South Africa is a society that comprises many linguistic, racial and ethnic identities – differences which were exacerbated and exploited by the apartheid state, and which have been equally reified in a post-apartheid context with regards to racial quotas in sport, affirmative action legislation and Black Economic Empowerment policies, to name a few. It is perhaps not altogether surprising that institutions of state and civil society in post-apartheid South Africa have been largely preoccupied with national identity and social cohesion – rather than with the integration of foreigners – when confronted with the question of diversity. In a society whose recent history is characterised by racial segregation, it is ironic yet inevitable that the ending of apartheid would be accompanied simultaneously by a celebration of non-racial democracy and ‘a resurgence of research into racial identities, attitudes and behaviour in South Africa’ (Seekings 2008: 1). South African society remains obsessed with these categories, going so far as to aggregate census data in these terms. Despite the ceremonial flag-waving that accompanies events such as the hosting of the FIFA 2010 World Cup, South Africa remains a deeply divided society – although contours of division are neither the same, nor perhaps as obvious, as they once were.

Amidst continuing socio-economic inequalities that characterise South African society, largely across lines of apartheid-inherited racial categories, the presence within that society of other articulations of either belonging or difference is very seldom explicitly recognised – at least in policy-related terms (see e.g. Landau 2012a). Yet the more hidden and subtle practices of exclusion from the narrative of unity in diversity expressed in the constitution were most horrifically and tellingly exposed in May 2008, when sixty-seven people were killed in several weeks of xenophobic-inspired violence that flared up in predominantly under-serviced and indigent neighbourhoods in cities across South Africa. These events were a major shock to the political establishment of South Africa, which assumes itself to be a tolerant and caring society. It is both tragically ironic and yet highly significant that at least twenty of those killed were South African citizens, members of demographically and geographically less prominent ethnic groups.

The xenophobic violence was all the more sobering to South Africa’s political and economic elite precisely because the violent eruption was the sharp end of a much more general hostility towards difference in society; not only towards ‘foreigners’, but also members of minority ethnic and sexual orientation groups within South African society. That this resentment was first so violent, and second directed towards vulnerable and marginalised groups rather than the
privileged position of the elite or even against whites, is further suggestive of the disintegration of the narrative of unity in diversity. Far from the constitutional assertion of a tolerant and diverse society, the xenophobic violence of 2008 illustrated the reality of an increasingly polarised, suspicious and precarious society.

Explanations for the xenophobic violence have ranged from dismissal of the violence as merely ‘opportunistic criminality’ (see Valji 2003) to interpretations based on the continued socio-economic marginality of the poor (Sharp 2008) and concerns about the nature and efficacy of the institutions of state and civil society after apartheid (Pillay 2008). Certainly, the causes of violence against others (whether foreigners or less-deserving nationals) are complex and varied, and not easily related to deep-seated antipathy – many of the victims of xenophobic violence had been living among their perpetrators without conflict for years prior. This short essay is not able to explore these arguments in any great detail. Rather, it is concerned with the implications of xenophobic violence for the possibility of a post-apartheid subjectivity based on an ethics of diversity: not only because of the fact that violence undermines the hegemony of state (for indeed it does), but also because the geography of xenophobic violence in South Africa corresponds very closely to what can be termed a lost geography of state – the spaces in society where the state does not appear to penetrate easily.

