Review


Richard Pithouse

I declare myself for the broader and against the narrower view,...for him that liberates the creative passions of the masses, against him who channels and finally sterilizes it.

- Aimé Cesairé (Henry 2000:247)

Research by David McDonald (2002) from Queens University has shown that in the post-apartheid era up to 10 million South Africans have been disconnected from water and that the same number have been disconnected from electricity. Furthermore over 2 million people have been evicted from their homes and a further 1.5 million have had their property seized for failure to pay their water and electricity bills. McDonald also found that the majority could not pay their water and electricity bills and that, therefore, the idea of a ‘culture of non-payment’ should be seen as, at best, a myth.

There is an acute crisis in our cities and Ashwin Desai’s book takes his readers into the lived experience of that crisis. A number of important scholarly critiques of the South African transition to democracy have been published. But Desai’s new book is very different to recent work by theorists like Patrick Bond, Hein Marais and Dale McKinley. Desai describes his book fairly, although not completely, as “journalism, an account from the frontlines of the establishment's 'undeclared war' on the poor.” (2000:7) That’s a useful description for a book which, although it is written by an intellectual with formidable theoretical acumen, is an accessible narrative which describes subjective (individual and collective) experiences of both the implementation of neo-liberal policies and resistance to neo-liberal policies.

But the book is not purely descriptive and it is not theoretically weak. On the contrary the work of important contemporary theorists like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri; Giles Deleuze and Frederick Guttari; Patrick Bond and David Harvey has clearly shaped the way that Desai has chosen to tell his story. But theory is employed strictly for illumination and never as an end in itself.

Desai’s book also differs from other critiques of the transition in that he has chosen to focus on one community’s experience of neo-liberalism rather than to develop a national analysis. But this does not mean that his work is parochial or of limited national relevance. On the contrary, as with Charles van Onselen’s celebrated The Seed is Mine, the detail and clarity of vision developed in a close analysis of a particular subjective experience is able to illuminate, with unusual clarity, aspects of the general, the national and, indeed, the universal.

The fact that Ashwin Desai tells this story is not insignificant. Desai is a well-known public figure in Durban with a weekly column in the Independent on Saturday and a talk show on East Coast Radio - a conservative station with well over a million listeners. Desai’s face appears on buses and billboards. He is also a high profile teacher at the Worker’s College, Natal Technikon and the University of Natal and an activist with strong support in a range of unions, the Durban student movement and a number of poor communities in Durban - particularly Wentworth, Mpumalanga, Umlazi and Isipingo. There were over 450 people at the launch of this book.

The book is written in a style that is unusually accessible and unusually compelling. Desai’s restless intelligence roams the plane of pure immanence and he engages, fully, with life as it is lived in these bodies, at this time and in this place. This gives his work some of the extraordinary immediacy and vitality that continues to win progressive writers like Frantz Fanon and Arundhati Roy such popular appeal in such reactionary times.

Desai’s celebrity status and the style in which this book is written have, together, ensured a wide readership for The Poors of Chatsworth. Indeed it is probably the only extant left critique of the ANC with a popular audience. This makes the book important as a political fact in itself.
Chatsworth is a formerly Indian township in Durban. Desai tells the story of the place and its people who have "photographs of grandparents as slaves and parents as sweatshop workers." (2000: 6) Chatsworth was a creation of the group areas act. In the 1950s Indians from all over Durban were rounded up and dumped in Chatsworth. The land from the new township had been taken from 600 Indian farmers. "So", as Desai notes, "just as some residents were arriving to start a new life, others were coming to grips with the destruction of a lifetime's work." (Ibid:13) The roads had numbers rather than names. The new houses, described as 'stables', started falling apart almost immediately. Many people’s expenses quadrupled after they were dumped in Chatsworth as rents and transport costs were far higher than in the areas from which they have been evicted.

Some were able to improve the material conditions of their lives and the township developed pockets of affluence. But thousands spent their lives working in clothing factories to try and pay their rent and stave off eviction. They had lost the independence they had enjoyed as occupiers of informal space and were locked into their obligation to the agents of their original dispossession - the Durban City Council.

