions in capitalist enterprises, his Marxist and activist training made it difficult for him to ignore the potential for such a consciousness to emerge. Maintaining contact with the grass-roots, with marginalized and poor people, was part of his education at the Holy Rosary Convent where he did his secondary schooling, and he retained this contact with the poor, believing there is the *locus* for change. He critically reflects on this, but he also maintains that it is the *economic location*, or in his terms the "structural position", of workers that places them in the proverbial front seat to drive change:

> For me it is very clear that you have to maintain not just the contact, but actual involvement with the people who[m] you see as historical subjects, the people who are going to change the world. Not because they are progressive, not at all; I don't believe that workers are by definition progressive. On the contrary, workers can be very reactionary; but because of their *structural position* [my italics] in the society there comes a moment when it is that particular group of people, obviously supported by other militant mobilised groups, that will turn things around …. I also think that merely writing, merely thinking, abstracting – that goes back to the eleventh thesis of Feuerbach, of Marx – is not enough. I honestly believe that it's not enough to know and interpret the world; you've got to change it. (Alexander, in Busch *et al*. 2014: 173)

Alexander shifted his "angle of vision" from a "base-superstructure" model to interrogating the *relations of production*, and therefore the ideological constitution of the class, or combination of classes, that he was convinced would lead South Africa's social revolution. In a polyglot and a multilingual society such as South Africa's, not unlike other societies, notions or popular perceptions of nationhood or what it means to be a South African cannot be achieved without communication.

At the same time, for Alexander, a sense of a national identity cannot be forged without acknowledging that languages are necessary cultural tools to preserve and to grow communities of people, and for people to be in a position to *express* themselves in the metaphors and imagery of a language they are comfortable with, and this meant their home languages. But language develops not only as part of a system of communication, according

to Alexander, it also develops as consciousness, and its transformative function has to be acknowledged:

> The other side of it is that because language is consciousness – as Marx puts [it], consciousness is the language of real life – it means that if you are able to change the language, you can change the behaviour. One has to be careful not to fall into an idealist position; in the beginning was not the word, as Goethe says, in the beginning was the deed. But it's not just either/or; the point is if you can change the *discourse*, rather than the language, if you can change the discourse you can begin to change behaviour. The behaviour leads to changes of structures and different visions of how society can be. (Alexander, quoted in Busch *et al*. 2014: 130–131)

For Alexander, ideology is not some rarefied or esoteric concept in his thoughts to be tucked away in some elaborate footnote or to be referred to in hushed, unintelligible explanations. Neither is "false consciousness" the ideology that Marx and Engels, the founders of what has come to be known as classical Marxism, preferred to call it. Rather, ideology is a lived reality along the lines that Therborn (1980) explains. In a nuanced interpretation of "working class" and "non-class" ideologies, Alexander paraphrases Therborn in his explanation of the power configurations suggested in practices of ideologies and how they come about. In accepting that class ideologies "co-exist with inclusive-historical ideologies", and are "not an aberration of underdeveloped class consciousness", Alexander also confirms Therborn's assertion that the construction of a "discursive order" is, in fact, a "class order" and an outcome of class struggles (Alexander 1986: 70):

> Therborn presents the key to understanding why the class struggle and the struggle for national liberation constitute two moments of one and the same social process in contemporary South Africa. In other words, why the struggle for national liberation is, from the point of view of the exploited classes, the inescapable political form of the class struggle. Stated as simply as possible, we can say that in South Africa, because of the peculiar development of capitalism, different strata of the working class have been 'subjected and qualified' differently. They have been 'open to' different 'non-class' ideologies with the result that working-class ideology [presumably an anti-capitalist or a pro-socialist ideology] has articulated with different existential and historical ideologies [for example religion].

Ideology, for Therborn, is the discursive practice through which a human being lives his or her relation to reality, how that person approaches meeting other people and what that person does with the information gathered in the engagements with other people. It is an ideology that is unambiguous in its bias and it is expansive in its internal logic.

Alexander took sides and lived his ideology, and its mutations were the direct consequence of his lived experiences and of the experiences of people he considered to be his friends, his mentors and his comrades. His "paradigm" (Richards 2013) was a porous framework that embraced and struggled with the "lacerations" (Gramsci, cited in Nussbaum 2003) of extraneous influences, of radical change and of ambiguities, of a quest to live out a humanness that is not averse to contradiction and difference. His approach to the register of history was, first and foremost, informed by his interpretation of historical materialism, and it is within this paradigm that he explored and experimented with the ambiguities embedded in dialectical reasoning.

