



Urban Transformation and ‘The Other’: From Racial Segregation and Oppression to Xenophobia and Suppression in South Africa’s Cities

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Just over thirty years ago (1976) the world was rocked by images of police brutality directed at crowds of young black South Africans openly venting their anger at a highly oppressive regime in Soweto, a ‘township’ set aside for temporary African settlement just outside Johannesburg. Ten years later the much-despised apartheid government embarked on a mildly reformist route, starting with the lifting of restrictions on the movement of black South Africans to the country’s cities and the economic prospects they offered, and replacing it with what it termed ‘managed urbanization’. This change in policy signified far more than simply the lifting of restrictive measures on the movement of a people; it for the first time signaled the acceptance of the white minority government of the presence and permanence of ‘The African Other’ in the heartlands of the biggest economy on the African continent.

With the transition to democracy in 1994 and the election of the first post-apartheid government led by President Nelson Mandela, a whole new era of State focus on urban areas began. Through a myriad of new laws, policies, strategies and plans, government sought to ensure that the cities were truly transformed into spaces owned, developed and enjoyed by all. At the same time, re-integration into the global economy, from which South Africa had been largely severed through sanctions aimed at ending white rule, was actively pursued through a range of export-focused strategies. While the ideals have far outstripped actual delivery, significant social, spatial and economic transformation of urban areas and globalization has taken place.

Globalization has, however, not only had positive outcomes. While some sectors have grown, notably tourism, others, notably heavy industry and textile manufacturing, historically large employers of semi-skilled urban residents, have seen severe shrinkages. In addition to this, huge numbers of migrants from other African countries, either in pursuit of (1) better economic prospects and business opportunities or (2) survival, driven from their home bases through civil war and economic mismanagement, have entered the country over the last decade. Together these two developments, i.e. (1) huge job losses in traditionally strong, stable industries and (2) high inward migration, worsened by growing frustration at the slow pace of the promised urban transformation, have spurred a new and highly disturbing development in the country’s cities - the intimidation, suppression and brutal attack of foreigners.

In this paper the transition from the brutal practices of a racially oppressive regime to the violent acts of a desperate urban underclass directed at an often equally vulnerable migrant, marginalized class, is mapped, described, explored and interrogated. This is done against the backdrop of the post-apartheid transformation and re-integration of the South African city into the global economy over the last three decades. While having a distinctly South African focus and flavor, the story and its undercurrents, are sure to speak to observers from many other developing and developed country contexts.

KEY WORDS: Urban transformation; racial segregation; globalization; xenophobia.