

EXPLAINING VIOLENCE AGAINST FOREIGNERS AND STRANGERS IN URBAN SOUTH AFRICA: OUTBURSTS DURING MAY AND JUNE 2008

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“The underlying reasons for the violence included high unemployment, inequality, a lax border control policy, and a nonexistent immigration policy.”¹ “[T]he emergence of xenophobic violence is typically rooted in the micro-politics of township life.”² “Anti-foreigner sentiment expressed uncritically in the media or from official channels can... contribute to... (such) sentiment in the popular discourse.”³ “[I]t was stupid of the police... People have been moved by the police so (shops were) targeted by the youth” (focus group participant, reported in Cooper)⁴

1. Introduction

During the second half of May 2008 (and continuing through the first week of June), a series of short violent outbursts took place in

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¹ South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), *2008 Fast Facts*, August 2008, Johannesburg.

² Misago J.P., Landau L. and Monson T., *Towards tolerance, law and dignity: addressing violence against foreign nationals in South Africa*, International organization for Migration: Pretoria, 2009, 54.

³ Hadland A. (ed.), *Violence and Xenophobia in South Africa: Developing Consensus, Moving to Action*, Human Science Research Council (HSRC), 2008, p. 15.

⁴ Cooper A., “*Sihlala sinovuya*”: *contexts and catalysts contributing to looting and violence towards foreign nationals in two low-income communities in Cape Town*, Unpublished, n.d., p. 11.

neighbourhoods of numerous South African cities and towns. The violence during these outbursts was perpetrated by civilians, and was inflicted on the property and the person of civilians. The perpetrators were largely young poor black South African men; the targets largely the property and businesses of foreign African nationals as well as these civilians themselves; and the locations predominantly urban informal settlements, townships and hostels. The series of outbursts began in Gauteng and spread about a week after the first serious event to other urban areas of the country, Cape Town and the Western Cape in particular. Initial state reaction was evasive, essentially denying the scope and seriousness of these events. Subsequently, as the series of events spread across the country, the state sought explanations in criminal and mob behaviour. This geographic spread of outbursts was accompanied by widespread coverage in the mass media – television, radio and newspapers – of these events and their possible causes. Since the reaction of many of the victims was flight from their residential areas, a number of temporary refugee camps were established (in Gauteng and Cape Town, in particular). During the aftermath of these outbursts, more than 20 000 refugees were accommodated in this way, numerous African foreign nationals were reported to have left the country, and government urged refugees in camps to return to the residential areas from which they had fled since these were said to have calmed down.

As the four prefatory quotations above reveal, explanations offered for these outbursts vary widely. The South African research community appears to have been caught as unaware and bewildered about the events of May and June 2008 as the political, state and economic elites. This may have to do with the episodic nature of these events that suddenly shattered assumptions of apparent peacefulness and may also have to do with their predispositions that poor black urban residents were victims entitled to a better urban life and accordingly entitled to manifest their dissatisfaction by protest and demonstration. The nature of the actions of the perpetrators, in terms of this characterization of the poor urban resident, is surely both out of character and deeply distasteful, particularly since it may be read as a betrayal of friendship on the African continent, a case of “black-on-black” violence.

In addition, during the aftermath of these outbursts, the term ‘xenophobia’ rapidly became the overriding label used in the media and in the popular discourse. Xenophobia is commonly defined as “the hatred or fear of foreigners or strangers” and the South African Human Rights Commission defines xenophobia as “the deep dislike of non-nationals by nationals of a recipient state.”⁵ It is worth noting however that it is the definitions by those urban residents whose sentiments may become xenophobic toward ‘foreigner’ and ‘stranger’ that are pertinent here (not technical definitions of intellectuals and of the state). Accordingly, a minority in a South African informal settlement may well be defined by residents as ‘strangers’ even though they (or some of them) may be South African nationals. Equally, the targets of this xenophobia need not be African or solely African, but could include foreigners from other continents residing in such a settlement.

The prefatory quotations above moreover have been selected to illustrate the four main dimensions that have been identified in the flood of news coverage and scholarly publications that have followed the May and June 2008 series of outbursts and that purport to explain these events:

- Explanations focused on external structural causes,
- Explanations focused on factors directly related to specific outbursts,
- Explanations for the diffusion of outburst events, and
- Explanations for perceptions concerning local policing.

By using these four dimensions as an analytic tool, this article aims to outline a general framework of understanding of the three week episode of collective behaviour, a series of events that appears to be of an evasive complexity.

The focus of this work will be on the perpetrators of the violence, not on the victims and refugees during and after the series of outbursts. Empirical evidence will be drawn from secondary sources as well as a project conducted in late 2008 which comprised a scan and analysis of print media articles on the series of outbursts as well as four focus groups in the Western Cape with perpetrators and eye-

⁵ Spurr N., *Shades of prejudice: An investigation into the South African media’s coverage of racial violence and xenophobia*. Media Monitoring Project Johannesburg, n.d., p. 18.

witnesses.⁶ Research was also undertaken in urban Northern Cape where outbursts did not occur. The article, accordingly, comprises four sections:

- A description of outburst events identified in the print media during the period under scrutiny.
- A synopsis of explanations given for these events either as reported by journalists or by journalists themselves, again as identified in the print media during the period under scrutiny.
- An analysis of explanations for these events given in the South African research community during the year after the period under scrutiny.
- An outline of the proposed general framework of understanding.

