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Reaping the whirlwind: Xenophobic violence in South Africa

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Reaping the whirlwind: Xenophobic violence in South Africa

Abstract

In May 2008, South Africa was hit by waves of violent attacks against foreigners from the majority world. These xenophobic attacks resulted in the death of more than 70 persons, many injured and displacement of approximately 120,000 people, all of them people of colour and most of them poor. While South Africa has long been considered one of the more violent countries in the world, the intensity of, as well as the apparent motivation for, this 'new' manifestation of violence came as a surprise to most. Based partly on the insights of Frantz Fanon and Hussein Bulhan, this paper examines the causes of this violence and argues that its emergence should not have come as a surprise. Furthermore, the paper explores the use of a memory project as a necessary starting point in South Africa for interventions aimed at addressing this violence.

Introduction

On the evening of 11 May 2008, in Diepsloot, a township in the north of Johannesburg, in the Gauteng province of South Africa, a Mozambican migrant, Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuavhe, was torched alive while a group of South Africans stood by laughing as he burnt to death (Worby, Hassim & Kupe, 2008). In the public memory, it was this cruel and gruesome event, more than any other, which marked the unfurling of a frightening wave of xenophobic violence that was to engulf the South African landscape for several weeks thereafter (Peberdy, 2009).

Not far from Diepsloot, in Alexandra, a township north-west of Johannesburg, other groups of black South Africans doggedly hunted down and indiscriminately attacked all people suspected of being foreigners. As the days passed, increasing numbers of people, including undocumented migrants, foreigners with legal residence status, and South Africans who 'looked foreign'¹ fell prey to these groups. The most frequently proffered justification deployed by locals for these attacks was that foreigners were responsible for increases in crime and 'stealing' South Africans' jobs, houses and women(!) (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

By 15 May 2008, the attacks had increased in momentum and had spread to several other areas in the Gauteng province, one of the northernmost and most populous provinces in South Africa. And by 22 May 2008, the violence had spread to several urban areas in the rest of South Africa (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

When, by June 2008, South Africans took stock of the horrendous excesses committed in their name

during the preceding month, it was reported that 120,000 people had been displaced, 670 had been injured, 70 had been murdered and countless women had been raped (Matsopoulos, Corrigall & Bowman, 2009; Peberdy, 2009). *En passant*, as with other forms of collective violence, this spate of xenophobic violence intersected in telling ways with the familiar enactments of dominant forms of violence, masculinity and masculine power in the South African context. Specifically, the perpetrators of these violent incidents were most frequently men and their victims often other men. Indeed, the characteristics of those involved in these incidents in large measure mimicked the demographic features of those involved in other incidents of violence and intended injury in South Africa (Matsopoulos, Myers, Bowman & Mathews, 2008). According to Matsopoulos et al. (2008), not only are adult men and more specifically black men more likely than other groups to be the victims of violence, they are also more likely to be the perpetrators of violence (cf. Bulhan, 1985).

Initially, most South Africans and South African institutions, including the South African academy, appeared to be caught completely off-guard by this outbreak of violence aimed at particularly African and Asian foreigners. However, as various social scientists observed subsequently, this wave of xenophobic violence should perhaps not have been experienced as completely unexpected (Peberdy, 2009). Moreover, the surprise or disbelief expressed by many South Africans, as Gqola (2008) observes, may have been a function of a defensive 'distancing' manoeuvre on the part of political and social elites in post-colonial contexts aimed at showing that it is 'them' (i.e. the poor, blacks and other marginalised groups) who are responsible for this violence, not 'us' (cf. Fanon, 1990). Furthermore, as a reading of

Gqola's (2008) analysis of the violence indicates, the surprise expressed by many in the wake of the events of May 2008 could also have been indicative of the latter's attempts to 'disavow [their] agency and complicity' in the profound and unacknowledged problems facing South Africa, due to current as well as past political practices (Gqola, 2008: 211).

Arguably, this orgy of violent excess could have been predicted long before May 2008, if one considers the litany of incidents of violence against foreigners, which were reported with ominous regularity in the local media during the preceding years (See Table 1 below).

Table 1. Some incidents of xenophobic violence reported in between 1994 and 2007.

In 1994, groups of South Africans in Alexandra participated in a violent campaign aimed at forcefully driving Mozambican, Zimbabwean and Malawian migrants from the township, reportedly because the latter were reported to be responsible for the alleged increase in crime, unemployment and sexual attacks in the area.

In 1996, a crowd of approximately one thousand South African inhabitants of an informal housing settlement attempted to drive all foreign nationals out of the settlement. Two foreign nationals as well as two South Africans were killed in the ensuing violence.

