

# Migratory Apartheid

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Migrants, the enemy to be eliminated. Whatever the country or the continent. Whether they are first, second or umpteenth generation. They are the scapegoats for every misfortune. From medical epidemics to the employment crisis. I had the idea for this article on migratory apartheid while walking in the residential district of Rosebank in the suburbs of Johannesburg at the beginning of the year. It came to me while monitoring the situation of West African migrants living in South Africa. The contrast is striking between Rosebank, with its new blend of people reflecting the new middle class of South Africa, and the migrant ghettos in the township of Alexandra. I was far from imagining that, a few weeks after this trip, these men and women, whose only crime is to want to live and work in South Africa, would be hit by a tidal wave of xenophobia. The International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination<sup>2</sup> provides me with an opportunity to reflect on what I saw and heard about the migrants in the complex city of Johannesburg. And in particular, to describe these new walls, both visible and invisible, and increasingly thick, that are being erected against migrant populations within the African continent and beyond.

## From migrant worker to economic migrant

During the ten days I spent in Johannesburg, I was able to meet migrants from West, East, Central and Southern Africa. It comes as no surprise to learn that the main West African community in South Africa is Nigerian, followed by the Ghanaian, Senegalese and Ivoirian communities. Although the number of Nigerian migrants in South Africa is significantly less than British migrants, according to U.N. statistics (17 000 Nigerians compared to 318 000 British), it is the Nigerians along with the other migrant communities from southern Africa that are mainly incriminated by the South-African population. As in all the other countries, migrants are accused of being involved in drug-dealing, prostitution, theft and every minor offense conceivable. Steve, originally from Nigeria, and a driver for a small, private transport company, showed me around the township of Alexandra. In his company, I was able to wander around the slums meeting his friends and family, and discover the human stories that make migration a school of life.

They are itinerant salesmen, drivers. They are food and drink vendors, security guards, car park attendants, construction workers. Every day they contribute to the town of Johannesburg, working hard to earn a living. Chinyere is a hairdresser in the township. She emigrated from Port Harcourt and, unlike some of her friends that decided to go to Europe, preferred to try her luck on the African continent. On her arrival, the Nigerian community took her under their wing. “ ***Here, it's your community that helps you to integrate at the beginning as it's difficult to get access to all the social services if you don't get some advice and haven't got the right papers*** ”. She didn't expect the welcome she got from her South-African brothers and sisters. For her, the hardest part is not earning a living but to live in fear of being attacked at any moment or becoming the victim of racketeering because you're a migrant. She is currently living as an irregular migrant, not because she doesn't want to

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<sup>2</sup> Celebrated on March 21st of each year, <http://www.un.org/fr/events/racialdiscriminationday/>

regularize her situation but because the South-African immigration authorities are not making it easy for her to do so.

Arthur, from Cameroon, tells me the same story. His application for the renewal of his residence permit has just been refused for the second time by “*Home Affairs*”<sup>3</sup> because, this time, mistakes were found in his lease agreement. The first time, it was because his vaccination records were missing. He had previously been employed as a bilingual interpreter with an agency that had eventually had to terminate his contract because of the bureaucratic complications and the levies imposed on employers by the South-African administration before they would grant a residence permit to their migrant workers. Each new request was an adventure in itself as the old residence permits granted to the migrant were not taken into account. It's now been nine years since Arthur left Douala to come and study economics in South Africa. He found a student job as a waiter before applying to work as an interpreter in his old agency. He is now trying to work as a freelance interpreter but, to avoid being illegal, needs a residence permit that the immigration authorities won't give him. And there's a reason for that. In their eyes Arthur is an economic migrant.

And we have the European Union to thank for that. Not only because they have they set the example by promoting security-oriented migration policies but, in particular, because they have permanently transformed migration-related terminology throughout the world. Thus, “**migrant workers**”, whose status and protection were enshrined in a UN convention, now find themselves called “**economic migrants**” throughout the world. During apartheid in South Africa, recourse to migrant workers, who were exploited in the gold and diamond mines and in industry, was the norm. Afrikaners<sup>4</sup> preferred migrant workers to avoid coming into contact with black South African workers active in the African National Congress<sup>5</sup> (ANC). The ANC often used industrial sabotage in its fight against apartheid. With the end of apartheid and the need for the new governing body to facilitate access to the employment market for black South Africans, from which the majority of them had previously been excluded, positive discrimination policies were introduced in all areas of business but in particular in the mining industry.

With blacks now having access to the national riches, the birth of a new middle class in South Africa led to an increase in the employment of domestic workers from Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Swaziland, Namibia, Botswana and Mozambique. Strong demand encouraged large-scale, illegal, immigration from neighbouring countries. But far from ensuring that these new waves of migrants received lawful treatment by introducing appropriate legislation, South Africa decided to step up migration controls and, like Europe, intensified the fight against “**economic migrants**”. With the economic need for migrant workers in the mining sector and large agricultural plantations continuing to be felt, this security-oriented migration policy did nothing to dissuade the migrants from arriving but on the contrary bolstered migration influx to South Africa via the clandestine routes. In particular, via the Limpopo, a crocodile-infested river which acts as a border between South Africa and Zimbabwe or via a network of road hauliers who, through a change in terminology, are now known as “**traffickers**”. The illegal situation of these migrant workers increases their exploitation in

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<sup>3</sup> Home Affairs is the South African administrative department responsible for immigration matters.