His focused return to the language question in the mid-1980s, and indeed for the rest of his life, was as much about addressing the conceptual strides and advances – while at the same time struggling with the inadequacies, contradictions and dilemmas – of political economy approaches embedded in historical materialism, as it was his firm conviction that the language question in Marxism needed rethinking and comprehensive attention.

Politics and engaging the dialectics of reform and revolution

Alexander spent the latter half of the 1980s and the early 1990s, in the years leading up to the democratic South African elections in 1994, researching, reading and writing specifically about the language question, language and educational planning, and actively engaging in the debates about the terms and possibilities of the negotiated compromises between the ANC, as the lead negotiator of the liberation movement, and the last apartheid government represented by the National Party.

The macro political environment, the international pressure on the apartheid state to concede to black majority rule, the growing tensions between the influence of the *exiles* and the

inziles[23] within the ANC, and the uncertainty about the ANC's socialist or capitalist character, meant that the outcomes of the intellectual battles about the multiple meanings of negotiations were not cast in stone. Both within and outside the ANC, different ideological and strategic positions were developed and promoted in the fights for dominance over the direction of the ANC.

Alexander's approach to the unfolding negotiations suggested a critical acknowledgement of the *realpolitik* of the negotiating moment, and he maintained his critique of the underlying imperatives driving the agreed upon social and economic system of the negotiators (Alexander 1993: 99):

> Whether or not the irredentist right wing of South African politics retards the negotiations, it ought to be clear that both in the so-called transition and beyond, the immediate future will be shaped by the market-driven imperatives of the system manifest in the profit motive, the principle of achievement and the technical-vocational needs of commodification. Most of the recommendations for educational renewal and restructuring that will emanate from the governing elite will be (and are already) based on norms and values that are not only compatible with, but tend to reinforce, the production of capitalist commodities.

The pragmatists and the moderates in the ANC, the incumbent "governing elite", eventually won this fight over the "soul of the ANC" and took over the reins of a pre-existing and pro-capitalist administration in 1994. The newly elected ANC government did not challenge the property clauses at the root of the apartheid-capitalist country it inherited to administer. A *political* revolution took the place of the *social* revolution envisioned by the revolutionary men and women of the ANC, the PAC, the Yu Chi Chan Club, the National Liberation Front, the South African Communist Party, the African People's Democratic Union of Southern Africa and the Black Consciousness Movement, who were sent to prison, suffered persecution at their homes or went into exile, for wanting to violently overthrow apartheid in the 1960s, the 1970s and the 1980s. All the main co-ordinates of capitalist reproduction and accumulation were to remain in place and the ANC, in 1994, was elected to manage the transition from apartheid-capitalism to some or other variation of *non-racial* capitalism.

[23] The *exiles* were people who had left apartheid South Africa and who found political refuge in other countries. Many returned during the 1989–1993 period of negotiations, and some, such as Thabo Mbeki and Kader Asmal, came to occupy central and leading positions in the post-apartheid government. The *inziles* were people who stayed in apartheid South Africa to fight the political struggle on the "home front".

Alexander and others had formed a new political organization, the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action, in 1990. He had also just been diagnosed with cancer. After spending time in the United States in 1991 at Yale University where he specifically investigated the *sociology* and *economics* of language and educational planning, and after undergoing cancer treatment, which made it difficult for him to work for about six months in 1991, Alexander was asked by Michael Ashley, the head of the School of Education at the University of Cape Town (UCT), to put together a team of people to look at curriculum and language policy. He did so and the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (Praesa) was formed in 1992, attached to and hosted by UCT. This came to be his "base" for the next twenty years, and it is no coincidence that the unit has retained the words "project" and "alternative" in its name.

By 1992, Alexander had recovered from his cancer treatments, and in his determined way, he started dealing with the conceptual and organizational issues "at hand". The UCT School of Education's Ashley had given him "carte blanche" to do what he considered to be in the best interests of his newly launched unit, Praesa. Alongside this, Alexander was preparing his framework to re-engage the momentum and the consequences of the negotiations between the ANC and the National Party. Together with his comrades in the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action, he put together an election platform called the Workers List Party to contest the impending 1994 elections.

