

Review

Ashwin Desai (2000) *The Poors of Chatsworth: race, class and social movements in post-apartheid South Africa*. Durban: Madiba Publishers

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Like its author Ashwin Desai, variously an academic, journalist, teacher, radio talk-show host, activist and member of cricket's national Transformation Monitoring Committee, it is difficult to pigeonhole *The Poors of Chatsworth*. It is a history of Chatsworth, a narrative of the lives of ordinary South Africans in pre- and post-apartheid South Africa, an examination of the impact of the ANC government's macroeconomic policies as well as a reflection on the likely mushrooming of social protest movements in post-apartheid South Africa. In his role as a weekly columnist, Desai has been a nonconformist, being critical of government, religion and religious leaders, organised unions, the media and other social, economic and political forces in society. Those who have become accustomed to his sharp wit, sarcasm, brazenness and boldness to speak his mind will not be disappointed with *Poors* which is based on historical research, interviews, as well as Desai's role as community activist in the struggle against attempts by the Durban Metro Council to evict its tenants.

Poors is a thought-provoking sociological study of South Africans coping with social and economic hardships. The title is taken from a comment by a resident of Chatsworth, Girlie Amod, to a local Councillor who wanted to know why Indians were demanding housing upgrades: 'We are not Indians, we are the poors' (2000:50). The choice of title reflects Desai's concern to deracialise issues by presenting an analysis of race and class in contemporary South Africa. *Poors* emphasises that class has been and continues to be pivotal in shaping consciousness in South Africa. Thus his comment at the very beginning that in Chatsworth 'Before (let us get this out of the way), they were all Indian. Now, less so' (4). This is also the

story of the African poor who comprise 30 per cent of the population of the area. It is a story of struggle and resistance by Indians and Africans against white and Black councillors in pre- and post-apartheid South Africa. Desai places great weight on everyday racial interaction in shaping new identities, thus arguing that identities are historically formed by relations of power, rather than being the product of external referents.

Poors begins with a call by Fatima Meer, long-time member of the ANC, and her Concerned Citizens Group in May 1999 for Indians to vote ANC, the 'party of the poor'; anything else would be construed as racist. However, when Meer visited Chatsworth she found massive unemployment and terrible poverty. Residents explained that they were voting for formerly white political parties because the ANC had failed to deliver on its pre-1994 promises. This disillusionment, rather than racism, led to support shifting from the ANC. Shocked by the extent of poverty, Meer plunged herself into the community's affairs. This turn from party politics to the mobilisation of the poor led, ironically, to accusations by ANC councillors that Meer was engaging in sectional and ethnic politics (56). This then is the first message of *Poors*: the constant racialising of events in post-apartheid South Africa as if race is the first and only explanation for behaviour.

Poors is not only about the present. It highlights the poverty of the mass of Indians, descendants of indentured workers, people like Harinarain 'Moses' Judhoo, talented but denied education by a combination of poverty and the shortage of schools (13). The cycle of material deprivation = poor schooling = low level employment = material deprivation has afflicted the majority of Indians throughout their stay in Natal. The residents of Unit Three in Chatsworth, the subject of this book, comprise municipal workers who were moved from the Magazine Barracks in the middle of the city in the mid-1960s. The many studies that reflect the poverty of working class Indians serve to dispel the myth of Indians being affluent traders. Traders, synonymous with Indians in the minds of many, make up a very tiny fraction of the Indian South African population.

The history of Chatsworth, an apartheid creation to keep the cities of South Africa 'European', is provided through narratives. Indians were removed by batons and bulldozers to houses described unflatteringly as 'the proverbial third class coaches of the apartheid train; cramped, ugly, unsafe, and hidden from view' (4). The Group Areas Act destroyed the very fabric of Indian life. People like Anamuthoo who had supplemented their

meagre incomes through market gardening and fishing could not do so in Chatsworth (24). Displacement destroyed communities 'based on trust, friendship, sociability, obligation and mutual support overlaid with a framework of kinship and religious norms'. Nuclear families replaced extended families and the sharing of expenses, while the long distances that had to be travelled and the termination of informal sector activities increased poverty and led to social problems like gangsterism, alcohol abuse and higher divorce and suicide rates (27). Council has been involved in evictions and water cuts since the late 1960s, making its function primarily that of 'efficient debt collector' (19).

1994 should have marked 'Freedom after the Long Walk to Chatsworth', with obvious allusions to the title of Nelson Mandela's autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*. Unlike Mandela, for the majority of South Africa's poor the optimism that delivery would replace struggle was in vain. The narratives in the book illustrate the dreadful impact that internationally induced and locally produced orthodox economic policies are having on poor South Africans who are forced to bear the costs of economic adjustment. Poverty, according to Desai, is the result of tariff reduction policies that have led to massive job losses across the country in the clothing, footwear, textile, leather and other industries that are threatened with extinction because they cannot compete against cheap imports. There is little hope of a trickle-up effect, thus Desai's bleak comment on Anamuthoo's son, retrenched because the shoe industry is shedding jobs to cheap Chinese imports: 'at 49 he will never work again'. For Desai, Mbeki is presiding over an economic genocide that is ignored: 'There is a tragedy that is unfolding but we refuse to see it because we are obsessed with presenting a sense of normality after all the years of abnormality' (97).

