Xenophobia and Capitalist Urbanisation Processes in Johannesburg's "African" Townships

Why are black South Africans attacking African and Asian immigrants in periodic xenophobic outbreaks in post-apartheid society? In 2008, various parts of the country were rocked by xenophobic violence which left 62 people dead, hundreds injured and thousands displaced. In 2015 and 2017, there were again fatal bouts of xenophobic violence in South Africa albeit at a lesser scale of destruction than that of the 2008 conflagration. These attacks have left many dumbfounded. How could it be in a country and a people from whom a lot was expected after being the focus of perhaps history's greatest international movement of solidarity, the anti-apartheid movement? The dream of a "rainbow nation" that was premised on reconciliation between blacks and whites has become a nightmare for people with a darker skin colour from other countries. The South African political elite is embarrassed and threatened by these attacks because they seem to expose the hollowness of this dream upon which is built the credibility and authority of the post-apartheid "nation." These attacks have been particularly painful and confusing for us, the political left, because of our ideals of international solidarity and the unity of the oppressed in the struggle for social and economic justice.

My analysis of the factors behind the xenophobia has been enriched by engagement with activist immigrants based in South Africa and fighting against this scourge. My interaction with the African Diaspora Forum (ADF), an organisation that unites different immigrant communities from other parts of Africa resident in South Africa, has helped me in my search for answers. I am the chairperson of the United Front of Johannesburg, an organisation attempting to unite labour, community and student/youth struggles on the basis of a transformative agenda, and we have supported marches organised by the ADF aimed at raising public awareness against xenophobia and putting put pressure on the authorities to address the plight of immigrants. The ADF views the problem of xenophobia as a human rights issue and part of the struggle for social, political and economic justice for immigrants. The United Front strives to build unity in the struggle for class and racial justice as part of the quest to keep alive and turn into reality the dream of a better life for all that drove the struggle against apartheid.

Figure 1: African Diaspora Forum logo (Courtesy of Trevor Ngwane)

The xenophobia outbreaks in South Africa and elsewhere, in my opinion, have a lot to do with the unevenness of capitalist development within and between countries. Under neoliberalism the world has seen the rich get richer and the poor poorer. The effect has been increasing inequalities between the classes with all the frustrations and injustices that this engenders, on the one hand, and increasing migration flows within and between countries as people search for economic opportunities, on the other hand. With respect to urban planning, the search and struggle for racial justice in the city, for the right of the city for all, has to take into consideration the obstacle posed by finance-driven urbanisation processes that benefit the few at the expense of the many. The dreams that drove the transition from apartheid to post-apartheid are dashed against the realities of capital flows that follow high returns on investment and in the process effect the "creation and/or destruction of entire built environments – and the social structures that accompany them" (Bond 2000:xiv) and in the process "intensifying uneven development at the world scale" and moving the world further from the goal of social justice (Bond 2000:26).

In South Africa, many analysts searching for the causes of xenophobia have zeroed into the economic inequality inherited from apartheid which the new post-apartheid order, with its pro-big business neoliberal economic policies, has exacerbated rather than eradicated (Nieftagodien, 2008:68). They view the violence as "an outlet, albeit a misguided one, for the anger of the masses" (Gumede, 2012:170). The anger of the urban poor is about lives "characterised by severe overcrowding, deteriorating services, high levels of poverty, rampant unemployment, ongoing racial segregation and the daily struggles of poor people forced to compete with one another" (Silverman and Zack, 2008:147). To this analysis I want to add an urban planning perspective, namely, how capitalist-driven urban development, and economic development per se, has led to uneven global, regional/continental and local spatial-economic development processes that produce tremendous pressures on the working class and the poor resulting in social tensions and conflicts that at times express themselves in xenophobic form. Furthermore, I want to emphasise

how the legacies of apartheid "insider/outsider" ideology of segregation and racial exclusion, with its stigmatization and denigration of certain bodies because of their skin colour or birthplace, has been kept alive rather than mitigated by capitalist development policies and the attendant ideological-political discourse commensurate with neoliberalism. Lastly, how the government of national liberation of the African National Congress has failed to adequately address these problems including its failure to effectively fight the scourge of xenophobia.