Following his 1988 debate[24] with academic Jakes Gerwel about the character of a university and the political implications of reformist paths, especially at the University of the Western

[24] Jakes Gerwel became the Rector of the University of the Western Cape in 1987. In his inaugural address, he sought to "reposition the university beyond the liberal/conservative binary that had come to define options available to the sector" (Soudien 2013: 173). Gerwel advocated that UWC be turned into a "university of the left". Soudien argues that Alexander's disquiet about Gerwel's proposition was his "anxiety about how 'alternative constructions of subjectivity' could emerge within the parameters framed for an apartheid institution" (*ibid*.: 174). The institutional culture of UWC at the time fed into the racial reasoning and confirmed racial stereotyping through its "disciplinary reason", that is, through the university administration's use of the presumed logic of different disciplines to justify racial markings. As with Soudien's nuanced assessment of the debate between Alexander and Gerwel, Lalu (2012) presents an equally textured argument, suggesting that Alexander failed to take "account of the fact that racial formations were products not only of ideology but also of disciplinary reason. Their desire to wrest control of the idea of community from the apparently instrumental logic into which it had been inserted in apartheid South Africa offered no account of its reinscription in the fields of knowledge that defined the university" (cited in Soudien 2013: 174). Gerwel's intention was to self-consciously redefine the mission of the university through populating it with overt radical

Cape and Gerwel's proposition that it could be turned into the "university of the left", prominent in Alexander's thinking were the platforms of reform that were exposed in the preliminary "talks about talks" between the ANC and the National Party government, and the possibilities of revolution. Caught between the Scylla of reform and the Charybdis of revolution, Alexander again turned to the classical Marxists, especially German communist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg. His lengthy citation of Luxemburg provides an insight into his subsequent strategic orientation towards the post-1994 state. In an article titled "Negotiations and the struggle for socialism in South Africa" (Alexander 1993: 30–80), he quotes Luxemburg, "bearing in mind that what she refers to as 'social democracy' we would now call democratic socialism":

> Can the social democracy be against reforms? Can we counterpose the social revolution, the transformation of the existing order, our final goal, to social reforms? Certainly not. The daily struggle for reforms, for the amelioration of the conditions of the workers within the framework of the existing order, and for democratic institutions, offers to the social democracy the only means of engaging in the proletarian class war and working in the direction of the final goal – the conquest of political power and the suppression of wage labour. Between social reforms and revolution there exists for the social democracy an indissoluble tie. The struggle for reforms is its means; the social revolution, its aim. (Luxemburg, quoted in Alexander 1993: 54)

While this may be a moot point, Wosa's fate was sealed by the outcome of the 1994 elections. Among the reasons proffered as explanations for its failure to gain a single seat in the new parliament were that its election platform, the Workers List Party (WLP), lacked the requisite electioneering machinery needed to contest a *bourgeois-democratic* election and that it failed to capture public opinion to support its causes. As an overt socialist alternative to the other political parties and despite its self-proclaimed assertions about promoting the interests of the rural and urban poor, the WLP made little impact on popular consciousness.

Organizational matters were not Alexander's forte. Instead, while he had different and radical philosophical propositions and alternative ways of being in the world to offer, he leaned on other people's expertise and organizational abilities to manage organizations of people. The

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and left-wing thinkers. Alexander's critique was that the overarching institutional dependence for funding and infrastructure on the apartheid state would limit the space for oppositional and pro-socialist thoughts.

complex dilemmas of organizational coherence and public profiling were not his strongest suite, and the micro management of people within organizations was not an issue he was overly concerned with. My view is that Alexander erred on the side of trust in people, believing that overall policies and principles binding organizations would be adequately understood by employees or by members in organizations in which he was, *de facto*, the prime intellectual inspiration. His way of relating to the world of organizations and to the people in them was cut from a cloth of informed naïveté, an innocence about people and their motivations. His complete embrace of the *bona fides* of every individual was a lodestar of his personality, his way of *being* in the world. In the bitter battles[25] waged in Wosa over whether the membership should be working inside or outside nationalist movements (particularly the ANC), he provides the following interpretations about political caucuses, or groups within groups. In the parlance of the 1980s and the 1990s, these political groupings within groupings were also called "tendencies". These comments by Alexander capture his essential Marxist and humanitarian approach, but they also point to his resistance to explicitly prescribe and give orders:

> I should like to stress that even where I might have had some reservations, I have never questioned the *bona fides* of any individual or group that joined WOSA. My general approach has always been to give people the benefit of the doubt until they show themselves unworthy of my trust in practice. Consequently, I have never accepted the suspicion that some of my friends and comrades expressed to me that certain individuals and groups had 'entered' WOSA in order to further their individual or 'tendency' concerns with a view to 'take over' the organisation or to walk away from it with a large chunk of its membership …. Nothing is more unworthy of the human condition or more contemptible than the conscious intention to instrumentalise other human beings whom one pretends to treat as though they were one's equals. (Alexander 1991: 4)

Unlike Vladimir Lenin, the Russian Marxist revolutionary and communist political strategist, Alexander lacked the ruthlessness and organizational acumen to manage political formations,

