Dangerous Ordinary Discourse: Preliminary reflections on xenophobia, violence and the public sphere in South Africa

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This paper is concerned with how we ‘think’ the problem of the May 2008 violence that swept through urban informal settlements in South Africa, in relation to postcolonial conceptions of the nation and the public sphere. It does so through a discussion of critical scholarly responses, as well official state responses of the President and the political leadership, and argues that whilst they may appear at odds with each other, there is a mutual epistemic tendency within both approaches: each seeks an ideal form of citizen-subject, which in effect silences a subaltern voice when it fails to correspond to a certain normative conception of the acting agent of the political. From the one vantage point, this indicates an unthinking passive ideological subjection, and from the other vantage point, it invokes the workings of a criminalized agent. Through a discussion of the way in which those who have been associated with carrying out the violence have been characterized in public discourse, I argue for a conceptual repositioning of critical thought in order to ask how the violence might illuminate a crisis in post-apartheid nationalist hegemony, signaled through a divergence in elite and subaltern politics and a fragmentation of the nationalist movement’s right and claim to speak in the name of ‘the people’.

The Picture and the Story

For a week he was known only as ‘Mugza’, or ‘the flaming man’. had followed his cousin, Jose, from Mozambique to the gold mines of South Africa. Jose had worked on the mine for eleven years. Now both men were stabbed and beaten. Jose managed to escape the final fate of his cousin. Set alight in full view of the residents of the informal settlement they lived in, and a contingent of press photographers, the haunting image of Ernesto’s burning body has become emblematic of the violence which swept through a number of South African shanty towns in May 2008. The violence has left more than 60 people dead and thousands displaced. A third of those killed were South African citizens. More than sixteen thousand people in Gauteng alone were forced to find alternative living arrangements. According to media reports, the attacks began in Alexandra then spread to other areas in and around Johannesburg, including Cleveland, Diepsloot, Hillbrow, Tembisa, Primrose, Ivory Park and Thokoza. Violence in Kwazulu-Natal, Mpumalanga and Cape Town soon followed.

When the picture of the killing of Ernesto Nhamuave ran on that Monday morning in the daily papers, the caption, and the accompanying story was silent on what happened after. A
reporter recalled a panicked resident warning police that ‘Shangaans are being attacked’. We were told that ‘one plump woman… could not contain her laughter…and regaled her audience with details of the event’. This reaction to the photograph, which brought laughter to some, and horror to others, marks a disjuncture in the imagining of ‘the nation’, which I argue, ruptures certain conceptions of the public sphere in South Africa.

*The Nationalisation of Scandal*

The still photograph has the capacity to arrest time like no other medium. We flip through our family albums, recalling the poignant moments of our lives. From the moment the camera took a portable form, it quickly allowed for the democratization of the image. The photograph has become intimate with the ways we mark our private life, as families, in our rituals of birth, and celebrations of marriage, for example. Photography has also acted as a marker of our shared public History. But those moments which enter into History—the authorized, fought over, revised truth of our past which validates us as humanity, or nations, can also simultaneously bring us to shame. The image of Nelson Mandela, emerging from prison, fist clenched, Winnie at his side, marshals thread-barely holding order, is perhaps one such photograph. It captures in full joy and tragedy the maxim of Walter Benjamin, the German cultural critic, that ‘every document of barbarism is also a document of civilization’. Barbarism and colonialism, and the futile violence of its civilizing mission became transparent that day to many skeptical South Africans, as the ‘enemy’, Nelson Mandela, took a few steps from prison, and blurred before their eyes into dignity, elegance and grace.

The ubiquity of the technology to capture still images has transformed the relationship between the spectacular and the banal. Its Trojan Horse power is that it has made the ‘scandal’ more possible. The US army banned images of weakness: the rows of coffins of soldiers’s bodies coming home from Iraq draped in the stars and stripes. In it’s hubris, it forgot to control images of the way it gloats. Abu Ghraib symbolized the gloat of an occupation at a loss. Otherwise panic stricken young footsoldiers now had control over the ‘enemy’ in an invisible prison regulated only by the determined will of an executive power at war with the world, convinced that any means was necessary. The private images of gloating became scandalous, which in turn scandalized behaviour that appears to have been normal in the prison. Secular modernity, argues Talal Asad, is marked by a particular relationship to the infliction of public pain, different to a premodern sensibility where the infliction of pain and
suffering was made a public spectacle, now the infliction of pain has been made into a public scandal (2003, p107).

