



Neville Alexander: Political philosopher (1936–2012)

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In talking about the significance of the passing of Neville Alexander, there are so many things one could say about why he was a critical public figure – both in South Africa and the world. One could talk about his deep intellect: he was, even in the company of some of the most talented intellectuals that this country has seen, one of its foremost scholars. One could talk about the profoundly important debates Neville initiated or engaged in in the course of his life: the first with one of his mentors, IB Tabata, about the armed struggle; the second with Nelson Mandela about the national question; the third with comrades in the left-wing community in the 1980s about the United Democratic Front; the fourth with Jakes Gerwel about the future of the university in South Africa and particularly the role of the University of the Western Cape in the revival of the South African academy; the fifth with linguists in the country around the need for multilingualism; and the last which he had with colleagues at the University of Cape Town and elsewhere about the question of ‘race’.

One could talk about his understanding of the society in which he lived, the fact that he was able to grasp, such as few in the country can, the contradictions of everyday life, of the misery of material deprivation on the one hand, and the joy, as he was to say regularly, of simply having enough and knowing how to thrive on it. One could talk about his unstinting love for the struggle for social and economic justice and what it meant for the future of the world. One could also talk about how in his adult life he refused to wear a tie and about how he refused that which he did not feel it was his alone to have – a red parking sticker which would have allowed him to park right outside his office at the University of Cape Town and a gold loyalty card which would give him access to the VIP lounge at airports – about how he refused to accept honours because he believed that his personal achievements were never simply his own, or about the fact that he drove a humble Toyota Corolla.

But it is his significance for those of us who work in the academy which is perhaps most important for readers of this journal. What is this significance? It is, essentially, that he represents the best qualities one would wish to see in a scholar. One sees in the way he conducted himself, those things which one would like to think embody the ideal of what it means to be ‘learned’ or ‘educated’. His ‘learnedness’, first awoken by his mother and father, stimulated by his teachers at Holy Rosary Convent in Cradock, filled in by his lecturers at the Universities of Cape Town and Tübingen and, most critically, deliberately crafted by his mentors in the political movement here in Cape Town, was about coming to a deep sense of self-awareness, an awareness of himself in history, about his relationship with people, time and space. It was, if you like, a ‘wide-awakeness’ to the world. It made him acutely sensitive to injustice of any kind. It made him immeasurably compassionate and kind. He had educated his instincts. Of course he was not perfect – he could, as those close to him know, sometimes be unreasonable. But for the most part, his education taught him that his own development was the result of the generosity of others. Others made it possible for him to become the important scholar of German literature and philosophy that he was, as well as one of the foremost intellectuals in the world on the questions of race and racism and multilingualism. Without these people his life could have gone in another direction. And so with a deep sense of awareness of his dependence on others, he came to embody that same generosity of which he had been a recipient in his own life as a scholar.

Titles meant nothing to him. He treated everybody in the circumference of his everyday world with the same undifferentiated respect. He sought to recreate in all of his relationships that same sense of possibility that he had experienced in his own development. He was acutely aware of how he spoke to people. When talking to his students, to his colleagues and academic peers, to those who supported in non-academic ways the world around him, he always engaged them with the deepest respect – as if everybody, including himself, could always be learning, learning to be better people. There was no conceit there. Background did not matter: neither his nor those of others. He was the one person whose learnedness had brought him to the point where the colour of another person’s skin, the way in which they talked or what they looked like, meant

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nothing whatsoever. He had, with this education, managed to expunge from his head the contamination of prejudice – the prejudice of racism, classism, lingualism, ageism and sexism – and come to a point in his life where people were simply people.

To be this kind of person he had to be honest – honest with himself and with others. He said what mattered to him. He could be searing in his analysis of an argument. He demanded of others the very best that was in them. But he was never unkind. Being like this he evoked fierce loyalty and admiration. It also got him into trouble. He had the ability, however, when he did get into these difficult situations, never to forego the opportunity of learning when he had made a mistake. An extraordinary episode in his life, and probably one that South African history will continue to struggle with, arose around the death of Steve Biko, for which Neville in some circles is indirectly blamed. Steve Biko had come to Cape Town specifically to speak with him about establishing a united front of those organisations at that time in exile. Neville himself said, 'He stood two metres away from my backdoor and I refused to meet him, as much as I would have liked to have done so'. The story goes that Biko waited for three hours – placing himself and Neville, both of whom were under intense police surveillance, at enormous risk. Steve, as is now well known, was arrested while driving back to King William's Town and was killed by the security police. Neville explained and I quote him:

Our group had...decided that I should not meet Biko at that time, and I have always taken such disciplined decisions as binding. When I look back I realise that this is perhaps the folly of being too principled. I was so hard, I was so principled....I am really sorry that the meeting never happened, but that is how it is. I acted in a principled manner, knowing that principled behaviour and self-sacrifice were the key to our survival in a time of terrifying repression. I had not been mandated to see him and could not get a mandate in time....I have always been a disciplined person, ever since I was a child. At times perhaps too much so.

Key to this story is the kind of person he had become through his education, which allowed him to give up any idea of self-



Neville Alexander speaks at the University of Cape Town at an event for the African Academy of Languages Year of African Languages in 2006 (photo: Carole Bloch).

importance. He was who he was because of others. This nurtured in him a capacity for self-reflection that was almost unlimited. His education imprinted on him the obligation never to stop thinking, thinking about his own behaviour, about himself and his relationship with others, to be self-critical, to be constantly asking how he personally could be a better human being. It is this extraordinary quality that made his work in all its dimensions so utterly compelling. He embodied what it meant to be 'learned'. We in the university community are deeply the poorer with him now gone.