Immigrant Influx into Johannesburg

Since it got its independence in 1994, South Africa has seen an influx of internal migrants and immigrants from abroad moving especially to Johannesburg making it "a densifying city, contrary to international trends…this densification is happening as the pent-up demand to move closer to jobs and services has been released with the ending of apartheid" (Harrison et al., 2014:9). Indeed: "The influx of African, Asian and Eastern European refugees in the past decade [2000 to 2010] has been the largest single mass migration, in the shortest period, in modern South African history" (Gumede, 2012:89). The floodgates into the country and into the cities were opened with democratisation. The apartheid state had strict and brutally implemented influx control policies not only against foreign immigrants but notoriously also against the movement of black people from South Africa's rural areas (the Bantustans) into the "white" urban areas (the "pass system"). Apartheid influx control policies served to allocate labour into the country's economic sectors according to need and serving to differentiate between a permanently employed urban proletariat ("insiders") and migrant workers ("outsiders") with temporary rights to be in the city or country (Hindson 1987). The draconian implementation of the racist influx control and urban settlement (town planning) policies served, like a dam wall, to stop the inflows of migrants both from within and outside the country.

It should also be mentioned that during the struggle against apartheid many African countries and peoples actively supported the anti-apartheid struggle and this sometimes involved great sacrifices to themselves. Guerrilla bases in South Africa's neighbouring states such as in Angola, Swaziland, Lesotho, Zambia and Mozambique provoked the wrath of the apartheid state sometimes taking the form of military attacks, assassinations and hostile political and economic interventions. It was common at the time to hear African leaders talk about how Africa would be truly liberated when South Africa was free and how the continent would benefit from its economic prowess. The xenophobia against nationals from African countries is thus viewed as a kind of betrayal and the South African government says as much when admonishing its citizens against the attacks. Nonetheless, the influx has been huge. From South Africa's neighbouring countries, that is, members of the Southern African Development Community such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Lesotho and others, "four discreet streams of movement" can be identified, namely, "contract mine migration, informal migration, white settler migration and refugee migration" (Crush, 2000:13), and "other forms: tourism, cross-border trading and shopping, visiting, migration for education, and so on" (ibid.). Notably, "since 2000 more than three million Zimbabweans have fled disorder to build a new life in South Africa…economic or political refugees, have streamed into South African from Nigeria, Congo, Morocco, Sudan, Rwanda and so on" (Gumede, 2012:89).

Johannesburg and the Gauteng province are a magnet for economic migrants and immigrants. For the latter: "Although South Africa is one of the world's most

unequal societies…the country remains for most Africans, compared to their own, a pot of gold" (Gumede, 2012:89). Often regarded as "the continent's richest economy," South Africa since the dawn of the new millennium "has experienced its biggest uninterrupted boom since the post-war growth spurt that ended in 1971. Economic growth has averaged over 5% in each of the last five years" (ibid.). The Johannesburg-Gauteng "city-region…account[s] for a significant proportion of the national economy, and are expanding in their importance…[accounting] for a disproportionately large share of economic and job growth since the ending of apartheid" (Harrison et al., 2014:3). Employment growth "has attracted large numbers of work seekers to Johannesburg. In 1996, shortly after the ending of apartheid, the enumerated population of Johannesburg was well over 2.5 million (1 634 126). In the 15 years until 2011 it increased by 68.4 per cent to almost 4.5 million (4 434 828). During the same period, the national population grew by only 28%" (Harrison et al., 2014:7). Johannesburg indeed is a "city of migrants" with "in-migration accounting for nearly 60 per cent of the population growth," and whereas in 1996 "the enumerated population of Johannesburg was overwhelmingly South African, with only 2.8 per cent of the population having non-South African citizenship. By 2011, 12.7 per cent of the enumerated population had a foreign citizenship" (ibid).