2. A description of outburst events

Articles on violent events captured from the print media were filed under an event name (typically the locality where the outburst took place) and a standardized set of event data was assembled for each. These data included date, duration, type of settlement, nature of violence, earlier xenophobic events in the same locality, reported precipitants and rumours and the nature of police intervention. In the four tables below, events have been classified in terms of the province in which they occurred, the date on which they took place, whether they were major or minor in intensity and whether they included violence against persons or solely against property. The first three tables depict events that took place in the periods 10-20 May, 21-31 May, and during June 2008, respectively. The fourth table aggregates these results for the entire period. Additional detail regarding data capture, methodology and validity is provided in Appendix 1.

⁶ Bekker S. and Leildé A., "Is Multiculturalism a Workable Policy in South Africa" in Rex J. & Singh G. (eds.), *Governance in Multicultural Societies*. London: Ashgate, 2004; and Bekker S, Eigelaar-Meets I. & Eva G., "Xenophobic violence in South Africa: reflections on the events of May and June 2008" in Uys T., Buhlungu S. & Patel S. (eds.), *Exclusion, social capital and citizenship: contested transitions in South Africa and India*, Pretoria: HSRC Press (forthcoming).

As is clear from Table 1, the majority of outbursts during the first phase took place in Gauteng. In addition, all major outbursts were situated in Gauteng and comprise more than a third of all events in that province. Most reported deaths during the three-phase period under scrutiny, in fact, took place in this province during the first phase. Four events were reported to have had identifiable precipitants, Alexandra – a black township in Johannesburg - being the most detailed. Significantly more reports identified rumours that were claimed to have fuelled the violent outbursts. A minority of reports on these events identified police presence and police intervention, most often attempts to disperse crowds. During the middle phase comprising ten days (see Table 2), a total of sixty-three events were reported by the print media. Thirty-two of these events took place in the Western Cape, thirteen in KwaZulu-Natal, seven in Gauteng, and eleven in other provinces. From the media reports, it appears that xenophobic violence in this phase was not as violent as during the first phase. The majority of events were classified as minor events on property alone. Police intervention was reported in a number of cases, most often involving the arrest of perpetrators. These events appear to involve opportunistic behaviour more often than earlier since media coverage and rumours involving earlier events led to the departure of many foreigners from their residences and the abandonment of their property. This anticipation of possible attacks created a context in which locals could vandalize and loot homes and shops belonging to those who had fled.

In the final phase (see Table 3), ten of the eleven reported events were minor with half involving assault on persons. This final phase – effectively during the first half of the month of June – reflects a diminishment in the frequency of events in all four classes as well as a (late) diffusion to new provinces and may be seen, at least in terms of print media coverage, as the petering out of the series of outbursts country-wide. In the aggregated table of outbursts in Table 4, it is worth noting that most major events took place in Gauteng during the first phase, and that most outbursts during the whole period under scrutiny were minor events involving vandalizing property and looting rather than assault on persons.

First Phase					
	Major Involving Assault / Death	Major on Property Only	Minor Involving Assault / Death	Minor on Property Only	Total
Gauteng	14	4	11	21	50
Western Cape	0	0	0	2	2
Other	0	0	3	6	9
Total	14	4	14	29	61

Middle Phase					
	Major Involving Assault / Death	Major on Property Only	Minor Involving Assault / Death	Minor on Property Only	Total
Gauteng	2	1	1	3	7
Western Cape	2	4	4	22	32
KZN	2	0	4	7	13
Other	1	0	3	7	11
Total	7	5	12	39	63

Final Phase					
	Major Involving Assault / Death	Major on Property Only	Minor Involving Assault / Death	Minor on Property Only	Total
Gauteng	0	0	2	1	3
Western Cape	0	0	0	0	0
Other	1	0	3	4	8
Total	1	0	5	5	11

Summary of all Events					
	Major Involving Assault / Death	Major on Property Only	Minor Involving Assault / Death	Minor on Property Only	Total
Gauteng	16	5	14	25	60
Western Cape	2	4	4	24	34
Other	4	0	13	24	41
Total	22	9	31	73	135

3. A summary of explanations for the outbursts found in the print media

During the first phase of the period under scrutiny, news reports of government reactions underline denial of both the extent and the serious nature of the outbursts. Ministers and officials denied that the outbursts (in Alexandra and then in Diepsloot and elsewhere in Gauteng) were of a xenophobic nature and that they were related to one another. Two alternative explanations were offered. The first was that the perpetrators were ‘criminals’ and the second that there was a ‘third force’ at work. A national minister was quoted as stating that the violence would be over within a week. Journalists and other

commentators repeatedly raised numerous structural causes for the violence. These included:

- failure of government policies regarding service delivery, combating crime, border controls and ‘soft’ diplomacy toward Zimbabwe;
- the high unemployment rate particularly among young urban black men; and
- the incompetence of the police (whether from lack of resources or from poor training).

In addition, evidence pointing to widespread sentiments of xenophobia among poor urban residents was often noted in reports.

Two police studies scholars in England⁷ have argued that two popular reasons commonly given – in different parts of the world – for outbursts are both one-factor as well as essentially reductionist explanations. The first they name the ‘riff-raff explanation’ where disorderly behaviour is primarily the preserve of the more deviant, transient or criminal-minded sections of society with predilections for anti-social or violent behaviour – that is, ‘criminals’, ‘mobs’ and ‘gangs’. The second they name the ‘agitator explanation’ where crowd members are said to be mindless and anyone can persuade them to do anything. They are especially vulnerable to unscrupulous individuals who want to use crowds to foment disorder – in effect, the bad leading the mad. In the case under scrutiny here, a ‘third force’ or ‘sinister forces’ appear to fit this description.

