'Fortress SA': Xenophobic violence in South Africa

Guest editorial by John Sharp
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The South African Human Sciences Research Council's report on 'Citizenship, Violence and Xenophobia in South Africa' (HSRC, June 2008) makes some disturbing recommendations to government on how to prevent a recurrence of the so-called 'xenophobic' violence that wracked the country in May, leaving 60 people dead and many thousands displaced and destitute.

Among the recommendations are proposals that government should legalize immigrants and refugees who are already in South Africa, and then close the country's borders effectively (using the National Defence Force if necessary) to ensure that additional foreigners – particularly poor ones – cannot 'come and go as they please'. Current illegals who benefit from the proposed amnesty should be given formal residency and identity documents, but should also be entered onto the country's regulatory and taxation systems.

Unless they manage to acquire South African citizenship, however, these foreigners will not be allowed to occupy housing the government provides free of charge to poor people, given the HSRC's recommendation that the government should undertake a 'national audit' in order to eject foreigners from this form of housing (although they will be allowed to purchase or rent on the open market, or to live in shacks in informal settlements). The HSRC also recommends that foreigners should be barred from certain kinds of unskilled jobs, including the construction sector and domestic work, and that there should be a new system of minimum wages in other sectors in order to prevent 'immigrants working for lower wages'.

The Human Sciences Research Council is a state- sponsored body that has attempted to raise its profile and influence in recent years by undertaking cutting-edge research of national importance. It is therefore reasonable to ask why its researchers have come up with a plan to turn South Africa into an impenetrable fortress, as well as a society in which migrants and refugees from the rest of Africa will remain at the bottom of the internal hierarchy. How is it that they, like many other South Africans, have forgotten so quickly that a great deal of the country's present wealth and development was built, over the entire course of the 20th century, on the backs of foreign African migrant workers?

Several reasons for this might be suggested. One immediate reason was, no doubt, the haste with which the HSRC sought to respond to the May crisis. The organization's researchers were given two weeks to study 'the causes of the xenophobic violence' and make their recommendations, and they began their focus group sessions in selected 'hot spots' (townships and informal settlements in Johannesburg, Pretoria, the East Rand and Cape Town) even before the violence had died down.

A second reason, presumably related to the speed with which the project was undertaken, lay in the fact that the researchers appear not to have questioned the definition of this violence given in their brief, which told them that it was 'xenophobic'. This is clear from the questions they put to focus group participants. The main question was 'What do you think led to the violence happening in your area?', and the prompts supplied to the interviewers included references to 'competition' between South Africans and foreigners for housing, jobs, water, sanitation and health services, and the notion that foreigners were 'responsible' for crime and the spread of HIV/AIDS and other diseases.

This formulation presupposes that those committing the violence drew a stark contrast between foreigners and South Africans, but this is belied by the fact that a third of the people killed in the course of the May violence were locals. Some of the latter may have been mistaken for foreigners on account of their appearance (ostensibly 'darker' than the 'typical'

South African) or their inability to speak any of the main South African languages fluently. But the anger of the moment also turned against people recognized as South Africans from far-flung parts of the country (such as the far north of Limpopo Province and the Mpumalanga Lowveld), suggesting that the violence was directed not simply at 'non-nationals' but at those construed as 'outsiders' in the urban areas in which most of it occurred.

But since the issues the HSRC researchers chose to highlight in their focus groups were not plucked entirely from the air, some participants dutifully confined their responses to them, agreeing that they particularly resented the presence of Zimbabweans, Mozambicans, Congolese and Somalis in their impoverished neighbourhoods for these specific reasons. Others, on the other hand, managed to provide more subtle and far-reaching arguments, even in the face of this barrage of leading questions.

> Government is fighting against us, employers are fighting against us, and foreigners are fighting against us. That is why we fight against them (foreigners), because they are nearer. They don't support us in our struggle (HSRC 2008: 45). One thing I noticed is that this fighting started when the food prices went up. Then South Africans began acting in the wrong way. They started thinking since the foreigners are here, let's just blame them before the food and other resources run out. They then started acting in the wrong way, pushing them out of the country and beating them up (ibid. 45).

