

From 'Foreign Natives'  
To 'Native Foreigners'



# From 'Foreign Natives' To 'Native Foreigners'

Explaining Xenophobia in Post-apartheid  
South Africa: Citizenship and Nationalism,  
Identity and Politics

Michael Neocosmos



Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa

First published under the CODESRIA Monograph Series, 2006  
© CODESRIA 2010  
Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa,  
Avenue Cheikh Anta Diop, Angle Canal IV  
BP 3304 Dakar, 18524, Senegal  
Website: [www.codesria.org](http://www.codesria.org)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage or retrieval system without prior permission from CODESRIA.

ISBN: 978-2-86978-307-2

Layout: Hadijatou Sy

Cover Design: Ibrahima Fofana

Printed by: Imprimerie, Graphi plus, Dakar, Senegal

Distributed in Africa by CODESRIA

Distributed elsewhere by the African Books Collective, Oxford, UK.

Website: [www.africanbookscollective.com](http://www.africanbookscollective.com)

The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) is an independent organisation whose principal objectives are to facilitate research, promote research-based publishing and create multiple forums geared towards the exchange of views and information among African researchers. All these are aimed at reducing the fragmentation of research in the continent through the creation of thematic research networks that cut across linguistic and regional boundaries.

CODESRIA publishes a quarterly journal, *Africa Development*, the longest standing African-based social science journal; *Afrika Zamani*, a journal of history; the *African Sociological Review*; the *African Journal of International Affairs*; *Africa Review of Books* and the *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*. The Council also co-publishes the *Africa Media Review*; *Identity, Culture and Politics: An Afro-Asian Dialogue*; *The African Anthropologist* and the *Afro-Arab Selections for Social Sciences*. The results of its research and other activities are also disseminated through its Working Paper Series, Green Book Series, Monograph Series, Book Series, Policy Briefs and the *CODESRIA Bulletin*. Select CODESRIA publications are also accessible online at [www.codesria.org](http://www.codesria.org).

CODESRIA would like to express its gratitude to the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA/SAREC), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), the Danish Agency for International Development (DANIDA), the French Ministry of Cooperation, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Rockefeller Foundation, FINIDA, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), IIEP/ADEA, OECD, IFS, OXFAM America, UN/UNICEF, the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) and the Government of Senegal for supporting its research, training and publication programme.

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



# Contents

<i>Preface to the First Edition</i> .....	<i>vii</i>
<i>Preface to the Second Edition</i> .....	<i>ix</i>

## **Chapter One**

Introduction: Accounting for Xenophobia in Post-apartheid South Africa .....	1
Xenophobia: Absence of Theory, Absence of Politics .....	1
Xenophobia: Bringing Theory and Politics Back In .....	6
Citizenship and Political Identity: Four Theses .....	13
The Study of Xenophobia in South Africa .....	16

## **Chapter Two**

The Apartheid State and Migration to South Africa: From Rural Migrant Labour to Urban Revolt .....	19
State and Citizenship in Southern Africa .....	20
The Apartheid State .....	22
Apartheid, Migrant Labour, Citizenship and Resistance .....	28
National Liberation and the Urban-Economic Understanding of Apartheid.....	39
Popular Struggles and National Citizenship in Countryside and Town .....	42
Conclusions .....	58

## **Chapter Three**

The Construction of a Post-apartheid Nationalist Discourse of Exclusion: Citizenship, State, National Identity and Xenophobia .....	61
Constructing the Nation and Moulding Citizenship from Above: Nationalism, Indigeneity and Exclusionary Legislation .....	62
Post-apartheid Nation-building Continued: Citizenship and the State Construction of Xenophobia.....	85
Society: Xenophobic Attitudes, Human Rights and the Absence of Politics.....	97

**Chapter Four**

Conclusion: Theory and Political Agency .....105

**Epilogue: May 2008 and the Politics of Fear** .....119

The Events of May 2008 .....121

The Sociology of the Events and the Poverty of Explanation..... 125

The Politics of Fear .....143

Concluding Remarks .....149

*Notes* .....153

*Bibliography*.....161

*List of Interviews* ..... 173



## Preface to the First Edition

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 indubitably (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 this 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', 'Vendans' or whatever. How could such a thing be? Was not 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), arrested along with more genuine foreigners. The epithet is also applicable to South Africans of Asian descent 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 a 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.

I am grateful to CODESRIA for funding the research on which this book was based, to Francis Nyamnjoh for encouraging me to undertake this research project, to Jude Fokwang for undertaking excellent qualitative interviews with West African migrants in Pretoria and Johannesburg, to Jonathan Mafukidze for surfing the web, and to the CODESRIA leadership for showing patience when the constraints of bread and butter work and the exigencies of intellectual endeavour threatened to derail my meeting of deadlines.

## Preface to the Second Edition

The fundamental reasons for a second edition of this book were the events of May 2008, which could only be described as systematic pogroms against ‘foreigners’ in many South African townships. These violent events left 62 people dead at least, and displaced thousands more, leading to introspection in the press regarding the violent re-assertion of social differences which the country, it was felt, had been able to overcome through its reconciliation process 14 years previously. The surprise expressed at the violent expression of xenophobia was nevertheless a clear result of ignorance of the evidence over the past 15 years or more, some of which had already been outlined in many reports by NGOs and state agencies included in this book and elsewhere. As a result, it was thought opportune to include a new chapter in the form of an epilogue which has been devoted entirely to explaining these specific events.

Yet, this book had not really addressed the violent expression of xenophobic sentiments because at the time of its writing (end 2005), this had only occurred in isolated incidents. What the book sought to explain then was the pervasive and predominant xenophobic attitudes within South Africa. It did so in terms of the development of a dominant political subjectivity over time. The organiser so to speak of this political subjectivity was to be the state and its various institutions, and it was also noted that while state discourse and practice was overwhelmingly xenophobic, the attitudes of South Africans were much more contradictory as there also existed evidence for a certain amount of ‘xenophilia’ among a minority of the population.

The core of the book argues that xenophobia should be understood as a political discourse and practice. As such, its historical development as well as the conditions of its existence must be elucidated in terms of the practices and prescriptions which structure the field of politics. In South Africa, its history is intimately connected to the manner in which citizenship has been conceived and fought over during the past fifty years at least. Migrant labour was ‘de-nationalised’ by the apartheid state, while African nationalism saw the same migrant labour as the foundation of that oppressive system. However, only those who could show a family connection with the colonial/apartheid formation of South Africa could claim citizenship at liberation. Others were excluded and seen as unjustified claimants to national resources. Xenophobia’s conditions of existence, the book argues, are to be found in the politics of post-apartheid nationalism where state prescriptions, founded on indigeneity, have been allowed to dominate uncontested in conditions of an overwhelmingly passive conception of citizenship. The de-politicization of an urban population which had been able to assert its agency during the 1980s, through a discourse of ‘human rights’ in particular, contributed to this passivity, it is argued. State liberal politics have remained













































































































































































































































































































































































































