

IMAGINED LIBERATION



XENOPHOBIA, CITIZENSHIP AND
IDENTITY IN SOUTH AFRICA,
GERMANY AND CANADA

HERIBERT ADAM
KOGILA MOODLEY



SUN PRESS



*Imagined Liberation:
Xenophobia, Citizenship and Identity in South Africa, Germany and Canada*

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Hendrik Geyer
STIAS Director
Stellenbosch
June 2011

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PUBLICATION

*For the next generation:
Kiran, Talia, Misha, Mila and Milan
– to encourage future engaged citizenship*

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	11
INTRODUCTION	13
<hr/>	
PART I	Integrating difference
1	Comparative xenophobia 21
2	South African perspectives on xenophobia 35
3	Youth voices 51
	Ethnography of township schools 55 • Attitudes of township learners towards foreigners 61 • Conclusions 72
4	Falling from grace 75
	Shifting views on 'Mandelaland' 75 • Reflections on Mandela 79 • Patriarchy, sexual violence and HIV/Aids 87 • Crime and punishment 92 • Corruption and consumption 95 • Re-racialisation, affirmative action and Black Economic Empowerment 103 • Descent into Zimbabwe? 105 • Popular sentiment versus a liberal constitution 109
<hr/>	
PART II	Variations of migration policies: Africa, Germany and Canada
5	Settler colonialism 119
	Two types of colonialism 120 • Founding myths and intergroup attitudes 123 • Metropolitan settler relations 126
6	Xenophobia in Germany 133
	The case of the Roma and Sinti 138 • Muslims as enemies 140 • Capitalist versus communist xenophobia 143
7	Multicultural Canada 147
	Canadian identities and cultural traditions 154 • Immigrant selection 161 • Opportunistic multiculturalism 166

PART III	Political literacy	
8	Xenophobia and political literacy	171
	Comparing political education in multi-ethnic societies <i>173</i> • Political literacy as strategy to combat xenophobia <i>176</i> • Nation, nationalism, ethnicity, ethnocentrism and critical patriotism <i>181</i> • Cosmopolitan consciousness <i>184</i>	
9	Theorising xenophobia	189
<hr/>		
CONCLUSION	199
APPENDICES	Author autobiographies	
I	Navigating ‘difference’: Insiders, outsiders and contending identities	209
II	Controversies: Peacemaking in divided societies.....	227
ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS	243
REFERENCES	245
INDEX OF NAMES	254

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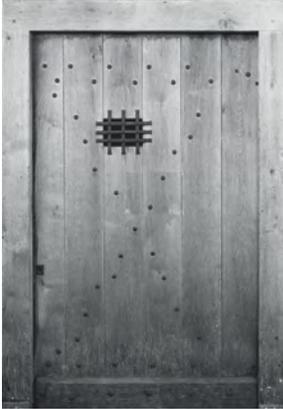
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Chapters 8 and 9, which focus on Political Literacy, offer a synthesis of arguments from previous publications. We thank the respective publishers for permission to reproduce short excerpts from these publications here. Chapter 5 ('Settler Colonialism') was expanded and translated from the original German (to appear in another forthcoming book), and a shorter version of Chapter 7 (about the Canadian approach to immigration) appears in *Intercultural Education*, 23(5).

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Kogila Moodley and Heribert Adam
Cape Town, June 2013



INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK EXPLORES XENOPHOBIA EMPIRICALLY, COMPARATIVELY AND theoretically. We portray xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa, post-fascist Germany, and multicultural Canada. Have these societies learned humanistic lessons from a racist past? With the main research informing this book having been conducted in South Africa, and with a particular focus on the current situation, we probe what went right and what went wrong with the vision of liberation.