### Diversity and its limits

The preoccupation with questions of diversity in post-apartheid South Africa, though emerging out of a history of racial conflict and a more recent ethics of reconciliation, is not first and foremost a question of tolerance of difference, at least as a general category. Diversity in the South African context implies engaging with particular defined differences within an already constituted political landscape. Xenophobia, as either discourse or as actual violence, need not necessarily conflict with this notion of diversity: indeed, one could all too vividly imagine a context where the exclusion of ‘others’ proves politically useful to discourses of nation-building, even when such discourses are entrenched in apparent non-racism. For this reason, policy related to diversity in South Africa is (increasingly) framed in the language of social cohesion. The explicit concern with ‘race relations’ that characterised research in the 1960s and then again in the early 1990s (Seekings 2008), in which research was conducted into perceptions of racial groups of each other (largely defined by apartheid categories), emerges only infrequently in the popular media around specific news events, such as proposals for race quotas in national sporting codes. Of far greater concern for the South African political and economic elite – and reflecting the changed political economy of South African society since 1994 – is the threat of social disintegration based on a range of criteria that are the result of historical racialised inequalities, but are not questions of race per se. Most specifically, these relate to geography and economy: while people formerly classified as white no longer make up the majority of the middle classes (Unilever Institute 2013), nevertheless the vast majority of the poor are black South Africans. In addition, there is a particular geography of inequality, with the urban centres having more infrastructure investment, and the disparity within these urban centres remaining between former white suburbs and former black townships. Poor, rural parts of the country remain the most severely indigent (McLennan and Roberts 2013).

Although the issue of social cohesion has emerged as a major preoccupation in policy circles, there is little consistency in how the term itself should be defined – let alone what the implications should be for policy. For example, the National Development Plan Vision 2030 argues for improvements in education and skills training, increased investment in science and technology, public infrastructure and urban development spending and a national health insurance scheme.
In contrast, the draft National Strategy on Social Cohesion and Nation Building drafted by the Department of Arts and Culture places emphasis on social mobilisation and the establishment of national identity, through defining shared values and symbols, and a shared constitutional democracy (Nyar 2013). The National Development Plan is clearly concerned with the sometimes poor relationship between institutions of state and particularly indigent sectors of society, with the emphasis being on growing the economy in order to create jobs and increase infrastructure spending, whereas the National Strategy on Social Cohesion is premised on reinvigorating a shared national identity.

Implicit in both of these conceptualisations of social cohesion – as with the notion of national identity in any context – is an imagination of the post-apartheid state as the central cohesive element within society. Whether as the provider of services, welfare and economic impetus, or as the guardian of the national identity, social cohesion implies – in the South African context – the construction of a political community through the redistributive, constitutionally obligated and democratic state. For Chipkin (2007), in the context of a racially discordant history, what binds a shared conception of the nation is precisely the celebration of democracy. That is to say, despite the inequalities that remain in society, the shared act of enacting a democratic right is the basis for what constitutes a sense of South African identity. In this sense, unity in diversity implies not a self-evident reality, but a political ideal that is enacted through the shared symbols of post-apartheid democracy.

As with all symbols of national identity, what the unity in diversity ideal implies is not a general inclusiveness, but an exclusivity of membership into a political community. The material symbol of this exclusive membership is the green identity document that all South Africans are issued with at birth, and that very actively defines one’s participation in the democratic process. Voting in elections in South Africa requires a stamped and bar-coded green identity document. However, in a more perverse materialisation of this national (and nationalist) symbol, the green identity document has been used as a way to identify foreigners and South African nationals in more prosaic contexts. Applying for access to stalls in the inner-city market place, for example, requires a green identity document, and there are anecdotal cases of marriages between South Africans and foreign nationals, or even fronting by South Africans with identity documents, in order to secure access to the resources (Wafer 2011). The ability to engage actively with the diversity of post-apartheid South Africa is a privilege of those who are already incorporated. It is therefore not surprising that a healthy informal economy exists in most South African cities for green identity documents.

The work of Giorgio Agamben (1998) has been influential in thinking about the body of the foreigner in post-apartheid South Africa in a context where legal status as citizen has become the site of intense contestation. Despite the fact that the rhetoric of the state is tolerant – sometimes even welcoming – of foreigners, they are nevertheless largely outside of the institutions of democratic membership. Foreigners, whether legal or undocumented, are protected by the constitution in terms of their basic human rights (Dodson 2011), but this does not prevent the more informal modes through which foreigners are controlled (Vigneswaran et al. 2010). As access to citizenship has become the primary mechanism to access social and economic resources, this has resulted in the emergence of both formal and informal modes of social order, which include new discriminatory practices (Gordon 2010). In this context, foreign nationals – especially other African nationals – have emerged as a particularly vulnerable group.

