SOUTH AFRICA AND THE 2010 WORLD CUP

Demons and Democracy:
Positive Values and the Politics of Outsiderness in Contemporary South Africa[1]

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On 11 May 2008, foreigners and other 'outsiders' were systematically attacked in Alexandra, a few kilometres from Southern Africa's financial centre and some of the continent's most exclusive homes. Within days, violence and fear spread across the country. During the two terrible weeks that followed, at least 62 people died. Another 670 people were wounded, dozens raped, and thousands verbally assaulted. By the end of the melee, a hundred and fifty thousand or more were displaced, tens of thousands fleeing to Mozambique or other neighbouring countries. Most were from elsewhere in Africa, others were South Africans who married foreigners, resisted the violent orgy, or belonged to minorities that are not quite South African enough. In the process, perpetrators destroyed or redistributed millions of Rand worth of goods and hundreds of shacks and houses.

At first this seems an inopportune time to reflect on xenophobia and the language we use to talk about outsiders of various stripes. Many in the government would certainly like to pretend that all this is now behind us and for many the 2008 attacks are little more than a minor entry in the country's ever expanding almanac of conflicts and crises. While xenophobia may seem far removed from racial tensions, poverty, and public protest, how we understand and address these concerns is inseparable from the bias and violence against outsiders. At the root of these tensions is a discourse of citizenship and transformation that

insists — often implicitly — on the categorization of people into a relatively homogenous, entitled majority and those for whom, by virtue of their experience, origins, or occupation, political recognition comes only by demonstrating their utility to a true and deserving political community. This is where our problem lies. Without a new language and politics of difference, the more we push for transformation, social cohesion, and dialogue, the more conflict and various forms of exclusion we are likely to see. Non-nationals are part, but in some ways a small part of that story. Unfortunately, I fear the ways we have mobilised for their rights may have done more harm than good.

If we are to move forward, we need to be clear just what we are talking about. We frequently hear people speak about how 'xenophobia happened in 2008' or, more generally, about South Africans' xenophobic tendencies. There are a few problems with these approaches. First, xenophobic violence has been with us for decades and has by no means ended. Dozens of foreigners have been attacked or killed since May 2008. Many are being regularly told that once the world cup circus has left, they too will be forced to get out. More broadly, xenophobia is more than a behavioural tendency. Elsewhere in the world the concept is often equated with a form of racism. While we need a term that differentiates

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discrimination towards outsiders from other forms of discrimination, the focus on internalised, naturalised attitudes towards others based on immutable characteristic – in this case origins – is what I am talking about here. Although foreigners are the most obvious victims, my discussion here is not limited to foreigners from across the border. We must remember that a third of those killed during the 2008 attacks were South African citizens. Their deaths stem from a cognitive schema that labels a range of people – regardless of citizenship – as outsiders who lack the full entitlements of urban residence. In Ermelo, Masiphumelele and elsewhere in the country, conflicts have erupted over the rights of locals versus other citizens. Outside of Durban, violent struggles have emerged among South African citizens that fuse political and ethnic loyalties with economic interests.

It is in light of these ethno-spatial and national divisions that I approach democracy. The concept is loaded, open to multiple interpretations and measures including, among others, equal application of the law, sanction for those who break or ignore it, administrative justice, and the freedom of dissent and difference. It is this freedom of difference or, rather, the freedom to be different that is at the heart of what concerns us here. For me, a strong democracy – of which there are precious few in the contemporary world – minimally adhere to Kant's law of hospitality as outlined in Perpetual Peace, where outsiders have a right to claim a decent reception, to be recognised and – if not embraced – treated with a level of dignity that recognises a common humanity. There are reasons why his formulation is imperfect, but it is a start. If we can get that basic level of recognition, we can then go a bit further, but the first step is accepting the legitimacy of the other's presence.

This privileging of recognition and mutual respect is critical in a country like South Africa where diversity, mobility, fragmentation, and novel social configurations – sometimes hostile, sometimes benign – are the norm, not the exception and it is in the most fragmented and heterogeneous areas where violence is most likely. The forms of community – particularly urban community – is what we must understand if we wish to identify the sources of xenophobia and, potentially, work to address it.

