Being Ineffective with the Xenophobic Attacks **[1]**

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Like a man suffering from post traumatic stress disorder startled by a loud noise, South Africa was jolted last week. A combination of controlled power cuts and xenophobic attacks reminded the country of 2008—a dark time in our post 1994 history. Again people fell on their keyboards, denouncing the violence of the xenophobic attacks, shaming the perpetrators and pleading for a more humanistic attitude and solution. Again I add my voice to theirs, because I worry about how the bourgeoisie perceive the problem.

Some people have linked [2] the load shedding to xenophobic attacks [3]. The timing with the Rhodes Must Fall [4] campaign [5] (which highlighted the unhappiness of black Africans who, to put it too briefly, feel that they are still living disadvantageously in the shadow of a colonial past). This campaign set off a nationwide series of statue vandalisms—soon it was no longer restricted to symbols of colonial oppression, but statues of Christian missionaries [6] and pacifist Mahatma Gandhi [7] (against whom, admittedly, there is some resentment locally because of racist comments which he made) were targeted as well. Somewhere, something in the larger South African conscience was triggered, and the reaction was fervent anger. And to fuel a perfect storm, the Zulu king was quoted [8] as inciting prejudice against foreigners1.

The violence erupted over a week ago and started in the east of the country and then spread north. Here in the south and west, I am not aware of any incidents yet. The secretary general of the current ruling party has said [9] that the violence should be thought of as "afrophobia" instead of "xenophobia". The reality is that it is African migrants who are attacked, not German tourists or Britons who have chosen to settle in a warmer climate. Rather, it is the people from the poorest continent who placed their hopes of prosperity (and/or safety) on moving to the richest African country and moved here with high hopes. Arriving with next to nothing with which to start a new life, they move into the shanty towns where the Apartheid government settled local black Africans to exploit their cheap labour. Many migrants doubtlessly fail to find their fortune here2. Others, having travelled far and given up much, roll up their sleeves and sacrifice what others might not be willing to do—they end up getting some of the scarce honest work. Other migrants arrive and are able to set up small businesses. While they work hard and are still fairly poor by middle class standards, they are far ahead of other people in the shanty towns. Perhaps even worse, people become dependant on them for food and basic goods, yet recognise that they are directly enriching foreigners who had a better head start than they ever did.

The reaction to the latest spate of attacks has been drastic. Many South Africans feel ashamed by what has been happening. Some African countries are now evacuating their citizens to safety. Difficult questions are being asked about South Africa, which is supposed to be a beacon of tolerance and diversity.

All week I saw blogs and social media entries being written on the horror of the xenophobia attacks. Some have shared graphical images of the injuries which the victims sustained. Some have heartened back to an old ad campaign [10] which shows that, really, we are (almost) all migrants (if you go far back enough in history). Others have launched humanistic campaigns [11] showing solidarity with the victims and apologising on behalf of the nation. Yet others have referred [12] to the Bible (Leviticus 19:33–37) to try and show that we (as locals) have a moral responsibility for foreigners.

While it is good to show solidarity and speak out against violence, I fear that doing so has little actual use.

The reality is that the people who are angry—who feel disenfranchised and fearful for their future prospects; who want nothing more than to escape their miserable lot in life as, 20 years down the line, blaming Apartheid is becoming all the less convincing—are not on Twitter or Facebook. They do not read what the newspapers are writing. They are not armchair activists, they *act* on what they are convinced. They are able to do so exactly because they are not trapped in the responsibilities of employment or society. They won't read the blog posts (because they do not have computers or Internet connections) and won't be shamed by them. They are angry and our blogs and and the speeches of government officials are an affront to them, because we have not walked a mile in their shoes. My fear is that the people condemning these attacks are disconnected from reality and really just being sanctimonious.

Of course I do not condone the attacks. What I saying is simply that the socioeconomic divide between those who are *angry* and those who are upset at those who are angry is far greater than we realise. It is so because we live on the coat tails of a society (Apartheid) which was engineered exactly to have such a divide. Another thing that is worrying me is that the middle class expects the attackers to subscribe to their philosophical and religious values. Regardless the objective warrant of these values, the attackers were never educated to think critically and likely never raised with the same mores. Here I need to play a post-modern hand and say that we *cannot* expect these people to subscribe to our values until they have had a same opportunities as the middle class has had[3]. We also need to remember that in the death throes of Apartheid, opposition to the regime became violent. The mid-1980s was the most violent period of the country. Violence was actively encouraged to overthrow the oppressors by making the country "ungovernable". Scarcely a decade later, it was expected of everyone to live in harmony together. The catch, though, is that many have still not yet seen such of an improvement in their quality of lives, so for what were they fighting?