Non-government and civil-society organisations that have mobilised against xenophobia have focussed their efforts largely on the rights and constitutional obligations of the state with regard to foreigners – itself a reversion to the hegemony of a narrative of a caring, tolerant society (see Monson 2010). Against the general hostility towards foreigners in South Africa, in
Diversity, xenophobia and post-apartheid state

both official policy and everyday xenophobia, many foreign nationals living in South Africa have adopted a disposition that does not align with the more hegemonic discourse of unity in diversity. This is a resistance to their condition as the *homo sacer* of South African democracy. Landau and Freemantle (2010), for example, have demonstrated how many foreign nationals adopt what they term an ethics of tactical cosmopolitanism in direct contrast to the discourse of diversity. While diversity implies recognition of difference, and is accompanied by charity and/or tolerance of difference, cosmopolitanism appeals to an ethics of what we might term indifference (Tonkiss 2003). In other words, cosmopolitanism appeals not to an acknowledgement of one’s difference, but to an assumption that difference is the constitutive factor of society.

Xenophobia and the lost geography of the post-apartheid state

This recent history of explicit violence against identified ‘others’, and the emergence more generally of discourses of xenophobia in South Africa after apartheid, have been the subject of a number of recent – and perhaps belated – attempts to understand a phenomenon of exclusion in a society with a constitutional commitment to diversity (e.g. Charman and Piper 2012). Responses have ranged from what might broadly be referred to as political–economy explanations to more governmentality explanations, drawing for example on Agamben’s (1998) concept of *bare life* to speak about the presence of the body of the foreigner as the site of political exclusion, or Pillay’s (2008) reformulation of Chatterjee’s (2001) notion of *political society*, the largely excluded masses, whose subjectivity amounts to a ‘subaltern self-fashioning’, which operate outside the normative frameworks of emancipatory or liberal politics and are often chauvinistic and violent in character. Xenophobic violence has been viewed differently in the recent literature. It has been seen variously as 1) violent attacks on foreigners within the context of the continued frustration of poor South Africans at inequality in service delivery – there exist various versions of xenophobia as an expression of quasi-fascist nationalism (Murray 2003); 2) the jealous protection of new-found rights by South Africans (Nyamnjoh 2006), or the broader construction of a xenophobic state discourse; and 3) a politics of violence in the history of apartheid and segregation (Valji 2003). Certainly, Dodson (2011) argues that there have been no real attempts to explain the propensity towards violence or towards anti-foreigner sentiment among South Africans. Although the majority of South Africans did not take part in the xenophobic violence of May 2008 – and the majority expresses abhorrence at the violence – Crush (2011) has shown compelling quantitative data to suggest that there is a strong anti-foreigner sentiment across all spheres of South African society.

Of course, it is not just foreigners who are the objects of exclusion in South African xenophobic violence. Perhaps of greater concern for the political and economic elite of South Africa than the threat of xenophobic violence, is the fact that some South Africans were also victimised in the violence of 2008. If the construction of the post-apartheid state requires that subjects inhabit an ethics of unity in diversity, then the victimisation of marginal ethnic groups within South Africa suggests that in many parts of the country subjectivity is still constituted by the ethnic divisions that colonial and apartheid regimes exploited. In this regard, it is perhaps not surprising that many from within the political elite have rejected the idea that xenophobia is nascent within South African society. The xenophobic violence of May 2008 has been labelled as criminal – an attempt to eschew the spectre of intolerance from the body politic of rejecting the idea that the hegemony of the state narrative of unity in diversity is here challenged.