Desai maintains that instead of taking care of the poor the government is treating poverty as a crime. Rents are rising in a context of unemployment, under-employment and depressed wages. In this climate of widespread poverty, Council has attempted to punish those unable to pay rent by evicting them or disconnecting water and electricity. In 1994 this was seen as the last stand of vindictive white officials. However, this pattern of punitive measures continued after black councillors took office. In May 1996 electricity was cut. Evictions in 1998 had to be put off when 2000 residents marched on the City Hall. In line with the neo-liberal economic thinking Councillors tried to privatise living arrangements by selling homes at low prices in order to end its historic role as landlord and remove

an issue that was crucial in mobilising people. Desai believes that the new attempt to tie people to lending institutions was intended to 'fracture the collective' and make exploitation subtle (48). Ironically, Councillors trying to sign over the houses were the very activists who pronounced in the 1980s that the houses had a shelf life of 15-20 years. Council's attempts have ended in defeat as a result of residents' resilience. When people were evicted magistrates agreed that people could not be cast out until suitable alternative accommodation had been found. Five defeats since 1994 and failure to end community activism has made Chatsworth a 'theatre of defeat for Council' (78). One of the ironies of eviction is that Council would like to solve its homeless problem by supplying homes of evicted tenants to those able to pay rent. By making others homeless, however, the problem of homelessness remains unresolved.

Desai raises several pertinent issues through this story of struggle and resistance. There is no culture of non-payment, only the economics of non-payment (8). Desai points to several individual cases to illustrate this. For example, Theisile Manqele, sole supporter of four sickly children including a year-old baby, was abandoned by her husband and lost her job when she was hospitalised following the removal of her spleen. Her water and electricity were cut because she was unable to pay for these services, ironically on the day that Minister of Water Affairs Kader Asmal received an international award of \$150,000 for bringing water to the very poor in South Africa (72). For Desai, appeals to 'revolutionary discipline' or Masakhane will not make people pay who simply cannot afford it (80).

Desai deconstructs race by highlighting continuity from pre- to post-apartheid South Africa. He points out that Council was acting very much like its apartheid predecessor in its use of language that 'criminalizes and stigmatises the poor, the arbitrary use of force, blaming the victims and continually increasing the cost of social services' (98). Community leaders continue to be labelled 'agitators', 'radicals' and 'counter-revolutionaries' (5). Activists who had fought for the poor now considered welfare, equity and social justice anachronistic. In the new South Africa 'the most sophisticated socialists themselves would not touch the label' (5). 'Anti-poor' policies are implemented by former anti-apartheid activists in a 'rigid, I am just following policy fashion' (45). In Chatsworth such individuals include members of the Durban Housing Action Committee (DHAC), formed in the 1980s to take up the struggle for Black housing. Deputy Mayor Trevor Bonhomme, once chairperson of DHAC, now

believed that giving the poor leeway would lead to a culture of non-payment (55). Maurice Makhatini, Council's Acting Executive Director of Housing, argued that evictions could not be compared to apartheid since the policy was 'racially blind'. Individuals in the same economic bracket 'will obviously stay together... Normal business practice demands that if tenants can't pay, they must be evicted' (55). The mainly black new leadership is reproducing class privileges and validating the established status quo.

Desai is optimistic that protest in Chatsworth marks the end to 'the complacency and anaemia of 1994' and the 'beginning of a mass-based struggle in the new South Africa' (6). He believes that the failure of the government to deliver in the context of growing poverty will generate struggles elsewhere with important consequences for identity formation. In the action of Indian women lying across the street to prevent the eviction of an African man, Mr Mhlongo (64), Desai sees the potential for building non-racial communities from the bottom-up; in the example of the women who got together to beat Shoba's boyfriend because he had abused her (70) and the 1200 women who attended a Women's Day rally in August 2000, Desai sees the potential for new gender-based identities; in recently-formed youth organisations such as the Chatsworth Youth Movement Desai sees potential for politics based on youth identity (84). Desai believes that the rise of issue-based social movements to resist 'anti-poor' policies will generate power and give people the self-assurance to wage mass struggle against the causes of social hardship in townships across the country (84) and forge a common collective identity, that of 'the poors', and thus challenge supposedly unitary racial identities. Very important for Desai was the fact that Girlie Amod's slogan 'We are not Indians, we are the Poors', mutated as fellow-activist Bongiwe Manqele responded, 'We are not Africans, we are the Poors' (50).