More sophisticated analyses were made by certain commentators:

“residents of Alex have been living in inadequate housing...- a veritable pressure cooker, the tipping point: perceptions of foreigners jumping the housing queue...Dissatisfaction ... has taken on the face of immigrants...”⁸

Two journalists moreover made known their concern about the silence of resident organizations in outburst localities and of commentators regarding the actions of residents:

“What I find (deeply) baffling is the argument that we should not condemn the people of Alexandra...”⁹

⁷ Waddington D. and King M., “The disorderly crowd: from classical psychological reductionism to socio-contextual theory – the impact on public order policing strategies,” *The Howard Journal* 44 (2005) 5, pp. 490-503.

⁸ *Business Day* (Johannesburg), 20 May 2008.

“the silence from community organizations such as civic structures, local churches and other grassroots bodies in the wake of the attacks is simply deafening.”¹⁰

During the latter phases of the period under scrutiny, the terminology used by many commentators now included terms such as ‘madness’, ‘pogrom’, ‘mob’, ‘barbarism’, ‘gang’ ‘a culture of violence’ and ‘hate’ as the scope and depth of the series of violent outbursts became apparent to all. Government politicians were quoted as admitting that this form of ‘mob’ behaviour needed an effective and immediate response (which took the form of the mobilization of the SA National Defence Force late in May). Simultaneously, they continued to state that ‘most’ of the violence was criminal in nature and that since it was ‘well-coordinated’, it was probably organized. The Minister for Intelligence Services was quoted as stating that “we cannot ignore ... that there were reportedly meetings held in hostels, that this prairie fire of hate seemed to move fast as if planned, and that there were printed pamphlets.”¹¹ Subsequently, in early June, President Mbeki was cited as stating that the recent attacks were not driven by xenophobia but by criminals.

Similar structural causes to those listed above were regularly raised, with housing demand in informal settlements remaining prominent. Three additional factors moreover emerged. In the first place, the diffusion of outburst incidents to the Western Cape and other provinces elicited the explanation that a ‘lack of leadership’ exemplified both the inception as well as the persistence of the series of outbursts. In the second place, some commentators characterized the perpetrators as putting up ‘a rugged disdainful resistance’ to the government and to the police by their violent actions. The third factor identified and widely referred to was the role that the mass media was playing in the diffusion of violence.

⁹ *Business Day* (Johannesburg), 16 May 2008.

¹⁰ *Business Day* (Johannesburg), 20 May 2008.

¹¹ *Sunday Tribune* (Durban), 25 May 2008.

“The scenes of mobs indulging freely in acts of xenophobic crime while the police looked on helplessly... perpetrators (who) declare their murderous intent on national television without fear of prosecution.”¹²

“The Daily Sun will stand accused of reporting uncritically on ... xenophobia... They sank to terrible depths with an editorial which proclaimed (to give the reader) ‘THE TRUTH’ about ‘ALIENS’.”¹³

4. Explanations for these events given in the South African research community.

In the immediate aftermath of these events, conferences were held at the Universities of Cape Town and the Witwatersrand. The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) launched a research project on the events in June 2008¹⁴ which carried out a series of focus groups organized in locations where violence had taken place. This was followed by a roundtable meeting designed to reflect upon, and develop recommendations regarding, these events.¹⁵ Since these recommendations were immediately made public, scholarly reaction and criticism materialized rapidly.¹⁶ The Institute for Security Studies published a paper in November entitled “South Africa’s Xenophobic Eruption”.¹⁷ In addition, a collection of essays on migration in post-apartheid South Africa, aimed at policy-makers, was published¹⁸ and a number of its authors subsequently contributed to two publications that appeared in 2009, one on addressing violence against foreign nationals in South Africa, published by the International Organization

¹² *Cape Times* (Cape Town), 4 June 2008.

¹³ *Business Day* (Johannesburg), 28 May 2008.

¹⁴ HSRC, *Citizenship, violence and xenophobia in South Africa: perceptions from South African communities*. HSRC Press, June 2008.

¹⁵ Hadland A. (ed.), *Violence and Xenophobia in South Africa: Developing Consensus, Moving to Action*, HSRC Press, 2008.

¹⁶ Sharp J., “‘Fortress SA’: Xenophobic violence in South Africa,” *Anthropology Today* 24(4), pp. 1-3.

¹⁷ Steinberg J., “South Africa’s Xenophobic Eruption,” *ISS Paper* 169 (November 2008).

¹⁸ Wa Kabwe-Segatti A., “Reforming South African Immigration Policy in the Post-apartheid Period,” in Wa Kabwe-Segatti A. & Landau L. (eds.), *Migration in Post-apartheid South Africa. Challenges and Questions to Policy-makers*, Agence Française de Développement No. 38, March 2008.

for Migration¹⁹ and a second in French on the occurrence of xenophobic violence in South Africa.²⁰

The two HSRC publications use relative deprivation as their main explanatory tool. Poor black urban residents are experiencing competition regarding jobs, inadequate provision of housing in their informal settlements, poor service delivery to their neighbourhoods, little effective government communication regarding these issues in their residential areas and corruption from government officials and the police, particularly regarding state treatment of foreigners living in their neighbourhoods. The relative deprivation they experience then comprises the frustrations they develop as a result of their expectations in these regards not being realized. These sentiments are converted into aggression, violent aggression against those they perceive as competitors and as the immediate cause of their frustrations, partially since they appear to be better off than themselves. Their targets accordingly are the ‘foreigner’ and the ‘stranger’ in their neighbourhoods. Simultaneously however the reports acknowledge that such an explanation remains inadequate:

- While it was generally known that xenophobic violence was taking place in South Africa, what is new in the case under research is the ‘wildfire character’ of diffusion;
- An important attribute of the case under research is ‘its violent and/or destructive character (killings, beatings, destruction of property and theft)’;²¹
- Young black poor urban men feel besieged by the challenges listed above. “In this context, the ‘foreigner’ is the nearest ‘other’, against which this sentiment can be expressed.”²²

None of these three issues noted in the reports are subsequently addressed in their explanatory framework.