[25] Within months of its formation in 1990, the different "tendencies" making up Wosa were at odds with one another over whether to work within nationalist movements (the ANC, PAC or Azapo) or whether the political organization should be campaigning outside these movements on a socialist platform. Alexander was in the United States at the time (1991), and he wrote a "Letter to the C.C. [here, it is not clear whether the 'C.C.' refers to a 'Central Committee' or to a 'Co-ordinating Committee'] and Members of W.O.S.A.", which is in his archive called The Neville Alexander Papers in the Jagger Library, University of Cape Town.

in part because he was averse to giving orders and mostly because he was opposed to the culture embedded in authoritarian practices. Philosophically, Alexander's positions on conflicts waged within organizational parameters were more confrontational, but still generic (Alexander 1991: 5):

> More fundamental is the philosophical/psychological source of the conflict and bickering, the failure to co-operate and discuss in a comradely way. In order to understand better what I'm trying to address briefly, I need to say a few words about the relationship between power and freedom. *A simple definition of power is the capacity to translate into reality one's intentions or thoughts*. *This involves in most cases also getting other people to do what one wants them to do* [my italics]. Economic, physical (military) and intellectual (including cultural/traditional) sources of power are the ones we know best. In any organisation, there arises a group of people who for one or more of these reasons obtain/accumulate power. Such elites or leadership groups are held in check in democratic organisations by means of various written and unwritten rules so that they do not fall prey to the temptation to abuse their power. The struggle to find 'the perfect constitution' that will guarantee this ideal condition is an ongoing, even if fundamentally futile, one but we have to learn from the experience of others if we do not want to be condemned to repeating their mistakes.

His self-criticism and his ability to argue against himself (because he was the chairperson of Wosa) point to an exploration of a dialectic of truth about himself. Alexander understood the complexity of organizational work, but he was not a political manager. He excelled at drawing up policies, constitutional frameworks and visions, which were his organizational *subsets* (Badiou 1989; 2011), and which were undergirded by his political philosophy. While he tended to engage every person he met, at work, at political meetings, and in the classrooms he created, he entrusted the information he was imparting freely and without the expectation of reciprocity. But managing an organization and practically dealing with the inevitable conflicts in political organizations were his albatross, and yet he persisted in participating in these organizations. In conflictual and paradoxical ways, Alexander's predisposition towards a Marxist-Leninist type of organization and the unstated *substitutionism*[26] assumed in

[26] Leading Marxist intellectual Ernest Mandel, during his visit to South Africa in 1992, made the following critical remarks about Lenin's and Trotsky's insistence on the absolute status of working class representation in their Bolshevik Party (the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) and the slide towards substitutionism over the 1919 to 1921 period of establishing the world's first communist state (Mandel 1992: n.p.): "We are critical of

vanguard-style anti-capitalist political movements was matched by his commitment to the proliferation of civic-type organizational forms where codes and rules of conduct and of responsibility are presumed and not enforced. Alexander was also aware of the danger of *democratic centralism*[27], a practice first advanced in socialist and Marxist parties, and which is a corollary of *substitutionism* and a necessary adjunct, but he nevertheless participated in decision-making processes built on an acceptance of its representative and democratic viability and of its Marxist-Leninist roots.

For the ANC, the alliance with the South African Communist Party, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African National Civic Organisation (Sanco), combined with its grass-roots support, its populist rhetoric and its sophisticated campaigning use of the struggle credentials of iconic figures such as Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Chris Hani, Oliver Tambo and Govan Mbeki ensured that it captured the majority and popular vote, and secure its political dominance in the system it negotiated with the National Party. The "government of national unity" led by Mandela and his deputy, Thabo Mbeki, was tasked with drawing up a Constitution for the country, which was completed and accepted in 1996. The political co-ordinates of a social democracy, along the lines of the Nordic states, were envisaged by the new ruling incumbents, and a Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), adopted by the transitional government headed by the ANC, was to be the state-sponsored vehicle to give expression to this social-democratic impulse.

Very soon afterwards, fiscal planning and macroeconomic imperatives[28] closed in on the residual political spaces for left-wing and socialist experimentation within the inherited state,

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some of the mistakes of Trotsky, which more or less coincided with those of Lenin in that period. We consider the years between the end of 1919 through 1921 bleak years in the history of communism, bleak years in the history of Lenin, bleak years in the history of Trotsky. These were years in which, contrary to his own tradition, Trotsky espoused the theory and practice of substitutionism [substituting the party for the working class]. The *practice* of substitutionism perhaps one can even excuse it, hmm? The working class of Russia was reduced drastically at the time by death, famine and economic dislocation due to the civil war. But the *theoretical* justification was awful, and it has had disastrous, long-term effects. It was corrected, first by Lenin I must say. Contrary to a legend, Lenin was quicker than Trotsky to realize the terrible consequences of bureaucratization in Soviet Russia. Trotsky came around a little bit later."

