

Understanding Xenophobia: 3 Articles on the violence in South Africa

Anyone following the international news in the last months has surely heard about the xenophobic violence in South Africa: in a wave of attacks across the country, 62 foreigners have been killed, thousands have fled to internal refugee camps, and many more have returned to their home countries.

We have seen how the lack of service delivery has stirred up feelings of discontentment and dispossession – and instead of directing this frustration at government, poor South Africans have become increasingly hostile and violent toward foreigners. For most people, the government is far too distant to be the object of physical aggression, so their anger finds its best outlet in proximity. Clinging to well rehearsed mantras of exclusion – they take our jobs, they take our welfare, they burden our state – communities have chased out their foreign neighbours and friends, creating a context where thousands of Zimbabweans, Congolese, and Somalis have been displaced by horizontal violence.

In a world where scarcity is increasingly common, xenophobia is clearly not only a local issue, but a global phenomenon. The election violence in Kenya, the looting and arson in Karachi, and the refugee crisis in South Africa all demonstrate the upheaval and cataclysm that can erupt from a struggle over limited resources. It is our view that there is a lot to learn and share from crises of xenophobia around the world, and it is our job, as a transnational movement of the urban poor, to invite dialogue and analysis about this issue.

Below is a series of three articles from different voices on xenophobia. It all started with a Mail and Guardian article by Michael Gomo, which prompted a response by our SDI colleague Ted Baumann, which prompted a further response from development consultant Paul Hendler. We are opening up a section of our webpage for ongoing debate. If you would like to contribute, please send articles to erin@courc.co.za.

Xenophobia: An evil excuse for laziness

Michael Gomo

23 May 2008

So many people have given so many reasons why xenophobia is rampant in South Africa, but none truly convinces. Sure, we are told that South Africans have been oppressed by their apartheid history, which the new South Africa government has failed to address. Yet South Africans are not the only people to have suffered oppression. Take the example of my country, Zimbabwe.

We were invaded in 1890 and we fought undeterred from that time on until we got our independence in 1980 -- almost a century of being treated like second-class human beings, and sometimes like animals. We understand the after-effects of such prolonged oppression and struggle on the psyche of a society.

Attaining independence is a wonderful achievement after so many years of lost confidence, but being a child of the oppressed doesn't imply one can relax and expect things to come one's way on a silver platter.

Come back in time with me to Zimbabwe. Forget what is happening today and give credit to those comrades who fought with a vision for their country.

Soon after independence, the government ventured into many initiatives aimed at instilling a sense of self-development in its people. First it was the extension of the hand of reconciliation, which simply meant that we needed each other, black or white. While our black comrades were in the bush fighting the enemy, the enemy's sons and daughters were in good schools so that the black majority would still remain submissive to those who owned the means of production.

The government knew quite well that there wasn't enough qualified and skilled labour to play a competitive role in the new Zimbabwe. The hand of reconciliation was simply a ploy to buy time while we were putting our house in order.

The government introduced a massive education initiative that included everyone above the age of six, up to the oldest person in the land. I remember very well my own grandmother bringing us lunch at school on her way to her adult education lessons. Learning took place across the country; under the trees, near rivers, at churches, on top of mountains.

While the majority was acquiring basic education in such harsh circumstances, the government was building colleges and universities. There was tertiary education for everyone in Zimbabwe during those days. I remember the vocational training centres to cater for those who had failed their general certificates. This was premised on the belief that we couldn't all become academics and there were many who had good skills.

All this explains the high literacy rate in the country -- it didn't just come naturally. It took years of investment and perseverance. It later became the foundation on which affirmative action, a cousin of black economic empowerment, was built. It wouldn't have worked without a skilled and qualified workforce.

My aim is not to show off what Zimbabwe achieved after independence, but to illustrate that it is one's choice to remain frustrated because one feels one has been oppressed for a long time or because the government doesn't deliver meals to one's doorstep.

The education system in Zimbabwe taught us many lessons. We learnt to work for ourselves and that the government was there to ensure the availability of infrastructure, policies and laws that promote self-development. We were taught never to look back but always to look forward.