¹⁹ Misago J.P., Landau L. and Monson T., *Towards tolerance, law and dignity: addressing violence against foreign nationals in South Africa*, International organization for Migration: Pretoria, 2009.

²⁰ Wa Kabwe-Segatti A., « Violences xénophobes en Afrique du Sud : retour sur un désastre annoncé », *Politique africaine* n° 112 (2008), pp. 99-118.

²¹ HSRC, *Citizenship, Violence and Xenophobia in South Africa: Perceptions from South African Communities*, HSRC Press, June 2008, p. 25.

²² *Idem*, p. 45.

In a guest editorial of an academic journal entitled ‘Fortress SA,’²³ a South African anthropologist criticized the HSRC reports for recommendations that South Africa should become an ‘impenetrable fortress’ in which migrants will remain “at the bottom of the internal hierarchy,” recommendations that take refuge in the notion of a bounded all-or-nothing citizenship based essentially on territory. To understand why such recommendations are made, the labelling by the HSRC reports of the violence under consideration as ‘xenophobic’ hides as much as it reveals – what is required is an analysis of the xenophobic discourse in the country as a whole, particularly at the top. In effect, what is required is to “study up”. Discourse at the top, for instance, is reflected in legislation designed to ‘control’ ‘aliens’ and such discourse satisfies the interests of South African elites, in particular, “when it comes to the question of paying taxes to provide shelter and services to people seen to be pouring into South Africa to escape political incompetence and economic mismanagement further north.”²⁴ The HSRC reports are in line with this discourse. The editorial also points to the fact that South Africans’ sentiments toward foreign African nationals are more complicated than simply xenophobic – some are positive and some negative depending on a number of local conditions. This explains why there were cases during May and June 2008 of an absence of xenophobic violence in certain urban places where significant numbers of foreign Africans had taken up residence. The article concludes as follows:

“The fact that some poor South Africans looted the possessions of people they saw as outsiders, chased them out of the townships, and burned at least one person alive was, without doubt, deeply shocking. But to understand just how shocking it was one needs to look at the broad sweep of South African xenophobia, consider the full extent of its causes, and reflect on the disturbing ways influential South Africans respond to it.”²⁵

The editorial sheds no further light on how such understanding could be achieved.

²³ Sharp J., “‘Fortress SA’: Xenophobic violence in South Africa,” *Anthropology Today* 24(4), pp. 1-3.

²⁴ *Idem*, p. 2.

²⁵ *Idem*, p. 3.

The proceedings of the colloquium on violence and xenophobia held at Wits University in late May 2008 have been published, together with an extended introduction, in book form.²⁶ It comprises a series of chapters that address a wide-range of issues considered to relate directly to the events: the media, the police, borders, migration, housing delivery, case studies, and a number of explanatory frameworks. It also includes a series of extraordinary colour photographs taken during the outbursts. The book's editors begin by asserting that the outbursts precipitated a 'national shock', partially generated by international moral outrage accompanying the events. In the mediatised world in which South Africa finds itself, it appears that the constitutional claim that "South Africa belongs to all who live in it" has been reversed by these violent xenophobic actions. However, they continue, the naming of the violence as xenophobic conceals as much as it reveals. The use of the term, in fact, may be seen as "an alibi for a much more profound social and political malaise"²⁷ and ought accordingly to be treated as "a secondary symptom rather than as a primary cause of violence." Again then, there is a plea to "study up". Whilst acknowledging that relative deprivation based upon material inequalities plays an important contextual role, their main argument is a political one pitched at the level of the nation-state: Perpetrators targeted those they perceived as not belonging to the South African nation-state. This nation-state then is conceived as one promising its (territorial) citizens a better life and the resultant culture of entitlement – for those who live in shacks without prospect of a job – led them to commit violence against non-citizens. The targets of this violence moreover were black rather than white foreigners, in effect pointing to a racialised ranking and stereotyping of the various groupings living within the South African nation, pointing to racialised degrees of belonging. "That the poor have made scapegoats of foreign blacks is a reflection of the political impasse on the long

²⁶ Hassim S., Kupe T. and Worby E. (eds.), *Go Home or Die Here: Violence, Xenophobia and the Reinvention of Difference in South Africa*, Witwatersrand University Press, 2008.

²⁷ *Idem*, p. 6.

walk to freedom.”²⁸ Precisely how this political impasse led to violence is not addressed.

One chapter in the volume however makes a significantly different case:

(There is) a disconnect between popular and elite ‘common sense’ on the matter of ‘foreigners’. This xenophobia ... is coming from below – it is profoundly democratic, albeit in the majoritarian-popular sense rather than the liberal-constitutional one... ‘They’ – the urban poor – occupy a different universe of meaning to ‘us’ ...²⁹

While acknowledging the indirect responsibility of political leaders for the violence, the author points to the absence in the formal political discourse of either mobilization aimed against foreigners or of an instrumental manipulation of xenophobic sentiments. Rather, within their militaristic subcultures that tolerate crime and violence and that experience corrupt and incompetent policing as normal, members of this underclass “have made a rational diagnosis of their problem.”³⁰ The plea here then is to “study down”. Why such xenophobic violence is claimed to be ‘profoundly democratic’ however is not substantiated. One last reflection on the publication is appropriate. A number of the book’s photographs are of perpetrators. Their body language appears to be devoid of guilt, of remorse and of fear of retribution. The young men shown carrying weapons or loot emerge as disinhibited and often as revelling in, as deriving pleasure from, their collective actions. Insofar as this interpretation is valid, nowhere in the book is this extraordinary conduct addressed.

