

XENOPHOBIA, NATIONALISM AND GREEDY BOSSES - AN INTERVIEW WITH ALAN LIPMAN -

Alan Lipman served as an early member of the underground SACP, which had been re-established in 1953 after its predecessor, the CPSA, was outlawed in 1950. He and his wife Beata worked in an SACP front organisation planning the Congress of the People, which adopted the Freedom Charter in Kliptown in 1955, and Beata beautifully hand-lettered the official version of the Charter. But after intense disagreements over Soviet imperialism with SACP leader Michael Harmel, the couple split with the Party in 1956. Alan engaged in an act of sabotage against the records office of the hated new pass system for black women. The couple fled into exile in 1963, narrowly avoiding being swept up in the Rivonia Treason Trial. In exile, Alan became involved with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and later shifted towards a libertarian socialist position. The Lipmans returned to South Africa in 1990 and although he initially ran as an ANC ward candidate, he became disillusioned with the neo-liberalism of the ANC and later became associated with the ZACF with whom he conducted a well-received workshop in Orange Farm in May 2006.

As far as I understand, xenophobia means dislike, even hatred, suspicion of strangers. And it's been an instrument of oppression used by those in power for centuries. When people are angry, starving, impossibly housed, can't get health services, can't get education for their kids, can't get education for themselves, they're angry. And where do they turn that anger? Ideally they turn that anger against those who benefit most from their misery but, in actuality, that's quite difficult; and when that does happen that's a revolutionary situation. But mostly people turn their anger against strangers in their midst or foreigners.

The Brits have hated the French for centuries, and vice versa; and the French and the Germans and vice versa; the Brits and the Portuguese and vice versa and you can go on and on and on and on; the Scots and the English; and the Welsh and the English. It's not a phenomenon that has to do only with colonialism, although it's intense when it's in a colonial or ex-colonial situation, as we know from the history of India, the history of China, the history of South America and the history of Africa.

So it seems to me that this word xenophobia which the press has picked up, whilst it's an accurate description of the hatred, dislike and suspicion of strangers, is also a useful concealment of what the real misery of the South African masses is: a lack of opportunities for employment, for housing, for education, for health services and for all the other things that we know about, and that they know about all too clearly in their daily lives. So the word xenophobia has been picked up and used as a kind of smooth covering of something which is mis-directed anger. It's anger directed at their most obvious strangers in their midst, instead of anger directed at what I would call the ruling class, which in SA has been rich whites, like you and me, because we are rich in comparison – I'm sorry to say that to you – and certainly an ANC upper clique which has promised the world. Every elec-

tion it has been "A better life for all", hasn't it? And every election it's been "A better life for my mates, and for me". So it seems to me that what xenophobia is, or the term xenophobia, is a cover-up for misdirected anger which should have been directed at the ANC, the ANC top leadership – and that goes quite far down in the ANC. Where else in the world would you get a minister talking about the Chinese people in South Africa in the way that our minister recently spoke about Chinese people? Which was racist, insulting, abusive and what the hell, there's not even been an apology, no attempt to understand it. You know why? Because she belongs to the upper clique, which has been lining its pockets and lining its homes with smart furniture, and the motor cars and all the other things; all the copying of the white ruling class habits.

So xenophobia to me is an attempt, not consciously necessarily, but an attempt by some consciously, to divide the people and to direct their anger in an entirely false direction. There may be a few people from Zimbabwe, or the Congo, or Malawi or from other countries, who are better educated than most of the poor in South Africa and who had a better chance to get jobs or small businesses as a result of that – but that isn't a whole group of people. It certainly is not the Zimbabweans who fled from the best pal of our President, you know, fellow gangsters.

So on the question of xenophobia I'm deeply suspicious and terribly hostile. While there are serious problems facing the world: problems of escalation of fuel prices (and that's another question of why fuel prices have escalated); problems of serious climate change caused by human actions (not your action, not my action, except we drive motor cars – I presume you're here by car, and so would I be) which is accelerating whatever natural processes are going on. So those are serious issues; the fact that there's not going to be enough fuel for your car or my car at the prices that we can afford

to pay. It may be five years away, it may be three years away, it may be even less. It's going to change all sorts of things in our lives. The fact that climate is changing, and that's happening quicker and quicker and quicker. The Arctic bloody ice is melting, and the sea is beginning to rise; I don't know how long cities like Durban will exist. Those are serious issues which our governments – if we call them governments; our rulers – should be paying attention to. But they don't even pay attention to xenophobia, the top rulers. What does Mbeki do? He went off to some bloody conference in Japan.