Teenagers escaped the tiny homes for the relative privacy of the street. Mandrax became the drug of choice and gangs proliferated. The violence of the system was turned inwards. Suicide, alcoholism and child abuse soared. It wasn't unusual for parents to leave for work at 4:30 am and to return at 6.30 p.m., Child neglect became a problem. By the eighties the corrupt police for seemed like just another gang. Evictions continued. People were desperate. Some families adopted children as a means of income as the Department of Indian Affairs paid foster parents R42 per month for each adopted child. Most Indian politicians concerned themselves with the community's political situation and ignored their economic situation. But the people were resilient. They raised their children and developed a deep sense of community and a rich tradition of struggle. Desai’s short history of Chatsworth the place is compelling. He makes it a very human history by splicing short biographies into the larger story. The story of Indian achievement is often told but here Desai tells the stories of the poor. People who, despite their stoic faith in the virtue of hard work, had their bodies destroyed and their spirits crushed by the machinations of a system that saw them as a disposable commodity. They coughed up blood on factory floors; returned home to hungry families with nothing but desperation and slipped, slowly but relentlessly, from leaking hovels towards eviction notices and life in streets or the bush.

But Chatsworth has become more than just another of the places were, in Desai’s biting phrase, the poor are still kept. Chatsworth has also become a struggle. The euphoria of the 1994 elections and the hopes for a better life didn’t last long. The state moved quickly to lower tariffs on imported clothes with the result that the local industry was decimated and tens of thousands of jobs lost. There were 435 employers in the clothing industry in 1995. But 1999 there were only 166. The human cost was staggering.

The state moved against the poor just as quickly. As early as July 1994 eviction notices were served on 950 tenants who were in arrears. Water and electricity cuts offs followed. By 1996 40% of tenants were in arrears and the City Council sent 50 men with guns and dogs to evict people from their flats. People who didn't want to be next hurriedly pawned anything of value. Young daughters took up prostitution. In 1998, after the local government elections, the City Council stepped up the pressure. People put their bodies on the line. There was blood on the streets and a death. The council showed no mercy. Even Happiness Shinga and her daughter, both of whom were suffering from AIDS contracted after separate incidents of rape, were evicted.

In May 1999 Professor Fatima Meer, hero of the struggle against apartheid, arrived in Chatsworth with a small organisation called the Concerned Citizens Group. (CCG) Their mission was to persuade the 250 000 voters in this community to vote for the ANC rather than the 'white parties' in the upcoming general elections. The business and professional elite embraced her call but the poor told her that they were “not concerned about their former oppressors but were angry at their present oppressors.” (Ibid: 8) Meer discovered that unemployment was running at 70%, that children were not at school because their parents couldn’t pay the fees and that disease was rife. When Winnie Mandela came to Chatsworth, looking for votes, she was reduced to tears by what she saw. Desai writes that "Contrary to government accusations, there was no 'culture of non-payment'. There was simply no income in these areas.”(Ibid:10)
Meer, against the advice of her doctors, threw all her energies into the compilation of a research report which she intended to present to government to show that people were not able to pay their rates and rent and to argue that poverty was not grounds for eviction and disconnection. While she was working on her report a woman in her eighties, Begam Govindsamy, received an eviction notice. Govindsamy had been evicted twice during the apartheid era. The CCG went to court and stopped the eviction. A new struggle had begun.

Meer made no further calls to the Indian community to vote one way or another. She submitted her report to the ANC and was horrified that after the elections ANC councilors were "among the most vociferous in insisting that electricity and water cut-offs and evictions be visited on the poor." She found that the "disciples of a better life for all were behaving as if poverty itself were a crime." (Ibid: 12) The CCG mutated into a non-sectarian human rights pressure group. Food hampers were distributed to the indigent. Gangsters were 'spoken to'. Diwali, the festival of lights, was reinterpreted with the City Council as the villain. The CCG used the constitution and the law to stave off evictions and disconnections. ‘Struggle’ plumbers and electricians reconnected disconnected services. Council used Orwellian corporate speak to prevent their own actions as technical. The CCG used the language of humanism and decency to insist that Council’s actions were immoral and therefore political.

Fighting the new order was difficult at first: “The easy moral satisfaction of the anti-apartheid struggle was absent. Petit-bourgeois support was slim and legal aid and foreign funding unheard of.” (Ibid: 5) But in time “Many suburbanites were openly supportive of the revolt taking place.” (Ibid: 6) Identities and loyalties proved to be fluid. Desai explains that after a clash between officials and protesters a defining moment in the struggle of and for Chatsworth occurred. One of the designer-bedecked (African) councilors began castigating the crowd. She had one lived in a shack she screamed. Why were Indians resisting evictions and demanding upgrades? Indians were just too privileged. One elderly aunty, Girlie Amod, screamed back: "We are not Indians, we are the poors." The refrain caught on as councilors hurried to their cars. As they were leaving they would have heard the slogan mutate as Bongiwe Manqele introduced her own good humoured variant, "We are not African, we are the poors” Identities were being rethought in the context of struggle and the bearers of these identities were no respecters of authority. (Ibid: 50)

On 8 February 2000 Council security came to evict Mr. Mhlongo and his children. They were driven away by a group of about 150 people, mainly women. The next day they returned - reinforced with a division of the Public Order Policing. There were more police than people. The CCG asked for council to allow the dispute to be settled in the courts. Council said no. The people stood firm and refused to allow the police into the flats. The police used live ammunition. Blood was spilt. Six people were wounded. But the security forces withdrew without effecting the evictions. Indian women had stared down bullets to protect an African family. The community grew more confident.