To those familiar with his work, Steinberg’s ISS Paper provides a familiar blend of interviews with perpetrators and victims in Johannesburg, an account of the troubles in Alexandra as a case study, a context of political history before and during transition in South Africa and a ‘modest’ contribution to understanding the causes of the violence. Typifying the series of events as “the first sustained, nationwide eruption of social unrest since the beginning of South Africa’s democratic era in 1994”, based on interviews and secondary

²⁸ *Idem*, p. 14.

²⁹ *Idem*, p. 53.

³⁰ *Idem*, p. 62.

information, the early stages particularly in Alexandra appear to have involved not only xenophobia but also “old ethnic tensions among South Africans themselves and old struggles for shares of local government booty.”³¹ Subsequently, as the violence spread, these two latter factors diminished and the collective behaviour was driven by a general “will to loot and burn.” The explanation for this diffusion is found in a particular conception of the national economy shared by perpetrators and others alike, together with a jostling for local party-political patronage: poor young South African urban residents define the national economy as comprising a fixed number of jobs and a fixed amount of work. The primary reason for the emergence of this zero-sum belief is the redistributive and affirmative action strategies of the state, as authorized by the ANC. In short, what these young men have learnt is that it is local party-political influence that counts when competing for jobs and that such work is provided by a bureaucracy rather than created by entrepreneurs. This then is “the style and pedigree of the local politics from which the riots emerged.”³² Since they believe that South Africans alone are entitled to these opportunities, entrepreneurially successful foreigners become targets of resentment and assault. Steinberg also writes that outbursts were averted in a number of neighbourhoods through the confrontation and intervention by ‘ordinary residents’.³³ Why this should be so, and what role police did or did not play during the outbursts are not addressed.

The International Organisation for Migration study, in its “objective, politically neutral account of the attacks,” aims to “move beyond much of the existing work that focused largely on attitudes and perceptions. Instead, this study outlines the political economy of violence against outsiders...”³⁴ The theoretical approach used is that of resource mobilization where collective action is seen to be used to

³¹ Steinberg J., “South Africa’s Xenophobic Eruption,” *ISS Paper* 169, November 2008, p. 6.

³² *Idem*, p. 10.

³³ *Idem*, p. 1.

³⁴ Misago J.P., Landau L. and Monson T., *Towards tolerance, law and dignity: addressing violence against foreign nationals in South Africa*, International organization for Migration: Pretoria, 2009, p. 6.

extract benefits from those who control or own resources.³⁵ Evidence is obtained from secondary sources as well as seven selected sites in Gauteng and the Western Cape, in five of which outbursts occurred and in two of which, selected as comparable sites, violence did not occur. Shared rumours in the different sites regarding links between crime and immigration, regarding access by foreigners to state-funded housing, and regarding the ‘stealing’ of jobs and ‘unfair’ business competition are identified. In addition, evidence of overlapping formal and informal leadership structures in these areas that play a series of complementary and/or competitive roles regarding community welfare, management and security is provided. Analysis suggests that informal leadership played a critical role in the launch of the outbursts in the five sites selected whereas formal leaders played a reconciliatory role in the others. The report concludes that

“in almost all cases where violence occurred, it was organised and led by local groups and individuals in an effort to claim or consolidate the authority and power needed to further their political and economic interests.”³⁶

In how far this generalization to the at least 135 outbursts identified above can reliably be made on the basis of the empirical studies provided is unclear. In an article by Wa Kabwe-Segatti,³⁷ drawing on evidence from the above study, the importance of understanding the parlous state of local authority penetration into urban informal settlements and townships is underlined. This overview of the series of outbursts in 2008 includes recent information on South Africa’s immigration policy debates and, during its aftermath, developments in the South African and international NGO sector regarding how foreigners, refugees and victims ought to be handled. This latter discussion reminds one of Mamdani’s observation that the specificity of “South African experience lies in the strength of its civil society, both white and black.”³⁸

³⁵ Tarrow S., *Power in Movement: Collective Action, Social Movements and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

³⁶ *Idem*, pp. 6 and 7.

³⁷ Wa Kabwe-Segatti A., « Violences xénophobes en Afrique du Sud : retour sur un désastre annoncé », *Politique africaine* n° 112 (2008), pp. 99-118.

³⁸ Mamdani M., *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 28.

5. A general framework for understanding the three week episode

Explanations may usefully be classified into the four dimensions suggested in the introduction:

- (i) external structural causes,
- (ii) factors directly related to specific outbursts,
- (iii) factors relating to diffusion of outbursts, and
- (iv) perceptions concerning policing.

(i) Four primary structural processes have been raised during the run-up to the outbursts, processes that are subsequently employed to explain the collective behaviour in either relative deprivation or resource mobilization terms:

- An increase in both the scope and depth of xenophobic sentiments among South Africans
- Large sustained migration streams of foreign African nationals entering South Africa after 1994
- Incoherence over the establishment of a national immigration policy, and
- Rising unemployment and recent price increases in the costs of basic foods and of transport.

