# From 'Foreign Natives' to 'Native Foreigners': Explaining Xenophobia in Post-apartheid South Africa – Citizenship and Nationalism, Identity and Politics

From the "Preface"

As this work progressed, it became apparent that what was required in a study of xenophobia in South Africa today was not an empirical assessment of its extent, which by all accounts is indubitably (although contradictorily) widely prevalent in society as well as within state institutions, neither a description of its characteristics, as there are plenty of these already, but rather an explanation for its existence. Empirical studies of xenophobia in the country are in fact extensive and detailed. On the other hand, existing explanatory accounts are deficient as they are primarily asocial and apolitical, and hence are unable to suggest ways of overcoming the problem. Therefore, overwhelmingly, they tend to metaphorically throw their arms up in explanatory impotence. The core of this particular account must be explanatory if it is to make a contribution to our understanding. Fieldwork in the form of interviews with (mainly West) African immigrants to South Africa was undertaken in both Johannesburg and Pretoria in 2003, but this provided qualitative data which generally corroborated that of other studies, while at the same time providing greater ethnographic detail to popular experience. There was nothing particularly original or novel here. Much more important was to attempt an account of xenophobia which could combine theoretical sophistication with historical sensitivity. It is this which has been attempted in this work.

Michael Neocosmos
University of South Africa
Pretoria, South Africa

Some comments regarding the title may be appropriate at this stage. Archbishop
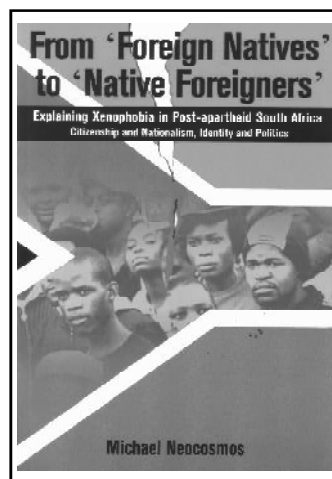
Desmond Tutu ('the Arch') used to make speeches in the 1980s wherein, in his customary manner, he would chuckle at jokes and encourage his audience to do the same. One of his favourites was the point that apartheid referred to Black South Africans as 'foreign natives' as it maintained that they were not South Africans but 'Transkeians', 'Bophu-tatswanans', 'Vendans' or whatever. How could such a thing be? Was not this a contradiction in terms, an indication of absurd logic? Tutu would note. This logic

was indeed absurd, but not much more absurd than any other state politics which, while adhering to a conception of citizenship as equivalent to indigeneity, attempts simultaneously to draw distinctions between different sections of the population living and working within the country. On the other hand, I use the term 'native foreigners' to refer to those Black South Africans in our new South Africa who, because they conform to the stereotypes which the police and home affairs officials have of 'illegal foreigners' today (their skin may be 'too dark' or whatever), arrested along with more genuine foreigners. The epithet is also applicable to South Africans of Asian descent who are often told that they do not belong in the country by xenophobic politicians in Natal. This shows that the absurdity continues. These expressions suggest not only that citizenship and xenophobia are manufactured by the state, both under apartheid and post-apartheid forms of rule, but also indicate a transition between two different forms of xenophobia, simultaneously with a continuity between state practices. These expres-sions imply the centrality of citizenship in under-standing the phenomenon of xenophobia.

The main argument of this work, has been influenced by the philosophy of Alain Badiou for whom politics must be understood fundamentally to be a militant emancipatory practice, a prescriptive universality vis-à-vis the necessarily particularistic political prescriptions of the

state which is always that of a dominant minority. The argument here is fundamentally that xenophobia in South Africa is a direct effect of a particular kind of politics, a particular kind of state politics in fact, one which is associated with a specific discourse of citizenship which was forged in opposition to the manner in which the apartheid state interpellated its subjects. This statist notion of citizenship has been buttressed by a 'Human Rights Discourse' for which the politics of agency are substituted by appeals to the state for redress. It follows then that the solution to xenophobia cannot be found in state policies and hidden state prescriptions nor indeed can it be addressed by appeals to a mythical 'Human Rights Culture'. It can only be overcome through political prescriptions of a truly universal kind.