In 1997, South African informal traders in Johannesburg launched a spate of violent attacks over a 48-hour period against foreign national informal traders. The attacks were accompanied by widespread looting.

In 1998, six South African police officers were filmed setting attack dogs loose on three Mozambican migrants while hurling racist and xenophobic invectives at them.

In 1999, it was reported that six foreign nationals accused of alleged criminal activity were abducted by a group of South Africans in Ivory Park, a township on the outskirts of Johannesburg. One of the six managed to escape from the mob's clutches, three others were seriously injured and two were reportedly killed by means of the notorious 'necklacing' method².

In 2000, two Mozambican farm workers were assaulted by a vigilante group after they were

accused of stealing. One of the workers subsequently died directly as a result of the attack.

In 2001, residents of Zandspruit, an informal settlement in Johannesburg, set fire to the houses of hundreds of Zimbabwean migrants forcing them to flee the settlement.

In 2006, several Somali shop owners were reported to have been forced to flee a township outside Knysna in the Western Cape Province, as a result of violent intimidation.

In 2007, more than 100 shops owned by Somali nationals in the Motherwell area in the Eastern Cape Province were looted during a series of attacks on African refugees over a 24-hour period.

Source: Hill and Lefko-Everett (2008: 1-9)

Why these xenophobic attacks?

During and in the aftermath of the xenophobic attacks of May 2008, South African social scientists appeared hard-pressed to explain why black South Africans were turning on foreigners from the rest of Africa and parts of Asia with such fatal vengeance. Some of the explanations proffered included the traditional (and somewhat less than useful) scapegoating and isolation hypotheses, to which I will, in a moment, briefly turn my attention. Firstly, however, a brief definition of xenophobia would be apposite.

Xenophobia is typically defined as the 'dislike', 'hatred or fear of foreigners' (Harris, 2002: 169). Importantly, however, as Harris (2002: 170) correctly emphasises, xenophobia is 'not just an attitude [as the standard definition of the phenomenon implies]: it is [also] an action'. As reflected by the incidents reflected in Table 1 above, xenophobia invariably entails acts and processes of violence, physical, as well as psychological and social. Furthermore, as also reflected by these incidents, in the South African context, xenophobia is not directed at just anyone. It is largely directed at people of colour. For this reason, Gqola (2008) in fact argues that the predominant nature of the violence directed against foreigners in South Africa in May 2008 was more than simply a case of xenophobia. It was also profoundly '*negrophobic* in character' (Gqola, 2008: 213; cf. Fanon, 1990).

Scapegoating hypothesis

Somewhat simplistically stated, the scapegoating hypothesis argues that xenophobia occurs when indigenous populations turn their anger resulting from whatever hardships they are experiencing against 'foreigners', primarily because foreigners are constructed as being the cause of all their difficulties. The traditional criticism directed at the scapegoating hypothesis of course is that it does not explain why foreigners are the group that is burdened with the hatred and abuse of autochthonous groups. More specifically, it does not explain why foreigners of colour in the context of contemporary South Africa invariably bear the brunt of the prejudicial and murderous hatred of the local population.

The following explanation also offered by various South African social scientists for the xenophobic violence of May 2008, perhaps partly addresses this lacuna.

Isolation hypothesis

The isolation hypothesis holds that the xenophobia manifested in May 2008 was a consequence of apartheid South Africa's isolation from the international community, and particularly the rest of Africa. During the apartheid era, South Africa's borders with most of the rest of the world were hermetically sealed, largely because apartheid South Africa was considered a pariah state; and partly because the apartheid state viewed most foreign countries as a threat to both its racist policies and the political stranglehold that it exerted on South African society. The antipathy expressed by South Africans towards other Africans in recent years, the isolation hypothesis holds, is a residual effect of the internalised antipathy or hostility engendered by the apartheid state towards the external world. Indeed, as Morris (in Harris, 2002: 172) argues, *There is little doubt that the brutal environment created by apartheid with its enormous emphasis on boundary maintenance has impacted on people's ability to be tolerant of difference.*

While there may certainly be some measure of truth in this argument, the question that it obviously raises is why this intolerance towards difference is largely expressed in relation to other Africans and people of colour and not in relation to the Europeans who have also flooded South Africa buying up businesses and countless acres of property over the last two decades (cf. Gqola, 2008).

In addition to the above-mentioned hypotheses, the social sciences in South Africa proffered various other explanations for the xenophobic violence of May 2008 in the aftermath of this violence. Perhaps one of the more persuasive and increasingly cited of these relates to issues of poverty.