Though xenophobic sentiments among South Africans were present before 1994, based upon survey data and print media reports, they appear to have increased after 1994, and particularly after 2000. South Africans who freely admit to xenophobic sentiments commonly associate this sentiment with the issue of ‘taking jobs’, and it appears that ‘service delivery’ became a frequently cited issue later, particularly after 2006. It also appears that xenophobic sentiments are marginally more pronounced, and have spread faster, among young males, and among residents of informal settlements.³⁹ International migration in the Southern African region, whilst being an integral part of developments since the mid-19th century, has changed in character

³⁹ HSRC, *Citizenship, Violence and Xenophobia in South Africa: Perceptions from South African Communities*, HSRC Press, June 2008; South African Migration Project (SAMP), *The Perfect Storm: The Realities of Xenophobia in Contemporary South Africa*, Migration Policy Series No. 50, 2008.

over the past decade and a half. Cross-border migration streams specifically from the African continent have increased – though not to levels commonly found in the popular South African imagination – and a majority of these migrants are undocumented.⁴⁰ Arriving as many do in Gauteng in the first place, they seek out accommodation in urban informal settlements and live accordingly in urban neighbourhoods which they share with poorer South Africans, many themselves (internal) migrants. The South African Government has been slow in developing a response to these migration streams. Inheriting an immigration policy from the apartheid government that did little more than to underpin the machine of racial domination, the new government has struggled to formulate a policy reflective of its new role in changing regional, continental, and global migration regimes.⁴¹ In spite of new legislation, transformation of the former migration management model into a more efficient and ethically acceptable system has been incoherent⁴² and an important gap between policy and practice in this domain remains, a gap associated with public prejudice that remains hostile to immigration as a principle and to migrants in particular. In addition, though predating the full-blown global economic downturn, South African society in mid-2008 found itself grappling with a toxic mix of negative social trends that probably exacerbated the incoherence in establishing this policy. These trends included rising food and energy prices, rising unemployment, poor municipal service delivery and a flagging economy. A major consequence was mounting competition in the

⁴⁰ Crush J., Peberdy S., Williams V., *International Migration and Good Governance in the Southern African Region*, Southern African Migration Project, Migration Policy Brief No.17, 2005; Vigneswaran D., “Undocumented migration: risks and myths (1998-2005),” in Wa Kabwe-Segatti A. & Landau L. (eds.), *Migration in Post-apartheid South Africa. Challenges and Questions to Policy-makers*, Agence Française de Développement No. 38, March 2008.

⁴¹ Crush J., Peberdy S., Williams V., *International Migration and Good Governance in the Southern African Region*, Southern African Migration Project, Migration Policy Brief No.17, 2005.

⁴² Wa Kabwe-Segatti A., “Reforming South African Immigration Policy in the Post-apartheid Period,” in Wa Kabwe-Segatti A. & Landau L. (eds.), *Migration in Post-apartheid South Africa. Challenges and Questions to Policy-makers*, Agence Française de Développement No. 38, March 2008.

labour market, particularly regarding casual and informal work opportunities.

(ii) The insufficiency of these structural explanations has been noted by a number of scholars: they cannot explain why violence occurred in some places and not others, why it was as intense during this period, why diffusion took place as it did, and so on. In particular, what event-specific data there is suggests strongly that local circumstances and meanings local residents give to wider events are critical in understanding the nature of these outbursts.⁴³ Two more points need to be made here. The first is that the dominant theoretical approach used by scholars – relative deprivation and resource mobilization – both emphasize the rational dimension of collective behaviour to the detriment of the emotional.⁴⁴ It is appropriate then synoptically to summarize Donald Horowitz's approach to such outbursts. In the second place, each event has been located within the three week period of outbursts, implicitly defining this period as an episode worthy of investigation. The danger is that earlier violent events occurring in the same location may be overlooked in the analysis.

With regard to specific violent outbursts, Horowitz⁴⁵ argues that both external contextual causes as well as immediate locality-bound causes need to be considered. Since the latter causes point to local and short-term issues, they imply a measure of spontaneity as well as deep emotion associated with the outburst – they imply both passion and calculation. In his study of a large number of 'deadly ethnic riots' in developing countries, he develops a framework of explanation for such outbursts. In the first place, he argues that each outburst has a 'rhythm' – a series of sequential steps to which outbursts often

⁴³ Cooper A., "*Sihlala sinovuya*": *contexts and catalysts contributing to looting and violence towards foreign nationals in two low-income communities in Cape Town*, Unpublished, n.d.; Misago J.P., Landau L. and Monson T., *Towards tolerance, law and dignity: addressing violence against foreign nationals in South Africa*, International organization for Migration: Pretoria, 2009; Steinberg J., "South Africa's Xenophobic Eruption," *ISS Paper* 169, (November 2008).

⁴⁴ Horowitz D.L., *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001.

⁴⁵ *Idem*.

conform. These include precipitants (each specific outburst has its own immediate cause), unsettling events, the dissemination of rumours, a lull, and subsequent broadening of participation.