Imagined Liberation traces how the dream of an inclusive, non-racial democracy faded in South Africa. For many former anti-apartheid activists, this vision has turned into a delusion, while others are still imagining liberation through outdated policies. In order to support our analysis, we use xenophobia as a prism for South African society at large. Inasmuch as xenophobic violence signifies the degree to which the imagined post-apartheid solidarity is being jettisoned, with a marginalised underclass displaying extreme hostility towards fellow Africans, our empirical evidence probes perceptions about foreigners in selected all-black

township schools. Thus, through the lens of xenophobia, we attempt to capture revealing aspects of the current collective mindset, twenty years after the abolition of legalised apartheid.

What puzzled us is that a society which, at the very least, freed itself from institutionalised racism, now practices new forms of black-on-black racialisation. Strangely, whites are not considered ‘amakwerekwere’, or hated foreigners. Whether visitors or locals, they are welcomed as tourists, investors and job creators. Still, hardly any white ever enters the sprawling slums. On the whole, racial groups continue to live apart and hardly socialise, yet interact respectfully, even amiably, at work and in the marketplace.

Our ethnographic research in townships in the Western Cape was aimed at discovering empirically what motivates a strongly anti-apartheid township population to turn violently against fellow Africans by exploring the reasoning and rationalisations behind this hostility. However, for successful intervention, it is not sufficient to merely register and document xenophobia by means of pre-formulated statements found in attitude surveys. For this reason, we let the respondents themselves give reasons for their hostility in open-ended replies. Furthermore, the way in which political figures, police personnel, teachers and community leaders react to xenophobia – whether they tolerate, deny, condemn, or even incite it – seems an important factor. We portray this reality as we experienced it through focus groups, surveys and interviews in impoverished township schools and participant observation in the racialised affluence of Cape Town and Stellenbosch during our annual research visits.

The research literature on xenophobia highlights foremost competition for scarce employment, demands for entitlement, and scapegoating for poor living conditions, as well as entrenched habits carried over from the apartheid era. But how do these factors relate to one another? And what about the new human rights culture of a progressive constitution? Here we have a society that liberated itself in the name of universal human rights demonstrating extreme hostility towards persons who move to South Africa because they lack these very rights in their own home countries, where they face limited life chances brought on by lack of employment opportunities, civil wars or environmental disasters. The liberal democracy ushered in by the end of apartheid guarantees basic rights for all South African residents, regardless of citizenship. Yet these inclusive human rights jar with the exclusive entitlements of citizens that underlie the legitimacy of a liberal democracy. Of all the countries in the world, South Africa has admitted the most refugees. Is there a limit to this number, dictated by a state’s resources and the hospitality of its citizens? This so-called ‘liberal paradox’ characterises all Western democracies that have enshrined the rights of refugees and asylum seekers.

Modern xenophobia harks at entitlements for citizens from which foreigners are excluded. But how can universal human rights be reconciled with the closed rights of citizens? Can hostility towards strangers be considered a universal phenomenon, perhaps an evolutionary mechanism for maximising survival, as sociobiologists assert? Is the antagonism displayed towards persons perceived as foreigners the product of insecure identity? Can xenophobia be unlearned and corrected through appropriate political education? How may one nurture empathy with refugees? After all, the strangers in this case are not visibly different, but share the same phenotype: sisters and brothers who assisted South African liberation, as the story goes. Is the notion of 'dangerous strangers' therefore invented or constructed, just as European anti-Semitism once attributed all kinds of imaginary features to Jews, or Islamophobia now ostracises Muslims and predicts an Islamic 'tide swamping' of a childless Europe, transforming it into 'Eurabia' after emptying its welfare budgets?

Or is xenophobia a collective paranoid delusion? The psychiatric profession generally defines delusions as dogmatic beliefs that are held with great conviction, yet lack any basis in evidence. The idea of foreigners swamping, flooding, drowning, polluting a nation, introducing diseases, peddling drugs, defrauding the locals and seducing women conjures up the threat of strangers lurking to invade and undermine a virtuous people – an age-old tactic to construct an enemy. In this way, anti-Semitism under Nazi rule succeeded in mobilising against a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. Xenophobia resembles this fictitious logic, but differs from the paranoid delusions of anti-Semitism. In economic terms, migrants pose a real threat under conditions of scarcity, with the newcomers competing with locals for scarce resources, especially jobs. This consideration imbues xenophobia with a rationality which anti-Semitism lacks and that cautions against pathologising it. A similar caution applies to the conflation of xenophobia with racism: the 'figment of the pigment' lacks a scientific basis. It was invented to rationalise colonial domination by justifying it with a 'civilising mission', presented as the 'white man's burden'. In contrast, the 'othering' of strangers rests on the right of locals: citizenship legitimises excluding non-citizens from the rights of natives.