It has been a while since an image arrested attention like this post-apartheid South Africa. Not that we have not had pictures of dead bodies on our front pages. And of dead black bodies. It seems however that a human being set alight and burning is another matter. The struggle for life, battling the presence of death being cheered on, is something we recoil from and cannot turn away from. And we have precedents. The images of the necklacing of Maki Skosana in the Eastrand township of Duduza in July 1985, marked such an event. Skosana was accused of being an *impimpi*, a police spy, and set alight by a jeering crowd. The accusation turned out to be a false one. The case of Maki Skosana happened to be captured by the media, and it became known as the ‘first necklacing case’. One of the photographers who captured these events, the late Kevin Carter, spoke of how this was just one incident that was preceded by others. What made this the ‘first’ was its coming to view to the South Africa that does not, and dares not go into a township. The apartheid South African government-controlled media made maximum use of the moment. A young, helpless black woman being set ablaze by a carnival of black people reinforced what the colonial mentality had long warned of: the barbarism of the native.

The meaning of this photograph, now ‘public’, and taken post-apartheid, will not only be determined by those who are its witnesses, but also by the authorized and contested meanings that will circulate around it. In the 1980’s, Bishop Tutu threw his body on to a man who was about to be necklaced, offering himself up in solidarity with this vulnerable person, in disgust and compassion. The Pulitzer prize-winning South African photojournalist Kevin Carter, who took many such pictures amidst celebrating residents of the townships in the 1980’s, eventually took his own life in despair. This image, of an ‘outsider’ being set alight, is now a part of ‘our’ History. Our family album. Its scandal is out in the open for all to see: refugees, the most vulnerable people on this continent, being attacked, and killed by the poor of South Africa’s townships, who too are counted as amongst the most vulnerable on this continent. Here we are not exceptional. Throughout colonized Africa, indigeneity has become a politicized matter. The colonial state distributed rewards and punishment along these lines, turning where you came from into a political matter. In his reflections on violence after colonial rule, written in 1963, Frantz Fanon observed with prescient foreboding clarity: “The colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones
against his own people... the colonized man is an envious man’. Without a meaningful
decolonization of the society which benefits all, Fanon warned, this envy in the post-
independence period turns on outsiders: ‘From nationalism, we have passed to chauvinism,
and finally to racism. These foreigners are called on to leave, their shops are burned, their
street stalls wrecked...We observe a permanent seesaw between African unity, which fades
quicker and quicker into the mists of oblivion...’

This paper is interested in the ways in which this picture, which indexes the violence that
unfolded in May, was responded in the public sphere, by political leaders, government
officials, the media and scholars. What can these poetics of public discourse tell us about the
nature of the public sphere and the forms of postcolonial modernity emerging in South
Africa? The scandal of Alfred Nhamuave’s death photograph, brings into a domain of the
‘public’, a scandal, precisely, I will argue, because it signals a crisis in the purchase of a
certain liberal-nationalist ideological discourse within the ruling elite of South Africa, and the
African National Congress itself. More generally, it is a crisis of the postcolonial present. As
David Scott has argued in his characterization of the crisis of nationalism in postcolonial
Jamaica, ‘the project of this middle-class nationalist-modern was to integrate progressively
the social and cultural formations that composed the plurality...around a single conception of
the national good, and a single portrait of the national citizen-subject’ (Scott, 1999, p191).
This modernizing desire, represented often as ‘democratization’, and ‘development’ and
containing the elements of social welfarism, also contains within it the impulse to transform a
hitherto disparate set of sensibilities into a singular unified force. How the state and the
middle classes have responded to the ‘scandal’ of this violence is a revealing moment of how
this project is fragmenting. This fragmentation is a fragmentation of the nationalist
movement’s claim to speak ‘for the people’.