Five additional locality-bound causal factors are prominent in his study:

- The development of widespread shared antipathy - anger - against 'outsiders', typically fuelled by rumour;
- The selection of targets in a context of risk aversion - the importance of the perception of impunity (that is, immunity from punishment or incrimination) on the part of those who eventually engage in the event.
- An assessment of the reduced risks of counter-violence that facilitates disinhibition regarding carrying out violent acts;
- Justification of mobilization in terms of local history, local identities and local issues, that is, in terms of the meanings local residents give to local issues; and
- The reversal of humiliation through collective action. In this regard, he writes:

"... the violence that aims to thwart domination, particularly the violence of so-called backward groups, is suffused with affect born of humiliation. Much of the pleasure that violence brings springs from the mastery that reverses dishonor..."⁴⁶

Investigations in the research community, our own included, have implicitly defined the period from mid May to early June 2008 as delimiting a particular episode of violent collective behaviour that requires explanation regarding inception, diffusion and termination. That such an episode has been constructed in the media and popular imagination is apparent but may well become analytically confusing: In the newspaper survey described above, violent xenophobic events reported in the print media before May 2008 (and dating from the late 1990s) were also assembled. Of the 94 events identified, a significant number took place serially in the same location. In addition, in the 60 locations where such outbursts were reported to have occurred, close to one half (28) were locations in which outbursts recurred during mid May to early June 2008, the episode period under scrutiny. Given

⁴⁶ *Idem*, p. 536.

extensive gaps in information gathered from the print media, the recurrence of events in approximately one half of all recorded places where an earlier xenophobic event took place points to continuity in the process of the perpetration of violence against strangers in underprivileged urban residential areas. A local history of violence against strangers (during which immunity from punishment could be learnt) mixed with media coverage of such recent violence elsewhere in the country appears to have been a potent combination. At the level of a location, then, the most useful period within which to investigate such violent collective behaviour could differ from the three week episode under scrutiny here.

(iii) Information on certain outbursts in the Western Cape during the second phase of the episode suggest that television and print media coverage of the first phase, together with the dissemination of credible rumours, led to an exodus of foreign Africans from their homes and neighbourhoods in anticipation of attacks, and enabled opportunistic looting and vandalism of these properties⁴⁷. Horowitz⁴⁸ argues that there are two types of what he calls contagion: imitation and common responses to a single precipitant. Contagion rarely explains entire waves of violence. It does, however, help explain why violence can spread from one place to another when precipitants at the subsequent location are less significant than they were at the first. A single precipitating event at one place can produce violent reactions at many locations almost simultaneously. Violence does not occur in isolation; it derives intellectual impetus from events regarded as comparable elsewhere. Actors judge the plausibility of their conduct by the fact that others have carried out similar plans. Diffusion to localities close by often takes place by word-of-mouth communication whereas

⁴⁷ Bekker S, Eigelaar-Meets I. & Eva G., "Xenophobic violence in South Africa: reflections on the events of May and June 2008" in Uys T., Buhlungu S. & Patel S. (eds.), *Exclusion, social capital and citizenship: contested transitions in South Africa and India*, Pretoria: HSRC Press (forthcoming); Cooper A., "*Sihlala sinovuya*": contexts and catalysts contributing to looting and violence towards foreign nationals in two low-income communities in Cape Town, Unpublished, n.d.

⁴⁸ Horowitz D.L., *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001.

diffusion to distant places typically takes place by way of mass media (radio, newspaper and TV) and cell-phone communication. In both cases, perceived official ratification of earlier violence is an important facilitating factor.

(iv) South Africa's state police have been widely criticized by scholars and in the media for their response to the three week 2008 episode. Criticisms ranged from incompetence, lack of resources to tacit complicity in the violence.⁴⁹ Criticisms of this nature however appear to be insufficient to explain the widely reported perceptions of immunity from punishment and incrimination that perpetrators across urban South Africa revealed during the three week episode. The issue of the insufficient penetration of state police presence into the informal settlements and townships of urban South Africa is at issue here. At a 2009 workshop in Cape Town, local police reported that "role players in the community who normally assisted us with crime investigations sided with the perpetrators" in a number of Cape Town neighbourhoods that experienced outburst during the 2008 episode. They also reported that refugees from these neighbourhoods, when they quit their homes and shops to seek refuge at police stations, sought out stations in distant middle-class areas rather than those closest to their neighbourhoods (personal communication).⁵⁰ In effect, non state policing (such as vigilante groups, 'civics', traditional authorities, informal security groups and so on) play critical security roles in such urban settlements.⁵¹ If policing is defined as "any organized activity, whether by the state or civil groups, that seeks to ensure the maintenance of communal order, security and peace" and if

⁴⁹ Cooper A., "*Sihlala sinovuya*": *contexts and catalysts contributing to looting and violence towards foreign nationals in two low-income communities in Cape Town*, Unpublished, n.d.; Hassim S., Kupe T. and Worby E. (eds.), *Go Home or Die Here: Violence, Xenophobia and the Reinvention of Difference in South Africa*, Witwatersrand University Press, 2008; Misago J.P., Landau L. and Monson T., *Towards tolerance, law and dignity: addressing violence against foreign nationals in South Africa*, International organization for Migration: Pretoria, 2009.

⁵⁰ Discussion during a seminar entitled "Public Violence: challenges confronting the police?", Centre of Criminology, University of Cape Town, 30 July 2009.

⁵¹ Baker B., *Multi-Choice Policing in Africa*, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet: Sweden, 2008.

security is considered from the point of view of the resident “rather than from the governance perspective of the political authorities,” then the resident may be thought of as having a choice of policing, besides that of the state police.⁵² The difficulty arises when the state no longer has the capacity to bring non-state policing under effective accountability and ‘community organizations’ endorse intolerance of outsiders and associated violence. This appears to have taken place during a number of outbursts.⁵³ In short, the issue is not solely that of perceptions regarding state police but probably more importantly perceptions regarding the role and legitimacy in the eyes of local residents of non state police organizations.

