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Review of Desai A.: 'We are the poors: community struggles in post-apartheid South Africa'

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Citation

Kessel, W. M. J. van. (2002). Review of Desai A.: 'We are the poors: community struggles in post-apartheid South Africa'. *H-Safrica*, 2002(December), 1-3. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4735>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ashwin Desai. *We Are the Poors: Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa.* New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002. 156 pp. Photographs, index. \$19.00 (paper), ISBN 1-58367-050-5.

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Published by H-SAfrica (December, 2002)

The Rise of New Community Movements in Post-Apartheid South Africa

This book, written in a tone of righteous indignation, aims to serve a twofold purpose. First, Ashwin Desai wants to demonstrate that in post-apartheid South Africa poor people are no longer discriminated on the basis of race, but continue to be discriminated on the basis of class. Nowadays, people are no longer relocated, evicted from their house, or cut off from water and electricity because they happen to be black or brown, but because they cannot afford to pay rents and rates. Second, the author has a heartening message: although bonds of solidarity were forged more easily in the common struggle against apartheid, poor people nevertheless are beginning to form new movements to defend themselves against insensitive bureaucrats and self-serving politicians. These new community movements are issue-based, wary of grand ideologies and politics, and thriving on small, often short-lived victories.

Since the ANC came to power in 1994, material inequality in South Africa has deepened. A new black elite has joined the old white elite, the black middle class is enjoying more opportunities in life, but the poor are becoming even poorer. Having embraced neo-liberal policies, the ANC became an ardent believer in the virtues of globalisation on free-market terms. One result has been a massive loss of jobs. Without protective tariffs, the textile and footwear industries witnessed many closures, dismissals, lay-offs and relocations to areas with even lower wages. For the working and non-working poor, few new opportunities have opened up, apart from backyard sweatshops where people toil long hours without any protection from labor legislation or trade unions.

The author unambiguously declares his own position: he is reporting "from the frontlines of the establishment's undeclared war on the poor" (p. 14). He indeed documents numerous examples of

insensitive policies and callous behavior, mostly taken from the Durban townships, with some examples from the Western Cape, the Eastern Cape and Soweto. Like in the old days, housing officials have no scruples against ordering the eviction of the elderly, the disabled, grandparents and single mothers with young children to care for but who are unable to pay the rents for their dilapidated flats.

Valentino Naidoo, a 13 year-old school pupil in Chatsworth, was caught stealing a toothbrush in a local supermarket. He was caught, stripped naked, beaten and then handed over to the police station where he was charged and released on 300 Rand bail. He stole the toothbrush because the girls at school made fun of him because of his bad breath. A lawyer took up the boy's case and wrote to a juvenile rehabilitation program. The reply came that the client was not eligible for one of the diversion programs as he was too poor to pay for the bus fare to town. Ironically, poor people are unable to benefit from pro-poor policies because they are too poor. A case in point is the provision of 6,000 liters of water for free to each household per month. Poor residents do not qualify for free water unless they first settle their arrears—not only on their water bills, but often their electricity and rent arrears as well. Cut-offs from water and electricity have reached a massive scale.

Promises of a better life for all seem forgotten in the municipal council chambers governing the townships of Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg, where "cost recovery was causing government to attack its own citizens in ways reminiscent of the apartheid days" (p. 91). Poor people are not perceived as citizens who are entitled to certain basic rights, but as paying customers who forfeit all rights when they are unable to pay. "The local councilors' only relationship to the community was to encourage them to pay up or get out" (p. 41). Today's rulers have rapidly forgotten where they themselves come

from and have settled comfortably in the plush seats of power.

The author does a convincing job in documenting the plight of the poor under this new government, but is less convincing in his description and analysis of the rise of a new generation of social movements. His first handicap is his penchant for flowery language and revolutionary rhetoric. Here, for example, is his description of mass mobilisation against apartheid during the 1980s. "The multitude was a network of rivers. Rushing out of schools, factories, and universities. Parting, joining, growing. It crashed through every wall the system had ever built. It ate razor wire, hit the police straight back, refused the chief, looked the future straight in the eye. The farmer's fences were now just wire and the soldiers were just scared teenagers. Anything could happen when one was between the broken and the built" (p. 10).

This image of a united people storming the bastions of apartheid with single-minded determination is hardly an adequate reflection of a struggle that was characterised indeed by courage, sacrifice, and idealism, but also by reluctance, confusion, and coercion. Fortunately, when Desai describes the community movements in the post-apartheid era, he is more down to earth. Nevertheless, there are many loose ends and unresolved issues. Part of the problem is, of course, that the author is wrestling with a very recent phenomenon that has not yet taken any definite shape. His pioneering work is commendable, but leaves many questions unanswered and--worse--unasked.