Competition Between the Included and Excluded

The apartheid system was premised on "the distinction between insider and outsider" whereby the right to be in the city was governed by strict influx control policies which allocated and circumscribed this right to clearly defined "groups of Africans" (Nieftagodien, 2008:69). This distinction has, for example, "long defined politics in Alexandra." The latter is one of the oldest townships in Johannesburg in which the 2008 xenophobic attacks started. and other townships in South Africa and sometimes beyond apartheid days (ibid.). In the 1980s this "cleavage manifested itself …in the form of *bona fides* (insiders) versus *amagoduka* (newcomers/rural), under circumstances of extreme social distress caused by the massive influx of people from the rural areas" (ibid.). Historically, South African society has developed "a deep prejudice against 'others', which was reinforced by apartheid segregation" with its "artificial hierarchy" between blacks "between Indians, mixed-race South Africans and Africans on the one hand, but also within these groups, whether it was based on economic status, on one's pigmentation or the size of one's language group [e.g. Zulu, Sotho, Venda, etc.]" (Gumede, 2012:169). In post-apartheid South Africa, "foreign blacks were placed at the bottom of this system" (ibid.).

In his poem 'Johannesburg,' Lesego Rampolokeng cuttingly laments: "Johannesburg my city/paved with Judas gold/deceptions and lies/dreams come here to die." The global economic crisis and the difficulties faced by a semi-peripheral economy such as South Africa means that economic survival is a struggle for most people. Among South African locals there is a "deep-seated local resentment against refugees from poorer neighbouring countries. The xenophobic attacks in the townships have much to do with competition over resources" (Gumede, 2012:90). "Any attempt to understand this conflict should be located in the politics of failed development and delivery. Alexandra and other townships that experienced xenophobic violence…are still dumping grounds of the marginalised and alienated" (Nieftogadien, 2008:68). "The combination of inadequate services, rampant food and fuel inflation and little social welfare has become a toxic cocktail. Locals perceive African refugees as taking jobs, houses and resources away from them (Gumede, 2012:90).

Figure 2: Communal water tap at Duncan Village informal settlement, East London (Photo by T. Ngwane)

Alexandra, unlike many South African black townships under apartheid, had a class of "stand-holders" who owned property and were concerned about the value of their properties. They were the insiders, and the rest, especially the newcomers, were outsiders. Similarly, in Duncan Village, a township in East London in the Eastern Cape province, there exists "this fragmentation [which] is spelt out through labels such as *inzalelwane* (born and bred)…or *abantu bokufika* (new comers)" (Ndhlovu, 2015:58). This "differentiated citizenship leading to community divisions" is "used to include and also to exclude other people from benefiting in service delivery" (Ndhlovu, 2015:64, 60). The excluded outsiders "are regarded as a threat to the interests of the insiders" when they appear to "make their claims on already scarce resources" (Nieftagodien, 2008:72). Thus: "African foreigners are defined as the quintessential outsider and as the immediate threat to the insiders" (ibid.).

It is possible to identify "two types of social movements" in the 21st century, namely, those "based on unequal inclusion in the major institutions of society and movements based on forcible exclusion from those institutions social movements" (Burawoy 2017:21). The xenophobic attacks, unlike the South African trade union movement that fights inside capital's economic structures, can be viewed as a movement of exclusion – forcibly excluding immigrants from jobs, houses and other benefits in a sad competition between competing groups of the (excluded) oppressed and exploited against each other (Nieftagodien, 2008:72). Commentators have identified "a deadly cocktail of reasons [that] is to blame for this xenophobic terror" (Gumede, 2012:168). The violence is viewed as "an outlet, albeit a misguided one, for the anger of the masses" (Gumede, 2012:170). The anger of the urban poor is

about lives "characterised by severe overcrowding, deteriorating services, high levels of poverty, rampant unemployment, ongoing racial segregation and the daily struggles of poor people forced to compete with one another" (Silverman and Zack, 2008:147). In a context where "more than half of the [South African] population still survive on less than R779 ($67) a month, or R26 ($2.20) per day" (Runciman, 2017:39), it is no wonder that township folk, "whose living conditions have not altered since the end of apartheid, thus feel excluded and marginalised from the new South Africa" (Nieftagodien, 2008:68).

