

## Book Review: Apartheid Vertigo: The Rise in Discrimination Against Africans in South Africa

by blog admin

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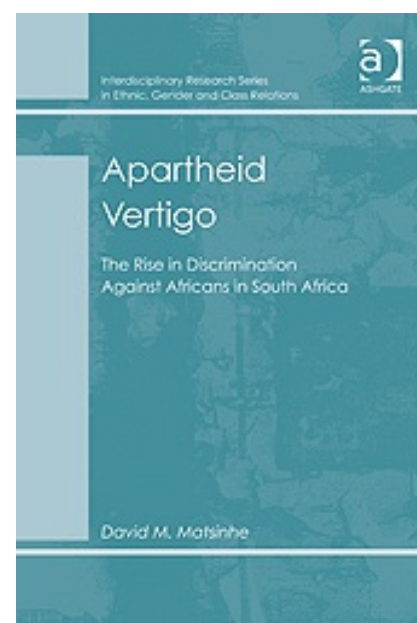
*For centuries, the colour-code shaped state and national ideals, created social and emotional distances between social groups, permeated public and private spheres, and dehumanized Africans of all nationalities in South Africa. Two decades after the demise of official apartheid – and despite four successive black governments – apartheid vertigo still distorts South Africa’s post-colonial reality. **Lindsay Harris** believes that those who enjoy the works of Zygmunt Bauman and Hannah Arendt will find this an interesting, if somewhat frustrating, read.*



**Apartheid Vertigo: The Rise in Discrimination Against Africans in South Africa. David M. Matsinhe. Ashgate.**

### Find this book

In *Apartheid Vertigo*, [David Matsinhe](#) argues that the increasing violence by black South Africans towards African foreigners is the perpetuation of a form of apartheid or a part of the legacy thereof. The colonial dichotomy between the oppressor and the oppressed has become, according to Matsinhe, the insider versus the outsider. The author argues that “citizens hold strong anti-immigrant attitudes and sentiments through the construction and mobilization of the image of makwerekwere (translation: foreigner), the bogeyman who stains the nation with his excessive blackness” (p. 133). This idea of a “makwerekwere” is used in a similar manner to the way “kaffir boy” was used under the apartheid regime – as a means to undermine the humanity of the subject thus enabling “citizens to engage in aggressive and violent behaviour without feelings of guilt” (p 152). Anyone who enjoys Zygmunt Bauman, Hannah Arendt and the like will find this an interesting, if somewhat frustrating, read.



The early chapters of the book present the theoretical principles behind “makwerekwere” and the transference of violence in South Africa as a result of the country’s history. It is likely for this reason that he discusses the challenges of social welfare, education, healthcare, even corruption in the civil service and government, with a bluntness I found refreshingly frank. My concern throughout the comparison is the exclusivity with which Matsinhe discusses these issues as solely affecting foreigners.

In Chapter 9, Matsinhe quotes a Congolese national who says the following; “The police, the community itself, they are almost the same” (p. 144). Later in the chapter, Matsinhe elaborates by saying; “An enduring belief exists among foreign nationals that the police and criminals operate in collaboration” (p. 151). Believable though this may be, the negative effects of institutional failure and corruption in government and civil society are not limited to foreign nationals. South Africa has the [highest incidence of rape in the world](#) – 127.6 per 100,000 people in the country. Of those raped, the majority can be assumed to be local. This statistic speaks volumes indicating that the victims of violence in South Africa should be seen as all encompassing – both foreign and local nationals. While I am not denying that South Africa is struggling with xenophobia and associated violence and social tensions, many other countries without a recent oppressor-oppressed narrative such as France, Belgium and Spain are also [struggling with severe anti-immigration sentiment and related violence](#).

In a crucial shortcoming of Matsinhe's analysis he fails to convince the reader of his key point, that there is direct causality between apartheid and the "makwerekwere" and further that such causality is exclusive. For example, he fails to consider and reject alternative explanations of, or other potential contributing factors to, the insider-outsider phenomenon. Societal responses and counter-responses are complex and by reducing xenophobia in South Africa to a single contributory factor is to oversimplify the issues. A more robust approach is required.

The value in this book lies in Matsinhe's exploration of the challenges faced by foreign nationals as a result of xenophobia. However, what Matsinhe fails to highlight is that the xenophobia experienced in South Africa by foreign nationals, and by the author himself, is a consequence of complex national policies limiting the actions of foreign nationals in South Africa. I frequently meet highly qualified foreign professionals working as car guards in Johannesburg due to their inability to secure the correct work permits from Home Affairs. As Matsinhe pointed out, this is in no way unusual – "refugee status appears to be granted randomly and in many cases it involves bribery with home affairs officials" (page 149). What is missing in the book is the very important contextualisation of complexity of proving refugee claims.

That being said, there is no doubt that the system is not so much designed but implemented in a way to 'trip up' foreigners. This is not limited to the police (nor is it limited to foreigners) but is present at every stage and during the majority of interactions post arrival in South Africa; from the taxi driver or fellow commuter, to the person responsible for processing work permits at Home Affairs. Nothing comes easy to a foreigner within this system.

In conclusion, whilst the author makes a valid point in that foreigners are treated poorly, he does not contextualise the reality that both foreigners and locals frequently receive similar treatment. Whilst it is recognised that foreigners *are* more vulnerable, the manner in which the author discusses such complex issues comes off as over-simplified.

In addition to this, Matsinhe fails to prove the causal link in his theory that apartheid has led to xenophobia and related thereto nor, that South Africa is unique in this respect. This creates the impression that he is forcing his theory to fit into his personal experience. This is a fatal flaw and takes away from the valuable voice he otherwise offers to refugees. Matsinhe's bias based on his personal experience as an African foreigner in South Africa is abundantly clear throughout the book and does not allow the reader to treat the matter with the objectivity it deserves.

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