The core of the book argues that xenophobia should be understood as a political discourse and practice. As such, its historical development as well as the conditions of its existence must be elucidated in terms of the practices and prescriptions which structure the field of politics. In South Africa, its history is intimately connected to the manner in which citizenship has been conceived and fought over during the past fifty years at least. Migrant labour was 'de-nationalised' by the apartheid state, while African nationalism saw the same migrant labour as the foundation of that oppressive system. However, only those who could show a family connection with the colonial/apartheid formation of South Africa could claim citizenship at liberation. Others were excluded and seen as unjustified claimants to national resources. Xenophobia's conditions of existence, the book argues, are to be found in the politics of post-apartheid nationalism where state prescriptions, founded on indigeneity, have been allowed to dominate uncontested in conditions of an overwhelmingly passive conception of citizenship. The de-politicisation of an urban population which had been able to assert its agency during the 1980s, through a discourse of 'human rights' in particular, contributed to this passivity, it is argued. State liberal politics have remained largely unchallenged. As in other cases of postcolonial transition in Africa, the hegemony of xenophobic discourse, according to the book, is to be sought in the character of the state consensus. The core argument of the book ends by asserting that only a

rethinking of citizenship as an active political identity could begin to re-institute political agency, and hence, begin to provide alternative prescriptions to the political consensus of state-induced exclusion.

It would appear then that the events of May 2008 could possibly be seen to undermine the argument above, as here were the poor seemingly exercising their agency albeit in a manner contrary to the main argument of the book. Can the pogroms of May then be described as the exercise of popular agency? According to one author at least, 'the xenophobic discourse current in South Africa today represents the authentic effort of the subaltern classes to make sense of their conditions: nor is their reading irrational'. Not only is it not a 'false consciousness' inculcated by right-wing elites mobilising ethnic sentiment for their own political interests, it is 'profoundly democratic, albeit in the majoritarian sense ... the truth is that popular democracy in action is not a pretty sight'. The vulgarity of these assertions is simply quite staggering. The poor are authentically xenophobic, we are told. Reading on, the idea seems to be not only to make us grateful for our liberal democracy which 'provides institutional protection from the immediate expression of popular passions', we should also be thankful for not living in an African 'basket case' where leading politicians have been manipulating national sentiment (Glazer, 2008: 54-6). It is difficult to think of a more crass supposedly intellectual 'reflection' on the pogroms. Of course, none of these statements are backed up by any evidence whatsoever. Most are simply false. At the same time the author can conveniently use the occasion to take a swipe at supposedly cherished 'leftist' accounts and their extolling of the virtues of the masses. Thank God for sensible liberalism, the people (read the middle-class in the suburbs) can feel safe in its embrace and sleep quietly at night, knowing that the state is looking after their interests and protecting them from the mob. It is difficult to think of a cruder journalistic opinion piece.

What beggars the imagination is the poverty of thought for which if there is no evidence of crude manipulation by elites, then the crypto-fascism (a severe term perhaps but I can think of no other one) to be found among subaltern classes must be somehow 'authentic' and essential to the life of the poor. Are we to believe that this is because nativist exclusion is also

authentic? That it is primordial and thereby inherent in African society, even though all the evidence from tradition ('invented' or not) shows that African cultures had sophisticated mechanisms for integrating strangers? In actual fact there can be no such thing as an authentic politics. To state as much is to advance the crudest reductionism which the author wishes to point to in others. What is interesting about these otherwise vacuous statements is that they are precisely located within the exceptionalist view of South Africa which I show below constitutes one of the conditions of existence of xenophobia, not least among the middle classes. The pogroms, it seems, were an expression of a rational popular agency, even though it may not have been a morally defensible one. We need not look any further, the political choices of the poor mean that ultimately this is a problem of the poor who should be kept in their place; after all the middle classes, however xenophobic they may be, are far too civilised to do their own killing.

Can the poor then be seen as exercising their agency when they killed their fellow poor and thus contributed to their own exclusion and oppression? What I argue in this book is that this was indeed a political choice, but if we are to speak of agency, then it must be considered as the 'agency of zombies' as Francis Nyamnjoh would put it. After all, choices are made in relation to the limits of existing hegemonic political subjectivities, and in the absence of clearly formulated alternatives, it is the state which is the main creator and organizer of these. As Mamdani (2001) has pointed out in his analysis of the genocide in Rwanda, ethnic and national identities and differences can become institutionalised. The systematic differential treatment of citizens and foreigners in South Africa for many years, some having the right to rights and others not (*de facto* if not always *de jure*) has had similar effects. The various political actors in this country have allowed its political culture to provide the foundation for xenophobic and inter-ethnic violence. A choice exercised within such parameters is in fact a simulacrum of agency, a pseudo-choice; in reality it is no choice at all for it requires no thought, but the mechanical reiteration of the logic and statements of those in power. This is borne out empirically by this book.

