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# Xenophobic violence and struggle discourse

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## Abstract

This paper argues that xenophobia in South Africa is entangled in discourses of liberation struggle, which are often used to justify anti-foreigner violence. We first examine some existing academic explanations for xenophobia, namely internalised racism, poverty/inequality, nationalism, and township and informal settlement politics. To avoid deterministically explaining xenophobia as ‘caused’ by any of these factors, however, we introduce a concept from social psychology, the concept of ‘working models of contact’. These are ‘common frame[s] of reference in which contact [between groups] comes to be understood in terms of consensual meanings and values’ (Durrheim and Dixon 2005a: 66). Xenophobic violence is not *caused* but *instantiated* in ways that are explained and justified according to particular understandings of the meaning of the ‘citizen-foreigner’ relationship. We then review three case studies of xenophobic violence whose perpetrators construed African ‘foreigners’ undermining the struggles of South Africans in various socio-economic contexts. We also examine three cases where xenophobic violence was actively discouraged by invoking an inclusive rather than divisive form of struggle discourse. We conclude by considering some dilemmatic implications that our analysis provokes.

Keywords: xenophobia, anti-xenophobia, struggle, working models of contact, determinism, South Africa

## Introduction

Do we have explanations for xenophobic violence in South Africa? This paper engages with some of the main explanatory accounts in the literature in terms of (a) their explanatory power and (b) their politics – the kind of critique of xenophobia they enable or constrain. Explanations for xenophobia are grouped together as: internalized anti-black racism; poverty, inequality and neoliberalism; nationalism; and township and informal settlement politics. As a number of other scholars have argued, some of these accounts (poverty, neoliberalism) suffer from a form of determinism insofar as they assume people are compelled to act in certain (xenophobic) ways by their history and context (Neocosmos, 2008). They also fail to explain how it is that anti-foreigner conflict is absent in some places which share the same or worse socio-economic conditions as places where it has happened (Kirshner, 2012), and, indeed, how the category of

‘foreigner’ in South Africa became socially significant in the first place (Neocosmos, 2006).

The case we make is that we need an understanding of xenophobic violence that accounts for both structure and agency: how people act in terms of their understanding of their position in a set of collective relationships, as well as how acting in terms of such beliefs can reshape and recreate that social context (Drury and Reicher, 2000). A concept from social psychology is introduced to help do this, the concept of ‘working models of contact’ (Durrheim and Dixon, 2005a). These ‘working models’ are the meanings that groups in contact give to their collective relationships in particular socio-historic contexts; they are ‘common frame[s] of reference in which contact comes to be understood in terms of consensual meanings and values’ (Durrheim and Dixon, 2005a: 66). These models are informed by history and context but are also forward-looking and have an action-orientation – they are ‘*performative explanations* which service a range of social, rhetorical and ideological ends’ (67, italics in original). Reviewing in some detail three case studies of anti-foreigner violence in different socio-economic contexts in Gauteng and the Western Cape – primarily from the perspective of South Africans who perpetrated and/or justified such violence – we argue that the model of contact emerging from these accounts is one in which African immigrants are construed as undermining the ongoing liberation struggles of black South Africans. Anti-foreigner discourses and discourses of liberation and struggle have, in many instances, become indistinguishable, which raises dilemmas for anti-xenophobic politics, whose proponents must construct an alternative discourse that navigates between the rock of xenophobia and the hard place of being a sell-out. However, three cases are also considered where xenophobic violence was actively discouraged using inclusive rather than a divisive struggle discourse. The paper considers dilemmas of anti-xenophobic activism, and concludes by arguing that we should retain a space for a critique of xenophobia even while we get to grips with the ‘local logic’ (Monson, 2017) and ‘moral order’ (Palmary, 2016) of anti-foreigner attacks.

## Extant explanations for xenophobia

### Xenophobia as internalized racism

Some authors argue that xenophobia is a form of internalized *racism* among black South Africans that has continued from apartheid. Tafira (2011:114) claims that what is typically presented as ‘xenophobia’ should actually be considered as a form of black-on-black *racism*, specifically ‘New Racism...practised by people of the same population group, which has characterised post-apartheid South African black social relations’. He argues that ‘people of the same skin colour, in this case black African immigrants and black South Africans,...have over the years been transformed into racialised subjects and...they have come to perceive each other in the light of their racial subjectivities’ (115). For Gqola, too, ‘The specific racialisation of the attacks matters...No one is attacking wealthy German, British or French foreigners in Camps Bay...This is unthinkable. This racialisation makes it safe to victimise Black people from the African continent in our everyday exchanges’ (2008: 213).

Although Tafira specifically differentiates his ‘new racism’ thesis from characterisations of May 2008 as ‘Negrophobia,’ these accounts all share an emphasis on the centrality of race and racism in the production of anti-immigrant violence. Tafira uses the concept of ‘new racism’, which emphasises ‘culture’ rather than ‘biology’ in justifications for racial discrimination, to account for how racism can be directed to one group of black people by another. However, Tafira’s new racism thesis still entangles race and nationality insofar as it relies on the *citizen-immigrant* distinction as the basis for who is victim and who is perpetrator of this ‘racism’. Moreover, the paper’s ethnographic data – a collection of names by which South Africans in Alexandra call African ‘foreigners’ – arguably does not substantiate the new racism thesis. The new racism/Negrophobia accounts also do not engage directly with cases of xenophobic violence targeting non-Africans, e.g. Asian shopkeepers (Crush and Ramachandran 2014a). Indeed, Monson (2015) argues that race or ethnicity is actually often not the most salient social distinction in the politics of the places where anti-immigrant attacks take place, which