The tragedy at the Throb nightclub on March 24, 2000 is used to illustrate the catastrophe spawned by economic conservatism and the callousness of new rulers. When several thousand school children met at Throb for an end of term party, a rival nightclub owner arranged for teargas to be thrown into the club in the hope that the children would patronise his club. In the stampede that followed 13 children lost their lives. Desai found the reaction to the affair revolting. Minister of Education Kader Asmal suggested that schools be used for after-hour activities to enable the youth to 'build more wholesome lives', forgetting that government cutback in

education meant that schools could not afford to pay for extra water and electricity (85). There is criticism too of the remarks of the ANC constituency MP for Chatsworth, Ebrahim Ebrahim, who blamed the broader community for failing 'to provide for the young adults so that they may find places where they can associate with their peers in safety' (83). Desai considers this response, 'by and large, sanctimonious, old-fashioned and very uncool' (85) because it failed to take cognisance of material conditions which are spawning 'the so-called moral degeneration of the poorer areas' (83). Government's macro-economic policies have fostered unemployment and poverty. Fathers have taken to alcohol abuse and violence to fulfil their traditional role of authority figure, while young people have taken to the adult-free world of malls, street corners and video arcades, in which 'there is an undercurrent of hopelessness ... the youth felt devalued, dismissed and degraded at every turn' (84).

Poors makes no pretensions about catering for academia. Desai makes it clear that his is not a theoretical analysis but 'an account from the frontlines of the establishment's undeclared war on the poor' (7). *Poors* can be criticised for sparse use of footnotes, the liberty taken by the author to add anecdotes and comments, and problematic structure that has the reader moving back and forth chronologically and between narratives. But these are minor quibbles. Desai has taken up Stuart Hall's call for intellectuals to engage in theory but remain committed to transmitting their ideas to a wider audience and engage in intellectual practice as politics. Desai can be considered an 'organic intellectual' in Gramscian terms. Both in his activism and writings, including his previous works *Arise Ye Coolies* and *Still Revolting*, he has always identified with the oppressed classes and worked on their behalf. *Poors* is a passionate account of the destructive impact of economic conservatism on the lives of many South Africans. While it is deliberately written in a popular style to have mass appeal and be comprehensible to a wide audience, as a trained sociologist Desai makes many pointed observations about the plight of the mass of South Africans for whom there is little benefit from neo-liberal economic policies. This is not a feel-good book. Unemployment and poverty are creating massive social problems and the stories in the book poignantly explode the myth of the miraculous 'Rainbow Nation'. While the narratives are bleak, Desai is heartened that resistance in Chatsworth shows that the war is no longer 'one-sided'. The claim on the back cover that the book is 'distressing but also exhilarating' is thus fully justified.

Poors raises important issues and there is a need for additional empirical micro-studies around these issues. These include the formation of identities, the relationship between structure and action, the role of the observer in the research process, as well as alternatives to globalisation. The new alignments to which Desai refers have 'de-essentialised' older social categories like race. This absence of essentialist social categories implies that there are no stable identities on the basis of which a politics can be established. Does this not apply to class ('the poors') as well? Desai's optimism about the emergence of class identity may be misplaced. The December 2000 Local Government elections showed that support for the ANC remains strong. Organised labour has largely been involved in class compromise and has acquiesced to government policy-making. Further, as Desai himself points out, issue-based movements are coming to the fore. This appeal to different sources of power based on the environment, gender, ethnicity, religion and so on might dilute class identity. While the interaction between Indians and Africans is encouraging, Desai does not, however, explore whether racial interaction remains issue-based or extends beyond these protests. Are there any social and cultural exchanges on a daily basis, for example, that would sustain the new identities that are being forged, and have meaningful long-lasting impact? Desai also fails to examine factors that might hinder the formation of new social actors, especially in the case of Indians who are a racial and ethnic minority. There also remains the problem of the construction of exclusionary discourse among 'the poors', the most conspicuous example of which are the well documented attacks against immigrants from other African countries. What are we to make of this xenophobia?

Poors portrays the Indian and African poor as engaging in action, struggle, negotiation and resistance in response to material conditions such as job losses, evictions, monetary discipline and housing shortages. It accents the forging of new personal and collective identities to replace old sources of identity such as race and suggests that structures do not exist objectively outside agents. Through their behaviour Indian and African social actors are involved in creating or reproducing new social and cultural organisations. Where does this leave Desai, the observer? According to Patrick Joyce, Desai the observer who is employing a concept of structure to explain the behaviour of 'the poors' is not simply recovering the story of this struggle but he is producing the knowledge that he claims to be covering. The relationship between agent, observer and structure is one that requires further scrutiny.

While providing a devastating critique of the government's economic policies, Desai does not explore or suggest alternatives to globalisation, neo-liberalism and structural adjustment. It is not enough to say: 'We've had enough'. The social justice issues raised in this book are not unique to South Africa. The increase of joblessness and decline of job security, the voicelessness of labour, drop in working standards, greater income inequality and the end of the welfare state are features of most economics in the world. Increasingly, nation states are influenced by factors external to their geographical boundaries. Is there a way out of the economic impasse where capital calls the shots? How can economic reconstruction be shaped to promote distributive justice in South Africa and counter what is seen as the inexorable logic of globalisation? These important issues need to be raised and debated by intellectuals and activists if we are to address the socio-economic tragedy unfolding in post-apartheid South Africa.