Endemic poverty

Various researchers have commented on the fact that most of the xenophobic incidents that have plagued South Africa before, during and after May 2008 consistently occurred in economically and socially depressed townships, which the South African historian, Nieftagodien (2008) appositely refers to as the human 'dumping grounds' to which South Africa's 'marginalised and alienated' have consistently been consigned, both historically and in the present. Indeed, as Nieftagodien (2008) observes, Alexandra, which initially was the epicentre of the xenophobic attacks of May 2008, is a township characterised by desperate and brutalising poverty. Specifically, Alexandra is a township where the overwhelming majority of a population of 350, 000 people live in makeshift shacks that are crammed into a mere 2 km²; a township with an unemployment rate of approximately 30 per cent and where 20 per cent of households subsist on a paltry monthly income of ZAR 1,000 (i.e. approximately \$128) or less. Within contexts such as Alexandra, Nieftagodien argues, xenophobia is bound to find fertile ground; particularly because it is within such areas that the majority of job-seeking migrants invariably land up (cf. Peberdy, 2009). Indeed, as reported by the South African Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC, 2008), while quite high amongst the general population of South Africa, anti-foreigner (and more specifically anti-African) sentiment is particularly pronounced in poverty-stricken urban informal settlements such as Alexandra.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that there are places in the world where people are as poor as and indeed poorer than the inhabitants of Alexandra. Yet these places have not witnessed the extremely high levels of xenophobia seen in Alexandra and similar townships in May 2008. This, of course, alerts us to the probability that endemic poverty on its own cannot account for the xenophobic violence witnessed in South Africa in May 2008. This leads to another explanation for xenophobia, which is related to the 'endemic poverty' explanation, and which links xenophobia to perceptions of relative deprivation; an explanation to which I will now briefly turn my attention.

Relative deprivation

Perceived relative deprivation can be defined as ‘the subjective feeling of discontent based on the belief that one is getting less than one feels entitled to’ (de la Rey, 1991: 40). Importantly, and as Pillay (2008) argues, it is not deprivation per se that evokes feelings of hostility towards foreigners, but perceptions of being deprived in relation to others.

With a Gini coefficient ranging between 0.68 and 0.70 over the last 20 years, approximately, inequality appears to have become increasingly entrenched in South Africa, both within the general population and within racialised groups (HSRC, 2004; Pressly, 2009). Indeed, research cited by May et al. (2000) and Pressley (2009) indicates that inequalities in income have become increasingly pronounced amongst blacks since 1994, and that they rank amongst the highest in the world.

Of course, while the poor are becoming increasingly poorer, the new political elites have no compunction about demanding and obtaining obscenely high salaries and all the trappings of conspicuous wealth, even if this is virtually inevitably at the expense of the poor.

In the face of the “naked display of self-enrichment” on the part of the new political and corporate elites, the response of “the marginalised, the unemployed ... and the working poor” to their apparently unchanging plight, or to being left behind in the new South Africa, is pervasive anger and resentment (Pillay, 2008: 100). In a context in which xenophobic discourses are encouraged and reproduced by the ruling elite (see Table 2 below for a range of statements attributed to various key role-players on the South African political landscape prior to May 2008), this anger and resentment are ineluctably directed at foreigners. Moreover, migrants are infinitely easier targets than the new political and corporate elites who typically construct themselves as the allies and champions of the poor in South Africa (see also Peberdy, 2009).

While certainly feasible, this explanation of course still does not account for why foreigners of colour and particularly African foreigners are the ones who bear the brunt of this anger and resentment.

Table 2. Political discourses and xenophobia

In 1994, the erstwhile South African Minister of Home Affairs, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, declared in parliament: “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 kiss goodbye to our Reconstruction and Development Programme” (Hill & Lefko-Everett, 2008: 1).

In 1997, the then Defence Minister, Joe Modise, in a newspaper interview, argued that there was a link between the presence of undocumented migrants in South Africa and crime in the country.

Also in 1997, Mangosuthu Buthelezi claimed that ‘illegal aliens’ annually ‘cost South African taxpayers billions of Rands (Hill & Lefko-Everett, 2008: 1).

In order to drive home the point that South Africa was ‘besieged’ by foreigners, the Department of Home Affairs, in 2001, disingenuously claimed that there were more than 7 million migrants in South Africa, despite having been alerted to the fact that the official 2001 census data indicated that there were in fact fewer than 1 million documented foreign nationals in the country.