The government -- without any experience in running or managing a country -- still managed to get its people to understand that Zimbabwe is a developing-world country. It was able to impress upon people that their government could not afford to give them everything, hence the need for everyone to work hard and play their part in national development. We soon understood what it meant to be competitive in a peaceful environment.

We also learnt that one should not just work for the sake of it, but rather towards starting one's own business and employing others. For this reason, many Zimbabweans do not favour buying things on credit as they have the mindset to save money to start their own business.

I come from a rural area that used to harvest enough to feed the family and sell the rest. The money from the sales of crops would be used to buy agricultural input for the following year, as well as to send the children to good schools.

Our people never used to depend on loans, but they survived and lived modern lifestyles in rural areas. Some small-scale farmers even produced more than the commercial farmers who had everything at their disposal. We were never attracted to their farms because we didn't see the need; we were a hard-working society that had embraced the spirit defining our development through hard work.

I think there are many lessons to be learnt from this experience. There is nothing here about taking anyone's job. I visited Zimbabweans in Alexandra recently. They came here as refugees from the economic situation in their country. They worked hard for a few years and saved some rands. They opened corner shops where the neighbourhood bought household goods. These shops were not there before, and they identified an opportunity to serve the community.

It is horrifying that anyone in his right mind should think that a foreigner who has opened a shop is taking away someone's job when, in fact, he or she is employing local people.

We have had our own experiences with foreigners in Zimbabwe, but we never treated them the way they are being treated here. We hosted colleagues from South Africa during the apartheid era. They were never harassed to such a dehumanising extent, nor asked for papers. We even hosted some of

the African National Congress leadership, and I am pretty sure other neighbouring countries such as Mozambique did the same until South Africa got its independence.

Please note: I am not saying it is payback time. I am simply asking: Why can't you be an understanding society as we were when you needed us? Let me not ask why white foreigners are safer in South Africa than their black counterparts.

I still remember vividly when the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) invaded the western parts of Mozambique and eastern regions of Zimbabwe in the late 1980s. Millions of Mozambicans flocked into Zimbabwe. Men and women, young and old, professionals and the rest, all walked very long distances into the country. The MNR even invaded parts of Zimbabwe, killing thousands of people in the process. Yes, we lost our relatives and friends in the process. But I still remember that more than 1 000 people came to our village for safety. The village elders didn't chase them away. They were given a place to stay. They actually slept in the open, in the field, in the few houses -- particularly the women with children.

I was one of those displaced from my bedroom to accommodate women who had young children. I slept outside just like everyone else. I never complained that a foreigner took my bedroom. I didn't even complain that it was winter and it was very cold outside. We didn't complain that they were finishing our food because there was plenty in the field. We understood that it was a difficult situation for them and they needed someone to assist. Our elders understood there were laws of humanity to be followed. In South Africa, it seems that sometimes laws are nothing but political rhetoric.

Some foreigners decided to proceed, but others remained. Those who remained were absorbed into our families. Some of the Mozambicans looked for jobs while others became domestic workers or cattle herders. Those with families were given small pieces of land to grow their own crops.

Their children joined us at school. Despite their poor English -- they spoke Portuguese -- they were very good in mathematics. Together, as young children, we forged relationships; they taught us maths and we taught them English. Today, as I write this piece 22 years down the line, we have people in Mozambique whom we now call our relatives. They were never threatened, killed or asked for their identity documents. They were treated like human beings. Remember, this was just six years after we had attained our independence, while in South Africa 14 years have already passed.

If you ask my elders, they will tell you that there was a time when people from Malawi flocked into Zimbabwe. Even today they constitute a sizeable percentage of the population. They have an equal share of everything. They came and looked for jobs, and settled in Zimbabwe. Today they are Zimbabweans.

There was a time when there were more Malawians owning houses in Harare than locals, because our people believed they didn't need a house in town as they already had a home in the rural areas. By then the Malawians were buying houses; today, if you go to some of the townships, especially in Harare, there are more people of Malawian origin than locals.

