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*Homo sacer: Citizenship and exclusion among irregular
labour migrants from Zimbabwe to South Africa*

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Abstract

Homo sacer is a concept that was used by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998) to refer to a naked or bare life that is depoliticised. Though he has a biological life, *homo sacer*, has no political significance. The term *homo sacer* was borrowed from ancient Roman law under which a man who committed a certain kind of crime was banned from society and all his rights as a citizen revoked. This status meant that such a man could be killed by anybody but could not be sacrificed in a ritual ceremony. *Homo sacer* is therefore the direct opposite of citizen. A citizen does not only have the right to political and economic participation but also the right to protection by the sovereign. Those who are excluded from these rights - *homo sacer* - exist in what Agamben refers to as "zones of exception" or "zones of indistinction" in which the application of the law is suspended. This paper argues that the concept of *homo sacer* appropriately describes the condition of "illegal" migrants from Zimbabwe to South Africa, who experience political and economic participation and in both country of origin and country of destination. They also lack protection by the state in both countries, of origin and of destination.