### Xenophobia is a result of poverty and economic crisis

Some authors explain xenophobia as a consequence of poverty, class formation, inequality and/or neoliberalism. For Amisi and colleagues, the roots of xenophobia are to be found in structural processes of ‘uneven and combined development’: a glutted labour market, housing shortages, township retail competition, highly gendered cultural differences, and apparently intractable regional geopolitical tensions. These root-cause pressures continue—as will xenophobia—because short of a national political shift in power and interests, they are extremely difficult to resolve. (Amisi, Bond, Cele and Ngwane, 2011:59)

By contrast, von Holdt and colleagues (2011:90) point to poverty as an explanation for xenophobia via the collapse of social meanings that poverty entails: ‘where poverty and unemployment are endemic people’s inclinations to subscribe to some lofty societal ideals dissipate. These inclinations dissipate because, abandoned and feeling there is nothing of value for them, people devise ways aimed at giving themselves a sense of worth’. In Amusan and Mchunu’s formulation, it is inequality specifically which leads to xenophobia: ‘In an environment where some segments of the population enjoy a disproportionate amount of wealth, the inequality within such an environment builds up resentment and eventually, someone has to pay the price for such resentment’ (2017:4; see also Mamabolo, 2015). Mngxitama also points to racialized inequality in his explanation for the May 2008 violence; he suggests that xenophobic violence is ‘not new’, insofar as it is part of a broader pattern of township violence, which itself is ‘a direct consequence of the wealth of a few’ (2008: 198).

While Fauvelle-Aymar and Segatti did find that the xenophobic violence of May 2008 was correlated with the prevalence of informal housing (cited in Monson, 2015), a number of authors have pointed out that poverty cannot be more than a partial explanation for anti-foreigner violence, since it does not account for a number of important observations. First, anti-foreigner attacks have *not happened* in many wards and communities which were at least as poor, and had at least as many immigrants, as the areas where it did happen in May 2008 and at other times (Polzer, 2015; Kirshner, 2012;

von Holdt et al, 2011). Second, economic crisis does not explain why *foreigners especially* should pay the price for resentment about inequality (Neocosmos 2008). Neocosmos asks why the rich, or whites, are not targeted instead. Indeed, 'Poverty can be and has historically been the foundation for the whole range of political ideologies, from communism to fascism and anything in between...[so] how do we logically move from this to stereotyping the foreign other?' (2008: 586-587). Third, economic crisis does not explain how the 'foreigner-citizen' distinction gained its current significance in the first place (Neocosmos, 2006). Accounts that link poverty and anti-foreigner violence would also have to go much further to explain how evicting 'foreigners' helps poor South Africans to recover a sense of worth, and why this could not just as well be recovered by other non-violent or non-xenophobic forms of political action. Certainly, anti-foreigner attacks have often been *justified* in terms of the supposed economic threat migrants pose to the prosperity of South Africans, but this is very different to accepting that this threat is the actual explanation for xenophobia (Crush and Ramachandran, 2014b).

Crush and Ramachandran argue that such economic accounts not only have weak explanatory power but are also politically dangerous. First, because they downplay 'xenophobia' as an effect of other, more serious root problems, they offer no real challenge to the pervasive 'xenophobia denialism' of the South African government: '[xenophobia] minimalists essentially argue that although xenophobia might exist, it is an epiphenomenon that does not get at the root causes of violence' (2014a: 1-2). Although academics emphasizing the centrality of economic crisis might not be xenophobia denialists themselves, their accounts amount to a kind of 'xenophobia minimalism' which Crush and Ramachandran place on the same continuum. Refusals to countenance that South Africa has a xenophobia problem crop up repeatedly in accounts which 'explain' attacks on foreign communities either as brought about by things that foreign communities themselves do, or as 'just crime'.

Second, Crush and Ramachandran are concerned that when the roots of anti-foreigner violence are located in economic competition and scarcity,

then the frames of reference are automatically loaded against [immigrants]. Seen in such terms, resentment and antipathy towards migrants and other "outsiders" become inevitable, inescapable aspects of the social landscape, justifying stringent controls over immigration, and exclusion...of migrants. ...[T]his distinction further invigorates the underlying rationale for xenophobia, the very idea that the presence of migrants and refugees poses a perpetual threat to the legitimate insiders (2014b: 13).

Having offered this critique of the poverty/economic crisis account, however, Crush and Ramachandran (2014b) do not provide any alternative explanation of where xenophobia comes from – historical, structural, or otherwise. They simply insist, using attitude survey data, that we must accept as a starting point that South Africans – of all races and classes – are highly xenophobic, a position they call 'xenophobia realism'. They highlight three survey findings in particular which indicate strongly xenophobic attitudes: '(a) the nature and strength of myths about migrants and migration; (b) the level of public

endorsement of coercive state measures to keep migrants out of the country and to remove those who are present; and (c) the degree of willingness to resort to coercion and violence against migrants' (p. 18). Crush and Ramachandran's point is that the *xenophobia of South Africans*, not economic crisis, is the reason for anti-foreigner attacks – hence their refusal to look elsewhere for 'causes'.