The HSRC's researchers are to be applauded for not excluding responses such as these from the discussion of their findings on the grounds that they sit awkwardly athwart the main thrust of the report. But they do not pursue their implications. Nowhere do they seek to explain, or even flesh out, the reference to 'our struggle' – which foreigners may not support, according to the respondent in question, but of which they were hardly the main target. Nor do they ask what the link might be between poor South Africans' 'struggle' and, for instance, 'rising prices', and how this link impacts on the kinds of recommendation cutting-edge researchers might wish to make.

The draconian recommendations purport to be based on 'community perceptions' uncovered by rapid research. But they derive from a very partial reading of these perceptions, entirely in line with the premise on which the research began. Anthropologists have long been aware of the danger of facile labelling of violence in various parts of the world. Whether the reference is to 'sectarian' violence in Northern Ireland's past (Feldman 1991), or 'interethnic' violence in Rwanda (Gourevitch 1998) or – in the present case – 'xenophobic' violence in South Africa, we have come to realize that these labels invariably hide at least as much as they reveal. They may have a certain descriptive plausibility, but they are not a basis on which to fashion a convincing analysis of the phenomena they describe, let alone responsible proposals on how to deal with the conflicts to which they refer.

Nor is this shortcoming accidental. The way these labels are deployed is rarely inimical to the interests of those wielding the lion's share of power in the relevant circumstances. South African sociologist Mike Neocosmos (2008) argues that the recent violence was a manifestation not so much of the xenophobic attitudes of the poor at the bottom of society as of a xenophobic discourse that starts at the top, at the highest levels of the ANC-led state, and is prevalent among the elites – the rising black elite as well as the established white elite – whose interests are the state's main concern. This discourse is evident in the rhetoric that is regularly employed by political leaders, the legislation aimed at the 'control' of 'aliens' that is already in place, and the licence given to agents of the state, such as immigration officials and the police, to indulge in systematic abuse of foreigners, especially those from elsewhere in Africa.

South African elites are happy to support this, or at least turn a blind eye, for various reasons. One involves the fear of competition from people from further to the north. Elite or would-be elite South Africans fear not only that these people may be better qualified for skilled and professional posts than they are, but also that the foreigners may take advantage of the various avenues dedicated to black advancement that have been opened in post-apartheid

South Africa. As Nyamnjoh (2006) suggests, the primordial notion of 'belonging' – of being indigenous (or 'native') to South Africa – is not deployed by the rising black elite purely in relation to their white South African counterparts. It is also being turned, with much greater harshness, on black Africans from further afield. It has now become extremely difficult, for instance, to appoint black scholars from elsewhere in Africa to positions at South African universities (unless it can be shown that there is no local person with even remotely similar qualifications), and black foreigners who do get appointed are expressly excluded from the official reckoning of the extent to which the universities are meeting the 'employment equity' targets set by the state.
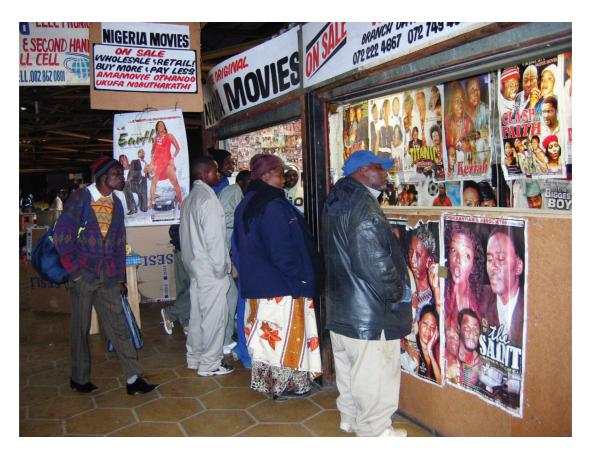
Turning the racialized notion of 'belonging' in South Africa against a new enemy has particular resonance for the rising black elite. But they and their white peers join forces when it comes to the question of paying taxes to provide shelter and services to people seen to be pouring into South Africa to escape political incompetence and economic mismanagement further north. The established white elite is, if anything, more vocal on this score, because they believe they are in the process of losing out to 'affirmative action', and are nonetheless carrying a disproportionate share of the tax burden (a conclusion they reach by counting the numbers in the different South African 'races' rather than their average levels of income and wealth).