Thus, if such subjectivities have become so hegemonic, so consensual that the majority of South Africans of all classes, racial groups and genders maintain similar xenophobic attitudes as attitude surveys show, then it would indeed be surprising if the majority of the poor (like the majority of the rich) were not bound by the same assumptions, the same questions and the same solutions. This no more implies a 'subaltern authenticity' than the apparent favouring of the death penalty by the majority of South Africans also implies authenticity. The fact of the matter is that many among the poor, as I show in some detail, resisted the dominance of hegemonic xenophobic discourse and provided political alternatives in practice, and even in one case, in theory. To do so, they had often to challenge the state consensus itself. The politics of xenophobia are therefore the outcome of struggles in society and to simply go along with state propagated ideologies – and hence to assert the authenticity and naturalness of nativism - is to fail to exercise a choice beyond the limits of these ideologies when such a choice is indeed possible. It is a failure to understand that what we are told is impossible can indeed be possible. At the intellectual level, it amounts to evacuating the possibility of thought beyond determination by state, class, race or ethnicity. It is to fall head-long into the ideology of given essentialisms for which nothing outside the obviously extant can be done. The intellectual is particularly guilty herself when, knowing precisely that society is generally oppressive of the other, she chooses to do nothing and simply waits for a disaster to occur before expressing her humanitarian concerns. As one of the characters in Marcel Pagnol's brilliant novels *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources* states: 'those who knew and did nothing are equally guilty'. It would be difficult for many middle class South Africans to wriggle out of this, despite their subsequent expression of solidarity with the thousands of displaced in the period following the pogroms.

From the "Epilogue: May 2008 and the Politics of Fear"

We are the ones who fought for freedom and democracy and now these Somalis are here eating our democracy.

- (NAFCOC – National African Federated Chamber of Commerce and Industry – leader, Khayelitsha, Cape Town, *Mail and Guardian,* September 5-11, 2008)

   The police are making as if we are criminals. We don't have firearms. We have babies and kids. Why are they so scared?

- (African refugee at the Blue Waters safety site in Strandfontein outside Cape Town, *Cape Argus* June 3rd, 2008).

   An action can be illegal. A person cannot be illegal. A person is a person wherever they may find themselves.

- (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 'Statement on the Xenophobic Attacks in Johannesburg', 21/05/2008)

The explosion that occurred in South African townships and informal settlements in May 2008 traumatised the country for a while. The fact that sixty-two people died as a result of pogroms in which apparent foreigners, primarily from the rest of Africa, were sought out and killed, were violently expelled from communities, and their belongings looted in an orgy of plunder and mayhem, left the country reeling under a number of questions. How could such a thing happen in the 'rainbow nation'? How could Black South Africans act so callously towards their fellow Africans and brothers? How could people who have been living in the country for as long as 12 to 15 years be attacked by their neighbours? The public soul-searching lasted for a few weeks thereafter as the scale of the disaster sunk in. This phase of xenophobic violence displaced large numbers of people estimated between 80, 000 and 200, 000 (FMSP, 2009: 20). The number of people staying in shelters at their peak reached 24, 000 in Gauteng and 20, 000 in the Western Cape (loc. cit.). The government found itself completely outflanked and unable to respond, blaming at times a 'third force', at other times 'criminals' and 'trouble-makers and opportunists' as it hesitated, lost as to what to do. Well known xenophobic politicians appeared on TV crying over the plight of injured Mozambicans, while others, who had been out of the spotlight for a while visited mothers and children

to comfort them. Most national politicians appeared on TV condemning the violence and referring to the crisis in Zimbabwe and the lack of border controls, as well as to poverty and living conditions in informal settlements as the underlying causal factors of the violence.

Most victims were sought out by their attackers (men, women and children) because they were deemed to be foreigners and massacred, robbed, raped and their belongings stolen and their houses burned. The violence was sometimes organized and at other times spontaneous. It is therefore valid to talk in terms of 'pogroms' of foreign residents during this period. The humanitarian assistance which followed was also largely both disorganised and coercive, the government deciding to reintegrate people into townships (often against the will of both sides) but also failing to ensure their safety. What most commentators stressed was the underlying economic causes of the problem, blaming poverty and deprivation, yet it requires little imagination to see that economic factors, however real, cannot possibly account for why it was those deemed to be non-South African 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. Neither can it account for the violence of their actions. Moreover, blaming xenophobic violence on poverty, relative deprivation or uneven development, is to blame the poor. In other contexts, poverty has not lead to xenophobic violence, and we shall see below that in certain instances, even in South Africa it did not do so. Xenophobia as a practice of more or less open form of discrimination and oppression, as this book shows, is widespread in South Africa and not restricted to those living in informal settlements. It is also a widespread phenomenon among the middle-class and particularly among state employees, as is the expression of prejudices towards Africans from the continent. …