Migration and State-making: Explaining Xenophobia in South Africa

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PETER VALE, JUL 23 2008

Has it taken a rush of xenophobia to turn the poster-child of George H.W. Bush's 'the new world order', towards a failed state?

The violent attacks on foreigners which first broke out in the city of Johannesburg in mid-May, resulted in 62 deaths and many more injured and displaced. For the first time since the troubled early days of South Africa's transition to democracy a decade and a half ago, the country's military occupied the streets of its shanty-towns. Suddenly a city that often chooses to measure itself against the world's finest, found itself staring into the abyss of Port-au-Price rather than Manhattan.

What had become of the idea of the Rainbow Nation, the triumphant trope broadcast by the irrepressible Nobel Laureate, Desmond Tutu, and in which all the country's people, under the forgiving leadership of Nelson Mandela, rejoiced?

State-centred Optics

Most commentaries on the xenophobia framed the fortnight of violence within two optics.

The first linked the events to the dire socio-economic situation in neighbouring Zimbabwe which had just experienced a seemingly pointless election. These conditions, the logic ran, had forced that country's citizens to flee southwards, seeking refuge in South Africa. Through this, the idea of Zimbabwe – place, political disaster, producer of social chaos – became a cipher for South Africa's mounting social woes.

The second optic positioned this very despair at the centre of the analysis. It argued that the presidency of Mandela's successor, Thabo Mbeki had simply failed to deliver sufficient social goods to South Africa's poor. Instead, of the deep-seated social and economic transformation promised by the end of apartheid, the new South Africa had delivered to its people a comprador class.

Few who rushed to speak on the violence seemed interested in the historical sociology of the southern African within which the xenophobia played out. But understanding the violence is not possible without appreciating the fluidity, identity and social turmoil which is the very essence of the region.

State-making

For all its state-authored divides, Southern Africa remains a single political entity. Archaeologists and Anthropologists – whose work remains oblivious in the empty conversations of political punditry – have long shown intimate linkages between the region's people. More recently, especially as the climate change debate has taken hold, environmentalists have argued that the region's delicate ecology is intertwined. So, floods and drought touch the lives of the region's people no matter where they live.

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It was of course the late-Eighteen Century discovery of Diamonds, first, and, later, of Gold which sparked a conversation over the possibility that states other than the British-linked Cape of Good Hope could exist in the southern African region. Until the allure of the region's wealth was opened up, the land beyond the borders of the self-governing Cape was considered as unforgiving as the Australian Outback.

This particular understanding of southern Africa was oblivious to the intricate social and economic linkages which lay beyond the imperial gaze. Turbulent and increasingly subjected to the impact of modernity – missionaries, miners and mercenaries – the sub-continent was in deep convulsion.

The mineral discoveries in Kimberley, first, and later on the Witwatersrand, occurred in places which would be incorporated into the state to be called South Africa. They only added to the social trauma by drawing the region's indigenous people into a moneyed economy which, with time, would corrode traditional forms of social intercourse.

It was around the wealth promised by these mineral discoveries that the shape of a region took place. Put differently, the template of the nation-state was super-imposed upon centuries of life and living. What was left unclear for almost a century however was whether this was to be a single state or a series of states.

Much of the dense political conversation over the most suitable form of state – or state system – in the region was lost by the rush to political independence which characterised the 1960s.

The latter development sealed the region's geopolitical fate: southern Africa would be a clustering of states around the rich and politically powerful South Africa. White-ruled Southern Rhodesia – the state that would become (after a number of changes in name and constitutional status) Zimbabwe in the 1980s – opted out of joining the Union of South Africa in 1922 when voters rejected proposals to join their rich neighbour. Others, like Lesotho (once called Basutoland), Botswana (Bechuanaland) and Swaziland occupied lesser positions within the region at the whim of Whitehall.

An immediate challenge for researchers – in History, in Comparative Politics and in International Relations – will be to map and understand the intense conversations over confederalism, federalism and state-formation which continued between the 1880s and the establishment of the region's first modern state, Union of South Africa in 1910.This largely unexplored political canvas – with its tension between modern and indigenous social relationships – forms the backdrop to the intense processes of social inclusion and exclusion in modern South Africa.

State and Migrant

At an official level, state-directed surveillance and control operates through the increasingly sophisticated techniques of border control with its technical devices like passports and visas. At a quotidian level, a continuous process of to-ing and fro-ing occurs across national boundaries which were originally drawn on maps in distant London and, very occasionally, were fenced—off by apartheid's infamous securocrats.

It was this dilemma – one of the least explored in the study of International Relations but well-developed in Historical Sociology – that faced the first post-apartheid government.

Openly appreciative of the support the liberation movements received from Africa's people during the their struggle, and declaring it desirous of becoming a fully-fledged African state, South Africa's new government drew on international experience which was increasingly anti-immigration. South Africa's security-makers drew on the unsympathetic models offered by Fortress America and Fortress Europe to feed their policy discourse.

But life on the street for would-be immigrants who has came (as migrants famously declared) "for Mandela", was often more brutal. Anger at the presence of migrants frequently erupted into violence as this vicious story from the early post-apartheid years suggests.

"In September 1998, three migrants to South Africa were savaged by a mob on a train: one, a Mozambican, was

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thrown out while the other two, both Senegalese citizens, were electrocuted as they climbed on the roof trying to escape the crowd. This violence was visited by members of a crowd who were returning from a rally in the country's administrative capital, Pretoria, who had gathered to protest under the banner of an organisation called "Unemployed Masses of South Africa" who claimed to represent 32 000 jobless people.[i]

In academia IR Regime Theory and its twin, Regional Integration Theory, are often advanced as the most propitious pathway to solving the tension between the transnational flows of people and the project of the national state. But these theories rely on leaky concepts like sovereignty.

In southern Africa the measure of their conceptual limitations are distilled in the regional organisation, SADC – the Southern African Development Community – which has shown itself to be utterly incapable of pursuing the interests of the region let alone its impoverished peoples.

As a result interminable debates on security and democracy privilege the state and its institutions over the deepening human tragedies – like HIV/AIDS – which plays out in the everyday lives of millions.

This claim is not made recklessly, nor is meant to reinforce the anti-statist sympathies which are often thought to lurk within the academe. In Southern Africa real life examples are everywhere to be seen. Consider just one: SADC has yet to develop a comprehensive strategy on AIDS – indeed, it has still to develop a single logo to brand the AIDS pandemic making it comprehensible to all who live in the region and who cross-over its often porous borders.

Migration to South Africa is possible of course. This is contingent on the battery of conditions which enable migration to the two global Fortress, America and Europe. These conditions are wealth, and skills which are needed in the much celebrated "knowledge economy". Both of these, alas, are held in short supply by the people of southern Africa.

So the gate into the new South Africa is not unlike the one that operated in the old. Discriminating and discriminatory it includes and excludes along a chain determined by the chance of birth and the privilege of childhood.

These considerations are often far removed from hopes that attended the ending of apartheid and the birth of the new world order.

They are also distant from the lofty calculations of mainstream International Relations. Caught by the latest policy fashion, the policy eye always falls upon the immediate crisis of the state, or of capital upon which, tragically, state power invariably turns. As a result, the lives of people lie beyond the ken of IR's procedural and punditry end.

If there are failing states in Africa – and if South Africa is to join them – the burden for this must fall on those over-exuberant declarations of the end of history and the utter failure of those who declared them to acknowledge that social processes and the everyday lives of people are the long *duree* of which the Annales School so eloquently spoke.

[i]"Train from Hell to Irene Station," *The Pretoria News,* 4 September 1998.

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