From 'Foreign Natives' to 'Native Foreigners'

Explaining Xenophobia in Post-apartheid South Africa

Citizenship and Nationalism, Identity and Politics

Michael Neocosmos

Monograph Series

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Preface

> The right of man to liberty ceases to be a right as soon as it comes into conflict with political life [i.e. with the state - MN], whereas in theory political life is only the guarantee of human rights... (Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, 1844, MECW3: 165)

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 without doubt (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 these interviews 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.

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', 'Bophutatswanans', 'endans' or

whatever. How could such a thing be? Wasn't 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), are arrested along with more genuine 'foreigners'. The epithet is also applicable to South Africans of Asian decent 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 continuity between state practices. These expressions imply the centrality of citizenship in understanding 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.

This book is divided into three chapters and a conclusion. The first which also serves as an introduction outlines abstractly and in some detail, the theoretical perspective to be followed. The second, which is mainly historical is concerned to trace the origins in detail of the different perspectives of citizenship as they arose around the struggle for and against the apartheid state. The third chapter discusses xenophobic discourse today, as a direct outcome of state practices as structured both by the practices of the apartheid state, as well as by the discourses

developed by the nationalist movement, and systematically reproduced by the legislative and daily practices of the post-apartheid state. The bulk of empirical evidence on xenophobia today is included in this third chapter. Finally, in the conclusion, I return to a discussion of the centrality of politics for any serious understanding of xenophobia in South Africa and indeed elsewhere.

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