What neither the black nor the white elite wants to hear is any hint of criticism of the miraculous' transition from apartheid to liberal democracy which they managed jointly, or of South Africa's official endorsement of the neo-liberal orthodoxy propounded by those who command the global economic system. It does not occur to them that the price that was paid for the political miracle was abject capitulation to this neo-liberal orthodoxy. Nor is this surprising, because it is not the elite but the poor in South Africa, as well as in the rest of Africa, who are paying this price.

Dividing the poor people of Africa up into 'national' entities, so that 'our' poor and the 'foreign' poor are confined to separate and well-policed compartments, and graded into an explicit hierarchy within South Africa, is in the interests of the whole South African elite (Neocosmos 2006). It is, indeed, one of the (relatively few) political areas in which their much advertised commitment to 'non-racialism' can be given real substance. They stand as one against the rest of Africa, and, as Neocosmos argues, the xenophobic discourse begins with them.

The HSRC's proposal for a 'Fortress SA' is in line with this discourse. But it cloaks its provenance in its narrow focus on the 'xenophobic violence' committed by some poor South Africans, and its selective reading of the evidence provided by the participants in its focus groups. In doing so it misrepresents the wide range of relationships that impoverished South Africans have with foreign Africans in their midst. The existence of such a range is attested by the careful findings of my colleague Owen Sichone (2008), based on his long-term, anthropological field research in Cape Town among immigrants and refugees from other parts of Africa. He did not seek to romanticize these people's position or pretend that they all lived in happy harmony with their South African hosts. Some South Africans in his study certainly resented the foreigners bitterly, mainly because they were competing with them for scarce jobs and other resources. The HSRC report highlights their views, and they would undoubtedly endorse many of its proposals, justifying their stance by pointing to the fact that they, rather than foreign Africans, had been (and still are) the victims of apartheid-era oppression.

But Sichone showed that others who were not in a competitive relationship with the foreigners valued their presence for a variety of reasons, and had generally friendly and warm relations with them. So pronounced were the divisions among poor South Africans in his respect that he felt obliged to balance the usual, easy portrayal of their xenophobia by calling attention to the existence of a complementary 'xenophilia' among them. Moreover, as he pointed out, while some poor South Africans were either constant xenophobes (a disposition prominent among young, unemployed men) or constant xenophiles (more characteristic of women, who are reported to find foreign men less domineering than their local counterparts), a great many people veered between these poles, depending on the circumstances of their encounters with foreigners and the foreigners they were dealing with.

Fig.1. Nollywood: A retail outlet for Nigerian films in Marabastad, Pretoria. Xenophobia against foreigners does not necessarily extend to their cultural products. There is a large market for Nollywood DVDs, particularly among poor South Africans. Moreover, two channels showing films from West and East Africa respectively have recently been added to local subscription TV, which caters to the middle class.

Sichone's insights help me to make sense of my own current field research in a small town in Limpopo Province, where there was no 'xenophobic violence' in May, even though a number of (mainly Zimbabwean) refugees have managed to access government housing ahead of some locals, who continue to languish in an under-serviced informal settlement. In this instance the South Africans are philosophical about the fact that foreigners have jumped the queue, largely because they are aware that, in a small town with very few job opportunities (and therefore little scope for competition over jobs), some of their number have opted to rent out their newly-acquired houses to Zimbabweans in order to realize an income from the one significant asset they possess. It is therefore highly ironic that, in one of the many places where there was no violence, the HSRC's proposed ban on foreigners occupying such houses would mean that it was illegal for impoverished South Africans to earn an income by this strategem.