## Xenophobia as a byproduct of new South African citizenship/nationalism

Neocosmos (2006) offers a historical explanation of why xenophobia exists at all in South Africa, and how it emerged in the transition from apartheid. He emphasises the changing meanings of citizenship in the production of xenophobia. Neocosmos argues that the current strong distinction between black people who are South African citizens and black people who are non-citizens or 'foreign nationals' is something that only emerged in the transition from apartheid. This distinction was not made strongly during apartheid either by the state or by the anti-apartheid movement, because the state was attempting to 'denationalise' all black people anyway by making them citizens of separate homelands, and regulating their presence in 'white South Africa' according to how it could make use of their labour. In this way, black people in South Africa were rendered both foreign and migrant (Pillay, 2013), and treated much the same as foreign migrants from further afield. Indeed, the Transkei, Ciskei, Venda and Bophuthatswana homelands were actually *modelled on* the neighbouring ethnic nation-states of Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana. This 'mode of domination' meant that

bonds of solidarity were developed between all Africans in the region and beyond, so that the struggle against apartheid was very much conceived...as a fight of all Africans and their allies against the apartheid state. The concept of "nation" thus developed tended to be inclusive rather than exclusive of Africans from the region (Neocosmos 2006: 30-31).

While there were other forms of 'black-on-black' violence during especially the latter years of apartheid, these occurred around political, ethnic or migrant identities, such as the ANC-IFP conflict in Natal/KwaZulu and the Transvaal (Minnaar, 1992); they were not framed in terms of a distinction between who was and was not a *South African citizen*. So xenophobia was not an inevitable outcome for post-apartheid South Africa, but, as the new state chose to treat its population as 'passive...subjects of state or white largesse' (Neocosmos, 2006: 77), a distinction then needed to be made between those living in South Africa who qualified for state assistance and those who did not. The dividing line for this distinction was new South African citizenship:

Under apartheid all rural migrants whether emanating from South African territory or not, were interpellated as foreign through the medium of tribal identification. Post-apartheid, only those emanating from beyond South Africa's borders are interpellated as foreign, as the Bantustans are simply struck off the map. It is no longer ethnic identity but national (and increasingly black African) identity which enables access to resources. (19)

Thus, a new set of reconfigured borders delineating foreigners from citizens replaced the old ones; and simultaneously a new category of denationalised outsiders was created amongst those living within South Africa's borders. Thus, for Neocosmos, the transition was 'a transition between two different forms of xenophobia, simultaneously with continuity between state practices' (vi). Neocosmos's account thus fills an important gap in the new racism, economic crisis and 'xenophobia realism' accounts by pointing to the historical relationship between citizenship and the ability to make claims on the state. However, as we shall see below, the connections between xenophobia and citizenship have been nuanced by findings that xenophobia is often justified by South Africans who see themselves as *also excluded* from the rights of citizenship, rather than 'an exclusionary claim by those who already belong' (Monson, 2015:149; Solomon, 2019).

### Anti-foreigner violence a consequence of a weak state and political expediency

A key insight made repeatedly by scholars at the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS) is the role that local political actors – either ward councillors or informal, sometimes self-elected leaders – often play in inciting xenophobic violence for their own political and economic gain (Misago, Monson, Landau and Polzer, 2010). Appropriating shops, goods and houses and being seen to be effective at solving community problems are some of these gains. The ACMS work has been driven by a conviction that 'violence...is a form of conflict with its own dynamics' (Brubaker and Laitin, 1998, cited in Misago, 2009: 13) and which requires explanation. Since xenophobic attitudes do not always or automatically translate into violence, this research has aimed to identify the 'trigger' factors by which whole communities are mobilized to attack foreigners. This work also takes us beyond global, deterministic accounts of context 'causing' xenophobia and into a local, blow-by-blow account of how xenophobic attacks are actually planned, incited and executed – often at public meetings, sometimes by ward councillors, sometimes preceded by the issuing of 'eviction notices', and often coinciding with service-delivery and other kinds of protests (see also von Holdt et al, 2011; Palmay, 2016). Polzer argues that xenophobic attacks happen where the state is absent or compromised and that 'violence against foreign nationals and ethnic minorities is a symptom of broader challenges of legitimate and accountable local governance, especially in informal settlements' (2010: 5). This work thus locates xenophobic violence in the 'micropolitics of township and informal settlement life' (Misago et al, 2009: 10). In this way, it appears that conditions of poverty and a weak state associated with *informal settlements* are often a contributing, but insufficient, condition for anti-immigrant violence.

This work moves us beyond determinism because it breaks the automatic link between pre-existing contextual factors and the emergence of violence. However, if we are to see anti-immigrant violence as more than only an 'elite' project (Monson, 2015), we need some account of xenophobia that is popularly diffused. Presumably incitements to violence must resonate with what Crush and Ramachandran (2014b) identify as the already-existing and very widespread xenophobic attitudes of South Africans towards 'foreigners' if these incitements are to be effective. Consider how King Goodwill

Zwelithini's infamous 2015 'moral regeneration' speech, in which he called on foreigners to 'take their bags and go back where they came from', and on the South African government to 'help us rid our land of lice' – even while invoking, in the same breath, Southern Africa's shared history of liberation struggles – was met with loud cheers by the audience (Zwelithini, 2015). Misago et al (2010: 10) do acknowledge that local leaders have 'used popular frustration' to drum up support for violence, but, as has been argued elsewhere (Kerr and Durrheim, 2013), some authors have tended to dismiss these frustrations as being based on unfounded myths about the economic threat that immigrants supposedly pose (e.g. see Misago, 2009; Crush and Ramachandran, 2014b). Understandably, many scholars take an anti-xenophobic position and are loath to take these "frustrations" seriously lest they appear to be simply repeating xenophobic beliefs about migrants "taking South Africans' jobs".