But xenophobia cannot be reduced to problems of a labour market alone and we soon had to question whether an impoverished township life suffices to explain scapegoating. The neglect of shanty towns was embedded in the overall political development of South Africa, where an urban elite continues to pay only lip service to the fate of the poor. This led us to revisit a once glorified liberation movement that is still politically strong, but morally weak. The long chapter 'Falling from Grace' sketches in broad strokes the collective state of mind of the 'Rainbow Nation' and identifies various moral turning points: the HIV/Aids denial, the continuing high crime rate, the corruption crisis and waste of public funds in the controversial

arms deal, re-racialisation through black economic empowerment (BEE), and the African National Congress's passivity towards the Mugabe regime. We argue that South Africa is not threatened by an unlikely descent into a Zimbabwe-type dictatorship, but by its opposite: disintegration into anarchy once liberation ideals lose their appeal. Given the deepening inequality in the country – no longer mainly based on race, but also increasingly on class – the disillusionment with an imagined liberation might trigger all kinds of irrational reactions.

As is well known, South African decolonisation was not achieved by military means and the departure of the colonizers – as happened in other African settler societies such as Algeria, Rhodesia, Kenya, Mozambique and Angola – but with the cooperation of the power holders, who could have delayed their ultimate demise for some time yet. This unprecedented 'negotiated revolution' forced both antagonists to compromise, and constrained the implementation of the initial visions of the new regime: transforming a colonial economy and capturing its commanding heights, redistributing wealth and land, or nationalising the mines proved impossible when the compromise rested essentially on the replacement of the political class in return for maintenance of the old property relations and neoliberal market order.

What needs clarification is how much of the current malaise may be attributed to the apartheid past, and how much should be ascribed to the short-sightedness of the new leadership. Obviously, the legacy of racial oppression is not wiped out by non-racial legislation. Internalised habits of domination and submission persist, even if they often go unrecognised by well-intentioned progressive forces. However, blaming the apartheid legacy for most of the current political deficiencies too easily exempts inept, self-indulgent new rulers. Failing to deliver textbooks in Limpopo or a teachers' union paralysing Eastern Cape education cannot be explained or excused by simply invoking Verwoerd's Bantu education of six decades ago.

In the chapter on Germany, we explore the dilemma of a modern welfare state that needs to attract migrants with the right skills, but ends up with non-integrating asylum seekers, like the criminalised Roma and Sinti, who are seen as defrauding the system. We also discuss European Islamophobia and the myth that an incompatible religion prevents integration, and seek answers to why xenophobia is much more prevalent in the former East German part of the country, even though few foreigners lived in the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

In the penultimate chapter, we present an official immigration society as an alternative to the South African model: immigrant-integrating, multicultural Canada. Why did South Africa not follow the Canadian or Australian example of a vision that not only regulates immigration through a sophisticated point system, but also celebrates cultural diversity and cherishes multiculturalism? Why do

South Africans reject the benefits of regulated immigration of skilled workers? While in some ways, South Africans are ahead of Canadians in terms of intuitively and comfortably living with diversity in daily reality, Canada leads in the teaching of mutual respect and the conscious integration of difference by encouraging tolerance of dissent and equality through citizenship. We also refer to Israel and the United States occasionally, as two ethnically divided societies that faced seemingly intractable problems and chose different solutions to confront their predicaments.