[27] Lenin's (1902) book, *What is to be done?*, is considered to be the philosophical and organizational template for both *substitutionism* and *democratic centralism*.

[28] Richards (2015) argues that this assertion on my part is an "understatement about the neoliberalism of the ANC because the apartheid regime actually enlarged the public and cooperative sectors to seize hegemony for

and the ANC adopted the main recommendations of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) strategy proposed by a 15-member technical committee in 1996.[29] This effectively replaced the RDP and re-opened the country to the "vicissitudes of the market".[30]

A summary and tentative conclusions

The structure of Alexander's approach to note-taking resembles his approach to writing. It was an ordered, almost pedantic structure with few signs of chaos. He learnt to write in the broad and the narrow confines of Catholicism, and in the informal but politically intense didactic school of the Teachers' League of South Africa, an affiliate of the Non-European Unity Movement. When he became an atheist in the 1950s, he carried with him the discipline of structure and organization. His organizational abilities were about his sense of *composing*, as opposed to *constructing*, an argument in an article, a book, a journal and in a newspaper. His lyricism and sensitive ear for sound and music combined with an unmistakable penchant for writing and the dramatic distinguished him from his peers. He was a dramatic soldier-actor in a theatre of dreams, a heaven of sorts, and his theatre of dreams was the "here and now". Every day's plays were the stuff of this theatre, and he played out his part every day of

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the Afrikaners against the English …. The ANC's neoliberalism economically was a turn to the right not only compared to its own left wing but also compared to its Afrikaner predecessors in Pretoria."

[29] The title of the document adopted by the government as its official macroeconomic policy was the *Growth, employment and redistribution: A macroeconomic strategy* (Gear 1996). In their acknowledgements, the then Minister of Finance, Trevor Manuel, the Deputy Finance Minister, Gill Marcus, and the Acting Director General, Maria Ramos, listed the following people who made up the technical team that produced the strategy: Andre Roux, coordinator (Development Bank of Southern Africa); Iraj Abedian, coordinator (University of Cape Town); Andrew Donaldson (Department of Finance); Brian Khan (University of Cape Town); Ben Smit (University of Stellenbosch); Daleen Smal (South African Reserve Bank); Alan Hirsch (Department of Trade and Industry); Guy Mhone (Department of Labour); Ernie van der Merwe (South African Reserve Bank); Ian Goldin (Development Bank of Southern Africa); Stephen Gelb (University of Durban-Westville); Dirk van Seventer (Development Bank of Southern Africa); Servaas van der Berg (University of Stellenbosch); Luiz Pereira da Silva (World Bank); Richard Ketley (World Bank).

[30] The inclusion of two World Bank representatives on this technical committee sent out an unambiguous message to the Left in South Africa. While critique may be entertained, the ruling incumbents, the ANC and its allies, had decided to align themselves with the consolidation of global capitalism. Stability and a prudent approach to fiscal policy became their watchwords. Alan Hirsch, who is listed as one of Gear's technical committee members, served as deputy chief economist in the Department of Trade and Industry and then as principal economist, analyst and strategist in Thabo Mbeki's presidency. He wrote a book titled *Season of hope: Economic reform under Mandela and Mbeki* (2005), which is a praise song for the economic "stability" achieved by Mbeki and former Minister of Finance Trevor Manuel during the years in which the post-apartheid government's Gear policy was implemented. While this may be contested and criticized, I put stability in inverted commas because it was indeed a stability for capital and for proponents of the misnomer called the "free market". For South African Marxists, the adoption of Gear was seen as a leap to the Right, conservatism and the further opening up of South Africa's sovereignty to the dictates of international capitalism.

his life, meeting contingencies of daily living with a mixture of seriousness and humour, and with an inimitable tendency to be able to seduce women and men to his thinking. His existential approach to daily living was undergirded by his Marxist approach to sociological context, strategy and writing.