### Is a social psychology of xenophobia possible? Material conditions are mediated by systems of belief

Henri Tajfel, a social psychologist who worked in the UK between the 1960s and the 1980s, argued for a social psychological account of group conflict that could explain the relationship between people's material conditions and their collective choices of action: 'A psychological theory of intergroup relations must provide a two-way link between situations and behavior' (1981: 129). The way it can do this is with an analysis of the meaning-making processes that intervene between the two. In so arguing, Tajfel was challenging the determinism of many psychological and sociological explanations, which locate(d) the origins of group conflict purely in competition over resources, or in evolution, or in the attitudes of the subconscious mind – as if these psychological or structural factors exert a unidirectional influence on people and compel them to commit certain actions. In social psychology, Tajfel's own discipline, deterministic explanations for group conflict still proliferate, often taking the form of circular reasoning whereby analysts observe group- or identity-based conflict and then conclude that this must be because of some natural ("psychological") propensity for people to identify with groups and to engage in group-based conflict (Reicher and Haslam, 2013). These explanations fail because they have little to say about cases where conflict is absent despite the existence of group identities, nor about how the salient identities around which conflict occurs at one historical moment have ceased to exist or be important at other moments (Reicher, 2004). Instead, Tajfel argued that 'the best way to predict whether a person will harbour hostile attitudes towards a particular group and what will be the content of those attitudes is to find out how he [sic] understands the intergroup situation' (1981: 130). As we have seen from the review above, however, explanations for xenophobia have not generally shown much interest in how South African citizens who support or commit anti-foreigner violence understand the 'intergroup situation' between themselves and immigrant African communities. This may be because academics are wary of taking extremely xenophobic 'myths' about migration and immigrants seriously; or because sometimes academics' own academic/political commitments incline them towards paradigms which offer explanations in advance of an investigation of local meanings (e.g. Marxism). While Tajfel acknowledged that 'it would be no less than ridiculous to assert that objective rewards (in terms of money, standards of living, consumption of goods and services, etc.) are not the most important determinant of...[many intergroup] conflicts',

he insisted that another part of the picture are the systems of beliefs about groups (which he sometimes referred to as ‘stereotypes’) that mediate between material conditions and the way group relationships actually unfold:

These ideas, attitudes and systems of belief become an inherent part of the intergroup social situation and..., in a variety of conditions, they are able to deflect in one direction or another the course of the relations between the people involved. ...[N]ot only the origins of stereotypes but even their contents cannot be dissociated from the prior existence and the special characteristics of a conflict of interests. However, once they are in existence, they become in their own right one of the causal factors which needs to be taken into account in the analysis of intergroup relations (1981: 225).

Tajfel was thus gesturing towards the ‘productive’ relationship between structure and agency: conflict is not reducible simply to economic competition, because ‘stereotypes’ or meanings about the collective self and the collective other intervene, producing group relationships whose direction and meaning take on a life of their own, or become greater than the sum of their parts.<sup>1</sup> This formulation overcomes determinism because it accounts for the possibility of change by presenting a reciprocal relationship between context and sense-making that develops over time.

More recently Durrheim and Dixon – also social psychologists of intergroup relations – took up Tajfel’s same question, calling on social psychologists to pay attention to ‘the meanings that participants themselves attribute to their encounters with others’ in particular socio-economic contexts (Dixon et al, 2005: 701). Dixon and colleagues were responding primarily to a social psychological research tradition called the ‘contact hypothesis’, in which researchers seek to measure the quality of interracial or intergroup contact in desegregated societies in terms of a set of pre-determined dimensions (e.g. Islam and Hewstone, 2003) – in the process nurturing ‘a strange incuriosity about how participants themselves make sense of their encounters with others within particular sociohistorical circumstances’ (Dixon et al, 2005: 701). As an alternative to the contact hypothesis tradition, Durrheim and Dixon proposed that researchers investigate local meanings and understandings of contact and of the nature of collective relationships from the perspective of the people participating in them. In what terms do people construe the nature of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and, importantly, the relationship between the two? For this purpose, they proposed the concept of ‘working models of contact’. Group members employ ‘a common frame of reference in which contact comes to be understood in terms of consensual meanings and values. We will call such shared frameworks of explanation and evaluation ‘working models’ of contact’ (2005a: 66). Contextual conditions of poverty, anti-black racism, local politics and the emergence of a new kind of post-apartheid nationalism may inform such models of contact between South African ‘citizens’ and ‘foreigners’, but they do not totally determine them. Also, such models draw on ‘myths’ and ‘stereotypes’ about immigration and immigrants, but are not completely reducible to them, and they cannot be dismissed as simply ‘false’. Rather, they render sensible the instantiation or enactment of beliefs about the nature of the intergroup relationship (Durrheim and Dixon 2005b); and so are ‘not merely interpretive

frameworks for “making sense” of social relations; [but] are also *performative explanations* that service a range of social, rhetorical and ideological ends’ (Durrheim and Dixon 2005a: 68). In the rest of this paper, we want to analyse how, and with social and political consequences, such explanatory practices accomplish or challenge xenophobia within particular contexts.

## Case studies of xenophobic violence and struggle discourse

In this section, we review in some detail three case studies of xenophobic violence in different contexts which articulate such local meanings from the perspective of South Africans who supported or carried out these attacks. From these emerge a ‘working model of contact’ that turns on a construction of African ‘foreigners’ as undermining (black) South Africans’ ongoing struggle for liberation. African immigrants are said to be violating imperatives of solidarity, liberation, community and struggle, violations which are treated as being punishable or rectifiable by violence. Thereafter, we consider two cases where xenophobic violence was averted through the mobilization of a different kind of identity-inclusive struggle discourse. If Neocosmos (2006) is right, ‘xenophobia’ as we know it was not a feature of the actual anti-apartheid movement; and yet, the case that will be made is that the discourse of liberation struggle has now become very closely tied to the discourse of xenophobia, so much so that the two are often indistinguishable.