Zimbabweans never complained. Instead they also started buying or building houses in Harare. We learnt our lessons, sometimes the hard way, and we took it as competition. Foreigners, because they had houses in urban areas, also had access to basic services such as good schools, clinics and so forth. They were part of us and we were together. These are the people who make Zimbabwe today.

There was a time when the government ventured into housing programmes. A noble idea it was, but the Zimbabweans that I know would rather join a stand-allocation waiting list than get a government house. They would prefer to build the house of their choice, to do it their own way -- unlike some people who still think a leader isn't a good leader because he didn't build a house for them; unlike some people in Mpumalanga who believe it is not a good idea to get a stand but rather a complete house from the government. They would rather let a Zimbabwean buy that stand and kill them later.

That's not the spirit of togetherness. The more you wait, the more the frustration. By the time you wake up, that foreigner will be a better person than you are. This world is not going to wait for waiters. Wake up and smell the coffee, South Africans!

In Praise of Michael Gomo

Ted Baumann

May 2008

Michael Gomo's article in the M&G Online ("Xenophobia: An evil excuse for laziness", 23 May 2008), is a fresh breath of insightfulness amidst the tut-tutting self-pity masquerading as analysis in the current anti-immigrant violence. His arguments about citizenship and the state-society relationship in Zimbabwe and South Africa shed light not only on the xenophobic pogroms taking place, but also on the nature of the South African state.

As a dual South African-US citizen, I've always been fascinated by the similarities and differences between my two homes. A comparative perspective is useful to me in understanding why ordinary South Africans are acting as they are, and where things could go from here.

Rampant inequality

To begin with, South Africa and the United States are both marked by extreme and growing income and wealth inequality – and citizens of both countries are increasingly conscious of the fact. In the US, the working and middle classes have enjoyed high and rising levels of consumption for most of the post-war period, obscuring the scale of inequality. The confluence of globalisation, corporate excesses, and economic downturn, however, is shifting awareness of the growing income gap between the top 5% and everyone else from obscure academic journals to the pages of *Time* and *USA Today*. Although the US electorate is still far from open revolt against the rich, the success of Hillary Clinton's Peronist populism suggests a growing undercurrent of class resentment.

In South Africa, the Mbeki faction of the ruling African National Congress has pursued a conscious strategy of socio-economic engineering, with the approval of *ancient régime* businessmen. Black economic empowerment policies have de-racialised the ruling class, and thereby protected South African capitalism from challenge on the left. Trickle-down economic policies were supposed to have mollified the masses outside the boardrooms, but have failed miserably; South Africa's globalised economy has no use for unskilled, politically-conscious labour. Growth has been largely jobless, and income inequality, especially within the black population, is growing fast. Most importantly, consciousness of relative consumption and opportunity inequality amongst blacks appears to be high and growing. Notably, South Africa's pattern of extreme violence during housebreakings and vehicle hijackings, driven by class rage, does not spare the black élite.

To them that hath, is given

Relatedly, both societies flaunt an almost obscene bias in favour of the powerful, against the weak. In the US, this is seen in the recent mortgage crisis, where government has bailed out investment banks whilst leaving millions of homeowners to certain bankruptcy and homelessness. The former are saved from the loss of their multimillion-dollar bonuses in order to "stabilise the financial system", whilst the latter are accused of irresponsible financial management. Major US corporations have reaped billions of dollars in profits from the Iraq war whilst flouting US tax, labour, and other laws, seemingly without consequence, whilst wounded veterans are routinely cheated out of medical care and pension coverage as a matter of policy. US consumer protection laws are laughable, allowing corporations to defraud customers via dodgy, incomprehensible "contracts" for telecommunications and other essential services. The US now has the largest prison population on the planet, composed primarily of young black males serving life for "three-strike" crimes like shoplifting. Meanwhile white-collar fraudster Martha Stewart has finished her 6 month holiday in minimum security and resumed here role as fashion maven for the tasteless middle class.