It is easy to simplify matters by suggesting that the problem lies, first and foremost, in the majority of poor South Africans' unremitting hostility to their equally poor counterparts from elsewhere in Africa. This allows the HSRC report to make the absurd proposal that there should be a national forum to discuss xenophobia, where inhabitants of the townships and informal settlements could voice their resentment of the foreigners, and national leaders would have opportunity to correct the 'stereotypes and misconceptions' the poor hold about these people. The aim of the latter exercise, the report blithely suggests, would be to transform these foreigners from 'dispensable others' into 'significant others'.

But perhaps the quality of the foreigners' 'otherness' is not the main issue for impoverished South Africans, many of whom would agree with the sentiment that 'the government is

fighting us, [and] the employers are fighting us', and that foreigners became the victims of this struggle because they were close at hand.

Nyamnjoh (2006) insists that one cannot begin to understand current South African xenophobia without taking account of the way in which, despite neo-liberal celebration of a world of 'flows', the actual working of the global economic order imposes ever deeper disjunctions and imbalances within, as well as between, nation states (see also Ferguson 2006). And, as Nyamnjoh says, the most significant gulf is between 'haves' and 'have-nots', rather than within the latter category. At least some of the poor respondents in the HSRC's survey see this clearly, as do many of the people in Sichone's Cape Town field research and my research in Limpopo.

But the HSRC researchers, apparently, do not. Their recommendations contain not a single proposal for the South African government to stand up to the dictates of neo-liberal orthodoxy (by, for instance, intervening in the market for jobs or basic consumer goods), and not a single warning to the elites in the society that the logic of their narrow self-interest is likely, in the long run, to result in its own downfall.

Moreover, despite the fact that the HSRC researchers cite Nyamnjoh's work, they take refuge in the notion of 'bounded' citizenship he challenges as outmoded, and ignore his arguments about the advantages of a more flexible approach to citizenship in South Africa and the rest of the continent (Nyamnjoh 2006).

Their proposals therefore suppose that citizenship must be an all-or-nothing attribute, and that millions of non-South Africans are desperate to acquire this kind of citizenship, by hook or crook, in South Africa. But this is not the finding of Nyamnjoh's and Sichone's field research, which shows that many foreign Africans see their sojourn in South Africa as temporary – an interlude before moving on to more desirable pastures beyond the continent or returning whence they came. They may well not regard South African citizenship as the ultimate prize many South Africans imagine it to be, although one supposes that they would prefer their transient contribution to the local economy not to be hedged about by all manner of restrictions on the work they may do and the accommodation they may occupy.

The fact that some poor South Africans looted the possessions of people they saw as outsiders, chased them out of the townships, and burned at least one person alive was, without doubt, deeply shocking. But to understand just how shocking it was one needs to look at the broad sweep of South African xenophobia, consider the full extent of its causes, and reflect on the disturbing ways influential South Africans respond to it.

The following is an excerpt from a statement by the Council of Anthropology Southern Africa (asnahome.org) about the violent attacks on 'foreigners' in South Africa: 'As anthropologists, we are deeply concerned, both professionally and as citizens, that these actions reflect a continuing emphasis in South African political discourse on cultural, racial and national differences. It is a discourse that, drawing on a long discarded anthropology, essentialises such differences even as it claims to celebrate them. It is a discourse that was central to colonialism, slavery, segregation and apartheid. It is a discourse that perversely persists to the present, now manifesting in the way the media labels as "xenophobia" horrendously violent acts where some South Africans raise fists, swing axes and pangas, and use matches to light fires as means to attack their fellows who happen to speak different languages and allegedly look somewhat different from themselves…' 'We suggest that, contrary to the current South African and international political consensus, the presence of people who are deemed to be ethnically, racially or nationally different is not at the core of the problem… As Southern African anthropologists, we are convinced that closing borders and repatriating foreigners is not the solution. Rather the solution lies in a politics which explicitly fosters the non-racialism espoused by the South African Constitution, that rejects and resists the power of identity politics, and that strives for a cosmopolitanism that valorises the contributions of all who have ever settled in our part of the world whilst ensuring the freedom of association and of cultural and linguistic expression of all human beings.*'

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