MIGRATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

CONFLICTS & IDENTITIES

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Migration in South Africa: Conflicts and Identities

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Review by Alan Hirsch

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Eddie Rakabe and Chris Nshimbi have assembled an interesting collection of chapters dealing with the broadly common theme of the complexity of responding to and managing migration in South Africa today. Some of the chapters are essays, contesting ideas in the context of existing knowledge, while others add to the stock of knowledge itself, presenting on original research.

The sudden influx into South Africa of Zimbabwean migrants in 2008 and 2009 and the emergence, in the same period, of virulent anti-migrant rhetoric and violent anti-migrant actions brought the issue of migration policy to the fore. Since then, it has seldom been out of the frame of South African politics.

As in many other countries, elections in South Africa are now accompanied by an assortment of wild claims about migrants. Politicians are expected to project anti-African migrant attitudes, even if they sometimes prefer to signal their position in oblique ways. Finding the balance between reassuring the insecure and vulnerable citizens and following sensible developmental policies is hard to achieve and even more difficult to articulate. So far, the current Minister of Home Affairs has so far managed this balancing act unusually well.

Vusumzi Gumbi points out that anti-migrant sentiments are more likely in societies with high levels of poverty, inequality, and specifically in South Africa's case, spatial injustice. He argues that the use of the term 'xenophobia' can be misleading—it is not 'the other' or 'the stranger' as such who is feared, but the impact of competition from outsiders for limited resources.

This will remind some readers of President Thabo Mbeki's resistance to the term 'xenophobia'. At the time I was tempted to share the view that Mbeki was being pedantic. Having thought about the use of the term in my own work I am now sympathetic to the distinction. There is clear evidence from in-depth research that foreigners are not hated for being foreigners except in the case of some older and less educated South Africans; younger, relatively more educated South Africans who are poor nevertheless resent what they see as unfair competition from irregular migrants

(Chikohomero, 2023). This combination of resentments is vulnerable to manipulation by unscrupulous politicians.

Nshimbi, in his essay on mobilities in Southern Africa, notes that the migration patterns in the region have deep historical roots. Unlike the myth of ever-migrating Africans, most Africans in pre-colonial societies were sedentary, but there were patterns of mobility in the Southern African region that predated colonisation. As he and Rakabe put it in the introductory chapter: "Southern Africa boasts a long history of human interaction and migration that predates the Westphalian state and is defined by strong relationships between ethnic groups who transverse the nation state borders of the countries of the region."

The central fact of colonisation in Southern African was the forced migrant labour that underwrote the provision of cheap labour for mines and farms and left its scars everywhere. Nshimbi reminds us that Samir Amin, in a landmark essay, referred to East and Southern Africa as '*Africa of the labour reserves*' (Amin, 1972: 503-524, author's italics).

The labour reserves are the focus of Rakabe's thought-provoking and persuasive chapter on the redistribution dilemma arising from regional inequalities within South Africa. Drawing on economic geography, Rakabe explains how difficult it is to effectively counter the spatial inequalities caused by apartheid's migrant labour system. The result, he shows, has been confused, confusing, overlapping and contradictory policies from Special Economic Zones to the District Development Model. The National Development Plan (NDP) ignored the National Skills Development Plan (NSDP) and the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA) ignored the NDP. And so on. The result has been that income inequality remains at levels similar to the apartheid era.

Sifiso Ndlovhu, in an articulate essay on "belonging and social cohesion", notes that the failure of South Africa's immigration policy to facilitate belonging and social cohesion echoes the failure of what she calls the "foundational myth of rainbowism" to include everyone. Though she doesn't refer to it directly, the resonance of the "Rhodes must fall" and "fees must fall" protest movements reflected the sense of residual exclusion among the less advantaged of those who managed to access higher education.

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In contrast, Janet Munakambwe shows how the struggle to include domestic workers under the law which entitles workers to compensation for injury and disease brought the trade unions in behind both local and foreign domestic workers in what was ultimately a successful campaign.

Indeed, just as the chapters of this book vary in form from philosophical essay to number-crunching economics, their perspectives vary too. As the introduction to the book points out, these different perspectives add to the richness of the book and reflect contemporary debates or tensions.

A reader might feel that one or two chapters are weak or at least thin, and she might be amused by the author who quotes his own earlier work as having "convincingly shown" something, and who also included eight of his own papers in his bibliography. She might be surprised that in an otherwise good paper, Ravi Kanbur's and Tony Venables's surnames are repeatedly misspelled. But having read the entire collection she will be satisfied that it is, overall, a valuable contribution to this critical area of work—migration studies in Southern Africa.

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BIOGRAPHY

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