Source: Hill and Lefko-Everett (2008: 1-9)

To my mind, if one wishes to find a suitable explanation for the events of May 2008 one also has to examine the legacy of colonial and apartheid racism, because it is ultimately in this explanation that one will find the answer to the questions: Why have Africans and other people of colour been the inevitable targets of the xenophobic attacks of May 2008 and earlier, and why have these attacks been characterised by such brutal and inhuman violence?

Legacy of colonial and apartheid racism

Various writers (e.g. Gqola, 2008; Harris, 2002; Mngxitama, 2008; Peberdy, 2009) argue that current manifestations of xenophobia should also be linked to the entrenched residual effects of colonialism and apartheid racism on the psyche of black South Africans. Specifically, it is argued that racism has been such a pervasive feature of South African society over more than three centuries and that it has had such a profoundly brutalising effect on South Africans that it is improbable that South Africans would not have internalised aspects of the insidious

racist messages of the old colonial and apartheid orders of the abjectly 'inferior' black Other and the 'superiority' of whites. According to this explanatory framework, therefore, it is infinitely less threatening to direct the disappointments and frustrations resulting from the unfulfilled promises of a new South Africa at other blacks (and particularly blacks from the rest of Africa), rather than whites. After all, blacks according to the racist scripts of the old order are deserving of such treatment.

Moreover, as Peberdy (2009) observes, the old apartheid order, in keeping with its racist precepts consistently constructed foreigners of colour as unwelcome visitors (indeed, even Africans born in South Africa were constructed as unwelcome imposters) and white foreigners as (generally) welcome immigrants, and critically important for keeping the 'black peril' at bay. This legacy, she posits, lives on in current constructions of foreigners.

Of course, formal apartheid is no longer a reality in South Africa. However, as argued elsewhere (Duncan, Stevens & Bowman, 2008), its legacy lives on, both through its ongoing material effects and through the intergenerational transmission of its damaging psychic legacy.

Nationhood and immigrants

Peberdy (2009) intimates that the often violent antipathy expressed towards foreigners can be read against changing constructions of South African nationhood. Indeed, she argues, that each re-definition of South African nationhood over the last century was accompanied by periods of pronounced processes of exclusion (and conversely, inclusion) in relation to foreigners – prescribing 'who is allowed to enter and who is excluded from membership' (p. 26).

Quoting Cohen (1994), Peberdy (2009: 26) argues that through these processes of exclusion, 'a complex national and social identity is continuously constructed ... in its (often antipathetic) interaction with outsiders, strangers and foreigners'. Indeed, she argues that foreigners often served as the foil for the development of new constructions or narratives of South African nationhood. Of course, if we are to employ this explanation to account for the xenophobic violence of May 2008 and if we are to make sense of why this violence was directed primarily at people of colour, then we will have to employ it alongside the history of apartheid racism.

Why the extreme levels of violence witnessed?

It is widely acknowledged that the autochthonous populations of developing countries tend to perceive migrants from poor countries very negatively. Specifically, they most frequently perceive these migrants as taking away jobs from locals and being responsible for crime and violence. Yet these negative (or xenophobic) perceptions seldom result in such wide-scale acts of interpersonal or intergroup violence as witnessed in South Africa in May 2008 (Matsopoulos et al., 2009).

Why was this hatred of the Other (and, of course, the Self as reflected in the Other) expressed in this orgy of violence? In a recently completed paper titled, *Picking the Eyes out of the Country: Contentious Happenings, State Power and South Africa's Future*, the historian, John Higginson (2010) provides us with a potential answer, or at least part of the answer to this question, when he observes, *The 'master narrative' of South African history is the violence of conquest, the violence of frontier wars, the violence of apartheid and of the struggle against apartheid, the criminal violence of gangs and the ritualized violence of ... faction fights (2010: 102).*

South African history is indeed steeped and inscribed in violence. However, very important to note is that this violence was not simply physical. Accompanied by a relentless negativisation and abjection of the other, it also had profound psychological effects, which are rarely considered to be worthy of any serious consideration in contemporary South Africa. As we have argued elsewhere (Duncan et al., 2008), until this psychological violence is comprehensively and systematically confronted and engaged with, it will perpetually continue to re-inscribe itself in the interpersonal and intergroup relationships in South African communities. Indeed, as Frantz Fanon (1990), in *Wretched of the Earth* implies, if left unacknowledged, ongoing violence perpetrated by the former oppressed, will be inevitable, because the latter invariably realise that the violence of their past and the violence of their current circumstances 'can only be called into question by absolute violence' on their part. Unfortunately, as also implied by Fanon (1990), this violence is often directed at the Self or at the Self as reflected in the Other. This observation is further developed by Bulhan (1985: 143) in his *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression*, through the distinction drawn between violence directed at exploitative institutions and the state and intra-community violence or violence directed at a similar Other. Those on the margins of society,

