

## XENOPHOBIA AND THE POLITICS OF CITIZENSHIP AND BELONGING IN SOUTH AFRICA

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*UCT psychologist Shose Kessi excavates the roots of xenophobia in the uneven distribution of resources that are the legacy of apartheid, and argues for readings of identity that recognise its embeddedness within structural inequalities.*

Since 2008, the term ‘xenophobia’ has become part of popular discourse in South Africa, following the surge in violent attacks against foreign nationals in towns and cities throughout the country claiming the lives of over 60 foreign African immigrants. Earlier this year, another wave of ‘xenophobic’ violence erupted in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. However, xenophobia as a concept is not well understood. There is a dearth of research on xenophobia in my field, social psychology, and yet it has become the topic of many campaigns, conversations and debates, which psychologists should be concerned with as it is deeply tied to issues of identity, conflict, and belonging.

In the courses I teach in social, critical and postcolonial psychology at the University of Cape Town (UCT), we talk about xenophobia every year as a significant social phenomenon that has arisen amidst the already complicated politics of identity and belonging in a context where inequalities and violence are rife. Every year, I get to hear a mishmash of complex views and explanations from students ranging from how Africans from other countries on the continent are much harder working and more

trustworthy than black South Africans to how they (the migrants) come here to take ‘our’ jobs and ‘our’ women. These equally disturbing, but contradictory views are expressed by South African students from very different racial, class and gender backgrounds, who position themselves on different sides of the xenophobia issue.

I usually start by asking the students to explain the concept of xenophobia. Many resort to the dictionary definition, which states an ‘intense or irrational dislike of people from other countries’ – and the conversation continues with questions such as: Who exactly are we speaking of? Which countries do the foreigners come from? What are the identity characteristics (in terms of race, class, and gender) of the perpetrators and those who have become the victims of violent attacks? The conclusion is often a limited explanation that xenophobia is a problem of prejudicial attitudes and competition amongst black people, young men in particular, living in under-resourced areas.

We then discuss how xenophobia manifests itself in our day-to-day lives. Most students say that they have never experienced or witnessed xenophobia and in doing so reveal a certain distancing from the problem as they separate themselves from the violent manifestations that happen mostly far away from their day-to-day lives. Defining xenophobia as an ‘irrational’ fear already sets us apart (as intellectuals with rational pursuits) from the horrific acts of those framed as ‘deviant’.

I also prompt the students to use their knowledge of Frantz Fanon and WEB DuBois to explain in social psychological terms how black bodies are not only framed as the ‘problem’ but also as lives of little value; how racism leads to self-hatred; and how that in turn can translate into black-on-black violence. I



Source: Wiki commons, *People’s March Anti Xenophobia*.

ask them to interpret the xenophobic attacks using Freire’s notion of ‘horizontal violence’ (Freire, 1970) making the assumption that people often distribute the guilt for their own oppression onto others like themselves or others in more vulnerable positions than themselves.

Through my research at UCT, I have described how scholars with so-called ‘black accents’ are labeled by students (mostly white students) as incompetent (Kessi & Cornell, under review). These include scholars from other African countries but many are also South African. As we have seen reported in the news, xenophobia also targets South Africans who we are told have been ‘mistaken’ for being foreign. Black South African students from working class backgrounds are also penalized for their use of the English language and looked down upon by their peers and lecturers. In one focus group, a particular group of black students described how they would identify who to sit with during meal times in their residences by picking up on certain markers of language, dress code or general appearance so as not to be seen to associate with those who are considered ‘too black’.

Under these pressures, black students often make concerted efforts to fit into the culture of the institution. They describe changing their accents and

speaking to each other in English. Hence, their feelings of blackness are closely tied to aspirations of whiteness. Many report that the pressure to assimilate is often met with comments like ‘you don’t speak like us anymore’ when they go home during the holidays or being called ‘coconuts’ when they befriend white students. They are made to feel as though they are becoming less black or less African. The consequences of feeling ‘un-homed’ (Bhabha, 1994) bring to the fore issues of belonging in South Africa for students who become exposed to spaces such as UCT.

All of these examples demonstrate how claims to blackness and Africanness, which are central to the concept of xenophobia, are acted out in our day-to-day lives. In many ways, these everyday experiences represent a microcosm of the politics of citizenship and belonging in South Africa. In order to tackle xenophobia, we therefore also need to move beyond explanations that are located at the level of the individual or the relational dynamics in communities to a broader engagement with the postcolonial condition. Belonging is not something that is given or that already exists transcending place, time, history, and identity. Through my research, I have encountered many people who feel that they do not belong in their communities even when they have never left the place of their birth. Belonging is deeply political and historical and when belonging implies assimilating into a culture and social structure that is oppressive to oneself, it necessarily has violent and devastating consequences.

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I see the problem of xenophobia as intrinsically tied to not only the historical economic and political structures of apartheid racism and colonialism but also profoundly intertwined with the current politics of globalization. The legacy of colonialism and apartheid is one in which difference was emphasized, monitored, and enforced through violent means and therefore has created the conditions for xenophobia and other forms of othering and conflict to flourish. A fellow psychologist Kopano Ratele recently wrote:

Till the vulnerability of poor black foreigners is seen in the light of the economic and social-psychological vulnerability of poor black locals, there is little light in the tunnel. In all likelihood, the violence we have witnessed emerges not simply from xenophobic attitudes but from multiple failures, socioeconomic conditions, and social-psychological vulnerabilities that have thrown together poor locals and foreigners in oppressive life circumstances (The Star, 29 April 2015).