He approached the dilemmas of Marxism with Marxism, or with historical materialism. He understood that the dilemmas of historical materialism are the dilemmas of history, and that for Marxism to survive the contemporary period, or epoch, it will have to adapt as a philosophy of radical thought, and develop as a transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary sociological and historical cognitive tool to unpack human evolution, human synergy and human difference. His discomfort with the Marxist structuralists of the 1960s and the 1970s resonated with his suspicion that the "parliamentary path to socialism" was fraught with what he considered to be class and ideological compromises, and also because the language used by, or the translations published of especially the French schools of Marxism, tended to be somewhat esoteric. Of the four dilemmas of Marxism, three stuck with him in his later work: the subjectivities of human agency and the *political self*; the difficult dialogue between Marxism and nationalism; and the question of the ecology, or the geopolitical spaces humanity and the rest of the animal kingdom occupy, or in his terms, the *geocide* perpetrated by "capitalist barbarism against humanity". The explosions within Marxism following the Russian revolutionaries' *fān shēn* against *Capital* in 1917 were nothing more than an intellectual interest in his imagination. His reticence, and here "refusal" would be too strong a word, to read contemporary philosophers such as Badiou, Žižek, Jameson, Eagleton and others, is an echo of a political choice that he had made about Althusser and the structuralists and post-structuralists in the 1970s and 1980s. It also points to the fact that he was, in the past decade or so, intimately involved in promoting multilingualism both in South Africa and in the rest of the African continent through the African Union's Academy of Languages (Acalan), and he simply did not have the time to study the new work being generated by the new actors on the stage of a Marxist or a communist renaissance.

His tensions with the Academy are long standing and yet, for 20 years and having accepted the invitation in 1991 of UCT's School of Education to house Praesa, this was his "base", his intellectual site of struggle where he juggled and struggled with propositions and notions of reform and revolution. As a revolutionary political activist and an educationist, or as a

sociologist of language, notions of “revolution” and of “reform” were in dialectical opposition, but he maintained that educational reform was as much about instilling new values and principles into the educational sectors as it had to do with managing a change in social and political organizational forms and structures. His 1995 decision to participate in post-1994 governmental structures through PanSALB and Langtag was his unambiguous message that he was prepared to work within the spaces of exploration, some analysts would say compromise, opened by the new government. Socially, he continued to seek the overthrow of capitalist production relations, and politically, he was prepared to experiment within the framework spelt out in the country’s constitutional provisions about multilingualism and “education for all”.

I am reluctant to venture any definitive concluding remarks about Alexander’s writings in English. Through this study about his writings, I have tried to identify and contextualize some of the ideological codes and sociological contours of my interpretation of a *philosophy of practice*, of historical materialism, that underpinned and that permeated his writings. The following four propositions, questions and remarks are therefore interpretive distillations of his writings in English, and I can only describe these as preliminary and tentative. I locate these propositions and remarks firmly in Bakhtin’s (1984) “context over text”. These propositions are initial efforts at developing ways of “Reading Neville Alexander’s writings”, which is the subtitle of this thesis on him.

First, Alexander was a committed Marxist whose life’s work was about exploring and adding meanings to communicating with people, power and politics. Like most other socially committed intellectuals, his self-declared mission included writing about and experientially engaging the universe of ideas to change society (No Sizwe 1979). He was no more and no less a human being who had daily rhythms that were not dissimilar to other human beings. The spaces between his writing outputs were filled by the day-to-day activities of an individual. The philosophical, political and ideological content of these spaces and of the spaces that were filled during his writing time is the focus of this thesis. This content ranged from the ordinary to the spectacular, from deep contemplation to less than solemn thoughts, and from states of discomfort to those of elation. Among the ontological questions that could be asked is: to what extent did his variation of Marxism inform and saturate his daily experiences with people, or to pose the question differently, was his revolutionary

subjectivity driven by his belief in the primary significance of the working class's *lived realities* or *real experiences* under capitalism or neoliberalism? The corollary to this question is: are the material conditions of life under capitalism sufficiently compelling to generate a revolutionary consciousness?

While Alexander held the view that the black working class should lead the struggle against apartheid and capitalism, the failure of this section of workers to overturn capitalist production relations also confirms Alexander's own assertion that the working class does not inherently possess a revolutionary subjectivity. Reflecting on his proximities to working class life and experiences, he says (Alexander, in Busch *et al*. 2014: 173): "[Y]ou have to maintain not just the contact, but actual involvement with the people who you see as historical subjects, the people who are going to change the world. Not because they are progressive, not at all; *I don't believe that workers are by definition progressive* [my italics]. On the contrary, workers can be very reactionary …."

In polemical ways, Alexander combined theory and practice. He was a part of the lives of ordinary people and he advocated the interests of oppressed and exploited people. He needed to be involved with ordinary folk to marshal his thoughts and propositions in ways that favour the interests of the urban and rural poor. His writings were a product, a reflection and a source of change (Alexander 2014: 173):

> I also think that merely writing, merely thinking, abstracting – that goes back to the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, of Marx – is not enough. I honestly believe it's not enough to know and interpret the world; you've got to *change* it.

This nexus between theory and practice was a signature trait of Alexander's writings and of his political speeches.