### Case 1: Squatter politics and civic commitment in Atteridgeville

Tamlyn Monson (2015) offers a historical analysis of the politics of housing in a ‘squatter’ community on the outskirts of Atteridgeville township near Pretoria. Attacks on foreign-owned shops took place there in 2008. Monson traces the squatter community’s struggle with the municipality for housing back to the late apartheid period in which black people violated the influx control laws and settled on the peripheries of cities. The squatter communities of Mshongo and Jeffsville were established by people experiencing chronic overcrowding and ‘enduring the mundane politics of landlord-tenant relations’ (136) in township houses, hoping that if they moved onto vacant land and erected shacks the government would eventually intervene and provide real houses. For most squatters the real houses have never materialised, so what started as a temporary arrangement has, over the years, become practically permanent. The community is in an ongoing struggle with the municipality about housing.

Monson observes two significant social distinctions in Mshongo and Jeffsville: first, between the original squatters who were there from the very beginning and who did the work of claiming the land, and those who came later, being largely ignorant of those origins; and second, between those who display political commitment and participate in the ‘civic labour’ of protest for housing, and those who are indifferent to this struggle – into which category ‘foreigners’ are seen to fall:

Problematizing the view of xenophobia as a present-day manifestation of apartheid’s racism (Gqola 2008; Matsinhe 2011; 2012; Mngxitama 2008; Tafira 2011)...[i]t is very clearly not a simple ethno-racial hatred that motivates collective attacks on shops. Rather, it is the idea that they...are indifferent to the

unfinished struggle of the squatters for citizenship....Lack of commitment appears as a betrayal of the political community, and the financial gain that accrues to the uncommitted as a result of their indifference heightens the sense of outrage (148).

‘Financial gain’ refers to foreign shopkeepers not closing shop when protests and meetings are happening. Monson explains:

One of the most prevalent complaints about foreigners focused on their failure to contribute to the collective struggle for better living conditions – a failure considered exploitative since they reap the benefits of social mobilization along with everyone else...This emphasis on forms of political commitment and civic labour as the basis of authentic membership was reiterated over and over again by different respondents: “the issue is in terms of attendance. Some of these foreigners would ignore the call for the meetings and continue with their business...And when things are fixed they would be first felt by those same people yet we are the ones who attend meetings” (male resident, Mshongo, 2008) (p. 146).

However, foreign residents often had other priorities and little interest in participation in local politics and protests. Monson points out that while ‘foreign’ squatters may appear superficially to share the same difficulties with livelihoods and shelter as South African squatters, this ‘does not involve the same collective political claim for dignity and inclusion in citizenship’s community of rights as it does for squatter citizens’ (146). South Africans in Mshongo also explicated clear continuities between the often coercive community tactics of the anti-apartheid struggle – for example, using violence and public shaming to enforce boycotts and stayaways – and the current manner in which the community polices itself and punishes dissidents, including foreign shop owners who do not attend protest meetings. Hence, the struggle is not over: “‘xenophobic’ mobilization may be seen to articulate a claim for inclusion by structurally excluded “citizens”, rather than an exclusionary claim by those who already belong’ (149; see also Solomon, 2019). Thus, Monson argues, anti-immigrant violence has a ‘local logic’ which is not well captured in representations of such violence as ‘senseless’. Instead, violence is explained by its perpetrators and supporters in terms which justify it: in this case in terms of a ‘working model’ of relations between the politically indifferent and the politically committed.

## Case 2: Eviction of Zimbabwean community from De Doorns

Philippa Kerr analyses the eviction of a community of migrant Zimbabwean farm workers from the informal settlements around De Doorns, a grape-farming town in the Western Cape, in November 2009 (Kerr 2017). This forcible eviction was carried out by South Africans living in the same settlements, who broke down Zimbabweans’ houses and looted their possessions, accusing them of taking South Africans’ jobs by working for farmers at less than the minimum wage. In interviews, not all informal settlement residents supported or justified the eviction. For many who did, however, the Zimbabweans’ eviction was not itself the town’s main problem, but an attempted *solution* to the problem of worker exploitation by white farmers. Despite identifying farmers as the primary agents in configuring these problems in their capacity as choosers of labour,

some interviewees nevertheless placed the onus for ‘solving’ this problem onto the Zimbabweans – trying to make them ‘go back to their country’. Farmers were said to be using Zimbabwean workers as a ‘remote controller’ – as a passive tool to avoid bargaining with South African workers and labour brokers. Zimbabweans were also accused of actively interfering in South African workers’ relationship with farmers, undermining their attempt to bargain for jobs and better pay, and displacing them from their ‘rightful’ farm jobs. Zimbabweans were sometimes also construed as unfairly *favoured* by farmers – a shift of favour which was experienced as a deep betrayal by some South African workers who felt they had first right to employment. Thus, once again, the language of xenophobia was, in this incident, indistinguishable from the language of resistance to white farmers. For their part, Zimbabwean workers and farmers vehemently denied the allegations of low wages; both spoke about farmers’ preference for Zimbabweans in terms of their being more reliable workers and less chronically drunk and absent. Also, a ward councillor and a group of informal labour brokers were implicated in the eviction, allegedly inciting it for their own political and economic ends (Misago, 2009).

Although the contextual politics in De Doorns were different to Monson’s Atteridgeville case – this was not construed as a struggle with the municipality over housing, but a struggle with the white commercial farming community over jobs and better pay – there are some similarities. In both cases, immigrant communities were presented as either indifferent to or undermining ongoing community struggles and hence failing at imperatives of solidarity and resistance. Also in both cases, the relationship between South Africans and ‘foreign’ squatters/workers was seen as secondary to, but interfering with, South Africans’ attempts to cultivate an adversarial relationship with some other powerful group or institution – either the municipality, or the white farming community.