The council responded by referring to the families targeted for eviction as drug lords, shebeen owners and 'sexual deviants; "Just as in the past", Desai writes, "it was to be presumed that poverty-stricken township dwellers were social deviants by virtue of their degraded circumstances." (Ibid: 65) There was a struggle over naming. The CCG found hiphop and attitude far more effective than theory and ideology. The truth worked well too. Litigation proved to be a useful tool for “forcing Council to reveal, in sworn affidavits, the brutality of its anti-poor policies.”(Ibid: 76)

By June 2000 23 786 households had had their water cut off by the Durban Council. But in Chatsworth cut-offs were no longer possible. People were prepared to put their bodies on the line and the CCG’s lawyer Shanta Reddy, could out argue the authorities. And solidarity was developing with people facing similar cut-offs in the nearby township of Umlazi. A powerful movement was growing.

The dramatic ebbs and flows of the story, and the short, terse chapters in which it is told, make this book read like the most compelling thriller. As with the story of Chatsworth the place Desai weaves individual stories into the larger story of Chatsworth the struggle. Like the story of Thulisile Manqele who lives in a flat with her four biological children and three other children. She lost her job due to ill health. Her electricity was cut off in August 1999 and a year later her water was cut off. At first she relied on a leaking pipe and then on rainwater. But during the dry season she had to use a local stream
that had been found unfit for human consumption. On 8 March 2000 the CCG won an urgent application to have her water reconnected. Many of the stories in this book don’t come with any hint of a happy ending though. Like the family trying to scrape the money together to take their child in to town for dialysis; the teenage mother who is still beaten and robbed by the rapist whose child she bore the father desperately trying to raise the money to buy his sewing machine back from the pawn shop; the teenager rapper who performs a song about the careful preparations made by a child before she sells her body for the first time. It’s called *First Night*.

The story of Chatsworth, the place and the struggle, is, self evidently, important and Desai tells it extremely well. But he does two other important things. The first is that he names names and meetings and dates and holds people accountable. He names everyone from the former activists turned council hard-liners, to Kader Asmal and the praise singers of the new order who, like Antjie Krog, confuse the well being of the leadership with that of the people they claim to represent. He accuses Mbeki of presiding over economic genocide and details the hypocrisy of the thirty members of the Metro Council who, as their term of office nears, voted themselves a pension payout that will cost the city an estimated R40 million. Incidentally, the hypocrisy of Durban’s political elite has been revealed to be even more blatant. While *The Poors of Chatsworth* was at the printers Durban journalist Xolisa Vapi reported that "KwaZulu-Natal ministers are in arrears for millions of rands for failing to pay their monthly rents of luxurious official houses." Vapi added that the ministers had proposed that their arrears be written off and that they be expected to pay rent of just 1% of their annual salary. According to Vapi public Works Minister Celani Mtetwa justified the ministers' failure to pay their rent on the grounds that “the official houses did not have swimming pools, tennis or squash courts”. *(Independent on Saturday 21 October 2000)*

South African democracy has been deeply compromised by a tendency to slavish conformity and an exaggerated respect for leaders that, at times, seems to confuse the ‘dignity’ of the leadership with the well-being of the people. In this context the uncompromising way in which Desai holds leaders and officials accountable gives his work, like that of Sipho Seepe, some of the frisson more usually associated with samizdat culture in totalitarian societies.

Desai also brings his intelligence to bear on the question of what can be learned and copied from the Chatsworth struggle. He writes that “there is much that would be fruitfully grafted onto the stout stems of struggle in other places. This book is for such graft.” *(Ibid:7)* And he has many insights. He argues that attitude does more than ideology; that the powerful will rush to blame the victims for their suffering and so the struggle for a profusion of positive identities is essential; that there is a danger that religious dogmatism and cultural chauvinism can co-opt the energies that drive resistance and he implies, against Marxist orthodoxy and in the spirit of Frantz Fanon, that communities rather than unions are likely to lead any challenge to the tyranny of the market.

