

XENOPHOBIA AND NATIONALISM: EXPOSING THE SOUTH AFRICAN STATE FOR WHAT IT IS

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While the violent intensity and geographical spread of the recent attacks on immigrants that took place across South Africa certainly surprised most of us, we should not have been surprised either that such attacks happened or at the state's response to the attacks, given the political and socio-economic context within which the post-1994 South African state was formed and has functioned. It is only by locating and analysing this context, with particular reference to the 'marriage' of a nationalist politics and 'nation-building' alongside economic neo-liberalism (both within and outside South Africa), that we can then understand and critically appraise the reaction/response of the South African state to the recent xenophobic pogroms.

When the dominant force in South Africa's liberation movement landscape, the African National Congress (ANC) came to power in the 1994 elections, it took political control of an existent state that had been built to secure the dominant interests of a national bourgeoisie. The only difference was that now, the state was in the hands of a movement whose main aim was to build, and secure, the interests of a black nationalist (as opposed to white nationalist) bourgeoisie. In this sense then, the democratic victory of 1994 represented, above all else, the triumph of a majority (black) bourgeois nationalism over a minority (white) bourgeois nationalism.

This state-centred 'changing of the nationalist guard' was overlaid by the ANC's acceptance (indeed, embracement) of South Africa's capitalist political economy, within the context of a dominant, global capitalist neo-liberalism. As soon became clear through the 'new' state's adoption of an overtly neo-liberal macro-economic policy/development framework (GEAR), the desire was to pursue a deracialised, national capitalism whilst simultaneously pursuing full-scale (re)integration into a global capitalist economy, through adherence to the ideological demands of its neo-liberal foundations.

In both theoretical and practical terms, these strategic and ideological choices on the part of the ANC leadership, demanded the creation of a dominant discourse of 'nation-building' as a means to politically legitimise the role and character of the 'new' bourgeois/neo-liberal state and the 'place' of those under its leadership. The majority black population who had, historically, been denied any meaningful national or international 'belonging', were told that they could achieve both because they were now the 'real' owners of a state dedicated to securing their national identity as well as their (nationally-located) international status and position. What was being consciously constructed then, was an inherently false and exclusivist nationalist identity and politics (in essence, an ideology of sorts), to be secured by political loyalty to a 'new' South African state claiming to represent the 'national will and interest' (both domestically and internationally).

Such a macro-nationalist paradigm was, and is, designed to create the illusion that the struggle for political and socio-economic liberation by the black majority is defined by the active and loyal participation of an 'authentic national subject' that supersedes all other 'identities' of social relations under capitalism (for example, class). It is an illusion not only because it has been clear (since 1994) that the fundamental decisions of the South African state have not been forged, or even informed, by the interests and needs of the majority of so-called 'national subjects', but also because under capitalist neo-liberalism such a 'subject' is effectively non-existent.

It is within such a context that the South African state has constructed and fed the idea and practice of xenophobia. At its conceptual heart, xenophobia is a fear of the 'other', with the 'other' most often being defined by differential (contemporary) nation-state 'membership'. Thus, and only thus, can the idea/concept of a legal, political and social distinction between, for example, a 'South African' and a 'Zimbabwean', be made. In turn, xenophobia cannot exist in practice without the competing ideological and institutional constructions, by the national state, of such 'national identities'.

In this regard, the South African state has been remarkably consistent in its contradictory ideational, discursive and practical construction of xenophobia. At the same time that the state, from its 1994 installation, has presented South Africa (and 'South Africans') as the new and natural leaders of a continental (black African) 'renaissance', it has systematically instituted immigration policies that have facilitated and favoured non-black African immigration whilst simultaneously constructing a web of sub-imperial presences across the continent, ostensibly designed to enhance South Africa's (corporate dominated) 'international competitiveness' status.

The result - creating and assisting in the exploitation and displacement of other African 'nationalities' (in the name of the 'national interest' and nationally defined 'economic growth') whilst using South African 'nationality' as the litmus test for societal acceptance and integration of those who have, not surprisingly, made their way to the 'new' South Africa. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in relation to Zimbabwe. Somewhat similarly, the state has, through its implementation of neo-liberal socio-economic policies inside South Africa which have fundamentally undermined any meaningful redistribution of political and socio-economic power/capital, made a mockery of substantive 'citizenship' for the majority of South African 'nationals'. It is the 'classic' ruling class recipe for constructed tension, prejudice, competition and conflict amongst the 'have-nots' (whatever their nationality). All the while of course, none of this applies to the respective 'haves', who have long ago placed themselves above and beyond such non-consequential identities such as nationality.

Under such a state-led rubric, the parallel constructions of internal (South African) xenophobic attitudes and practice have flourished. The coercive forces of the state – most notably and consistently through the conduct/actions of the police services - have thus treated African immigrants as if they were, *a priori*, criminals and charlatans intent on destroying the imagined 'national community' of 'authentic' South Africans. The endemic corruption in, and venality of, several departments of the state – here, Home Affairs and Housing have taken the lead – have criminalised the desperation of poor African immigrants and thus contributed substantially to their parallel illegalisation in the eyes of both the 'law' and amongst many with whom they live. Leading ANC politicians, alongside sizeable sections of the mainstream media, have also been

remarkably consistent (despite transparently hypocritical denials to the contrary) in their reactionary populisms that have sought to portray African immigrants as the main cause of a host of South Africa's economic and social problems.

For a long time prior to the recent xenophobic pogroms, the social inheritances of the state's sustained construction of a xenophobia-friendly South Africa were clear to see for anyone paying attention. Whether it was throwing Mozambiquans off a moving train, the deportation of tens of thousands of assorted 'foreigners' every month, the aiding and abetting of Mugabe's scorched-earth politics in Zimbabwe, the blaring media headlines about trouble-causing 'aliens' or the murder of scores of Somali shop-owners, there was ample evidence to show that the so-called 'rainbow', 'African renaissance' nation was a mirage. The reality was, and remains, that one of the most defining socio-political features of post-apartheid South Africa is a narrow, chauvinist nationalism.

Once the pogroms began, intensified and spread, the response of the state was predictably tragic. For the first several days there was a deafening silence, a silence that was so cynically and contemptuously consistent with the ways in which the lives of the 'non-existent' had, for so long, been treated by the South African state. The complete absence of any political, moral or social leadership (not to mention basic human empathy) from the state, most clearly visible in the pathetic, half-hearted response of the police services to the ongoing violence, only gave further succour to the xenophobes. A state constructed xenophobic, chauvinistic nationalism, combined with the catastrophic socio-economic impacts of economic neo-liberalism, had finally broken 'free'. The state could not own up to its own creation.

The dishonest attempts to blame 'a few criminal individuals', the empty calls for 'African unity', the hypocritical praise for humanitarian 'patriots' and the belated mobilisation of a few state resources and personnel that followed, confirmed what many have long known and have tried (mostly unsuccessfully) to expose – that the South African state is a state whose very existence and legitimacy has been built on the social and physical corpses of the poor and downtrodden (whatever their nationality). It is the logical 'outcome' of the kind of post-apartheid politics and ideology that has not only been embraced and celebrated by those who have benefited from it, but has been tragically imbibed by many of those who are oppressed by it.

Any national state is but a reflection of the (national) society which gives it both form and life. While a collective (South African) ownership of responsibility and shame for the recent xenophobic pogroms is both needed and required, it is also the role and character of the state, along with the content of the policies that flow from it, which desperately need and require radical change. That is a struggle which demands that we all throw off the yoke of nationalism. It is a struggle that must know no borders.

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