A number of empirical survey-based studies have been tracking the growing anti-immigrant
sentiment in South Africa since 1994 (Crush, Macdonald, Rietzes, Murray). According to
these studies, there is a calculable steady increase in xenophobic sentiment at both the level of
officials within the state, as well as in the popular discourse. Secondly, there has been a steady
increase in the number of actual attacks on foreign nationals. It is important to keep in mind
that violence perpetrated against foreign migrants, and particularly Africans, was documented
as early as 1994. A 1998 national public opinion survey conducted by the Southern African
Migration Project (SAMP) using a sample of 3,200 found that the majority of South Africans
are indeed xenophobic and that opposition to immigration and foreign citizens is widespread: twenty five percent of South Africans want a total ban on immigration and forty-five percent support strict limitations on the numbers of immigrants allowed (Neocosmos, 2005: 114). Large percentages of respondents opposed offering African non-citizens the same access to a house as a South African (54 percent) and 61 percent felt that immigrants put additional strains on the economy. In addition, sixty five percent of black respondents said they would be ‘likely’ or very ‘likely’ to ‘take action’ to prevent people from other countries operating a business in their area (Crush, 2000: 125).

In the annual South African Social Attitudes survey (Figure 1. below), conducted by the HSRC, the growing number of South Africans who would not welcome foreigners is evident. The graph clearly shows a marked increase in anti-foreigner sentiment in urban informal settlements in particular, growing from 33% in 2003 to 47% in 2007.

**Figure 1: South Africans perception of foreigners, by settlement**

![Graph showing South Africans perception of foreigners, by settlement](image)

Whilst no government official has advocated violence against foreigners, Human Rights Watch (2000) noted a worrying trend from some state officials who were identifying foreigners as possible factors impeding developmental progress in South Africa. A former Minister of Home Affairs was quoted as saying that ‘if we as South Africans are going to
compete for scarce resources with millions of aliens who are pouring into South Africa, then we can bid goodbye to our Reconstruction and Development Programme’.

In the next section of this paper I look at how those who are most associated with the violence are being ‘explained’ and ‘represented’. The first representation is that the perpetrators of the violence are among the poorest of the poor. A compelling explanation for the violence points to the link between poverty, inequality and the struggle for economic survival in South Africa. The violence, as noted above, occurred in informal housing settlements, characterized by high levels of poverty, unemployment and housing shortages. In a country where more than fifty percent of the population lives below the poverty line, the competition for resources amongst the poor is intense, and leads to a number of negative effects and practices. This competition occurs and is perceived to occur over access to jobs, commodities, and housing, and contributes towards crime. In addition, against the backdrop of a global increase in food and energy prices, the poor globally are experiencing increased levels of economic security.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in South Africa, Antonio Guterres said the violence reflected growing global tensions:

"The underlying factor is basically poverty," he said. "We are witnessing an increase in the number and intensity of crisis that generate displacement around the world. We are very worried."

This view was underscored by Moeletsi Mbeki of the South African Institute for International Affairs, and brother of South African president, Thabo Mbeki, who argued that "treating the symptoms won't treat the underlying malaise." He has argued that the underlying problem is "the extreme and widespread poverty in South Africa, accompanied by homelessness and landlessness, and the lack of any way out of this."

A study by the Center for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation further emphasized this causal factor when it argued that 'the targeting of African foreigners is a product of proximity-they reside in areas where both poverty and frustration with a lack of government response to the economic situation is at its highest amongst South Africans.'

A version of the socio-economic argument suggests however that poverty and inequality in South Africa must be located within the global patterns of labour migrations and the political economy of the Southern African region, and with governing elites that have accepted the
global economic orthodoxies. These policies have affected the poor most harshly, but the argument goes, the current xenophobia attitudes in South Africa are primarily the result of an elite consensus built on the foundations of shared economic interests.

As the South African anthropologist, John Sharp argues, the current attitudes against foreign Africans are

“prevalent among the elites – the rising black elite as well as the established white elite – whose interests are the state’s main concern. This discourse is evident in the rhetoric that is regularly employed by political leaders…South African elites are happy to support this, or at least turn a blind eye, for various reasons. One involves the fear of competition from people from further to the north. Elite or would-be elite South Africans fear not only that these people may be better qualified for skilled and professional posts than they are, but also that the foreigners may take advantage of the various avenues dedicated to black advancement that have been opened in post-apartheid South Africa… Nor is this surprising, because it is not the elite but the poor in South Africa, as well as in the rest of Africa, who are paying this price. Dividing the poor people of Africa up into ‘national’ entities, so that ‘our’ poor and the ‘foreign’ poor are confined to separate and well-policed compartments, and graded into an explicit hierarchy within South Africa, is in the interests of the whole South African elite.” (Sharp, 2008, p2)

