

The Politics of Fear and the Fear of Politics: Thinking About Xenophobia in South Africa

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Reflecting on the causes of the xenophobic pogroms in South Africa in May of this year during which thousands of people were displaced and 63 were killed, it is striking how most commentators have stressed poverty and deprivation as the underlying causes of the events. Yet it requires little effort to see that economic factors, however real, cannot possibly account for why it was those deemed to be non-South Africans who bore the brunt of the vicious attacks. Poverty can be and has historically been the foundation for the whole range of political ideologies, from communism to fascism and anything in between. In fact, poverty can only account for the powerlessness, frustration and desperation of the perpetrators, but not for their target nor for their manner of deploying a political practice. Why were not Whites or the Rich, or White foreigners in South Africa targeted instead? Of course, it is a common occurrence that the powerless regularly take out their frustrations on the weakest: women, children, the elderly – and outsiders. Yet this will not suffice as an explanation. The systematic and concerted attacks on those deemed to be foreign according to popular stereotypes requires more of an explanation than powerlessness can provide, however important a factor that may have been.

In order to provide a more adequate explanation one should first recall the observations made by Frantz Fanon in the immediate post-independence period in Africa:

The working class of the towns, the masses of the unemployed, the small artisans and craftsmen ... line up behind this nationalist attitude; but in all justice let it be said, they only follow in the steps of their bourgeoisie. If the national bourgeoisie goes into competition with the Europeans, the artisans and craftsmen start a fight against non-national Africans ... From nationalism we have passed to ultra-nationalism, to chauvinism, and finally to racism. These foreigners are called on to leave; their shops are burned, their street stalls are wrecked... (Fanon, 1990: 125).

The collapse of nationalism into chauvinism, Fanon observed, was fundamentally occasioned by the new post-independence elites, who grabbed the jobs and capital of the departing Europeans while the popular classes only followed in their footsteps in attacking foreign Africans. This suggests that a politics of nationalism founded on stressing indigeneity lay at the root of post-colonial xenophobia. To what extent is Fanon's account applicable to post-apartheid South Africa?

There is little doubt that the politics of grabbing and enrichment among the post-apartheid elite have been both brazen and extensive. So-called Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) has enabled the development of a new class of 'black diamonds' whose new-found wealth is not particularly geared towards national accumulation and development but primarily towards short-term, quick profits in a country where estimates put the poor at half the total population. Reports of corruption among state personnel from the national to the local levels abound. Few get prosecuted, let alone convicted, in a hegemonic culture that extols the virtues of free-market capitalism, equating private enrichment with the public good and quick profit with development. Yet how do we logically move from this to scapegoating the 'foreign other'? In order to provide an answer, we must shift our focus from economic to political hegemonic ideologies.

I have argued at length elsewhere (Neocosmos, 2006) that xenophobia must be understood as a political discourse and practice, the result of political ideologies and consciousnesses - in brief, political subjectivities - which have arisen in post-apartheid South Africa. This politics of fear has at least three major components: a state discourse of xenophobia, a discourse of South African exceptionalism and a conception of citizenship founded exclusively on indigeneity. This politics of fear, which finds its origins fundamentally within the apparatuses of power, has been complemented since the 1990s by a fear of politics: the unwillingness or the inability of popular politics, with a few exceptions, to break away systematically from a state politics of fear. Since the 1990s, an independent popular politics, independent that is from state subjectivity, political parties, corporatist unions, etc has struggled to manifest itself. It is gradually emerging at the margins of 'civil society' among some shack-dwellers organisations to which I shall refer below.