### Case 3: “Violence in the name of peace”

Ingrid Palmary (2016) interviewed members of the so-called Greater Gauteng Business Forum (GGBF) who organised attacks on foreign-owned shops in 2011 and in 2015. She draws out some key themes in the discourse of GGBF members in their justifications for this violence – themes of law, community, freedom, healing and reconciliation. On law:

[GGBF members] present themselves as being on the same side as the state without a sense of irony that in acting for the police, they are indeed breaking the law. So they described how they would “go” into foreigners’ shops and conduct search “operations” and find weapons...In this way they were constantly positioning themselves on the side of the rule of law...[T]here is no sense that they should hide their activities and the practise of ‘closing a shop’ is one deemed professional and appropriate. (p. 88-89)

Palmary also reproduces an ‘eviction notice’ that was written and distributed to foreign shop owners by a SANCO official (South African National Civics Organisation – supposedly civil society) giving advance notice of the attacks in pseudo-official language, thus dressing itself up in the discourse of officialdom and bureaucracy.

A second theme which Palmary finds is persistent references to ‘community healing and freedom [which] have in many ways become the central logic behind the exclusion of foreigners in South African townships’ (p. 96). Palmary emphasises that these ‘positive’ themes – as opposed to, say, anger and hatred – legitimated violence perpetrated by South Africans as noble and moral:

“We had to battle for so many years against apartheid. Now we defeated that part and now we are in the process of rebuilding the country to trust each other, to get to know each other, get to tolerate each other, to live with each other...so...we want us to heal without any disturbance from them.” (GGBF representative, 2011) (2016: 96-97)

This is why Palmary calls her chapter ‘Violence in the name of peace’. South Africans, without irony, construct foreigners as inherently violent, whereas their own violence against foreigners is ‘noble and defends South Africa’s freedom and communities’ (95). The similarity with the De Doorns and Atteridgeville cases is that ‘freedom’ and ‘community’ are key themes in justifications for anti-immigrant violence. However, ‘freedom’ is also being used in a slightly different way here. In Atteridgeville and De Doorns, violence was committed in the name of ongoing struggle, whereas for the GGBF, violence is committed in the name of the rule of law, peace and reconciliation, and in protecting the gains of the (finished) struggle. Thus, the GGBF are not constructing themselves as being in an ongoing struggle with some powerful authority, but rather they appropriate the language of the state and of nation-building. This may have something to do with the fact that in a context of petty township capitalism – the GGBF represents small business owners’ interests – there is indeed no other powerful third party (e.g. the state, or employers) with which they can construct themselves as being locked in struggle.

## Anti-xenophobic forms of struggle

So far, we have reviewed three cases where discourses of freedom and/or struggle were used to legitimate anti-foreigner attacks. The following section considers contrary cases, where struggle has been carried out in deliberately non- or anti-xenophobic ways. We consider in particular the Merafong Demarcation Forum (MDF) on the West Rand, PASSOP (People against Suffering, Oppression and Poverty) in De Doorns, and Abahlali baseMjondolo – the Shackdwellers’ Movement – in Durban. These examples show how the nature of the struggle is itself contested, as different groups seek to mobilize or resist exclusionary actions against immigrants.

### Case 1: Xenophobic violence averted in Khutsong

Kirshner (2012) offers an analysis of how anti-foreigner violence was averted in the township of Khutsong, next to Carletonville on the West Rand, in May 2008. He highlights the role played by a local community-based organization, the Merafong Demarcation Forum (MDF), in discouraging xenophobic violence. Kirshner also constructs a history of struggles between community and municipality – in this case,

community resistance between 2005 and 2007 to the state's attempts to incorporate Khutsong into the North-West province from Gauteng. Khutsong had a history of 'low-level xenophobia', and there had been a Mozambican community there since 1950s – initially living in mine worker compounds, but from the mid-1990s more integrated into the township community. Khutsong residents took part in violent 'anti-demarcation' protests against changing the municipal boundaries between 2005-2007; the mayor and ward councillors were largely absent from these. But when the anti-foreigner violence of May 2008 broke out elsewhere in South Africa, other community leaders actively encouraged Khutsong residents not to follow suit:

Khutsong residents witnessed the disquieting events [of May 2008] on the TV news. As the crisis unfolded, the local community leaders invited members of the community to Khutsong Stadium, as they had done repeatedly from 2005 to 2007. "They told us not to be afraid because of what was happening in the townships outside Johannesburg, in Alexandra. They said whatever was happening in Alex would not happen here," recalled a Mozambican man who has lived in Khutsong for 9 years. (1314-1315)

Kirshner suggests a number of reasons for this active discouragement of xenophobia; some strategic, and some principled. Anti-foreigner attacks may have detracted from the demarcation protests; MDF organisers actively downplayed nationality-based divisions, instead emphasizing local provincial boundaries ('We are Gauteng people') and the importance of 'a collective sense of place around which opposition to the government's plans could build' (p. 1320). Importantly, Kirshner shows how leaders mobilized against xenophobia by invoking struggle discourse, which was used inclusively rather than divisively:

We said 'these are our brothers and sisters.' We told people that blaming foreigners was morally wrong. After all, we owe Africans a debt of gratitude as repayment for their sacrifices during the anti-apartheid struggle and for their contribution to building our mining industry. ...Zuma stayed in Mozambique during the liberation struggle, and Chris Hani was in Zimbabwe. We made these examples to show people we have a history with neighbouring countries in the struggle. (Mogale, cited in Kirshner 2012, p. 1320)

Kirshner therefore argues specifically against accounts of xenophobia which treat it as an automatic consequence of poverty and deprivation. Instead, his study 'highlights the importance of examining local social struggles and their intersections with broader political-economic dynamics in explaining the presence [or absence] of xenophobia in specific places' (2012, p. 1324).