Sharp took offence to the report put out by the Human Sciences Research Council, which focused on the perceptions amongst South Africans in areas where the May violence took place (HSRC, 2008). Sharp puts emphasis not on what (negative views) many in the communities articulate about foreigners, but on the elites and on those who are beneficiaries in local instantiations of the global political economy. In other words, the sentiments of the urban poor are to explained through the material interests of local elites grasping the benefits of neo-liberal capitalism. Since the work of Nicos Poulantzas (1973), such homogenous conceptions of the elite have been shown to be quite inadequate to the task of explaining the contradictory and fractious nature of dominant forms of power under capitalist rule, and in explaining the specific and contingent forms that the idioms of ruling class ideology might take at the national and local level. However, what is useful to note is that Sharp’s emphasis on the elites, and the structural determinations of global capitalism implies an inevitability that the resentment of the poor will lead to violence against the rich. At the same time Sharp
is intent on showing that not all poor and black South Africans are xenophobic nor violent towards foreigners. Why some are, and why some are not, and how the targets come to be Othered in their particular forms is not given much attention. Whilst Sharp quotes Michael Neocosmos (2006) approvingly, his economic reductionism leads him to miss the crucial insight of Neocosmos’s argument in relation to xenophobia in South Africa, that the recourse to an explanation in economic terms is in and of itself insufficient:

“In actual fact, poverty can only account for the powerlessness, frustration and desperation of the perpetrators, but not for their target. After all why were not Whites or the rich or for that matter White foreigners in South Africa targeted instead? Of course it is a common occurrence that the powerless regularly take out their frustrations on the weakest: women, children, the elderly... and outsiders. Yet this will not suffice as an explanation.” (Neocosmos, 2008)

This brings me to a second conception of the representation of the perpetrators of the violence: as interpelled subjects of a xenophobic state. In his substantive discussion of the rise of negative sentiments and violence toward foreign Africans in South Africa, Neocosmos astutely points out that the leap from Economy to Identity is made far too easily in many of the available explanations (2006). If it is simply that high levels of inequality produced resentment, which leads to violence, why were poor Africans from elsewhere on the continent generally targets of attacks, and not wealthy white or black South Africans towards whom an economically motivated resentment might be expected to play itself out? Neocosmos correctly challenges us to to explain the behaviour of those who carried out the violence, rather than assume it from their socio-economic condition, as John Sharp does.

Neocosmos seeks his answer in the realm of ‘politics’, and in particular in the realm of a ‘state politics’. What I am interested in is his conception of the political, and in how it obscures certain domains of practices from theoretical exploration. I am not disputing the quite useful account in his book of the rise of xenophobic tendencies, nor the numerous documented cases of systematic prejudice and discrimination cited, nor the importance of understanding the enduring legacy of colonialism and the politics of indigeneity on citizenship in Africa. Neocosmos’s reading of the ‘political’ leads him to the conclusion that those who are acting in a xenophobic and violent manner do and act as they do because they
are so thoroughly under the sway of a centralized state hegemonic discourse, that in effect they are acting without thinking:

‘The prevalence of xenophobia suggests the opposite, in other words the absence of thought, and the weakness of popular prescriptions on the state…’ (Neocosmos, 2006, p135)

This absence of thought is the effect of a process which indicates that xenophobic and violent subjects are interpellated into the state’s discourse at the foundation level, through the constitution that founds the political community itself:

He argues that:

‘South African legislation has systematically provided the basis for a hegemonic xenophobic discourse within the country. The roots of the problem are to be found in the constitution itself which actually distinguishes between two categories of people: citizens and persons.’ (2006, p 98).

While noting the range of different, and sometimes contradictory messages emanating from state officials regarding the presence of foreign Africans in South Africa, Neocosmos goes on to conclude that, ‘Xenophobia is not about Human Rights, it is an issue of power, of politics; in the absence of an understanding of this fundamental fact, it seems impossible to address the problem, and the utterance of state institutions condemning xenophobia will continue to seem more and more like empty rhetoric, as it is state institutions which have provided the conditions for a hegemonic discourse of xenophobia in the first place’ ( Neocosmos, 2008, p103).