It is the nature of recognition – the grounds on which people make sense of themselves and others and the basis of community – around which my argument is formed. Elsewhere in the world, these

debates are typically over the terms in which migrants or other marginal minorities are incorporated into a self-recognised body politic. The problem in transposing those deliberations in South Africa – particularly urban South Africa – is that we are hardly in a position to presume there is a polity. It is in the processes of creating a political community – a community of mutually recognisable political subjects – that we find the sources of xenophobic mindsets and the source of xenophobic actions.

Let me explain. First, given its political dominance, The African National Congress effectively controls the gateways to political inclusion and public representation (although elsewhere social inclusion takes place largely outside formal politics and the law). Although they are electorally dominant, they still lack the moral legitimacy that comes from reflecting the general will. Because there are voters but not a polity, the logics of politics shifts from policy and the technical aspects of governing to fashioning a body politic that can legitimise its rule. As Rousseau and De Tocqueville suggested many years ago, reflecting the general will first means creating it.

In trying to create this community, they have heeded Nkrumah's advice to 'seek ye first the political kingdom…" Initially this could be seen in the strategies of floor crossing and co-opting sworn enemies (e.g., the New National Party). This has increasingly manifested itself as appeals to establish a singular set of values –recently punted as a demand for social cohesion – in the hope of conjuring a nation from South Africa's diversity. If successful, the ANC will then be positioned as the progenitor and guardian of the newly constituted nation.

I understand the logic but it is the practical choices and strategies that worry me. Let us look, for example, at Jacob Zuma's 2009 letter, the 'Moral Vision of the ANC.' He begins with explicit reference to the Constitution's most universalistic and liberal commitments: to respect individual rights and diversity. With that out of the way, he shifts the language to that of collective, almost communitarian politics. Here he argues that, "One of the areas that we will focus on more strongly is nation building. The ANC will work to promote the vision of a united South African nation, sharing common positive values…". Through these evocations of nation and of common positive values he shifts away from the possibility of an egalitarian individualism or some form of mosaic multiculturalism to the language of monocultural dominance. At first glance this

all sounds quite innocuous. It is in the bit about transcending difference that we feel the rub.

In its approach, the ANC offers us a sleight of hand. In almost all cases, the language of overcoming difference sets as a prerequisite narrowing or eliminating the economic inequalities that prevent the South African majority from claiming their place in the South African polity. Even in the Department of Justice's own, Draft Action Plan to Counter Racism, Xenophobia and Other Related Forms of Discrimination, it argues that the only effective means of countering both racism and xenophobia is by addressing the decades of racialized denigration manifested by economic deprivation. This is a worthy goal but it should trouble us for at least two reasons.

First, it shifts the terms of negotiating difference from battles over culture and values to the seemingly less contentious debate around the question of economic liberation. Who, after all, can deny the righteousness of overcoming a past injustice and the truism that full participation in society requires a relatively level playing field? Still, this is a depoliticisation of difference that denies the possibility to debate values by diverting attention almost exclusively to material concerns.

The second effect is more insidious. By speaking of the need to address the denigrations of the past, the ANC has enforced and further naturalised the categories of difference inherited from apartheid. If the primary positive political value is about remedying past inequalities, we have little choice but to keep using the racial categories used to generate such inequities. Whites remain the reference group and everyone else must catch-up. Should we somehow manage to erase those boundaries of difference, we would render the government's project invisible. By focusing largely on this white-black dialectical, the official discourse almost fully excludes what we commonly call Indians, Coloured, Chinese, and other groups. It also means we do not consider class, gender, or other equally –and potentially more potent – sources of division.

Through this sleight of hand, the ANC has fused economic liberation with a battle over values. For Jacob Zuma – and I believe for many others in the political leadership and the citizenry – the only 'positive values' that we can accept in politics is about promoting the welfare of politically disadvantaged people. In practice, this language of empowerment is effectively about who is entitled and who is not, and this has become a language of race and space.