Oh and by the way, just the other day it was published in the paper about the meal that the delegates to that conference in Italy about food shortage; the meals that they had and the food shortage that is going on. It's cartoon copy-book nonsense: pheasants and caviar and all sorts of crap – probably tastes good, I don't know I haven't tried it – fed to these guys by something like 35 chefs from all over the world. That was their meal, and the next minute they're sitting down discussing food shortages. There's no food shortage. There's food profits making food shortage, yes. Okay, so those are the real issues, or the real international issues that we should be confronting. Or we should be confronting South Africa's behaviour at the United Nations recently in supporting what's been going on in Burma. These are the sort of things we should be talking about. South Africa's actions in not allowing the Zimbabwe issue to be discussed. Now whether the Zimbabwe issue is as bad as it's painted, and I think it's probably worse, is another discussion all together. But these are the things that attention should be paid to, but we whip up a call about xenophobia and what happens?

Our ministers say it's 'criminal elements' as though there aren't criminal elements in all popular uprisings. Of course criminals will take advantage of that. And another issue; what makes them criminals? How come they're criminals? So I'm not impressed with the xenophobia charge at all. I'm impressed that the anger that people have shown has been again channelled in another direction.

It's the displacement of the genuine, profound, legitimate anger of the people; who have had no promises fulfilled, who are poor and worse off, despite what the polls tell us; I was just reading about some poll or other that tells us that the working classes think



SACP veteran turned anarchist Alan Lipman

they are better off in South Africa – bullshit, they're worse off. And they're worse off under the leadership of a Communist Party that isn't communist, and a trade union organisation that is barely trade unionist.

What do you think about government allegations of third force involvement in whipping up the xenophobic violence in order to destabilise the country ahead of next years presidential elections? Was it just an attempt to shift the blame and avoid accepting responsibility?

If I was a member of a third force, and I wish I was an active member of a civil society third force, I would take advantage of popular unrest as well. I've been called an agitator for most of my adult life, my father called me an agitator when I was 10 years old and I've been called an agitator ever since. That could be a third force of course. I would agitate, I would agitate against this government. If that's called third force, okay, I'm a member of a third force. I welcome anger and opposition against oppressive conditions. The government will say 'third force', 'criminal elements', 'our political enemies', all sorts of things. Of course they'll say that. Our government behaves exactly like my three decades of experience in Britain and Europe, how governments do there. When Tony Blair says things the next minute you'll hear it coming out of the mouth of Mbeki. They're the same. There should be more than a third force opposed to our government, there should be a popular uprising.

With Jacob Zuma's ascendancy to power within the ANC there seems to have been a correlating increasing attitude of chauvinism through the country, with an increase in hate crimes and attacks being perpetrated primarily against poor black lesbians. Do you think the xenophobic pogroms could have anything to do with Zuma's rise and the culture of chauvinism associated with him?

I think it is something to do with Zuma's probable ascendancy. What does Zuma offer? He offers the actions. Okay, let's agree he wasn't guilty of rape, and I reserve my opinion on that. Let's say he didn't rape that young woman; he certainly took advantage of a young woman who was the daughter of his best friend, so there's something strange about that. He certainly paraded his sexism, he paraded his dislike, his hatred, his fear of gays; and that goes for male gays and woman gays. So, Zuma's no choice, we're faced with a very strange situation. We either support the smooth, sophisticated, hypocritical Mbeki or we support the very likely crookery of Zuma, and that he had something to do with the arms deal – and who didn't in government – is not disputed. What's in dispute is whether he is guilty of a technical crime or not. That he was an associate of Schabir Shaik he doesn't argue against, and the Shaiks don't argue against that. So yes, Zuma is a poor choice of a leader – if we need leaders, and that's another question, as you well know.

Zuma's a poor choice of a leader. We had the choice of either the smooth sophistication of Mbeki or the rather crude homophobic allegiances of Zuma. So it's a pretty sad situation.