The structural discrimination towards foreigners, embedded in legal citizenship, translates into the realm of the popular, both at the level of state officials, transmitted through the media, which he argues is part of the state’s ideological apparatus:

‘The mass media in South Africa are clearly a state ideological apparatus despite their many conflicts with government, and in any case government, government must be clearly distinguished from the state itself” ( Neocosmos, 2006, p111).
At the legal foundational level therefore, a distinction is made between who is an insider and who is an outsider. This legal distinction, a distinction also about who is a citizen and who is not, translates into exclusionary practices which permeate the popular consciousness. That these conceptions are not generally challenged, indicates the level of subjection. A crucial distinction in Neocosmos’s conception of the political, is a distinction between liberal politics, and what he calls emancipatory politics. Liberal politics engenders a ‘passive’ form of rights-based citizenship, which encourages a ‘technicist’ conception of governance. On the other hand, ‘emancipatory’ politics implies an active form of citizenship, which makes demands on the state: ‘In sum, liberalism in postcolonial Africa systematically militates against the formation of a moral community of active citizens, in other word against the construction of political community properly understood. In the absence of political agency given the hegemony of political passivity, political choices cannot be made by the overwhelming majority, and political morality disappears’ (Neocosmos, 2006, p119).

In the absence of an emancipatory conception of politics, argues Neocosmos, a campaign against xenophobia is bound to fail, since to conceive of it through the lens of ‘rights’ is to condemn it the realm of legal citizenship, which is the very domain of its origin: ‘The overcoming of xenophobia then, presupposes the recovery of a prescriptive politics in society, and hence the recovery of an active citizenship…The problem is that an emancipatory politics has disappeared from post-apartheid society in favour of appeals to the state’ (Neocosmos, 2006, p133)

There are a number of questions that arise from this argument, particularly relating to how a state discourse of bureaucratic power becomes not simply a dominant discourse, but an hegemonic popular discourse, which is a distinction Neocosmos tends to obscure. He does point us usefully to the logic of authoritarianism, drawing on Mahmood Mamdani’s (1996) work on the legacies of colonial technologies of rule. This argument has its geneaology in the logic of bureaucratic power (Weber). And on the other hand, he couples this to an Althusserian conception of ideological domination which hails its subjects into subordination at the realm of colonizing their consciousness. The one speaks to a microphysics of domination at the positional level of the contingent, while the other speaks to a macrophysics of domination at large, which allows him to make a rather simplistic claim that the mass media are ideological state apparatuses in order to explain the passage of state discourse to popular discourse. There is additionally, a normative underpinning of Neocosmos’s
conception of active citizenship, which equates political community, moral community and emancipatory politics. For Neocosmos, xenophobic practices indicate an uncritical interpellation of subjects into their subjection. Their agency- acting violently towards outsiders- cannot therefore be made we are told from the disposition of choice nor political morality, since passive citizenship has done away with ‘prescriptive’ politics.

In this discussion I have attempted to show that one way of talking about those who are described as xenophobic and violent towards foreign Africans- mainly urban poor black Africans- in scholarly discourse, is to describe them as interpellated subjects of the new African elites (black and white), driven by two logics: an accumulative logic of capitalism, and a state logic which reproduces the legal boundaries of exclusionary national citizenship as practiced historically. Caught between the pincers of the Law and the Economy, belonging and survival are transformed into xenophobia and violence, and which marks an absence of political morality and prescriptive politics.

Let us turn now to how the State itself has described its violent and xenophobic subjects.

*Speaking like a State*

The official state response was characterized by two themes. These largely corresponded to the approach taken by the ruling African National Congress. The first was an expression of shock, and sort to remind those who where expressing negative sentiments about foreign Africans, and urging them to return to their countries of origin, that ‘we’ owe a debt of gratitude those on the African continent for their support and hospitality given to the exiled liberation movements during the anti-apartheid struggle.

This response reminded ‘the nation’, that South Africa was firmly committed to playing a constructive role on the African continent, through the building of regional and continental institutions which would facilitate development, peace and security. As the Secretary General of the ANC, Gwede Mantashe put it:

"Many of us, including myself, will think of the kindness we received in the poorest communities of Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, Nigeria and many other African states. We will recall that our neighbours were collectively punished by the apartheid regime for harbouring the cadres of the ANC. We will remember that our children were given
spaces in overcrowded schools in remote rural villages, and when we were injured and ill, the hospitals of many African countries nursed us back to health” (Mantashe, 2008)

The second theme of the political elites response was to name the event itself, and this vacillated between whether to deny or recognize xenophobia, and to name the events as the work of criminality. I have noted above that there is widely available empirical data that has been produced by policy oriented NGO’s, and reports in the media, to indicate systematic prejudice and growing violence towards foreign African immigrants over the last decade or more. I make this point in order to contrast the existence of this ‘available knowledge’ prior to May 2008, with the responses of the President and of political elites within the African National Congress in the immediate aftermath of the violence. These responses broadly invoked three interlinked tropes: denial, shame and criminality.