## Case 2: Anti-xenophobic activism in De Doorns

In De Doorns, there were different kinds of anti-xenophobic responses to the eviction of the Zimbabwean community in 2009 (Kerr 2017). One came from farmers, some of whom strongly condemned this attack and its instigators, and who offered

accommodation to displaced Zimbabwean workers afterwards (Kerr and Durrheim 2013). Another came from Zimbabwean workers themselves, who dismissed the claims that they had been working for less than the minimum wage and instead pointed to South African workers' own shortcomings for why they were being overlooked by farmers (Kerr, 2017). The dilemma of these kinds of responses, however, is that they may simply repeat the same ideological divides which were taken as a justification for violence in the first place, as those who opposed xenophobia were also seen to be anti-struggle.

Another kind of anti-xenophobic politics, however, was practiced by mainly Zimbabwean members of the migrants' rights group PASSOP (People Against Suffering, Oppression and Poverty), who were active in De Doorns after the Zimbabweans were evicted in 2009, up until, and during, the farm workers' strikes that took place around De Doorns in late 2012 and early 2013 (Wilderman, 2014). During the strikes, PASSOP organisers had to tread a very fine line between the moral universe of worker liberation and the moral universe of anti-xenophobia. They had to find ways of challenging the often highly xenophobic, divisive tactics of some South African strike organisers, while simultaneously showing that Zimbabweans, too, were actively participating in workers' struggles (Kerr, 2017). PASSOP also highlighted the common class identity of all workers *as workers*, and tried to downplay the national and racial divisions that had featured strongly in earlier anti-immigrant violence (Kerr 2017). This is another example of how struggle discourse was mobilized in inclusive rather than divisive ways. PASSOP organisers claimed they had been reasonably successful, insofar as there were no attacks on Zimbabwean farm workers during the farm workers' strikes.<sup>1</sup>

### Case 3: Abahlali baseMjondolo's anti-xenophobic struggle in Durban

Abahlali baseMjondolo, the shackdwellers' movement that was formed in Durban in 2005, is locked in an ongoing struggle with the ANC government in KwaZulu-Natal over housing, land and the freedom to organise independently of the ANC (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2018; Clarke, 2018). In the course of this struggle, Abahlali have taken a consistently anti-xenophobic position. The movement began when a piece of land set aside for new RDP houses in Durban was sold to a private buyer, and Abahlali's ongoing grievances concern the corruption that prevents proper allocation of state housing to the poor (Clark, 2018). An enduring theme of Abahlali's writings is the persecution and victimization of black, poor people in South Africa by the state, irrespective of where they come from:

When we try to unite and to take to the streets to assert that every person is a person, that everyone counts, we are openly beaten by the police. Once we again we say that there is no democracy for the poor in this country. It does not matter which country you were born in, or what part of South Africa you come from, or what language you speak. If you are poor and black you are excluded from this democracy with the open use of violence (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2015, n.p).

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews with two PASSOP organisers, June and August 2013 respectively.

They point out that, while the anger of poor South Africans is justified, turning on their foreign neighbours is not going to solve the problems of ‘rats, fires and lack of toilets’ that they experience (Abahlali baseMjondolo, cited in Solomon, 2019, p. 166). In this way, “Abahlali directly challenges the exclusive articulation of rights underlying [xenophobic] arguments that South Africa’s poor are the victims of migration” (Solomon, 2019, p. 167). Moreover, Abahlali have “used their experience of being marginalized as ‘illegal’ squatters to challenge the distinction between citizens and noncitizens in the country” (Solomon, 2019, p. 164). For instance, they draw attention to similarities between informal settlements, refugee camps, repatriation centres and other ‘dumping grounds’ for unwanted people (Solomon, 2019). In this way, Abahlali have reconfigured the boundaries between who belongs and who does not by emphasizing not formal citizenship – from which they themselves are in practice excluded – but rather by building solidarity among the excluded poor. In this way, Solomon notes that ‘by calling themselves the “people of nowhere”...Abahlali’s anti-xenophobia work challenges the prevailing geography of citizenship’ (p. 167).

This anti-xenophobic position has come at a cost, however:

We have been working to build a politic from below that accepts each person as a person and each comrade as a comrade without regard to where they were born or what language they speak. In this struggle we have faced constant attack from the state, the ruling party and others (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2015, n.p).

During anti-immigrant attacks around South Africa in April 2015, Abahlali described the punishment they received for their anti-xenophobic action in Durban:

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of April we supported a march against xenophobia organised by our comrades in the Congolese Solidarity Campaign together with the Somali Association of South African and other migrant organisations. There was a permit for the march and yet the police would not allow it to go ahead. They stopped people from leaving their communities to travel to the march. They attacked the march with tear gas, water cannons and rubber bullets. One Congolese man was severely beaten by the police with a plank. One of our members, from the Marikana Land Occupation in Cato Crest, had her leg broken during the assault by the police. We also noted senior police officers accusing Abahlali: “What do you have to do with this march? Why are you supporting them”? ...At the march on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April there was another march of the so called “locals” who were screaming and saying “awahambe” (“foreigners must go”). ...We were not only assaulted by the police. We were also threatened and assaulted by this group who said to us: “Why are you supporting these foreigners”. On that day the police were supporting this group. Despite the violence and intimidation from the police and “the locals” we made it to the City Hall. (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2015, n.p.)