In the language of contemporary South African politics we see the creation of a ring fence – a laager, if you will–around the deserving citizens and the heart of South Africa's nation and political community. In Chipkin's work, Do South Africans Exist, he argues that the language of individually empowered citizen is no longer appropriate. Instead, what the ANC is seeking to create is the 'authentic national subject' and the 'authentic representatives of the nation' that must now be economically empowered. Critically, membership in this group is only open to those who can show that they were denied the wealth and benefits of South African society. Resistance to a June 2008 court decision granting a small group of South African Chinese the right to be classed as 'black' for affirmative action (i.e., BEE) purposes illustrates how committed people are to manning the border. Elsewhere, government continues to measure success in education, water, or other forms of transformation almost purely in racial terms while almost overtly denying the possibility that greater and more meaningful divisions may exist within the 'black' population than between blacks and whites (or anyone else). In the meantime, dissent, criticism, or claims to values other than those of liberating the black nation are often dismissed as threatening to undermine the transformation and, I suspect, the ANC's legitimacy as the carrier of the national spirit and holder of all but a few of the highest political offices.

This leaves us in a situation in which there are two ongoing struggles. The first is about defining the values of the South African population internally. This continues with ongoing debate over the death penalty, homosexuality – and even homosexual imagery – free speech, patriarchy, and a range of other greater or lesser points of cultural identification and signification. Obviously, the more homogeneity the leadership can achieve, the easier it will be for them to reflect – or claim to – the general will. The second is over what those outside the laager are to do to claim a space in South African politics. From how I read it, the only appropriate behaviour is to support, through actions and attitudes, what Zuma has called the country's positive value; one can claim political privilege and even a right to presence only to the extent that we are seen as economically empowering a deserving majority.

With this we come to the position of newly arrived foreigners and other questionable groups in South Africa's political cosmology and why they have so much trouble even achieving the minimal kind of recognition Kant was talking about. In even the seemingly

progressive language of academics and activists, South Africans have accepted a dual logic that legitimises the frustrations, fears, and exclusions of the emerging South African polity: that people from elsewhere on the continent are inherently different and, moreover, that they are an economic threat. As such, they not only endanger welfare but also the national democratic revolution. The number of foreigners and their economic impact does not support these conclusions, but it is, after all, perceptions and not facts that drive politics. And the perception that foreigners undermine 'local' interests has turned them into a resource to be used by unscrupulous politicians. This same demonization has also prevented the government officials from responding appropriately to violence or threats of it. As a policeman told a colleague soon after the 2008 attacks, "we've spent more than a decade trying to convince the local community that we're on their side. If they see us defending foreigners, all that we've done will be lost"

With this I would like to refer to an earlier point: that responses to xenophobia on the part of civil society, government, and migrants themselves may only be enforcing the sense of threat and difference that is at the root of xenophobia and, at the very least, denying the possibility of recognition either as a guest entitled to basic rights or, better yet, unencumbered recognition as people invested in a shared future.

Although the government has done very little to counter xenophobia – the National Action Plan on Racism and Xenophobia is now almost 8 years behind schedule – the interventions it has taken to counter violence and to promote tolerance also risk entrenching a language of difference through the forms of recognition that they demand. Here I refer to the process of community dialogues that the government – as well as the Nelson Mandela Foundation and others – have launched in the wake of the 2008 attacks. These dialogues are premised – as was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission– on the notion that by creating neutral grounds for deliberation, confrontation, and debate the participants will come to recognise and accept as political partners, if not as equals, those they previously opposed.

However, the structure of these deliberations themselves help to constitute differences since participation demands we accept the terms of engagement and present ourselves as opposing others. The way that this has been done is by demanding that 'community representatives' take part in negotiations. For many years such strategies largely failed because migrant communities refused to recognise themselves as a community. However, in the post 2008 events, they have come to realise – as have the broader South African politics – the communitarian basis on which South African politics is organised and have, to a certain extent, sought to organise accordingly. In some instances these groups have sought South African members, but they have rarely managed to elicit sustained support and participation from the poor black population. With organisations such as the Africa Diaspora Forum and broader national association, migrant groups have become active participants in entrenching and naturalising these differences and on terms that are inherently unequal and confrontational. By demanding participation as citizens and strangers, these processes assert a power and authority over identification of the stranger that entrenches a relationship of subjugation and outsiderness.