At a memorial service to honour the lives of those who had died in the violence, the state president, Thabo Mbeki, challenged the description of the violence as attributable to negative feelings toward foreigners:

"What happened during those days was not inspired by possessed nationalism, or extreme chauvinism, resulting in our communities violently expressing the hitherto unknown sentiments of mass and mindless hatred of foreigners – xenophobia…I heard it said insistently that my people have turned or become xenophobic… I wondered what the accusers knew about my people which I did not know…And this I must also say - none in our society has any right to encourage or incite xenophobia by trying to explain naked criminal activity by cloaking it in the garb of xenophobia." (Mbeki, 2008a)

It is a remarkable passage, rich with suggestion. Mbeki, as state president, in this enunciation absorbs into his the voice that of ‘the nation’, invoking the right to speak ‘for the people’, and performs in this short paragraph a number of actions which seek to give an official authoritative narration to what has happened. Firstly, he absorbs the nation into a familial and proprietary relationship of intimacy, by referring to my people, rather than ‘the people’. Secondly, he claims the right to name the event based on his privileged insider and authentic understanding of ‘his’ people, and in that move negates the right of others to name the event as such, presumably based on them not being of his people: ‘I wondered what the accusers knew about my people which I did not know’ (emphasis added). We would have to assume to
know, or to wonder, who are these ‘accusers’ Mbeki is referring to and admonishing? Thirdly and importantly, Mbeki then names the event ‘criminal’ and not xenophobic. By naming the event as ‘criminal’, and not the product of ‘possessed nationalism’, Mbeki also plucks the floundering nationalist project itself from the smouldering embers in order to invoke it as the grounds from which to articulate his displeasure: as an embarrassed elder.

A few days later, on the occasion of commemorating June 16th, the day of the Soweto student revolts in 1976, and now officially a public holiday celebrated as ‘Youth Day’, President Mbeki once more invoked the feeling of the shame of an elder, whilst also naming the event as criminal:

"[W]e must admit that all of us have been humiliated and shamed by the small number of young people who recently took it upon themselves to lead the criminal acts against fellow Africans who live amongst us, and participated in looting their property." (Mbeki, 2008)

The General-Secretary of the African National Congress, Gwede Mantashe, echoed more forcefully the view that the violence was the result of criminal agency:

“we support the deployment of the SANDF to the effected areas, to do no more than support the police in rooting out the criminals who inspired these acts of barbarism".” (Mantashe,2008)

And the President of the ANC Youth League, Julius Malema, proclaimed in even stronger language that:

“our people must not be hoodwinked by criminal elements who claim to have a solution to their plight. Killing others and burning their homes does nothing for our society, and may cloud genuine concerns they may have. We call on government to unleash every resource at its disposal to nip this anarchy in the bud, including the deployment of the military if the need arise…. We do not believe the government has done enough to arrest this anarchy and we expect swift and decisive action from the law enforcement agencies and other relevant organs of state. Those who quell this anarchy must be apprehended and the criminal justice system must ensure that they rot in jail. We call on
our communities to work with the law enforcement agencies to identify these thugs and ensure that they are removed from our communities as they have no place in our society. (Malema, 2008)

Malema has become somewhat known, and controversial in the mainstream for his militarist prose and posturing. In this statement the proclamation against illegitimate violence by citizens against others, sheds the gloves of constitutional discourse, to reveal the bare-knuckles of the legitimated violence of the state. This violence is being expressed here more nakedly than usual, but explicitly reveals the violence that Michel Foucault has argued lurks behind the force of Law, as the coercive might of the state is called forth to ‘nip’, to ‘quell’ anarchy, and to ensure that the offenders ‘rot’ in jail (Foucault, 1978; Benjamin, 1978).