A minister was quoted on the radio a while back as saying that, in the Freedom Charter, when it says that South Africa belongs to all who live in it what is actually meant is that South Africa belongs to all who were born here. This obviously could lend itself to xenophobic interpretation. You and your wife were involved in drafting the Freedom Charter; can you tell us what the tone and the sentiment and understanding were at the time of writing it?

The sentiment and understanding at the time, and the sentiment and understanding since then for people who supported the ideas, or some of the ideas of the Freedom Charter, was that South Africa belongs to the people. The people who are in it, who are alive in it. All the people. Not the people who were born here. I was born in South Africa, my father and mother were born in South Africa. So bloody what? What does that make me? And different from anybody else? And my wife was born in Germany. So I'm a better South African than she? It's crap. It's bullshit. It's divisive talk that comes from the top. You've just given me a better example than the ones I've cited of the sort of non-communist, non-socialist, non-democratic ideas that are being spouted by our cabinet members.

Could you tell us what you think has been the role of nationalism in perpetuating the kind of thought that leads to xenophobic attitudes?

Nationalism is a disease. There were circumstances, during occupation of the Nazis, that right-wing nationalists joined in the opposition against the Nazis, and that would apply to most imperial situations. Opposition against the British occupation of and exploitation of India, came also from right-wing Indians. So there have been cases where nationalists have supported popular movements, or been party to popular movements, but nationalism is a disease and xenophobia is just the worst symptom of that disease. I don't need nationalism, I'm not a patriot. What have I got to be patriotic about? Of course I love South Africa. I love the climate, I love the people, I love the beauties of South Africa, of course. But when I was living in Britain I loved the people and beauties of Britain as well, but that doesn't make me a British nationalist or a South African nationalist. Nationalism is the polite term for xenophobia, they're the same bloody thing. And when business people and top ANC spokespeople talk about nationalism what they're really talking about is xenophobia, because it's the same thing.

I think you touched on the role of nationalism in the ANC, as a bourgeois-nationalist cross-class party that hijacked the struggle and diverted it away from what

could have been a popular revolution into the two-phase National Democratic Revolution. The first phase already having been reached and the second phase looking like a distant dream on the horizon. What do you think about the role of this class collaboration in the NDR?

I've learned to become very suspicious of nationalism. I've learned to become very suspicious of the people who spout nationalism. Earlier on in my life I was taken in by that, I've been taken in very badly; I'm a gullible old man. I even went to Israel in 1948 and took part in the murder and the displacement – I only lasted six months there – of the Palestinian people, and I'm deeply ashamed about that. I'm also ashamed about supporting, earlier on, the ANC: African National Congress, about supporting nationalism in the Congress. I'm now, not only guilty but hostile and immediately suspicious of people who talk in national or nationalist terms. They don't need to. And as I said, I'm proud to be human. It's difficult enough to be a human being in an alien society, and this society is alien to me, in a humanistic way. This society is not humane, it's exploitative down to the core. So I strive, in my own personal life, to be human; because we're not human, we're divorced from ourselves, we're alienated from ourselves, from what we really are.

The ANC is actually a nationalist party, so why do they talk at the same time about African Renaissance and that Africa must unite?

The talk about African Renaissance is largely down to people like Mbeki who, I think, had dreams – and I think they were imperialistic dreams – about Africa rising against the Western dominance. That Africa was colonised by the Western powers is history, it's absolutely so. But also the people he thought would support him in this renaissance, where he propagated the ideas of renaissance, were at meetings of the African leadership. Now the African leadership, as Fanon rightly pointed out to us, that leadership is corrupt as hell. It's deeply deeply corrupt. It's almost endemic in its corruption. What they mean by renaissance in actual terms is making more money for themselves, more power for themselves. Power is the important thing, power brings money. And that's what the African Renaissance is. You've noticed he's stopped talking about the African Renaissance over the last few years, because African Renaissance doesn't have any appeal to anybody any longer; except a few so-called intellectuals. Don't be taken in by the African Renaissance. It's a weird term anyhow: if he's talking about African Renaissance why does he take the 'renaissance'? Which was a bourgeois expression three centuries ago. Why does he take that phrase, why doesn't he take a phrase that comes out of Africa? Like ubuntu. Don't believe a word Mbeki says, if Mbeki says "I want to go to the toilet" I don't believe it.