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**We are the Poors: Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa, Ashwin Desai. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002. 156 pp.**

As South Africa rides yet another wave of “Madiba Magic” in the wake of its celebration of ten years of democracy, the third democratic elections and being awarded the 2010 Soccer World Cup, Ashwin Desai’s book carefully deconstructs the realities of the South African “miracle”. “We are the Poors” cuts through the national myth to demonstrate how liberation ideals have been usurped by neoliberal economic practices. Desai’s primary objective is to “give some account of the lived experience of both the human cost of the ANC’s capitulation to domestic and international capital and the growing resistance to the ANC.” (12)

Desai recognizes that he is not covering new theoretical ground in this book. The “betrayal of the South African liberation struggle” (11) has been well documented by Patrick Bond, John Saul, David McDonald, John Pape and others.<sup>1</sup> However, what stands out about this work is its human face. Instead of engaging with the neoliberal economic, globalization and new social movements literatures in a dry, abstract manner viewed from above, Desai tells the story through the people on the ground. The main section of the book provides an in-depth analysis of the experiences and reactions of the mainly Indian population of Chatsworth, Durban. The point is not that this is government discrimination against Indians (as some within the Indian population have claimed), or that the resistance is anti-black (as some in the government have claimed). The book’s title is drawn from the statement, “We are not Indians, we are the poors.” Desai’s use of this statement as a primary theme serves to anchor his theory that in South Africa people are no longer discriminated against on the grounds of race, but on the grounds of class.

By grounding the book in the history and experiences of a particular community, Desai succeeds in demonstrating why the current programs of evictions, retrenchments, service cut-offs and other manifestations of the new economy have had devastating effects on the people of Chatsworth. In 11 short chapters, he provides the history of the diverse difficulties of the people of Chatsworth from the time of its development as an apartheid-created area to the present day. Each chapter is grounded in an individual’s story, the day-to-day lived experiences of the poor people of the area. Through telling the stories of individuals affected by the different circumstances with the same root cause, a sense of a gathering storm of new activism is developed. As the narrative style of the book illustrates, this is not a new high-minded, ideological struggle, but a new struggle for survival mobilized around particular issues.

The Chatsworth section of the book is well grounded in its historical and spatial context, but “We are the Poors” is a book with two definite halves. The second half takes the debate beyond Chatsworth and into other types and locations of struggle. The focus therefore rapidly shifts between Mpumalanga and Isipingo (two communities in Kwa-Zulu Natal and Soweto,

respectively) and Cape Town's Tafelsig area, and then onto industrial strikes and the 2001 World Conference Against Racism. Within this latter section, Desai is clearly attempting to illustrate the spread of the emergent resistance and the dawn of a new facet in South African politics. However, this section lacks the critical edge of the Chatsworth section. The strength of the first section was its contextualization, its rootedness. The social movements within the second section seem somehow disembodied. There is little sense of how these movements fit into the broader local political environment. Desai proposes that the political movement encapsulated within the formation of the Durban Social Forums alliance at the World Conference Against Racism marked the beginnings of a new form of South African politics around flexible alliances of disparate groups. This is perhaps a little premature and the presentation of these disparate groups within the book is misleading in its inherent suggestion of community and communication. "We are the Pooors" is effectively an updated and extended version of the 2000 publication, "The Pooors of Chatsworth." The disconnection between the two sections and the less nuanced nature of the second half of the book are the result of Desai's efforts to widen the scope of the earlier work.

Like other recent publications by the Monthly Review Press, this is an engaging book written by someone with passion for both the theoretical issues and the people affected by current government policies. This is both the book's great strength and its fundamental flaw. As an activist academic, Desai clearly cares greatly about the people he writes about. His passion is contagious and his journalistic skills bring the reader face-to-face with the lived experiences of the poor of post-apartheid South Africa. However, this very passionate engagement perhaps cloud his critical engagement. We are encouraged to get dragged along in the excitement of the moment, but never to step back and look at the bigger picture and ask questions of the process and of alternative interpretations.

That said, "We are the Pooors" is an immensely readable and engaging book. It should be a key reading for any scholar of South Africa, particularly for those based outside of the country. Its accessibility makes it a good recommendation for students. Although locally focussed, the book's engagement with the bigger issues of globalization, neoliberal economics and new social movements makes it a good entry-level text for a wide readership.

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#### **Reference:**

Saul, J. S. (2000) "Cry for the beloved country: The post-apartheid denouement," *Monthly Review* 52 (8), 1-51.

McDonald, D. & J. Pape, eds. *Cost Recovery and the Crisis of Service Delivery in South Africa*. London: Zed Books, 2002.

1. See for example Bond, P. (2000) *Elite Transitions: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in the New South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.