Second, since his political baptism in the years leading up to and including 1957 when he formed, together with Kenneth Abrahams, the Cape Peninsula Students' Union, and through the direct and indirect influences of the iconic figures, Minnie Gool and Isaac Tabata, Alexander's political and theoretical preoccupation and his focus have been on the country's national question. For much of his political life, he has tried to answer the question, "What or who is the nation?" His political testament, *One Azania, one nation*, is a profound and

detailed study that provides the gist of his answer. He rejected the "four nation" thesis of the African National Congress. He rejected the crudely described "two nation" thesis of the black consciousness movement. He forcefully argued against the idea of nationhood that is premised on the assumption that the human species is divided into different "races". In his South African case study of what he describes firstly as the Azanian nation (No Sizwe 1979), and then secondly, in his later writings (Alexander 2013), as the "Garieb" nation, he questions the illusionary implications of South African cleric Desmond Tutu's much publicized "rainbow nation". Instead, he posits a multiple-meaning metaphor whose origins are to be found in Amilcar Cabral's description of nation-building processes in Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde islands in the 1960s and the 1970s:

> The rainbow, besides being an optical illusion, as an iconic metaphor of national unity places the emphasis on coexisting colour units. If the recent xenophobic events herald the end, that is, the disappearance, of the rainbow, this may well mean that we can start somewhere else. My proposal is that we conceptualise our multicultural reality in dynamic and indigenous terms by means of the metaphor of the Garieb, the great river that flows into the ocean of humanity. Its main tributaries (African, European, Asian and modern 'American') that flow together to constitute the mainstream culture of South Africa will from time to time and from place to place, under different circumstances, have greater or lesser influence on the whole, but they do not disappear altogether. We can be both one and different in dynamic ways …. South Africa is the one country in the world where, for historical and cultural reasons, it is possible to demonstrate that a raceless society is possible, a society where, if we return to the sources of our Garieb nation, we can fill the notion of *ubuntu* with humanistic, as opposed to mere folklorist, content. (Alexander 2013: 170–171)

Implicit in this quotation from Alexander is the political acceptance of the idea of building a nation in spatial and temporal terms. At the same time, he seems to imply that South Africa's multiculturalism suggests the nation's eventual demise because an emerging nation's growth or flow has to contend with humanity's multiple tributaries and global interests. The social question that Alexander raises here is whether nations are necessary to build at all in light of biological science's refutation of the phenomenon of "race" as a valid entity, and in light of globalization's disregard for geographical and cultural boundaries. Cognizant of the violent intersection of "race", class and culture in the formation of post-colonial and anti-capitalist

nation-states, Alexander proposes a Brechtian participant-observer approach to resolving the conundrum of nation-building processes (Alexander, cited in Dollie 2011: 155):

> The nation is being imagined, invented, created before our very eyes. Indeed, we are extremely fortunate to have been afforded ringside seats by Clio enabling us to observe in the most concrete manner possible the contest between the nation conceived as a community of culture and the nation conceived as a political community. As organic intellectuals, however, we resemble Brechtian rather than Aristotelian theater-goers. Like every other would-be mother or sire of the new nation, we want to be involved in its conception even if only as midwives to the wondrous fruit of the womb of our struggle. At worst, we are willing to be mere critics, those (usually tired old) men and women who stand around in the labor ward admiring or bewailing the features of the new-born infant.

Alexander did not stay in the labour ward admiring or criticizing the features of the infant nation. He became an active participant and a critical observer in the post-1994 South African Ministry of Arts, Culture and Technology as chairman of Langtag and as a deputy chairman of PanSALB, the language board. Together with his colleagues at Praesa and at government-initiated and state-sponsored institutions, he developed the framework for South Africa's multilingual future, and actively promoted indigenous languages in the institutions of state and of civil society. His "return to the source" was an unabridged return to place the ownership of nation building firmly in the hands of the oppressed and exploited people. He did so by acknowledging that ordinary people's practices of communicating with one another are the sociological and political templates of their mother tongue languages as their principal means of communication and of discourse.

Alexander's policy proposals on the language question, despite their acceptance by the post-1994 government, lacked the political infrastructure and support to make them the dominant reality in the linguistic paradise that was envisaged in the country's 1996 Constitution. The acceptance of a neoliberal framework for growth and stability ensured that the question of language was placed on the strategic back burner. Even when Acts of parliament were promulgated to give clear and unambiguous direction to language planners and implementers to accord the indigenous languages the same status as English and Afrikaans, these promulgations have stayed, to use Alexander's words, "on the drawing board" and rarely got "off the board".