Even where it is engaged, xenophobia is cast as a potential threat to social cohesion, not as a social problem in and of itself:
Xenophobia is... the exclusion of many people from the mainstream of our society, regardless of claims as to whether the presence of foreigners is lawful or not in each particular instance. The phenomenon of ‘othering’ has real consequences in many respects, including shaping the response of those excluded in legitimating behaviour that is not desirable. To what extent this is prevalent in society is only known in a very limited sense.

(Office of the Presidency 2013)

Under the Mbeki Presidency, when the main impulse of social and economic policy was the expansion of the black middle classes and the broadening of economic access to those previously denied access to the mainstream economy, the question of social cohesion was hidden behind the increasingly multi-racial face of the South African middle class. Tragedies such as the August 2012 Marikana Massacre (where a wildcat strike by mine-workers turned violent, and forty-four mine-workers were shot dead – some in the back – by riot-police) raise the uncomfortable spectre that for many black South Africans the relations of domination and oppression remain unchanged. The desperately poor communities dependent upon mine-worker’s wages, and the micro- and informal economies that these wages sustain, are spaces of deeply suspicious, fractured and precarious subjectivity. Certainly, in such spaces the substance of post-apartheid democratic citizenship remains elusive. The breakdown of what has been termed the labour/citizenship nexus after apartheid (Dubbeld 2013) has resulted in the dissipation of discourses of citizenship amidst the fluidity, informality and extreme anxiety about and/or antipathy towards state authority. These ‘badlands’, situated in the blind spots and on the peripheries of the post-apartheid state imagination, are notorious hotbeds for what have been termed service delivery protests (i.e. protests that make claims upon state infrastructure). These protests have been primarily explained in terms of legitimate and unrealised expectations of democracy; certainly, service delivery backlogs are identified by both civil-society and state institutions in South Africa as a key element undermining social cohesion.

The informal settlements and makeshift livelihood strategies that characterise the mining-belt to the north and west of Gauteng (the province that contains the cities of Johannesburg and Pretoria, and largely regarded as the economic heartland of the country) resonate in many ways with the sorts of spaces that Landau (2012b, 2013) refers to as esturial spaces: ‘cities, or parts thereof, where varied migrant trajectories intersect to generate novel forms of social interaction and authority’ (Landau 2012b: 2). For Landau, these esturial spaces are spaces of dynamism, of rich associational life and new articulations of subjectivity. Yet to the definition of estuary must be added other qualities implicit in Landau’s use of the term: estuaries have a propensity to muddy, to divert and to stagnate. In other words, esturial spaces are also spaces of suspicion, immobility and precarity. Landau is mostly concerned with those peripheral and interstitial spaces of large South African cities such as Johannesburg, and with the trajectories and subjectivities of foreign migrants in South Africa. The communities that cling to the disappearing economy of waged labour in the mining-belt, and with it the disappearing politics of citizenship, might be implicated into far more controlled histories of (internal) labour migration, but the conditions that both these groups face in the present political-economy of South Africa is not dissimilar. The eruption, therefore, of xenophobic violence in May 2008, and the continued spectre of xenophobic sentiment among many communities in South Africa, is both horrifying and incredibly revealing about the status of citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa. It is no coincidence that the sites of sporadic service delivery protest and xenophobic violence in the last ten years tend to correspond to a geography of largely esturial spaces, i.e. spaces where the presence of the state is tenuous at best. It is in precisely these sites that the political project of social cohesion and unity in diversity appears least resonant.
Conclusion

This short commentary cannot attempt to cover in any great detail all the popular and academic discourse that the xenophobic violence of May 2008 has produced. There have been many fierce debates about the implication of the violence for the project of the democratic post-apartheid state. The political goal of unity in diversity is one that should contain an ethics of tolerance and empathy, and in reaction to the xenophobic violence there was an outpouring of compassion towards the victims. What the violence does highlight, however, is that diversity and xenophobia are not necessarily opposing ideas and that the geography of xenophobic violence articulates the potential contours and limits of the post-apartheid state.

References


Alex Wafer


Open University.