Those working on behalf of migrants – NGOs, individual activists, some progressive government officials, and some migrant associations – have tried a number of other strategies to achieve recognition and elicit hospitality from the South African population. One of these has involved a series of appeals based on legal and moral obligations to assist those who are vulnerable and in need. Such appeals mean we approach foreigners not as potential equals to whom we owe a human obligation as we would our neighbours or our own countrymen. Instead of being recognised as equals who may also have been disadvantaged by apartheid, our response to them is one of obligation to the needy: the kind of obligation we feel (or should feel) to a dependent child or orphan. In an environment in which the primary political project is about economic transformation, this only perpetuates the idea of the collective outsider as inherently threatening because they distract us from our adherence to the country's positive political value: dedicating scarce resources to foreigners means less for 'us'. This may not be empirically true, but our language of obligations and rights often speaks to these fears.

In rounding up, I wish to just touch briefly on another migrant response to the combination of paternalism and hostility they have received; it is worth discussing here for what it means to the nature of the South African political community. This is a kind of self-alienation where foreigners approach South Africans with a kind of elitist disdain, looking down

on their struggles and values as somehow lesser than their own. In many cases, particularly after the 2008 attacks, this means physical as well as social self-segregation. Rather than investing in South Africa, they deny the rights of South Africans to label or bind them. As South Africans forge a national identity, many foreigners are shaping counter identities that try to justify their presence in the country without becoming part of it. This is an understandable response but, like the attitudes they confront, is similarly premised on the lack of mutual recognition. The more distant they become, the more reified South Africans seem and the greater the gulf of difference becomes.

Where does this leave us? Unfortunately, I am a political scientist and not a politician — and a foreign one at that — both positions that leave me uniquely ill-equipped to offer practical suggestions that any one is likely to heed. What I can say is that in 1994 South Africa faced a series of difficult dilemmas that have been addressed in ways that have raised other, increasingly acute challenges.

To be sure, South Africa is in a unique position, not just because of its tragic and twisted history, but because of the time of its rebirth. Politicians have chosen to try to create a classic, modern nation state in an era and in a region in which such a construct is practically impossible to achieve. This reflects a combination of political exigencies — of trying to win the support of the black majority while not drawing attention to difference — and a lack of creativity and foresight. Denying many forms of difference has entrenched apartheid era racial categories as the primary basis for political mobilization. It has also generated an endless war: overcoming racialized economic disparities is impossible in this generation and for many generations to come. If the only positive political value we have is about economic transformation and tolerance can come only later, we have only justified, not countered, discrimination.

If we are to move forward in addressing conflicts over difference — xenophobia, racism, homophobia, misogyny, ethnic chauvinism, spatial communitarianism — we will have to take on the difficult task of, 'desanctifying' some elements of the identity we have increasingly taken for granted: race and nationality being the most important for our discussion here. In place of dialectics — deserving, disadvantaged blacks versus over-privileged whites or South Africans versus foreigners — we need to work towards a more pragmatic language of politics that allows us to see the differences that are preventing us from fighting poverty and marginalisation, not merely those that are politically expedient. Doing so will not be easy; it will require critiques in places and of people that have been largely immune to censure.

Rather than evaluating if policies and politicians are in line with Zuma's positive values, we should also begin asking if they are in line with Kant's laws of hospitality and others' suggestions that good policies are those that reflect the interests of all who will be affected by them. Addressing xenophobia is the subject of this article, but that is not where this effort should start. Rather, we must first reconsider the categories and values informing how South Africans address each other. Although I am not optimistic, I believe it is not too late to look for an alternative to a political community that will only become inclusive after we have banished the evils of racial inequality. If South Africa clings almost exclusively to a language of race and victimisation, embedding it in policies and public discourse, the possibility of a universal, humanistic recognition — for foreigners and for fellow citizens — will continue to elude us.

Biography
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Loren Landau has been with the 'Forced Migration Studies Project' (WITS University) since 2002. His research explores sovereignty; migration and urban transformation; and state-society relations, and he has published extensively on these issues. Loren holds a PhD and an MA in Political Science from the University of California, Berkeley, an MSc in Development Studies from London School of Economics and Political Science, and a BA in Political Science from the University of Washington, Seattle. He has received a number of research awards and fellowships including the Vice Chancellor's Award for Academic Citizenship (University of the Witwatersrand) and the Lisa Gilad Prize for most innovative and thoughtful contribution to the advancement of refugee studies (International Association for the Study of Forced Migration).