

Weakest in our midst now bear the brunt of our failure to improve the lives of the poor.

Jonathan Faull

It is South Africa's suburban nightmare made real: spontaneously, mobs of urban black men, armed with the traditional weaponry of the poor – clubs, metal bars, knives, and match boxes – roam the streets seeking victims. It is the moment when the structural violence of poverty, unemployment and material inequality explodes beyond its systemic, economic and social shackles to disgorge violence. Like Neo in the Matrix, we are summoned to the “Desert of the Real”.

But the nightmare of the suburbs has not been fully realised. The victims don't drive SUV's and drink G&T's and the violence is not directed at the structure of the economy that reproduces with each waking moment the emasculation, indignity and dehumanisation that the cocktail of poverty, unemployment and inequality necessarily assert. Instead, the victims sought are the weakest among us - refugees, migrants and asylum seekers - conveniently othered as interlopers who steal our jobs, our houses, our possessions, our women and our birthright.

The suburbs have already begun to rationalise the violence into the “us” and “them” of race and class: Our blacks, true to form, are too lazy to get the jobs the foreign darkies work slave wages to keep. And they think we're racist! Look, the blacks are killing each other. It's their tribal thing again...

Racist projections cast in the traditional South African tropes of indolence and industry, barbarism and civilisation, stasis and progress, are finding their new evidence, air-brushing away the entrenched social legacies of, and responsibilities for, Bantu-education, forced removals, ethnically defined locations, human rights violations and the armed confrontations of the late apartheid period.

Contrary to the expedient rationalisations of the suburban South African mind, the nightmare of the past week is neither spontaneous nor is it written into the DNA of black people. If one scratches the surface of this society, we are all complicit in the bigotry that has found such purposeful foot soldiers in the back alleys of Johannesburg: Like drink driving and tax-evasion, xenophobia is a national past time in South Africa that defies our entrenched communal and class divisions. Garden variety intolerance, discrimination and apathy in the face of overwhelming evidence of prejudice towards foreigners, must now witness its logical endpoint.

The levels of existing poverty, unemployment and material inequality in South Africa are politically and socially unsustainable. This much has always been true. For this society to flourish, democracy, in that well worn cliché, must deliver a “dividend” through the material improvement of the lives of the poor. The vivid

and visceral violence of the past days is a timely reminder of these truths, and of the failure of our political institutions and representatives to channel the frustrations, grievances and aspirations of citizens into meaningful change.

Through the apartheid era, the enforcers of fascist and racist policies had faces, institutions, systems, and jack-booted henchmen that could be resisted and confronted. Townships, suburbs, hostels, and beachfront apartment blocks had social engineers and architects who could be challenged and obstructed. The transition has largely absolved the state and the enclave economy of their complicity in the impoverishment of millions. Now townships and the poor appear spontaneously, legitimated by an authorless economy commanded by invisible hands. Indigence and wealth are losing their trace.

Should we be surprised that in the absence of meaningful political representation and mediation, the atrophy of social change, and a context of socially acceptable xenophobia, that the structural violence of the lives of citizens at the margins is projected internally onto the weakest in our midst?

At a recent Cape Town Press Club briefing on the Zimbabwean Crisis, academic and political analyst, Brian Raftopoulos was asked what lessons South Africa could learn from the conflagration in that country. He responded by rebutting assertions that the African National Congress and Zanu-PF share a common ideological and internal logic for government, that the South African and Zimbabwean economies are structured in very different ways asserting dissimilar pressures and countervailing forces on their respective governments, and that the nature of our juxtaposed struggles for liberation set our independent courses on different trajectories.

But, he asserted, if there is a lesson for South Africa to learn from Zimbabwe, it is that levels of racialised poverty, unemployment, asset ownership and income inequality, inherited at the moment of liberation, must be substantively and democratically addressed to prevent the populist exploitation of grievance for undemocratic ends. I'm not sure if anyone was listening.

The epidemic of violence sweeping Gauteng must now serve as a stain upon our collective moral conscience, where its poisonous roots found such fertile ground.

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