There is a name for the kind of political activity which we witnessed during a few weeks in May: *the politics of (ethnic) cleansing* made infamous in the ex-Yugoslavia of the 1990s and then repeated in several parts of the African continent (Rwanda and, more recently, Kenya being the most infamous). The notion of 'cleansing' with all its dehumanising connotations of dirt and purification is a common *leitmotif* of all these politics irrespective of their historical specificities. The term was also invoked in the recent South African pogroms by perpetrators. It should be clear that 'cleansing' is the name of a politics of fear, of violence, a politics of war against those who are seen to be different for whatever reason. To counter these politics, an active politics of peace is necessary, but for this to develop we need first to understand the politics of fear and the fear of politics which prevail in South Africa today.

A state discourse and politics of xenophobia

Government departments, parliamentarians, the police, the Lindela detention centre, the law itself have all been reinforcing a one way message since the 1990s: We are being invaded by illegal immigrants who are a threat to national stability, the RDP, development, our social services, and the very fabric of our society. African migrants are fair game for those with power (police, state bureaucrats, employees at Lindela) to use in making a fast buck. Examples abound, but what is interesting from interviewing migrants from West Africa in 2003 is that while xenophobia from state agencies was consistent, the feelings of the South African people towards foreigners were very contradictory. We can see that today in that many South Africans helped

distressed foreigners in many ways. People like ex-home affairs minister Buthelezi who in May 2008 publically cried tears for the victims of xenophobic violence, stated in 1998 that *“if we as South Africans are going to compete for scarce resources with millions of aliens who are pouring into South Africa, then we can bid goodbye to our Reconstruction and Development Programme”*. In fact Buthelezi developed quite a notoriety for his infamous xenophobic statements, which included inter alia the suggestion that all Nigerian immigrants are criminals and drug traffickers. Not only Buthelezi but politicians of all shades of opinion asserted their politics of fear during the 1990s. By 1998 Human Rights Watch had concluded that: *“in general, South Africa’s public culture has become increasingly xenophobic, and politicians often make unsubstantiated and inflammatory statements that the ‘deluge’ of migrants is responsible for the current crime wave, rising unemployment and even the spread of diseases”* (Human Rights Watch, 1998: 4).

This political discourse was supplemented by regular police “crackdowns” on people deemed to be “illegal immigrants” and by the setting up of regular extortion rackets by the police in places like Esselen Street in Pretoria. At one point in 2000 - when the Human Rights Commission meekly raised its concerns regarding “the ill-treatment of ‘illegal immigrants’ in recent police blitzes in Gauteng” - a government spokesperson was quoted as saying that the HRC *“was creating the impression of being sympathetic towards illegal immigrants,” continuing to state that the government wanted to hold regular meetings with the HRC to ensure that they do not work at “cross purposes”* (Business Day 30th March 2000).

The police are particularly notorious, using their powers to avoid intervening to help foreign migrants when attacked by criminals, by raiding and beating up migrants in their sanctuaries, by tearing up official documents. All this is documented at length. Moreover, there is evidence (though less documented) that on several occasions police and employees of various departments have encouraged members of communities to ‘uproot’ or ‘round up’ ‘illegal immigrants’, leading to systematic xenophobic violence as in the case of Zandspruit outside Johannesburg in late 2000. In other words, state institutions have, in the past, provided legitimacy for the kind of behaviour we have been witnessing recently. Although state institutions have never condoned violence against migrants and have regularly condemned it, they have provided an environment wherein such xenophobic violence has effectively been legitimised by the state.

I will refrain from detailing migrants’ experiences at Lindela detention centre, suffice it to note that this is not a prison and that the people held there have not been found guilty of any crime. The Human Rights Commission found in 1999 that *“employees of the private Dyambu Trust (which runs Lindela) extort money from detainees under a wide variety of circumstances. These circumstances include requiring money for fingerprinting, for the use of public telephones, and in order to allow access of family and friends to the Facility...”* (SAHRC, 1999: 44). Moreover, staff at Lindela also apparently extorted amounts for the final processing of those who are due to be deported: *“at Lindela we were asked to pay an amount of R50.00 before being deported to Zimbabwe...yesterday we were supposed to go home but they asked for money to take us home. I didn’t have any money so I didn’t go”* (ibid.: 43).