In South Africa, the situation is equally crass. The political elite openly manipulates the criminal justice system to protect itself whilst the lumpenproletariat-based prison population rises inexorably. Ordinary citizens seeking ID documents or social welfare benefits are treated with utter contempt by public servants, whilst politicians race around in blue-lit motorcades bristling with guns to shoo away any outraged Jacobin who might have the impudence to object. South Africa's protected oligopolies in banking, retail, and many foodstuffs, as well as parastatal monopolies in essential sectors, continue

to screw consumers for all they are worth. Black economic empowerment deals make already rich black businessmen even richer, whilst 25% of the working-age population has simply given up looking for honest work.

Free Lunch

Neither society asks its citizens to sacrifice or work for their freedom, except in an emergency. The US under George W. Bush has managed to ignore the economic and material consequences of an expensive war, largely by massive deficit financing and foreign borrowing. A WWII-style “war effort” by mobilised, frugal citizens would be considered absurd today, sure political suicide. The US Congress continues to dish out pork to all and sundry despite the massive budget deficit, including billions in subsidies to farmers already enjoying super-profits thanks to the global food crisis. At household level, the daily fairyland of consumption on credit continues unabated. Despite the highest petroleum prices in history, there is no serious effort to reduce fuel consumption.

In South Africa, although the ANC government has occasionally flirted with the rhetoric of citizen mobilisation for development, the logic and mythology of liberation politics dictate that the ANC’s developmental state must take responsibility for, and control, everything. After all, the ruling party “is” the people (so the logic goes), so what need is there for popular self-action – except as sedition? Productive citizen self-action, such as the construction and gradual improvement of informal settlements (in the absence of any rational state plan to provide urban housing) is treated as a “disease” to be “eradicated”. As Gomo notes in an exceptionally trenchant turn of phrase, this state-centrism, coupled with hopelessly inadequate public sector delivery mechanisms, powerfully reproduces the average South African’s “choice to remain frustrated because ... the government doesn’t deliver meals to one’s doorstep”. The exception of begging people to turn off the lights to avoid a collapse of the mismanaged electricity grid merely proves the rule.

Hail to the chief

Both the US and South Africa have seen a massive shift in political power from citizenry to state, especially the executive. In both societies, the notion that the sovereignty of the state derives from the consent of the collectivity of citizens has given way to a sort of post-democratic aristocracy of the connected, in which citizens appear more as subjects than as sovereign individuals. George W. Bush’s seizure of the White House in 2000 marked the beginning of the most radical reinterpretation of the role of the executive branch of government, especially the office of the President, in US history. The President can now ignore legislation passed by Congress, and violate established laws and treaties, with the stroke of a pen. For all intents and purposes, the Presidency is approaching kingship, albeit without the hereditary bit – and even that, after 20 years of Bushes and Clintons, is beginning to look doubtful.

Mbeki-era South Africa is somewhat different because the country has never experienced true popular sovereignty, except for a few fleeting moments at the end of the apartheid régime, before the ANC dismantled all forms of popular self-organisation. South Africa merely traded racial exclusivism for the ANC’s democratic centralism, albeit in the service of capitalist accumulation. Autonomous organisation by the poor is regarded with deep mistrust, and spontaneous outbreaks like the current pogroms are assumed to be driven by a “third force”. Within the ANC and its allies, power has been steadily accumulated by the politburo-like National Executive Committee, whilst under Mbeki, government has seen a return to PW Botha-style centralisation of power and information in the Presidency. Despite some recent posturing by the Zuma faction in parliament, this centralisation of power looks set to continue as long as the ANC remains in charge.

Don’t bother me son, I’m accumulating

Perhaps the most striking but least obvious similarity between the US and South Africa is the level of contempt with which the ruling élites regard the mass of the citizenry. After eight years of the Bush administration, it is now clear that the Rove/Cheney strategy amounted to a simple formula: lie through your teeth to the people; they’re too stupid to know the difference, and by the time they figure it out, we’ll have got what we wanted and it’ll be too late for them to do anything about it. Such a strategy reveals the utter disdain with which the neoconservative movement regards the average American – just so much brainless voting fodder. This also explains why the neocons and the

Clintonites are united in fear of Barack Obama, who actually seeks to appeal to the intellects of US voters. What might a critical and enlightened electorate do, once they realise what has been done to them for the last two decades?