Third, Alexander's engagements with people were different. In part, this is because political and educational imperatives merged seamlessly with a heightened self-consciousness about himself and the people with whom he was engaged in the moments of conversation. These engagements were marked by the conventionally mundane to the esoterically sublime, and they flowed into acts of sitting down and reading, percolating ideas and then writing, and taken together, these acts produced a dense thicket of his intellectual gatherings. Alexander's writings provide some of the main signposts on a map of the man's complex and evolving identity, and they provide indicators to some of the main sociological and political and conceptual matrices that underpinned his definition of the world and those of his peers, critics and supporters. He was not a politician in any dictionary meaning of the term, but he was politically motivated, and, for much of his adult life, he rarely shied away from analyzing and criticizing the consequences of centralized state power or, for that matter, decentralized state power and power relations between people.

This preoccupation with the centrality of politics in his conversations with people and with his understanding of the interests he represented to people with whom he spoke was accompanied by a detailed sense of what Bakhtin refers to as "context over text", both in written and in spoken texts. His acute awareness of the immediacy of the moment in conversations was matched by his understanding of the sociological context of the spoken word he was listening to, or of the text he was reading.

What separated Alexander from many other academics is that his pursuit of knowledge, his search for what Soudien (2013) refers to as "better knowledge", in educational theory or in political theory, was anchored in the existential imperative to act in the "here and now". For Alexander, "knowledge for knowledge sake" is the antithesis of a "pedagogy of the oppressed" (Freire 1968), and it is not a sufficiently compelling motivation to pursue social enquiries. Instead, Alexander located his writings firmly in the realm of "praxis" as Gramsci (1971; 1996) understood the term. In this definition of praxis, reflections and actions are coterminous determinants and symbiotic acts of engagement in the creation of socially conscious knowledge. Alexander placed his writings and his spoken words at the service of humanity. Through his writings and speeches, he advocated the primacy of working class interests over those of other social classes and other sectional interests that drive dominant, dominated or subordinate groups in society.

Fourth, the "dance of an intellectual mandarin" (Dollie 2011) has been both solitary and collegial. The philosophical journeys that Alexander undertook were exclusive to the extent that they involved his analytical and conceptual tools he developed and refined over many years of contemplation. His "intellectualism", his dogged commitment to scientific investigations, his meticulousness as a researcher, and his unshaken belief in a socialist future had not endeared him to the apartheid government and to dominant sections of the post-apartheid government. But he attempted to test and experiment with his ideas in government-created forums and in non-government-inspired forums he created and worked in with like-minded activists and multilinguists, his colleagues, his students, his comrades and the intellectual groups with which he became associated. In this dance, Alexander's life's work had the indelible tracings of Samora Machel's socialist enthusiasm; the internationalism of Ernesto Che Guevara; the elegant and polemical prose and the revolutionary zeal of Leon Trotsky; the considered historical depth of E.H. Carr; the "madness" to oppose the status quo of Michel Foucault; the studied and existential embrace of a lived reality of Jean-Paul Sartre and of Simone de Beauvoir; the faith and passion of Martin Luther; the intellectual honesty of Amilcar Cabral; the nuanced reflections of philosophy and action of Antonio Gramsci; the sturdy and incisive dialectics of Rosa Luxemburg; the detailed knowledge of language of Noam Chomsky; and the courage and inventiveness of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. As a South African intellectual mandarin who briefly occupied a political position of influence in the state through PanSALB and Langtag, Alexander brought his own set of challenges to an increasingly deracialized capitalism that continues to undermine his humanistic vision of what South Africa could be. His theoretical contributions and policy proposals are awkwardly spoken about by the political authorities. My view is that it is in the vital interests of humanity to not only revisit his propositions and his analyses of what it means to be human, but to implement, with reasoned and textured argument, his policy suggestions especially about primary, secondary and tertiary education.

Throughout his political, academic and activist career, Alexander generated controversy, and often consciously. His words and ideas spoke of great passion. At the same time, as an *organic* intellectual, he experimented with and tested his ideas in a local and global laboratory of politics and education. Not surprisingly, he inspired equally passionate responses in his peers, his critics and his colleagues. He fought his battles in what Isaac

Deutscher, the Marxist historian, calls the “revolution’s threatened city”. Alexander eschewed the self-awarded station of intellectuals who stand on the walls of a city in flames and watch, with apparent distance and presumed objectivity, its disintegration. He took sides and fought alongside his comrades, his neighbours and his friends for a society free from oppression, racism and exploitation. In profound ways, Alexander’s writings have opened different doors into the life of his threatened city, and as Brechtian theatre-goers, we have been invited to participate in its re-imagination and in its reconstruction.

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