Provincial ANC leader Bheki Cele, the MEC for transport, community safety and liaison in Kwazulu-Natal departed slightly from the script when he noted that ‘South Africans are "disgusted" at the recent xenophobic attacks’ (Daily News, 2008). The description, as we can see in these accounts, of those who carried out the attacks, from the official discourse of the political ruling elite, describes the participants as ‘hooligans’, as ‘anarchists’, as ‘thugs’, and most consistently, as ‘criminals’, that have ‘shamed’ and ‘embarrassed’ the ‘nation’.

The Elite/Subaltern Rupture

In this next, and final section of the paper, I want to suggest a different conceptual ground from which to read the events of May 2008, which I argue, might be the grounds from which to conceptualize a political subjectivity lost in the scholarly and political discourse I have discussed above. This is towards being able to think an account which does not presuppose a normative or prescriptive character to the subjectivity or intentions of the subjected. We have seen that in the reading of subjection as the interpellated subject of state discourse, a ‘moral character’ to the ideal agent of emancipatory politics is assumed, desired and lamented by its absence on the post-apartheid political landscape. On the other hand, we have seen that in the reading of the political elites, an assumed normative conception of the law-abiding citizen which absorbs the elite discourse of Pan-Africanism, of a debt to the continent for its hospitality to the liberation movement exiles, is also assumed and lamented as absent. Both these accounts share the epistemic affinity of marking the event by the presence of an absence, of presupposed conceptions of the political subject. The one laments the absence of a fully interpellated subject- the law abiding citizen, and the other laments absence of the
non-interpellated subject, the political agent of emancipatory politics. If the one laments too much interpellation, the other laments too little interpellation!

If we dispense with a theorization of the absent present, of what Valentin Mudimbe has described as ‘theologies of salvation’, what form of politics might we be seeing unfold in the corporatized identity given to those who have participated in the violence of May, those who have been described as ‘hooligans’, ‘marauding mobs’, and ‘barbarians’ embarking on a criminal rampage? In his discussion of violence in postcolonial Indonesia, James Siegel noted the rise of the figure of the ‘criminal’, who was given the vernacular term ‘kriminalitas’, and its relationship to the ‘nation’:

“The criminals of kriminalitas, emerging from anonymity to cause discomforting surprise, were the continuation of ‘the people’ adapted to the New Order. They came at a time when the division between classes had become increasingly marked by disparities in material conditions, while the explicit definitions of those who have and those who do not have are suppressed. It is a time when communication among various parts of the nation is felt to have been broken off, though this remains an implicit fear given the official thinking in which the nation is conceived of as a family while criticism is censored. “Criminals” are “the people”, who, lacking a voice, burst on to the public scene nonetheless.” (Seigel, 1998, p4)

Recall the political elites invocation of the nation as a family, of ‘our people’, and of how those who behave this way are not part of what we, ‘South Africans’ do. In one of the few newspapers articles which attempted to explore the views of those who participated in the expulsion of foreign Africans from informal settlements, headlined ‘Inside the Mob’, journalists Thembelihle Tshabala and Monako Dibetle, writing for the Mail and Guardian, interviewed residents in Alexandra township (Tshabalala & Dibetle, 2008). One interviewee, Simon Mvelase, an Induna at the Jeppe hostel, also invoked a claim to speak for the ‘people’, as ‘South Africans’, but with a rather different message we have heard from the political elites. He noted sanguinely that ‘South Africans have come to express themselves against overcrowding and the loss of jobs because of the growing number of foreigners. Its not a Zulu matter, its for all South Africans’. He went on: ‘The people of South Africa have spoken... They are revolting against foreigners who are making their lives difficult by taking jobs and increasing crime and corruption’
Another journalist, Bronwynne Jooste, interviewed a group of young men in Nyanga in Cape Town, who had taken part in the looting of shops owned by Somali traders. They spoke without remorse about their actions, acknowledging that it was ‘criminal’, but were unrepentant: ‘You must remember the people here are poor, they are hungry. I saw them carrying all the meat and chicken out of the shops. Later that night we made a braai and ate it. It was a crime, yes, but that that days was just a way for the people to get stuff they cant buy themselves’ (Jooste, 2008). Articles like these, which gave voice to views that might conflict with middle-class and legal morality, where far and few between.