South Africa is really no different – except perhaps to the extent that ANC bigwigs still believe their own rationalisations. To listen to Ronnie Kasrils try to blame the current pogroms on an apartheid-era third force, to Aziz Pahad defend the Zimbabwean political process, to Manto Tshabalala-Msimang defend the public health system, or to any ANC spokesperson denying that the party is divided, is to come face-to-face with wilful denial. These are not unintelligent people. They cannot possibly believe that any reasonably-well informed South African citizen will believe this reconstruction of reality. And this is the point: they speak and act as they do precisely because they believe in their hearts that the mass of South Africans are ignorant of the truth, and that it is *better* for them that they remain so. They seem to believe that the majority are too ignorant and dependent on the ruling party to discover the truth for themselves, and knowing that they can simply assign any doubters to the dustbin of racism or coconutheid. And to perpetuate this ignorance, they steadily disassemble any source of alternative knowledge – the SABC, the Scorpions, and so on.

ooOoo

So how does this all tie together? As Dr. Evil said to Austin Powers, “were not so different, you and I”. The rich and powerful of the United States and South Africa are consciously manipulating these societies for their benefit. Both societies, however, are gradually coming apart at the seams of the contradictions of capitalist accumulation masquerading as the defence of liberty, or as post-liberation developmentalist social democracy. In the US, this process has not yet reached the stage of open revolt; in South Africa, it may well have.

The only way to bind up these tears in the socio-political fabric is to keep the people ignorant, and disempowered. Time will tell whether this effort succeeds. The current xenophobic pogrom suggests that in South Africa, at least, it is not – but that South Africans still have yet to see the true enemy.

Paul Hendler

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I am forwarding this because in the dust of our descent as a society in the last two weeks there has emerged, broken out into the open, also a splurge of viewpoints about how we drifted into the current situation as a country. I think that this is a welcome sign. We have a responsibility to respond to these ideas because social debate is what takes our thinking to a higher level in the sense that as a group of like-minded people – and hopefully one day as a society – we are able to have a more many-sided and therefore objective view of ourselves. I don't want to get into an academic debate of the meaning of objectivity, let me just say that while reaching an objective understanding requires much analysis and method it is also true that each of us carries an aspect of the reality in his/her consciousness and discussion and debate where we hear each other and respond, which is an inherently social process, is a precondition for developing a more objective view of the world. Thinking in isolation and debating with oneself inevitably leads to a more and more subjective, and therefore limited view of the world.

Joel, could you please forward this to Michael Gomo, whose mail address is nowhere to be seen. Reading both Ted Bauman's and Michael Gomo's pieces struck a strong chord. Being brutally frank is illuminating for the cracks in society that it reveals, otherwise hidden by the common sense of every day talk. I truly appreciate what Ted and Michael have done because it jolts one to think, respond and act, in a truly social manner rather than being atomized. I also agree with some of the trends that they are highlighting. Brutal frankness is however almost always simplistic and usually abounds with oversimplifications.

Joel, you talk of the need for trenchant analysis. I am also responding because what I read in both pieces is anything but trenchant analysis, if by that term we mean the weighing up of factual evidence in deciding what conclusions to draw. Facts that are related to the points we are making are what help to keep our analyses relatively objective, and prevent them from becoming raves. The rest of what I have to say is to demonstrate that simple point.

It is interesting to note that the views of Michael Gomo and Ted Bauman are both similar and also very different.