Fanon observed that in the periphery the “proletariat of the towns is in a comparatively privileged position. In capitalist countries, the working class has nothing to lose; it is they who in the long run have everything to gain. In the colonial countries the working class have everything to lose....It is these elements which constitute the most faithful followers of the nationalist parties.” *(Fanon 1976:86)* It does seem that in South Africa challenges to the new order are more likely to come from communities than unions. After all it’s clear that COSATU affiliated unions will be not be able to enter into serious contestation for as long as COSATU remains in an alliance with the ANC. It’s equally clear that the COSATU leadership has a direct personal interest in remaining loyal to the ANC. Moreover GEAR’s surrender to the market has put such pressure on unions that, even if they chose the independent route, market forces won’t give them much room in which to move.

However an unemployed person facing eviction at the hands of the nationalist party has nothing to lose from direct dissent. It is entirely rational for her to defend what little she has. And when the agents of the state come, with guns, to take what little she does have she is unlikely to be persuaded to blame anyone but the state for her suffering. Moreover, many of the unemployed lack the ideological and party commitments that can weaken the “voracious taste for the concrete” *(1976:74)* that Fanon sees as a necessary condition for any meaningful challenge to post-colonial bourgeoisie nationalism. This taste for the concrete is a central theme in Desai’s book and reaches to the heart of contemporary debates about the revival of the left.
The anti-capitalist demonstrations in Seattle, Prague and Genoa made Francis Fukuyama look, at best, quaintly dated. But the left is still in crisis. As Boris Kagarlitsky observes many people are ready to fight for national or ethnic identities but for those who claim allegiance to socialism “Actions are replaced by declarations, ideas by symbols and programmes by the reciting of principles.” (1999:60) He argues that the only way for the left to get over its self doubt, what he diagnoses as its neurosis, is for the socialist project to be “translated into a language that people understand. This is not the language, cultivated by Western intellectuals, of postmodern radicalism.” (1999: 73) In Kagarlitsky’s view the language that will be understood and that will be able to generate new collectivities and to inspire new struggles is the language of basic needs. The neo-liberal assault on education, healthcare, transport and, in the case of Chatsworth, housing, water and electricity, makes the language of basic needs extraordinarily resonant. The ANC’s election promise to provide free basic services has not changed this. Water and electricity disconnections were still being threatened and implemented in Durban on the grounds that people had to make up their arrears before they could take up free services.

But of course defensive struggles are not inevitable. Various forms of what used to be called (and what Kagarlitsky stills calls) false consciousness can persuade people that they deserve to suffer, that there is no alternative to their steady dispossession or, as in the case of neo-fascism and xenophobia, that their suffering should be blamed on some ‘other’ rather than state policy.

Desai describes the poor of Chatsworth as part of the multitude rather than part of the people. The significance of the idea of the multitude lies in the recent work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. In *Empire* they argue that it is a serious error to, as is usually done, look at modernity, and its legitimating philosophy, humanism, in a reductive way. Their argument is that there are two opposing humanisms in modernity - one revolutionary and one reactionary. In their view modernity began as a revolutionary movement in that “the powers of creation that had previously been consigned exclusively to the heavens are now bought down to earth. This is the discovery of the fullness of the plane of immanence.” (2000:73) And immanence, they argue, is radical and revolutionary in that it “develops knowledge and action as scientific experimentation and defines a tendency toward democratic politics, posing humanity and desire at the center of history.” (2000:74)

They understand immanence to refer to the view that the powers of creation inhere in humanity and, more particularly, in the multitude rather than The People. They define the multitude as “the universality of free and productive practices” and The People as “an organized particularity that defends established principles and properties.” (2000:316) But it is perhaps more useful to note that they speak of the multitude in terms of a disordered collection of desiring subjectivities and the people in terms of an ordered collection of subjectivities disciplined in the name of some transcendent power above and beyond the individual desires in which creative powers are taken to inhere. That transcendent power may be God or the Gods, ethnicity, The Market, The Leader, History, The Party etc. Hardt and Negri are resolutely opposed to any transcendence of a realm or agency outside the grasp - in time, space or capacity - of the multitude. They insist that “Immanence is defined as the absence of every external limit from the trajectories of the multitude, and immanence is tied only ...... to regimes of possibility” (2000:373)

There is, clearly, a profound difference between the enabling and expansive approach of recognising and encouraging the fractious, anarchic energies of the multitude and the normalising and restricting approach of reifying one image of an ideal humanity. The regulating (and oppressive) ideal against which Desai shows the poors of Chatsworth to have successfully resisted is not fully explicated but could possibly be called Masakhane Person. Masakhane person is, of course, in gear with neo-liberalism. She knows that everything must be paid for and that good people can and do pay. She knows that she has no rights to that which she can’t afford.