Figure 3: *Thembelihle community protesters. September 2015 (Photo by T. Ngwane)*

Organising Against and Learning about Xenophobia

The South African government, despite its progressive rhetoric, "has long turned a blind eye to foreigners' systematic marginalisation, mass deportation [close to 300 000 people in 2007] and the ever more rapid and rabid murders at the hands of the country's citizenry" (Landau, 2008:105). Clearly: "The xenophobia is also institutional. South Africa's home affairs department is notoriously unfriendly to refugees and immigrants…Refugees are routinely rounded up and dispatched to Lindela, a notorious exit camp" and many "deported by special train and dumped across the borders" (Gumede, 2012:91). The ADF campaigns to get the Department of Home Affairs to issue the necessary documents to immigrants speedily and helpfully. Often immigrants who find employment find themselves caught between employers and state officials whereby both parties fail to provide documents necessary to issue work permits thus opening migrants to police harassment. As Mngxitama (2008:196) caustically points out: "The *kwerekweres* [derogatory and

offensive name for immigrants] are already marked out for harassment by state institutions. Now the poor citizenry are finishing off the job in a demented frenzy."

The involvement of elites in stoking xenophobia has been identified by the ADF and it lodged a complaint with the Human Rights Commission when in May 2015 xenophobic "attacks followed comments from the Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini, who…called for foreigners to leave the country" which left at least five people dead in Durban before the attacks spread to other parts of the country including Johannesburg" (Dixon 2015). In February 2017, it was the anti-immigrant comments by Johannesburg Mayor Herman Mashaba that saw another eruption of xenophobia in the Johannesburg South suburb of Rosettenville and which then spread to Pretoria (eNCA 2017). The ADF organised a march to the Mayor's office and wrote a joint letter with the United Front and the National Union of Mineworkers' of South Africa's Johannesburg North Local to the president of the country and other senior officials complaining and warning against impending xenophobia attacks. Mashaba, who had refused to meet with the ADF, was forced to grant them a meeting which I attended in solidarity and which turned out to be a farce because the Mayor, in my opinion, is a dodgy populist maverick like Donald Trump who further angered rather than assured the ADF delegation. They left saying they would not never again have anything further to do with him.

Capital's Divisive and Destructive Urbanisation Path

A major factor that most analyses of xenophobia have neglected is the role of finance capital in urban planning and housing development. This was sharply brought to me in the course of the interaction with Mayor Mashaba who, like Trump, is a multi-millionaire businessman turned politician whose vision of Johannesburg is decidedly capitalist and suspiciously neoliberal. Alexandra emerges as a good example of the unconstructive role played and the chaos wrought by urbanization processes driven by finance. Alexandra, already with a property-owning class in the 1940s and 1950s, even then experienced the incursion of financial speculators who soon had as "many as 85 percent of the three-quarters of Alexandra's [about 2 500] stands which had freehold status" carrying bonds (Bond, 2000:202). The 1980s saw a similar process of financialisation of the housing stock in Alexandra and in other black townships which the post-apartheid neoliberal state consummated thus effecting the "urban transformation of apartheid townships into free market investment arenas" further financializing housing provision (Bond, 2000:186). Then as now, the overindebted home-owners of Alexandra, and elsewhere, sought "to transfer interest payment costs to their tenants through overcrowding, over-building, and high rental charges" (Bond, 2000:205). In sum, the "low-quality housing finance in the 1940s had much to do with the genesis of the housing squalor which exists in Alexandra to this day" (Bond, 2000:204).

The rule of finance capital over the housing market has resulted in "intensified impoverishment and informalisation [that] derive from the rapid and unplanned process of urbanization underway in SA" including "the township tensions created by the uneven allocation of housing finance" (Bond 2000:15, 186). The urban poor is excluded by big finance from access to housing, their only hope is the government-provided "RDP house" from which many are excluded or have to wait forever for because of stringent and slow state processes, and from which "foreigners" are expressly excluded from acquiring (Silverman and Zack, 2008:148). With "the financiers" at the "helm of the space-economy" (Bond, 2000:22-23) we have seen "the commodification of township housing" (Bond 2000:205-206). The

commodification and financialisation of housing has been an important factor in the "class configuration" of working class townships in South Africa (ibid.). Financialisation of the provision of housing has created the "insalubrious warrens of congested squatter camps" found in working class townships and, in the case of Alexandra, "the first recorded incident of xenophobia occurred a few months after the 1994 election. In January 1995 the Alexandra Land and Property Owners Association organized a march of about 400 residents to the police station to demand the 'immediate eviction of foreign residents'" (Nieftagodien 2008:73). It is thus to this post-apartheid "pseudo-democratic 'de-racialized urbanisation'" that we can trace the hitherto unrecognised structural causes of the rise of xenophobia in South Africa (Bond 2000:22).

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