They are similar in that they both reduce the wave of xenophobia to a simple cause, for Michael it is sheer laziness and for Ted it is the distorted and mystified revolt of the abused and exploited workers under capitalism. The problem with reducing social actions of live agents to one or other cause is that by definition one can't demonstrate this, there are no facts to present that will prove this point because people and social movements (like the xenophobic social gangs) are complex and have many conscious and unconscious inputs to their minds on a daily basis. Their views are also similar in that neither offers much explanation on the crucial points that they make: Michael doesn't explain how Zimbabwe descended from where it was to what it has become now (which would be very useful to know in order to try and prevent our further slide away), a place where respect for human rights and (depending on one's political identity) human life is scant and the economy (or what is left of it) and political space is dominated by a parasitic class of apparatchiks, which is close to Ted's description of where South Africa might be heading (the possible likelihood of which should be of grave concern to us all). Likewise, Ted's depiction of South African society and the various classes and groupings that play a role in driving it similarly lacks qualification, certainly provides no facts for the sweeping generalizations about social engineering (isn't GEAR laissez faire?) aligned with ancient regime businessmen, largely jobless growth (what are we to make of Haroon Borat of UCT estimating net job creation of 1.6 million between 1995 and 2002; shouldn't we be counting the self-help entrepreneurs that Gomo is extolling?), crime being driven by "class rage" (what about the inability to apply the law, the state of lawlessness? To what extent was the "class rage" driven by local organized crime, i.e. street-level gangsters and local shopkeepers wanting to take out the competition? In this regard the story from an eyewitness in Kayamandi about how local students were forced to stop assisting foreign nationals at gun point), public servants (all public servants?) treating citizens (all citizens?) with utter contempt, no state housing plans (there are detailed state housing business plans, many of which have, and others which have not, been implemented) – the piece is replete with examples of these generalizations for which there is often evidence to the contrary.

But there the similarity ends. Michael is quite scathing of what he regards as the parasitic state of mind of South Africans while Ted observes that the exploited are attacking the wrong enemy and implies (hints? hopes?) that they will soon recognize the true enemy. Michael also has a solution to the present problem, and one which we can surely all subscribe to: study, work hard, save, become an entrepreneur and self-reliant but remain humble enough to be compassionate to those who are seeking refuge from oppression (how do we work towards enabling the context in which self-reliance takes root and grows? What public interventions are required to create the context in which private self-reliance blossoms?); Ted's piece concludes without any ideas about what the alternative is, beyond saying that the people need to recognize the enemy; would he balk at endorsing Michael's solution because of its capitalistic nature?

Presumably the ANC in alliance with the ancien regime and nouveau riche capitalists is, for Ted, the enemy. But are the ANC and the capitalists a monolithic bloc? Last week's networks carried pictures of ordinary ANC members in Diepsloot trying to educate the people about why attacking foreigners was not only wrong but also no solution to poverty. And Georgina, you told me you have heard similar "facts" about Soshanguve. Is the ANC leadership really the strong centre that Ted seems to imply? Then there's Dick Endhoven's Spier Estate initiatives in sustainable business practices and pro-poor employment policies and job creation and outsourcing – is this not going in the complete opposite direction to the Yengenis of this world? How many other Endhovens are there in the corporate world? Are we not possibly seeing a spinning out of power, and therefore control, to different locations in society? Does this open up democratic space locally? If so, and notwithstanding the importance of strong grassroots democracy, is it not also important to have a degree of central state control to prevent a society like ours descending into further chaos? This is surely an important question in the context of global financial instability, rising prices (the impact of peak oil? and therefore a long-term structural problem?) as well as the climatic disasters that might visit our land as a result of global warming.

It seems to me that we (including whoever in the ANC, the state, civil society, business, parliamentary opposition, trade unions, etc) who think alike, have shared values and can see the deeper economic, financial and climatic context that we're in, and are likely to be in for a long time, are facing a serious historical challenge to fight for appropriate, implementable policies and practices that can address the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable members of society while at the same time entrenching a law-based society where all people, local and foreign, rich and poor, have security of person and property. To have a hope of achieving this the we referred to above are going to have to look at each other, listen to each other, carry on a dialogue with each other and negotiate our way over many treacherous passes. I am concerned that we do not dig ourselves into positions that will paint us into opposing corners when the time requires the coming together of new social movements, drawing on our rich and recent history, and not giving up on making the country, the continent and the planet more secure places in which more and more people are enabled to sustain their lives beyond mere survival.