The Chatsworth poors are not a disciplined or corralled people. They have not subjected themselves to surveillance. They refuse to know their place and accept their fate. They are a fractious, anarchic and out of control multitude. They know their desire. They prefer the rap artist to the academic and the communal cooking pot to the stage managed rally. Desai's book is alive with the energies and desires of the multitude. Political platitudes, orthodoxies and abstractions are all dissolved in a flood of humanity. This is the central contribution of the book.
In the months since the publication of this book similar revolts against disconnections and evictions have occurred in communities around Durban (e.g. Wentworth, Mpumalanga, Umlazi and Isipingo) and around the country. (e.g. Taflesig and Soweto) In the case of Soweto the campaign against electricity disconnections lead by the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee resulted in mass arrests and high profile coverage in national media. These movements have not only attracted attention from the media and the police. It is important to remember that by September 2001 a loosely networked alliance of anti-neoliberal movements was able to put twenty thousand people on the streets of Durban. (Pillay and Pithouse 2001) It has become clear that a critical mass of people are not going to suffer the crisis caused by rigid adherence to user pays policies in docile silence. And Desai’s message is that this emerging and rapidly growing politics of resistance should built on the desires and needs of the multitude and expressed through popular subjectivities.

The Poors of Chatsworth is a potent critique, from the left, of the ANC and the new, neo-liberal order. The ANC has successfully contained and co-opted most of the forces likely to oppose it from the left, like AZAPO, COSATU and the SACP, and is easily able to shrug off criticism from the right. So a popular critique from the left is an important intervention. Time will tell whether or not the (often) spontaneous revolts breaking out all over the country will continue to grow and to connect with each other or whether they will be contained, fragmented and defused. But right here and right now Desai's reflections on the Chatsworth experience are urgent and essential reading. The Poors of Chatsworth is well described in the words of the poet, Bei Dao:

it’s a pen blossoming in lost hope
it’s a blossom resisting the inevitable route (1996:73)

References

Vapi, X (2000) Ministers Owe Millions. Independent on Saturday, 21 October, Durban
They also organize mass protests in Europe, like the one on August 29, 2020 where 12 million people signed up and several millions actually showed up. Why do these 500+ medical doctors say the pandemic is a global crime? What do they know, that we don’t?

One of the many protests against the ‘plandemic’ that you will not see in the mainstream media. 2. Hundreds Of Spanish Medical Doctors Say The Pandemic Is Planned. In Spain a group of 600 medical doctors called ‘Doctors for Truth’ made a similar statement during a press conference. In 2015 a ‘System and Method for Testing for COVID-19’ was patented by Richard Rothschild, with a Dutch government organisation. Did you catch that? NASB 1977 Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. Amplified Bible Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad and easy to travel is the path that leads the way to destruction and eternal loss, and there are many who enter through it. Christian Standard Bible Enter through the narrow gate. 14, “till the latter part of the fourth century the first has no Greek or Latin patristic evidence in its favour, much against it.” They think this is “one of those rare readings in which the true text has been preserved by without extant uncial support. It was natural to scribes to set ver. 13 in precisely antithetic contrast to ver. Aestheticists protested against the severe & vulgar reality, against bourgeois pragmatism. They concentrated their art on pure form. They rejected both the social & the moral function of art. It was inspired by the ideas of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood & the works by John Ruskin & Walter Water. The representatives of Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood turned to ancient art as a model for their own works. A new understanding of the mission of art as devoid of any moral aspect was initiated. Walter Pater emphasized the importance of form in art over the matter. Art is indifferent to what...Â Among other honours, he was sounded out for the British Poet Laureateship and on several occasions for a knighthood, all of which he rejected. just watched everyone in the White House arrested declared an unnamed person doing one of the two videos shown below. (Video contains graphic language) https://youtu.be/ywfXNGNvuU. Mustang Medic filmed the Washington DC scene closer up. Crimes of these elite politicians have recently been exposed from findings of the Russia hoax Mueller probe, impeachments of Trump and Obamagate. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vT57EP1wl9g&feature=share. It was reported that to date, 260 global elites have been served, The deal that they got was that if they gave information that was useful, they could have a better death, or a jail cell for life. Obama gave up Michelle, and then breached his warrant.