In other words, people are kept in what amounts to detention - in conditions worse than prison according to the same reports - and not repatriated on time unless they pay bribes to officials. At this centre, people's rights are systematically violated and they seem to be regularly coerced through the use of physical violence for the simple reasons of maintaining control. People are denied a free phone call as required by law, they are not informed of their rights, and they are regularly detained for longer than the stipulated maximum of 30 days. Another victim stated: "the security staff here at Lindela randomly abuse us. They assault us. They leave us alone in the Wall and we are not allowed to go to the loo unless given permission. But since they do not enquire as regularly as they should, people often go to the loo without asking. If such a person is caught he is usually assaulted by security officials" (*ibid.* 47).

As has been observed on many occasions, legislation which deals with issues of migration in South Africa is founded on notions of exclusion and control and on the assumption that people wish to abuse the system and come to South Africa simply in order to take and not to provide anything (Crush, 1999). The legislation has scarcely changed from the days of apartheid and the dominant organising principle, according to one author, is to defend "Fortress South Africa" against "hordes of immigrants". To do this, police officers and officials from the Department of Home Affairs are given such excessive powers over extremely vulnerable people that bribery, extortion and corruption become not only possible but regular practices.

The press has by and large also contributed to creating a climate of fear of migrants. A number of surveys of the press have been undertaken one remarking that "the general tenor running through English-language newspaper reportage on foreign migration issues is more negative, more unanalytical than critical." (Danso and McDonald, 200: 5). Insofar as the content of the press coverage is concerned, regular refrains concern the comment that "migrants 'steal jobs'", that migrants are mostly "illegal", that they are "flooding into the country to find work" and that "foreigners are unacceptably encroaching on the informal sector and therefore on the livelihoods of our huge number of unemployed people" (*The Star*, 21st July 1997). Other xenophobic repetitions concern the supposed drain which migrants represent on the South African economy, the links between illegality and migration (occurring in 38 percent of the sample analysed) and the purported links between crime and immigrants (such as in the statement in the *Financial Mail* of the 9th September 1994 that: "the high rate of crime and violence - mainly gun-running, drug trafficking and armed robbery - is directly related to the rising number of illegals in SA"). One researcher puts the facts straight when she notes that "out of all the arrests made in 1998, South African citizens comprise an average of 98%" (Harris, 2001: 76).

Under such conditions, it is not at all surprising that a public discourse of fear and xenophobia has become hegemonic in the public sphere. The politics associated with this discourse are invariably founded on the notion that migrants from Africa are here to take and not to give. After all, the reasoning goes, they are so much more backward than we are in Africa! It should be noted that such xenophobic conceptions are also prevalent among professionals. One respondent who had a high position in the Gauteng Department of Health told me that every time a new appointment was made, his South African colleagues sent him a copy of the immigration legislation as if to say that they only wanted Black South Africans appointed.

The discourse of exceptionalism

There is a hegemonic notion of exceptionalism in South African public culture (maintained by all, not only Whites). The prevalent idea here is that the country is not really a part of Africa and that its intellectual and cultural frame of reference is in the United States and Europe. Given that South Africa is industrialised, democratic, advanced in relation to other countries of the continent and also a paragon of reconciliation and political liberalism, Africa is seen as the place of the other. It was thought until recently that what happened in Rwanda and more recently in Kenya could not possibly happen here. According to this perception, South Africa is somehow more akin to a Southern European or Latin American country, given its relatively high levels of industrialization and now (increasingly) of liberal democracy. To this must be added the view that South Africa must be celebrated as it is the envy of the world for having managed a reconciliation process successfully. A corollary of this view is one that sees Africa as some kind of strange backward continent characterized by primitivism, corruption, authoritarianism, poverty and failed states; thus its inhabitants wish only to partake of South African resources and wealth at the expense of its citizens. Africa is thus a continent to be guided, advised, developed and visited by tourists in search of authentic primitivism and wild animals. It is not a continent to which we really belong, only a place to be acted upon. This view is regularly upheld by the press, which simply takes its cue from its European largely neo-colonial sources (which are reproduced totally uncritically). The rhetoric of an African Renaissance, upheld by President Mbeki is one which maintains that such a renaissance can take place as an effect of neo-liberal policies such as NEPAD (the New Economic Partnership for African Development) within which South African capital and expertise has a prominent role to secure such a continental resurgence. While such views combine a commitment to liberalism and to the continent's development, they regularly come up against the narrow arrogant nationalism which sustains the idea of South African 'leadership' of the continent.