Desai sets out to describe an electioneering visit in 1999 by ANC stalwart professor Fatima Meer to Chatsworth. Her mission, and that of her small organisation labeled Concerned Citizens Group (CCG), was to convince the residents of this largely Indian township to rise above their narrow ethnic false consciousness and resist the temptation of voting for the "white parties" (National Party and Democratic Party), but to vote rather for the ANC. The reception was cool and at times hostile. People told her that they were "not concerned about their former oppressors but were angry at their present oppressors" (p. 17; this is one of many references with footnote numbers, but without actual footnotes). Meer conducted a socio-economic survey and found that, contrary to government accusations, there was no culture of

non-payment. With unemployment running at 70 percent, there was simply no income in the poor sections of Chatsworth.

Under the 1950 Group Areas Act, Chatsworth was designed as a segregated Indian township. By the late 1990s, the number of inhabitants had risen to over 300,000, still predominantly Indians, but with some 30 percent African residents. Desai assures us that among the poor, racial and ethnic identities are perceived as largely irrelevant. They find common ground as "the poor", waging joint battles against a common enemy. This claim reminds one of much wishful thinking in the 1980s, when Marxist activists had managed to convince themselves that non-racial class identities had superseded the "false" consciousness of race and ethnicity. But race and ethnicity, as well as religion, proved more pervasive than the ideologues had anticipated. At the very least, one would have liked to read how the poor of Chatsworth arrived at this dominant common identity, and how their class identity fits in with a range of other identities, expressed in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, etc.

Another missing link is the relationship between the CCG and local civic and/or worker leadership. Desai tells us that the CCG transformed itself from political lobby into a human rights pressure group, acting as a catalyst in reviving flat dwellers' associations in some sections of Chatsworth. "A powerful leadership started to emerge in these areas, some relying on the grounding they had received as shop stewards in the union movement of the 1980s" (p. 41). Here, the reader would like to know who these powerful leaders were, what their background was, and how they managed to mobilize a following. The description and analysis of this process of social mobilisation is unsatisfactory. The reader is told that "the community" was devising new methods of struggle. But the methods used sound very familiar: demonstrations at the houses of local councillors, attempts to "speak to" criminal gangs, the election of leaders, the adoption of constitutions and linking up with other community organisations. How are people, demoralised by the betrayal of a previous generation of civic leaders, persuaded to go through these familiar routines again? The romantic mystification of "the community" is unhelpful. Here "the community" is devising new strategies, elsewhere in the book "the community" is filing out of a courtroom (p. 55).

Who exactly are the people making up this "community," and how do they relate to the proclaimed "community leaders"? What defines a "community"?

This question becomes particularly compelling in chapter 6, where "the community" and the CCG react differently to a council proposal that tenants take ownership of their houses. The CCG, and the author as well, are full of indignation about this latest trick: the historical role that council played as landlord would be annulled. "This fracturing of the collective feeds into making the processes of exploitation, control, and surveillance more subtle, diffused and effective" (p. 43). The CCG tried to argue that private property was anathema to a sense of community. But among the residents, "the idea of ownership was passionately received" (p. 45). Apparently, "the community" harbored a different set of aspirations than the community leaders.

Again, the reader is reminded of community struggles in the 1980s. Activist leadership embraced bread-and-butter issues as a convenient mobilising tactic among ordinary township residents, but worried about the reformist nature of these struggles. Once the rent increases were called off, or the bus service restored, many ordinary people were likely to resume their daily business rather than engage in further mass action. In order to safeguard the revolutionary nature of the liberation struggle, it was deemed necessary to include demands that could not be met within the existing societal order. Similarly, Desai underlines that the actual demands of the poor are within the realm of the possible (p. 143) while praising "the flexibility" shown by the residents in constantly shifting the goal posts (p. 44).

In view of their recent experience with Inkatha or the "so-called liberation movements" who used "the people" as cannon fodder, poor people tend to be wary of politics and ideologies (p. 122). Nevertheless, prestigious international gatherings such as the World Conference against Racism in Durban provided a platform for these disparate movements to unite in an ad hoc alliance and to make telling points about class and against "naked imperialism" and "corporate globalisation." "People who had inhabited radical subjectivities in the past that had fragmented and left them disheartened, once again entered the mass political realm, trying new languages and ideas" (p. 145).

I am not sure what that means. Hopefully, Desai and others will move beyond pamphleteering and produce well-researched studies about this new generation of community-based social movements, their new language and ideas. The issues are extremely important. What went wrong with the previous generation of social movements, campaigning under the banners of the United Democratic Front and the African National Congress? Why did the "strong democratic organisations and elected individuals" who led the people during the anti-apartheid struggle not serve the people's cause once the battle was won (p. 150)? And how exactly does this new generation of social movements differ from its predecessors?

Library of Congress call number: HC905 .D38 2002

Subjects:

- Poor--South Africa.
- Blacks--South Africa--Economic conditions.
- South Africa--Economic policy.

Citation: Ineke van Kessel. "Review of Ashwin Desai, *We Are the Poors: Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews, December, 2002.

URL: <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=275841043567194>.

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