In this way, Abahlali pursue a very different kind of struggle than that described earlier in this paper. Rather than claiming that ‘foreigners’ undermine the struggle, Abahlali call for solidarity among the poor on the basis of shared rightlessness.

## Discussion and conclusions

This paper began with a discussion of some themes in the literature attempting to explain xenophobia – nationalism and the construction of citizenship after apartheid; (new) racism; poverty and inequality; and township and informal settlement politics. Indeed, a similar overview has been given by Kirshner (2014) under the heading ‘What causes xenophobia?’ But the case made in this paper – and what Kirshner’s own work suggests – is that this question needs respecifying. Xenophobia is not *caused*; it is *instantiated* or *enacted* in violence or other actions which are rendered sensible as part of the application of a model of understanding of the nature of the collective ‘we’ and the collective ‘they’ and the relationship between the two. This gets us beyond deterministic explanations for xenophobia insofar as it draws attention to the active meaning-making processes which have the power to concretely shape the nature of relationships between groups. However, although xenophobic violence cannot be said to be ‘caused by’ race, class or nationality, these categories are surely not totally irrelevant either, because ‘struggle’ is a practice born of a response to institutionalized white racism that equated ‘black’ with ‘working class’, ‘non-citizen’, ‘non-urban’, etc. The research cited in this paper has started to show how the language and practices of struggle are invoked in anti-foreigner violence across a number of different socio-economic and political realms – struggles over jobs, housing and citizenship, *inter alia*. Arguably *struggle*, rather than race, class or citizenship per se, is the common thread linking each case study.

This analysis raises a number of dilemmas. One is: if xenophobia is articulated in the language of struggle, how can or should an anti-xenophobic politics articulate itself? Does doing anti-xenophobia mean being anti-struggle? In one sense, the MDF, PASSOP and Abahlali examples have shown that the answer is no. Struggle can be mobilized in identity-inclusive ways, where the model of contact is not one in which ‘foreigners’ are undermining ‘South Africans’ struggles, but where immigrants and South Africans have been included under a broader community umbrella. Although they do not use the term, Abahlali have arguably shown xenophobia to be a form of false consciousness, where, instead of directing their anger at the corrupt, failing state that represses them, poor South Africans direct it at their equally repressed migrant neighbours (Solomon, 2019). However, as Abahlali have also experienced, mobilizing in xenophobic or anti-xenophobic ways are not simply equally pursuable options. Rather, choosing anti-xenophobia may come at a high cost, as it provokes a backlash from opponents who attempt to delegitimize anti-xenophobic struggles and respond with further violence (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2015). Thus the very nature of the struggle becomes contested: anti-xenophobic action becomes its own, new struggle, amid contradicting claims by opposing parties to own the struggle or be its legitimate heirs.

Secondly, our analysis challenges von Holdt *et al*’s claim that in cases of dire poverty, people’s willingness to subscribe to ‘lofty societal ideals dissipate[s]...because, abandoned and feeling there is nothing of value for them, people devise ways aimed at giving themselves a sense of worth’. Our analysis clearly shows that it is not a

supportable argument. Evidently, economically poor people actively make claims for their own inclusion – and, often, the violent exclusion of others – precisely on the basis of ‘lofty societal ideals’ like struggle and the realization of South African citizenship. Indeed, devising ways of finding a sense of worth is by definition an idealistic, moral and active project, and the examples of anti-xenophobic struggle show that there is nothing to dictate why this sense of worth may not be regained through other forms of non-xenophobic political action. Social psychological work from beyond South Africa shows how racist and xenophobic violence is often construed as a moral project, whether or not it is perpetrated by people who are poor (McKeever et al, 2013; Reicher, Haslam and Rath, 2008). However, unlike Western xenophobia where anti-immigrant violence is associated with the far right, in South Africa we have argued that it is associated with forms of rhetoric and action that claim descent from the anti-apartheid struggle.

A third dilemma is that the studies of xenophobia examined in this paper, which try to take seriously the logic and ideologies informing anti-foreigner attacks, risk flirting with ‘xenophobia denialism’ because they sometimes question whether xenophobia is the right name for this violence – especially if by ‘xenophobia’ we mean a kind of psychological pathology or prejudice which is based on the misinformed belief in a series of migration myths. But our point is that if the work of critique is done primarily through an analysis of xenophobia as morally depraved and senseless, what are we left with, in the way of tools for critique, once we see that anti-foreigner violence is neither senseless nor amoral/immoral? On the contrary, it is construed as moral by its perpetrators in terms of deeply-held ideological imperatives such as struggle and the realization of South Africans’ liberation. We argue for retaining a critique of xenophobia even while avoiding characterizing it as senseless and immoral. The approach offered in this paper has the potential to develop this critique, insofar as it treats people’s constructions of the nature and meaning of collective relationships between ‘citizens’ and ‘foreigners’ – and the performative consequences of these constructions, both xenophobic and anti-xenophobic – as objects of study in their own right, rather than as mere byproducts of other socioeconomic or psychological processes. Xenophobia is deadly serious and we should take it this seriously in our analyses – an unpopular position in a context where many South Africans are almost violently opposed to the idea that South Africa is a xenophobic country.

#### Notes

1 Steve Biko (2004, 97) grappled similarly with white beliefs about black inferiority, suggesting that although they were invented for ‘economic reasons’ to justify black exploitation by whites, in time they gained a life of their own. Hence, ‘White people now despise black people, not because they need to reinforce their attitude and thus justify their position of privilege but because they actually believe that black is inferior and bad’.

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