While such views are not universal, they are indeed dominant. This dominance can be connected to a schizophrenia characteristic of the new Black ruling elite which, on the one hand, wishes to assert its Africanness vis-à-vis the old ruling elite of Whites, but which concurrently and stridently asserts its adherence to a Western culture of neo-liberal economics and politics. Presumably its ability to become super-rich is predicated precisely on its acceptance in the global world of the new capitalist world order. Africa seems to be an embarrassment to the new elite as it reminds them of those they wish to forget, their poorer relatives; although simultaneously it is seen as a place where fortunes can be made, in extractive industries for example. The dominant South African discourse on Africa is thus undoubtedly neo-colonial in its essence.

The politics of indigeneity.

The idea that South Africans are not quite Africans is complimented by the dominant perception that indigeneity is the only way to acquire resources, jobs, and all the other goodies which should be reserved for native peoples only. This necessarily leads to a debate on who is more indigenous, and hence to nativism, the view that there is an essence of South Africanness which is to be found in 'natives'. Hence the stress on the native (eg in Native Club) which itself leads to privileging the twin ideas of birth and phenotype ('race') as the essence of the indigenous. This is extremely dangerous. A recent letter to the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper argued that BEE deals

should be restricted to the indigenous, by which the author meant that “Indians” and “Coloureds” being somehow less indigenous should be excluded. This is a common way of arguing in the public sphere. In fact historically, the only truly indigenous people in Southern Africa would be the San, all other groups having migrated from somewhere else at one time or other in history. Indigeneity, then, is never a historical fact nor a natural one. It is always politically defined by those with power. The previous apartheid regime spent much intellectual time and effort trying to prove that there were no people living in South Africa before the White colonisers arrived, precisely to stress their indigeneity and, hence, to exclude. Most elites on the continent and elsewhere have done the same as they have organised citizenship rights around political indigeneity.

In fact how indigeneity is understood by power can change quite rapidly. Under apartheid indigeneity was defined in racial terms and White migrants were given citizenship rights soon after their arrival. In the 1990s, Basotho mineworkers were given citizenship rights to vote in the 1994 elections and later were given the opportunity to apply for citizenship. Here the rules of indigeneity were bent in order to provide citizenship rights on the basis of the place of labour. In fact a strong case can be made that it is labour, rather than indigeneity which must constitute the basis for rights in Africa (Mamdani, 1991). Only in this way it seems will migrants, who change their place of residence in order to work, have equal rights to everyone else.

The post-apartheid state has continued to classify people according to apartheid groupings. This is a fundamental problem, as it stresses the thinking of politics through the lenses of racial and national stereotypes which thus become ‘naturalised’. Blackness is only stressed vis-à-vis Whites, not in relation to other Africans. In fact there has been a complete failure by the post-apartheid state to construct a nationalism which is firmly rooted in Africa. NEPAD, the internationally sponsored programme for continental development launched with much fanfare in South Africa a few years ago, is simply the neo-liberal Western entry into the continent. Neither the ideas of the African Renaissance nor those of Ubuntu have been taken beyond the stage of being simply state slogans with little in terms of roots in the population at large.