Bulhan (1985) argues, know that defending themselves against the quotidian assaults by broader society and callous governments invariably results merely in more intensified assaults. Indeed, as Bulhan (1985: 143) notes, “the high proportion of prisoners of [their] ... class and color, the all-pervasive media and institutions of social control engender in [the marginalised] ... a sense of vulnerability”. Thus, they avoid attacking the institutions and systems responsible for their hardship. However, while they believe that they are unable to defend themselves in the broader political, economic and social arena, they will defend themselves and exert whatever control they have over their own lives in the spaces that they construct as their own, namely their homes and neighbourhoods. “That is why”, as Bulhan (1985, p. 143) argues, “the slightest challenge ... or offense” by those like him who inhabit these spaces, “push [them] to a volcanic eruption of repressed aggression”.

Xenophobic violence and community psychology

As should be clear from the presentation thus far, the explanations for the outbreak of the xenophobic attacks of May 2008, on the surface, are complex and fairly diverse, ranging from the effects of scapegoating, isolation, relative deprivation, the politics of nation-building and the processes of otherisation peculiar to the South African context, to the direct effects of institutional racism, which persist to this day.

Nonetheless, as complex and diverse as what the explanations outlined ostensibly are, they are connected to each other by one common element, and that element is apartheid oppression and its ongoing impact on South African society. Any intervention aimed at dealing with the xenophobia of the type that we continue to see in South Africa will have to start with an engagement with the toxic legacy of apartheid. There are of course various interventions that could potentially be effective in this regard. However, the intervention that I would briefly want to introduce here is one on which I have been collaborating over the last two years, namely the Apartheid Archives Project. This is an intervention that aims to understand the difficulties in living experienced by particularly the marginalised in South African society, not only through the present, but also through the past. Moreover, it is an intervention that aims to obtain an understanding of current South African social problems through listening to the explanations of those directly affected by these

problems, rather than condemning them out-of-hand, as many South African social commentators have been prone to do since May 2008.

This intervention is of course strongly informed by the principles of community psychology, and particularly the notion that the most effective and most lasting solutions to communities’ problems emerge from an engagement with the understandings which these communities have of the genesis of these problems (see, for example, Rappaport, 1981).

Of course, the opportunity to ‘call into question’ the violence of marginalised communities’ past (and present) through listening to their accounts of this violence may just serve as mechanism that could obviate the need to calling past and present inequalities and hardship into question through acts of violence directed at the Self and the similar Other.

The Apartheid Archive Project

Based in part on the assumption that experiences (and particularly traumatogenic experiences) from the past will constantly attempt to re-inscribe themselves in the present if they are not acknowledged and dealt with, this project aims to examine the nature of the violence of institutionalised racism of (particularly ‘ordinary’ black) South Africans under the old apartheid order and their continuing effects on individual and group functioning in contemporary South Africa. More specifically, the project aims to explore how earlier experiences under the old apartheid order currently mediate and continue to structure individual and group responses to the Other. To this end, the project is in the process of collecting narratives of experiences during the apartheid period of both black and white South Africans, of representatives from elites and marginalised social categories, of racist perpetration and victimisation, and of trauma and resilience. The aim is to collect as many narratives as possible over a three to five-year period from different sectors of South African society (but particularly from marginalised groups, such as the poor and the socially vulnerable, whose life stories are rarely incorporated into dominant historical accounts of the past).

It is hoped that the generation of these stories will allow for processes of reflection on the part of South Africans in ways that will allow us to engage with our past; and in the process to obtain some understanding of the ways in which this past

continues to impact on the ways in which we relate to ourselves and others.

Of course, in relation to the problem of violence against foreigners it will be critical to pointedly explore South Africans' perceptions of how their past and present influence their responses to foreigners and the rights of the latter in South Africa. I believe that this project will enable us to obtain a much more nuanced understanding of the types of violence that had been visited on South Africa in May 2008, thereby affording us the tools to much more effectively deal with this violence currently besetting South Africa and most frequently the poor and marginalised. Given the unacknowledged legacies of our past that continue to cast a shadow over intergroup relations, this or other similar projects would be an essential starting point for any interventions dealing with the problem of xenophobia and xenophobic violence in South Africa.

Notes

- ¹ Perhaps indicative of the ongoing influence of the old apartheid racial ideology, many South Africans are persuaded that there are discernible differences between black South Africans and other Africans, with the latter perceived as having a darker skin tone!
- ² This form of violence entails placing a petrol-doused tyre around the victim's neck and setting the tyre alight.

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