One post on social media which aimed to show the folly of these attacks cited a newspaper article from February[4] which cited official statistics that "only" 4% of the working population are international immigrants. However, what needs to be borne in mind is that a quarter of South Africans (or, perhaps more accurately, a quarter of all people living in South Africa) are unemployed. Given the imbalance in the availability of jobs across social and education levels, I imagine that the average person maturing in a shanty town understands that their chance at employment is less than one in four... perhaps between one in five and one in ten? This hopeless prospect will do much to fuel the clamour for jobs, and every single precious job held by a foreigner is one not held my myself, someone in my family or one of my friends. Also, if (and this is a rough personal estimate) there are 30 million employable adults, and 75% are employed (meaning that there are 22.5 million jobs available in South Africa today), then four percent of that is nearly a million. While in relative terms the numbers seem small, in absolute terms, a million (additional) people having no real hope for the future is terrible.

We should also not think that the problem ever is purely money. It is dignity and self-perception as well (something which has been brought to light with the Rhodes statue debacle). At some point I believed that the "classes" had distinct problems: I would stress when my car breaks down, but someone who does not have a car does not have to deal with that (particular) stress. But I now believe that the reality is that we share more as human beings than we might realise. In the past week I—who am very privileged middle class—struggled with emotions of loneliness and abandonment—emotions from which the impoverished are not immune. I may have a different perspective on it and so we end up dealing with it differently than other people, but the base emotions are the same. They can lead to fear and breaking down and acting out. And they compound on top of economic instability, worries about the future and the family, thinking about existence, the meaning thereof and our place in it, etc... The best of us can short-circuit with dwelling on only one or a few of these factors.

So, what do I propose we *do*? It is all good and well pointing out problems, but what is the use of all of this insight if I can't fix the problem? Unfortunately I do not have all the answers. There are reasons why Jesus said that we would always have the poor among us (Matthew 26:11)—and one is

that it is such a very difficult problem to solve. The first thing I would consider is that we need better education in the country. The economic model of Apartheid government relied on having a vast pool of uneducated workers. Twenty years after Apartheid South Africa still primarily relies on selling raw minerals—the government (in my opinion) thus does not have an incentive to eradicate unskilled labour. However education is necessary for a number of reasons:

- Education can help people seize entrepreneurial opportunities and make people less reliant on unskilled job opportunities.
- There will be greater financial responsibility. Wage workers are prey to payday lenders5. South Africa in general (regardless of which socioeconomic segment is under consideration) does not save much money and many are riddled with debt.
- People need to think critically about morals, values and government—it is my strong suspicion that at present many poorer people are susceptible to eloquent instigators who are sent into their midsts to provoke them for some or other agenda.
- People need to learn patience. I believe that capitalism can be the best economic system for people to better their own fortunes. This requires hard work and self-denial. Worst still, it won't pay off dividends in one's own life: the majority can best hope to improve the situation for their children, who in turn will have more prosperous children. I am convinced that the (honest) path between poverty and economic security is at least two generations long. People need to learn and accept this.

It is the responsibility of the wealthy to create (in a free market system) a better society for the rest (and if they don't they will be held accountable on Judgement Day). I am now not pointing the finger at the previously advantaged white citizens of the country, but our black diamonds as well.

If you work with or employ people who are historically socioeconomically disadvantaged, treat them fairly and seek their prosperity. This does not necessarily mean paying them more: it means equipping them in whatever way appropriate; even if it means teaching them a new skill or helping their children with school work. Let us humble ourselves and look at the example of our brothers and sisters in Kenya [13]: "Heard about a church in Kenya where people are not encouraged to keep the same domestic worker for more than two years: by then they should have been helped to pursue a career." Sit down with people. Talk with them. If if they are angry or sad. Treat them like human beings. If you are a non-Christian, then I appeal to you. If you are a Christian, this is expected of you by the One who created both of you.

(Sorry, that's a little more labour intensive than writing on social media...)

- 1. As mentioned, though, for years already there has been a dissastifaction with and distrust of foreigners. This has even lead government to propose legislation [14] to show that it is listening to the concerns of the people.
- 2. Some of them have told me personally that they are not happy here. They recognise that this is not paradise and, to put it simply, miss home. Many actually work with the sole goal of earning enough to afford the travel home.
- 3. Here I wish to refer to an article which discusses "equality" which I quoted in this article of mine [15].
- 4. Wilkinson, Kate, (2015, February 12). Are Foreigners Stealing Our Jobs? *The Witness*. p. 9.
- 5. Payday lending was a big contributing factor in the Marikana Massacre [16], as repayments deducted from wages led to a perception that wages were decreasing.

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