Beyond the fear of Politics

It can be seen then, that xenophobia is a political discourse as well as a political practice, a set of ideological and practical parameters within which solutions to our pressing problems are being conceived. The terrible thing is that other than in a few instances, such a discourse and practice has been unsuccessfully contested and has been allowed to become hegemonic. There is no doubt that many in the ANC in particular have spoken up against xenophobic utterances in the past, but these have been largely isolated voices and they have not constituted an alternative political discourse founded on equality. They have themselves been largely equivocal. We are opposed to xenophobia, but on the other hand, how are our social services to cope under massive pressure from immigrants? It should be clear then that the recent wave of xenophobic pogroms was entirely predictable given the politics briefly outlined above. The fact that quasi-fascist politics (a strong phrase, perhaps, but I can think of no other) have acquired a certain grip over large sections of the poor should come as no surprise. To use Malcolm X’s famous expression, “the chickens have come home to roost.”

The final point, then, must be one of confronting the fear and passivity of putting across alternative politics. Passive citizenship, the expectation of delivery from the state, the fear of criticism, self-censorship, the culture of uncritical celebration have all been noted at one time or another as obstacles to political thought. Siphso Seepe, reviewing Es'kia Mphahlele's book *Es'kia Continued*, recently remarked that "the burning of books is now replaced by self-imposed censorship [...] We cannot be celebrating forever" he remarked (*Sunday Independent*, 24th April 2005). A fear of contesting authority, kowtowing to those in power, the politics of cramming 'our people' into positions – all this has led not only to a demarcation between ethnic and other identities capable of some form of 'delivery', but also to a politics of the exclusion of others as a standard practice. The exclusion of alternative thought and hence of alternative politics, constitutes the dominant practice. Neo-liberal politics with its hidden violence on the poor and all politically excluded has become consensual at the level of state politics with which organisations of 'civil society' concur. These may exist beyond state institutions to various degrees but for the most part they do not exist outside a domain of state politics legitimised by state power (Neocosmos, 2007). The fear of responding to the state politics of fear in a critical and organised manner is also an effect of a political disorientation also prevalent in other countries, resulting partly from the gradual disappearance of the familiar dichotomies around which our politics had been constructed (e.g. right vs. left, nationalist vs. socialist, state vs. market, etc). The inability to consistently say "no" to treating people differently in an organised manner, to say "yes" to maintaining a firm point that all must be treated equally by power, the absence of all this enables the fear of politics and political agency. This is why those South Africans who risked their lives to help foreigners being attacked in a myriad of ways should be saluted.

Politics is too important a business to be left to professional politicians alone. A consistent political practice of peace must be systematically developed and sustained in the face of attack. If this becomes an outcome of the current events, it would be a very positive development. The demonstrations in Johannesburg and elsewhere in late May were important beginnings; the people of South Africa need to pursue this and not lose the momentum. The alternative is to allow the current collapse into evil to degenerate even further into inter ethnic violence, which it easily could.

We cannot wait for elections to engage in politics for what is right. We need to maintain what the French philosopher Badiou calls an axiom of equality, namely the idea that every single person who lives in this country must count the same and must be treated the same. To remind ourselves of the Freedom Charter: *South Africa belongs to all who live in it*. The only way to challenge xenophobia is to courageously fight the fear of politics and stand up for those ideas that challenge the politics of fear and discrimination. Some have already begun doing this. It is noteworthy, for example, that in those shack settlements in Durban in which the popular movement *Abahlali base Mjondolo* has a strong presence there were no incidences of xenophobic attacks. Abahlali also released what I think was the most important statement on the xenophobic violence.¹ It is particularly significant in that it has emanated from an organisation

¹ The statement is available at: <http://abahlali.org/node/3582>

of poor shack-dwellers themselves. One of its main statements was: “An action can be illegal. A person cannot be illegal. A person is a person wherever they may find themselves”. It seems to me that holding on to the consequences of such an axiom is where an alternative politics of peace and equality should begin.

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