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Book Review

Against Racial Capitalism: Selected Writings, Neville Alexander

Edited by Salim Vally and Enver Motala

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This carefully curated collection of Neville Alexander's writing is the latest contribution by Salim Vally and Enver Motala⁴ to the ongoing collective efforts to honour who Alexander was, acknowledge and interrogate the vital intellectual contributions he made (particularly in reference to contemporary struggles), and recognise the indelible mark he left—not just in South Africa but globally. The focus of the book then is apt, given that this was a subject to which Neville Alexander (1979, 2008) made immense contributions. In South Africa, the problematic of racial capitalism arose during the 1970s in debates in the anti-apartheid struggle as part of attempts to characterise the relationship between apartheid and capitalism and, in doing so, illuminate how to strategically engage in revolutionary struggle (Kelley, 2023).

One of the features of racial capitalism is its entanglements with both activism and the academy in key struggles across global contexts that range from apartheid South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, to the anti-racism struggles in the United States. It is a term not only found in South Africa and the United States, but also in Namibia and Kenya in the early 1970s (Levenson & Paret, 2023), and is linked to the anti-colonial struggles that recognised the racialised nature of violent extraction and profitability that transcended geographical boundaries.

For Alexander, his contribution to racial capitalism was not an exercise in situated scholarship alone. It was first and foremost a strategic attempt to deal with the national question as articulated by the apartheid government, as well as a critique of the response of the dominant liberation movement at the time (Alexander, 1979). In ways that were subsequently mimicked in other parts of the world, Alexander's ideas around racial capitalism were not to simply describe apartheid, but to strategically inform the ways opponents to it could engage in the struggle against it. He was a key theorist who firmly believed that successful resistance to apartheid required a strategy that addressed not just

⁴ See also, Motala and Vally (2017) for an exposition of Alexander's view on the national question as well as critiques against it.

structural inequalities as a result of capitalism, not just racism, but the intersection of the two in the particular context of apartheid South Africa.

It is important to note that Alexander's writings encompass a wide range of topics. The choices made by the editors for inclusion in their book span chronological time, and depth, and range across foci but represent only a selection of Alexander's impressive body of written work. We can appreciate that the editorial choices illuminate racial capitalism's defining feature of social and economic domination based on social theories of ostensibly intractable difference. Vally and Motala include Alexander's writings on the national question, on education, on language, culture, and identity, on racism, and, as mentioned, range from 1964 to 2013.

The book opens with a short foreword by John Samuels and Karen Press and presents to readers a timeline of South African and associated history from 1910, against which key events in Neville Alexander's life are mapped. We learn details of Alexander's life, education, and political activism situated within specific times and places as a way of reminding us to not detach who Alexander was from what and why he theorised. The book is sectioned into four parts, each comprising of an introduction written by the editors followed by a selection, in part or whole, of Alexander's writing.

Part I, entitled "Prison Writings: 'The University of Robben Island,' 1964–1974," includes excerpts from Alexander's time on Robben Island as a political prisoner and excerpts from his seminal text on the national question. Alexander documented and theorised various aspects of his experience on the island as a political prisoner, which included the brutality of prison life, practices of teaching and learning, and "work." The editors alert us to other writings done on the island such as "A note on beauty" that elucidates questions of dignity, ideology, racism, and prejudice. It was on Robben Island, through ongoing discussions with Nelson Mandela and others, that Alexander grappled with questions of what constitutes a nation, and the ways of building one antithetical to apartheid.

Part II ("Reaping the Whirlwind: The 1970s and the 1980s") is a collection of writing that situates the development and use of the concept of racial capitalism by Alexander within the debates and events that include the Soweto Uprising of 1976, the merger of the Black Consciousness organisations, and the development of the National Forum in opposition to the dominant liberation movement. The resultant orientation of a socialist alternative, based on a united front of forces against apartheid, was adopted in 1983 and identified racial capitalism as the central problematic in South Africa. This is dealt with in hindsight in the final article.

One of the dialectics that characterises racial capitalism is one of centre and periphery. With the undoing of the shackles of apartheid and the struggle and contestation of imagining and preparing for a new democracy, Part III ("The Transition to Democracy: 1990–1994") demonstrates how Alexander grappled with South Africa's deep existential notions of racial difference, and what it means politically to re-enter a world structured along neoliberal lines that threaten the very notions of democracy. World events and neo-colonial global arrangements are brought into conversation with the role of Africa in bringing about a more just global order, and concomitant issues of language and education offer practical alternatives premised on democratic ideals.

The final section of the book ("Post-1994 Essays, Talks, and Op-Eds") brings us full circle with a critical examination in a post-apartheid South Africa of how to build a "non-racial democratic republic" (Vally & Motala, 2023, p. 208). Racial capitalism in post-apartheid South Africa is dominated by legacies of dispossession and exploitation. The conception of racial capitalism as a "travelling theory" (Levenson & Paret, 2023, p. 336) that cannot be contained by temporal or geographical boundaries, but is shaped by its significance in struggle and resistance, is clear in the writing chosen for this section. The call for

the reconstitution of values, ideas, and practices in line with a democratic ethos alongside an ongoing analysis of post-apartheid political, economic, and social realities, are part of what Vally and Motala (2023, p. 209) say makes Alexander one of the “most committed and knowledgeable intellectuals.”

As noted in the foreword, this edited selection of Neville Alexander’s writing was done by two of his long-standing friends. Salim Vally and Enver Motala have, individually and collectively, struggled and continue to work tirelessly in workers’ education, community struggles, political, worker and student organisations, and globally in anti-colonial struggles of various kinds. This contribution not only introduces Neville Alexander to another generation of activists and engaged intellectuals but also serves as an expression of radical love (Darder, 2002, p. 34), which encourages us to build critical communities, insist and engage in dialogical spaces, and develop critical reflective practices oriented towards human dignity and a more just world.

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