<sup>4</sup> Afrikaners designates white South Africans. During the apartheid era, Afrikaners, who were in the minority, held all the power in South Africa and opposed any political participation of the black majority.

<sup>5</sup> The political party in power in South Africa since the first post-apartheid elections in 1994.

the domestic and construction industries, security companies, mining companies and agricultural industry. It means they have to work long hours for low wages. In a country that has one of the most powerful trade union federations in Africa, The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the competition that irregular migrant workers represent for national workers has brought a rapid increase in xenophobic attacks.

### **The Surge in Xenophobia**

The process by which migrant workers, made illegal by restrictive migration policies, compete with national workers in the mining, industrial and construction industries is not unique to South Africa. Nor, either, is the surge in xenophobia that is hitting both the North and South of the African continent and beyond. But what is specific to South Africa, raising questions and shocking people's consciences, is the increase in xenophobic violence by blacks towards other blacks over the last few years. “ ***Why are black migrants considered differently to white migrants?***”. Margaret from Zimbabwe, and a researcher at the University of the Witwatersrand, explained to me during a discussion on apartheid, that despite its disappearance, apartheid has left a deep mark on the black South African conscience linked to the power wielded by the white population. This means that, although the Pakistanis, Indians, Chinese and Europeans of various nationalities find themselves in the same, illegal, situation, they are not victims of the surge in xenophobia.

Another question that haunted me while listening to the African migrants' experiences, was whether the South African people consider themselves a member of the African Union and embraced its pan-African vision. It was in Lucien, another academic, that provided me with the answer. From the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lucien was able to settle in South Africa by obtaining refugee status after overcoming a thousand and one obstacles. While also working as a car park attendant, he was able to begin studying at university, and thanks to a grant, was able to pursue doctoral studies that have led to him now having a post as a lecturer and researcher. I realised from talking to Lucien that the South African middle class have their eyes turned towards the West and the BRIC countries (Bresil, Russia, India, China) rather than the African continent. On the other hand, South African businessmen see the African continent as an important market and that is what directs the South African government's positions.

Lucien spoke to me about the part the South African mining companies have played in the successive wars in the east of Congo, and the strong presence on the continent of telecommunications-related businesses such as MTN and DSTV. For him, the only purpose of Mrs Dlamini-Zuma becoming head of the African Union, with the results that we are all aware of<sup>6</sup>, was to reinforce South Africa's economic presence on the continent. South Africa's pan-African vision is, thus, just as predatory as the colonising powers', to grab as much of the African continent's resources as possible while refusing its migrant workers. In light of these explanations, it is easy to understand why there have been appeals in certain African countries to boycott South African products and companies in response to the xenophobic surge. It is extremely unfortunate, that faced with this alarming situation, both in Africa and the rest of the world, no institutions at the continental level, or at the

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/01/27/mme-dlamini-zuma-et-l-union-africaine-chronique-d-un-rendez-vous-manque\\_5070121\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/01/27/mme-dlamini-zuma-et-l-union-africaine-chronique-d-un-rendez-vous-manque_5070121_3212.html)

international level, seem up to the job of countering this surge in xenophobia which is in constant progression.

### ***The Global Compact*<sup>7</sup> : the ultimate solution**

Paradoxically, the two countries on the African continent that have been in migration news the most over the last few months, due to their countries' xenophobic attacks on black migrants, are South Africa and Algeria, who are among the most influential countries in the African Union. It is, therefore, easier to understand this institution's reticence in taking a clear stand condemning the rise in xenophobia in all regions of the continent. Whatever the country, whether it is Angola, Gabon, Ethiopia, Sudan, Niger, Morocco or Libya, the hunt for African migrants or their use as bargaining chips in negotiations with the European neighbour have become systematic. By making European official development assistance conditional on the implementation of migration controls and the fight against migrant trafficking, the negative perception of African migration on African soil has been reinforced. There is absolutely no doubt whatsoever that the security-oriented migration policies implemented on the African continent have influenced the rise in xenophobic acts. And this, without a doubt, now comes as a challenge to the African Union's will to move towards free movement on the continent. Although many citizens on the continent hold this project dear, it stands in opposition to the current policies of many African countries, leading to concerns that it could be put on hold indefinitely.

For many civil society activists, all that remains is the hope that a new global pact on migration, reaffirming the right to free movement and the rights of migrant workers, will put an end to the xenophobic migratory policies that are spreading around the planet. More than ever before, the citizens in the North and the South of the planet are at a historical turning point to make mobility a right for all and to make human migration an opportunity, whatever the region. It is up to us to make sure we mobilise, inform, and speak out in order to convince the States to take courageous positions during the coming negotiations on the global compact for safe migration and refuse to be influenced by the advocates of hate that are poisoning countries' national debates. The future will bring freedom of movement and a world in which we can live together in harmony, or it will not. We have to get that message across so that the world's populations will finally accept that our societies become multicultural forever.

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<sup>7</sup> The Global Compact for Safe, orderly and regular migration: is an initiative launched by the United Nations on 19th September 2016 to respond to the challenges that migration poses for States. The negotiation process will be launched in 2017 and the compact will be ultimately adopted in 2018.