In this statement, Ratele is referring to an underlying political economy that produces violent social structures and violent individuals. If we want to address xenophobia, we must therefore interrogate these broader ideologies and how they constitute ‘us’, not only at the level of national politics but more globally as well. The 1994 moment in South Africa happened in the context of globalization. For the privileged, globalization is often seen in a positive light as bringing the benefits of science, free-trade, democracy, communication systems and corporation-controlled capitalism to the entire world through transnational, transcultural, and transborder processes (Sloan, 2005). But globalization also relies on a more

subtle form of economic and cultural colonization, presenting macroeconomic quantities, such as GDP, as the benchmark upon which human life is measured. Poverty has become an organizing principle that places people and nations on a hierarchical scale. We live in societies in which we have come to construct not only black people but the poor in general as the ‘problem’ and hence deserving of their fate. The very idea of poverty relies on negative images of Africans as passive, lacking in agency, uneducated and unskilled – and this allows us to ignore the broader structural and political causes of economic and racialised violence. We need to ask ourselves the question *who or what is violent*, not just in the context of South Africa but in relation to the continent and the North-South divide. In the context of globalization, the politics of citizenship and belonging have deepened the divides between the rich and the poor, between South Africans and other Africans.

It is easy for many to stand back from the responsibility of fuelling xenophobic violence. Instead, we can spend our time thinking of moral solutions and discussing issues far removed from the realities of the perpetrators and victims of the violence, such as the unity of Africans through ‘we are one’ campaigns and how other Africans supported South Africa during ‘the struggle’. At that time, independence movements throughout the continent articulated a pan-Africanist vision where it was clear that the liberation of all Africans was tied to the liberation of South Africans. In today’s climate, we compete with each other for material and symbolic recognition in a globalized and hierarchical world system. Within this context, the politics of racism fuel hierarchies of blackness depending on a variety of markings, such as skin tone, clothing, accents, language, and so on. I would argue therefore that the impact of internalized racism or that

horizontal forms of violence must be located in a much broader framework than simply a phenomenon that occurs in under-resourced areas and amongst the poor.

It is not surprising that, in the context of global capitalism, the South African elite would want to position itself differently in Africa. For instance, in most of sub-Saharan Africa, we speak of 'development' as the framework for tackling the problem of poverty and social change. In South Africa, it is the rhetoric of 'transformation' that prevails. These differences are not only tied to whiteness but also crystallised in North-South relations. In a research project I conducted with young Tanzanians several years ago on the topic of development, one participant remarked, "development is those who speak English" (Kessi, 2011). Recently, as I was looking for scholarships for my daughter to study, I came across the following advert: "The Margaret McNamara Memorial Fund (MMMMF) grants will be offered for female students from developing countries who are currently studying in South Africa..." In these examples, we clearly see not only the relationship between hierarchies of racialised identities but also how these are reinforced between Africans themselves in a global framework of change.

Such views perpetuate the experiences of exclusion for migrant communities in South Africa. The legitimacy of African migrants to live and belong in South Africa depends on formal immigration laws and policies but also *everyday representations and experiences* of African people. Belonging is an affective and reciprocal experience that is linked to access to material and symbolic resources. Material resources such as food, education, health, and income allow people to participate more fully in the nation. Symbolic resources are the cultural means such as language, community ties, and other less tangible assets such as

respect and recognition for one's beliefs and ways of life that are needed in order to construct positive individual and social identities. When dominant notions of 'South Africanness' are closely tied to whiteness, they not only function to create a national elitist group of 'insiders'; they also function to exclude others, such as the poor as well as migrants, particularly African migrants. Indeed, 'elite' and 'white' migrants are more likely to be recognised as equal or superior and thus have more entitlement to become part of the nation as compared to 'non-elite', non-Western migrants. By being recognised in their social context (by dominant others and powerful institutions), they are able to participate in processes of 'imagining' the national community (Howarth, Andreouli, & Kessi, 2014).

Social psychologist Michael Billig (1995) argues that the idea that nations are imagined, constructed artefacts is rarely acknowledged or reflected upon; instead, we largely represent nationals and non-nationals as 'naturally' different groups of people (Howarth et al., 2015). This is also institutionalized through state policies, and objectified in very tangible national borders that create a physical distinction between 'us' and 'them'. In very unequal and oppressive societies like South Africa, where asymmetric power relations are largely uncontested, differences become normative and permeate habitual ways of thinking and engaging with others (Ibid). The struggles of African people across the continent to belong in their own land has been protracted and violent. Consequently, in many countries, post-colonial reconstruction has been tainted by internal ethnic and racial conflicts. South Africa is no exception.

The politics of citizenship and belonging in South Africa are fraught with restrictive national laws and policies, complex racial politics, and competing claims

to material and symbolic resources, all of which must be understood in a historical and ideological context of apartheid and colonialism. This situation translates into representations of poor black people in general and African migrants in particular as 'the problem', which in turn fuels emotional and physical violence against and amongst us whilst exonerating the privileged from the responsibility of xenophobia.

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Naming xenophobia demands of all of us to reflect on our identities, our rights and privileges, the things that we might do everyday that contribute to sustaining discrimination and conflict. Xenophobia is about identity and belonging and must be explored in relation to racism, capitalism, nationalism, other forms of material and structural violence that are globally embedded.

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