6. Conclusion

During 2009, urban residents of townships and informal settlements in South Africa have experienced wide-ranging disruption and violence once again. The ostensible reasons this time round have been given as dissatisfaction with municipal service delivery and rejection by locally employed public sector workers of proposed state salary adjustments. Outbursts appear to share the same mix of passion and calculation as those of 2008. Little evidence of xenophobic violent intention however has appeared.

This current episode of collective behaviour highlights two questions that, implicitly at least, have emerged from the general analysis above. The first is the extent to which the anger reflected in this collective behaviour is generalized and not directed at strangers and foreigners in the first place. Horowitz⁵⁴ argues that violent behaviour is often a mix of direct and displaced aggression, displaced because aggression against superiors may be converted into aggression against unranked groups since the former runs the risk of retribution which inhibits violent behaviour. The HSRC quotes the

⁵² *Idem*, pp. 22, 27.

⁵³ Misago J.P., Landau L. and Monson T., *Towards tolerance, law and dignity: addressing violence against foreign nationals in South Africa*, International organization for Migration: Pretoria, 2009.

⁵⁴ Horowitz D.L., *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001, p. 146.

following from one of their focus groups held immediately after the 2008 three-week episode:

“(G)overnment is fighting against us, employers are fighting against us and foreigners are fighting against us, that is why we fight against them because they are nearer; they don’t support us in our struggle...”⁵⁵

Young men in this urban underclass seek to develop and sustain strategies of coping and of survival in an otherwise hostile and exclusionary environment. They seek personal dignity in this humiliating environment. Given few choices to survive in their society moreover, many opt for activities defined by the state as criminal and often find themselves involved in violent behaviour in pursuit both of resources as well as of tangible triumph over dishonour and humiliation.⁵⁶

The second question refers to the emotional dimension of participants’ behaviour during these outbursts. As mentioned above, many of the media images of perpetrators portray body language that appears to be devoid of guilt, of remorse and of fear of retribution. The rational calculations that underpin resource mobilization and relative deprivation theories fail to explain these images of young men as disinhibited and as reveling in, as deriving pleasure from, their collective actions. In the survey of explanations offered for outbursts during the 2008 three-week episode, none address directly the emotional dimension of this extraordinary conduct.

Appendix 1

Event data were assembled by consulting daily and weekly national and provincial newspapers and by employing key word scans within two separate electronic search engines. Some 4000 news articles (drawn from some 40 newspapers) relating to reports on xenophobic sentiment and on events of xenophobic behaviour were assembled, the

⁵⁵ HSRC, *Citizenship, Violence and Xenophobia in South Africa: Perceptions from South African Communities*, HSRC Press, June 2008, p. 45.

⁵⁶ Bekker S. and Leildé A., “Is Multiculturalism a Workable Policy in South Africa,” in Rex J. & Singh G. (eds.), *Governance in Multicultural Societies*, London: Ashgate, 2004.

large majority relating to the period under scrutiny. The validity of information on event data gathered through the print media requires comment. It is clear that there are issues relating to selection bias (the nature of the sampling made). The print rather than the electronic media, national and regional rather than local or country papers, two search engines, and specific keywords were selected. There are also issues relating to description bias (the veracity with which selected events are reported in the press). Recent research on the use of newspaper data in the study of collective behaviour⁵⁷ has concluded that:

Although newspaper data may ignore key dimensions of a protest (e.g., its purpose), when event characteristics are included, especially hard news items (i.e., the who, what, when, where, and why of the event), the reports are, in general, accurate, indicating that missing data may be the most serious form of description bias... (R)esearchers can effectively use such data and ... newspaper data does not deviate markedly from accepted standards of quality (emphasis added).

Some 135 separate events during the period under scrutiny were identified. Articles were filed under an event name (typically the locality where the outburst took place) and a standardized set of event data was assembled for each. These data included date, duration, type of settlement, nature of violence, earlier xenophobic events in the same locality, reported precipitants and rumours and the nature of police intervention. Since sources are secondary and drawn from the print media and other published material, there are substantial gaps in the data relating to most variables mentioned above. After a first scan of these data, a four-way classification of events was developed. Each event was placed in either the major or minor class of outburst, and into either a class including reported assaults on individuals or a class where violence was reported to be exclusively directed at property. The following table summarizes both the name of each class and the criteria used.

One further classification was made. The period 10 May to end June was divided into three intervals:

⁵⁷ Earl J., Martin A., McCarthy J.D., and Soule S.A., "The use of newspaper data in the study of collective action," *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004), pp. 65-80.

- the first phase from 10 to 20 May (on which latter date events spread rapidly beyond Gauteng to other provinces),
- the middle phase from 21 May to 31 May (during which most documented events outside Gauteng took place), and
- the final phase from 1 to 30 June (when the series of outbursts appeared to peter out).

Classification of violent outbursts		
Violent outbursts as separate events	MAJOR	MINOR
Including assault on individuals (classification via two or more criteria, data permitting)	(Major with assault) Event of longer duration Violence wider in scope Assaults including attacks, rapes, murder Significant police presence	(Minor with assault) Event of shorter duration Violence narrower in scope Few assaults mentioned, no deaths Insignificant or no police presence
Without assault on individuals (classification via two or more criteria, data permitting)	(Major on property only) Event of longer duration Violence wider in scope Actions including looting, fire-raising, vandalization of residences and businesses Significant police intervention	(Minor on property only) Event of shorter duration Violence narrower in scope Few actions including looting, fire-raising, vandalization of residences and businesses Insignificant or no police presence