The emergent and rapidly growing tabloid press in South Africa, has however thrived on their representations of the ‘popular’. The Daily Sun, South Africa’s fastest growing and largest paper, a tabloid, was taken to court by the Media Monitoring Project, for its reportage on xenophobic sentiments amongst South Africa’s poor in a way that, alleged the MMP, did not condemn or denounce these views (see Hadland). The media, according to the MMP, have a responsibility to educate and shape the views of citizen, and the Daily Sun, ‘in its capacity as the biggest daily newspaper in South Africa, can play a very constructive and positive role (MMP, 2008, p4).

The matter-of-fact recognition and disavowal of the moral claim of the law on their social conduct by the youth quoted above, and the wildfire growth of a tabloid press that thrives unapologetically on reporting aspects of popular and working class life taken to be distasteful to the mainstream media in South Africa, is worth exploring. It speaks to the emerging disjunction between spheres of social existence, idioms of social practice, and iterations of self-fashioning in which ‘the people’ becomes an openly contested signification which no longer belongs to the dominant nationalist discourse. Discussing this disjuncture in the Jamaican context, David Scott has observed that ‘what is particularly striking about the new sense of social division that marks the…present is that this division is characterized neither by the ready assumption of the moral authority of the middle class, nor by its ability to bring the political force of the state it manages to bear on the cultivation of these values. In short, in the postcolonial present, it can no longer be said that the working classes are “alienated” form the middle-class values. It has now to be said that they are simply indifferent to them.’ (Scott, 1999, p194).
Conclusion: the nation and multiple public spheres

In this essay, so far, I have suggested two ways in which to talk about the violence of May 2008, in which the figure of the xenophobe, the criminalized young man, is either a figure without emancipatory politics, or a figure insufficiently incorporated into the realm of the good citizen. I am arguing that compelling as the normative aspirations that underlie both projects might be, they miss or refuse to engage with emergent forms of subaltern self-fashioning at work in the society, as forms of ethics rather than politics perhaps. These forms of self-fashioning do not articulate themselves in the familiar terms of the Marxist left nor of the liberal-nationalist right, and an attempt to give a revolutionary or nationalist reading to them ends in the expression of disappointment and nostalgia for a moment of what was (a memory of emancipatory politics no longer there), or a lament for moment of what should be (the incomplete project of development and national cohesion). These forms of self-fashioning, contained in practices which openly flout the law, express chauvinist views and make statements which make different claims for and on behalf of ‘the people ‘and the ‘nation’ to those which the middle classes hold dear, constitute what I am calling ‘dangerous ordinary discourse’. A discourse disowned as not a part of the nation-as-family, disavowed of political character, and dismissed as not ‘South African’. Policed in the ‘public sphere’, it ruptures it occasionally, abruptly and dramatically, as the vivid photograph of a burning Mozambican man did in May 2008, setting of a ‘moral panic’ expressed in the middle-class press’s rush to bold headlines of condemnation, fused with a mixture of horror, embarrassment and incomprehension.

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1 Tshitereke, C (1999) Xenophobia and Relative Deprivation, Crossings, June

ii http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-05/24/content_8240500.htm

iii http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-05/24/content_8240500.htm


v It is this sentiment, which co-exists in a fraught and contradictory relationship alongside discriminatory legislation and practices toward foreign Africans amongst the political elites, and which also commits them to a Pan-African developmental agenda, that is lost in John Sharps homogenous conception of the elites.

vi The invocation of criminality features as both a state rationale for explaining the event, and also as a subaltern rationale for explaining the attacks. This was picked up by Mantashe, when he noted that “The same mob that accused people of being criminals acted in the most obscene of criminal ways.” As one reporter noted ‘Another lynch-mob leader, Thabang Mokolane (21), told the Mail & Guardian that foreigners are more criminally inclined than South Africans and they get away with crime because they can afford to pay chocho (bribes). And in another report, the violence was justified by a participant because: “We're afraid to walk at night because we fear being mugged by these people,” said Mokolane. “We're also tired of white people thinking that we're criminals when these people are worse than us.” (Mail and Guardian, ‘Inside the Mob’, 2008)

vii More recently Malema claimed he would kill to defend ANC President Jacob Zuma, which sparked a public outcry in the press. See ‘Malema and the Kill for Zuma saga’, The Times. http://multimedia.thetimes.co.za/audio/2008/06/malema-kill-for-zuma/

viii Cite the statement by the Anthropology Association of South Africa