In the conclusion, we scan the social science literature for theoretical conceptualisations of xenophobia, ranging from the notion of 'moral panic' and Fanon's 'post-colonial condition' to Freud's 'narcissism of small difference' and psycho-social concepts of 'identity assertion' and 'reversal of honour'. Merely preaching noble constitutional principles overlooks the fact that the progressive ideals embraced by an urban elite barely resonate with substantial sections of a depoliticised population. For this reason, we argue that only increased political literacy can create a cosmopolitan identity that immunises against a violent citizenship of exclusion. But what real interest does a complacent ruling group have in such nuanced, critical political education when it is better served by uncritical conformity?

Given the vast literature on 'Mandelaland', we were frequently asked what is new or different about this book. Our answer was fivefold: Firstly, we unashamedly attempt to explore neglected dimensions of the landscape, such as identity, perceptions and attitudes, and moral commitments – aspects which orthodox Marxists dismiss as mere 'superstructure'. Secondly, we write from a comparative perspective as 'inside outsiders' who have lived and taught intermittently in Germany, South Africa, Egypt, the United States and (for the longest time) in Canada, and bring these experiences to bear on our interpretation of the South African context. Thirdly, we minimise the popular journalistic focus on political leaders, letting the emphasis fall instead on the sociological conditions in which they succeed or fail by exploring the factors that render a following susceptible to the calls of government. Fourthly, our own modest empirical research tends to be more ethnographic than representative; we therefore complement it extensively with representative countrywide opinion surveys and reflections on immigration policies worldwide. Finally, we focus on the perpetrators of xenophobia, rather than the experiences of victims or the vast refugee assistance programmes run by civil society organisations, as we believe, first and foremost, that a deeper understanding of collective hate is a precondition for minimising it beyond well-intended charity. Finally, we apply social psychological and psychoanalytical concepts in theorising South African ethnic relations, superimposing them onto common economic explanations. What interests us are the fantasies that sustain xenophobia and other collective outbursts of hate. We also tried to write for a politically interested general

audience, South Africans and non-South Africans alike. For this reason, we did not confine ourselves to academic treatise, but instead sought to communicate in a more journalistic style, deliberately utilising media pundits extensively to enliven the portrait of South African society with everyday descriptions.

Regrettably, we continue to use apartheid racial labels, because South Africa is not yet a race-free, colour-blind society – and probably will not be for a long while yet. Even in the post-apartheid state, the old race categorisations are officially retained, albeit to measure the progress made towards transformation (greater representivity) through affirmative action policies. In addition, the legacies of varied identities associated with false ethno-racial categories persist. Thus, the common label of ‘African’ for the black majority does not mean to suggest that the members of other groups are not also ‘African’ in the political sense of citizens of Africa: people who consider this continent as their only home and origin. This is clarified in Chapter 5 (‘Settler Colonialism’), which also compares the South African liberation process with the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In contrast to the Middle East, all parties in South Africa, including the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), have accepted the African status of ‘original settlers’, so that not all Africans are black, and not all blacks are Africans. It should also be noted that with the rise of Steve Biko’s Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in the late 1960s, ‘black’ became a proud political term embraced by politically conscious members of all three of the previously disenfranchised groups, including Indians and the so-called ‘Coloureds’.

Finally, in order that there may be greater author transparency, we have appended mini autobiographies. Since the viewpoints we adopt and the research topics we chose emanate from our personal histories, these auto-ethnographies should allow the reader to better evaluate our biases and vantage points. Kogila, as a Durban-born Indian South African, describes how her family managed to overcome systemic discrimination during a period when Indians were considered as inassimilable aliens; while Heribert, of German background, outlines the obstacles he had to overcome in order to liberate himself from religious provincialism, as well as the many academic controversies in which he has been involved since graduating and working as an assistant at Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s Frankfurt Institute of Social Research in the 1960s. The book effectively synthesises our combined fifty years of academic involvement in South Africa and can also be read as a series of essays on the multifaceted trajectory of this complex country – a microcosm embodying the problems of both First and Third Worlds.