The Voices of the Poor
Bill Freund

We Are the Poors: Community Struggle in Post-Apartheid South Africa
by Ashwin Desai


"One of the designer-bedeviled (African) councils began castigating the crowd. She had once lived in a shack, she said, in one of the Indian resisting evictions and demanding upgrades? Indians were just too privileged...One elderly aunty...screeched but we are not Indians. We are the poors" (p.4).

This dramatic moment is the epiphenome of Ashwin Desai’s We Are the Poors. This is a book about the economy of South Africa that I’m not sure is as appropriate in these pages. However let us give some time to the first. How do we read this book on its own terms? Desai has been a university lecturer and a popular and effective journalist in Durban. Pugnacious and cheeky, he is never willing to release his foot from the door when something utterly requiring discretion lies within. In the days before many Indians in Durban could acquire professional qualifications, there was the well-known Durban law firm, the man of all trades who made it his business to identify burning community issues and take up the cudgels against oppression. Such a law firm disappeared in 1994 for ambitious and butlime were critical in creating a sense of community able to act in concert. Thereafter it should also be pointed out that there have really been generations of effective leaders in Durban Indian neighbourhoods, notably including leaders of so-called civic in the 1980s who usually were loyal to the underground ANC.

Nonetheless they were stuck into the same issues long before the end of apartheid as discussed in this book—fighting over bus fares or rents—as Indian townships already enjoyed a basic urban infrastructure for all the inequities suffered compared to white suburbia. It was in an Indian neighbourhood in Durban, Isipingo, as this book mentions, that an independent candidate from a long-established civic organisation, became the only such post-apartheid Indian candidate from a long-established civic organisation, based in the boardrooms of large South African companies recently lost the right to seize the houses of poor people on the grounds of small-scale debt. Nobody moreover seems to realise South Africans are huge bundles of "monitoring" to check whether or not they are free and fair.

There is however a terrible systemic failure on the part of the ANC to do much about this, to fail into the happy, dreamy world of corporate fantasy because they lack the education, the skills, the business sense, the expertise, that the stability in their lives, to some extent to line in this way? A huge part of the population (and it is a much larger share of Africans than any of the racial minorities) are unemployed and many of the employed earn pitifully low wages. This is even truer if one counts, as the state now desires, workers in the informal sector as employed, however pathetic their earnings.

The ANC’s answer has been “delivery”, the handing out of free houses, electricity, etc. But there has still been a move towards a considerable scale. For instance, something between one to two million new houses have been built by the state since 1994, mostly for poor people and distributed on a fairly general basis. However, these services are not costless. Use and maintenance require payment, a point not made by militant ANC enthusiasts looking for votes in 1994 and afterwards, and herein come the struggles. The far greater availability of say, electricity, creates tension when it is taken away.

To what extent can people pay for water and electricity and housing? This is very difficult to say. As a top official in one of the big South African cities told me, “there is a hard to separate mix between the belief of people that they need pay, that these things are theirs by right”—something that ANC militants used to promise in more stirring times themselves—and the reality that many are too poor to make a contribution that will even repay costs. The state has been able to come up with slightly more generous policies. For instance (as Desai says) few evictions take place anymore. Meters have been installed in private homes to prevent the billing being used to make people pay for water.

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The Congress of South African Trade Unions, which Desai dismisses as totally toothless, has been the leader of voices in asking for a Basic Income Grant (BIG) system, a welfare state where there would be a small handout to the whole population. I do not think that BIG will make headway. The ANC is afraid of turning the black population into a nation of drones living on the dole, not an entirely contemptible position in my view. This is probably one reason there is such resistance to the mass handout of drugs to mitigate the effects of HIV.

But it forces us big questions Desai does not really broach. Can there really be “free basic services for all poor people” in a country no richer than South Africa, as one of the organisations he celebrates demands? (p. 140) How do we create an economy that substantially adds jobs, initially for those with very limited skills and initiative? How do we reform the educational system so that it genuinely enlightens people? How can we narrow the gap between the wages of those in the first and second economy and make sure that low skill jobs also provide a living wage? Is not the land question not about how much is owned by those with pale skins but about providing some security and options for those who want to live in metropolitan and urban areas. (The one notorious South African land invasion story—which gets considerable attention in this book—takes place in Bredell on the periphery of Johannesburg and it is certainly not a story about farmers or agriculture.)

This is where the ANC comes very short although in its defence it cannot be said that the contemporary world is rich in answers in the wake of the declining salience of industrial policies on a Keynesian model. Some aspects of the anti-globalization approach help to understand why things are moving in the way they are but they are not very helpful in suggesting solutions. South Africa badly needs a coherent and affordable social welfare policy. Will a crisis, as Desai hopes, sink the ANC? Not very likely, I think. Unless the poor have a coherent basis for organisation centred on a positive vision of change, not merely a phansis (down with...) approach, it is not clear where discontent can go politically.

As Desai says, and it is as true today as it was five years ago, “their protests were not driven by ideology but by the need to survive and the desire to live decently” (p. 9). For the latter, they have in South Africa a model on a large scale of very pleasant lifestyles experienced by a substantial minority more than anywhere else in Africa. But that model is not going to be sustainable for the majority in the foreseeable future. Of course, the poor may in time vote in a protestor whatever the protestor actually does once in power. Or the ANC may split at some future time as ambitions and tempers rise over the stakes for power.

At the moment, however, Desai is only recording movements that acquire some structure and clear sense of purpose at the level of the local or at special galvanising moments such as the UNO Racism conference. These movements reveal a lot about South African life as it is actually being lived today but those hoping for a new anti-apartheid movement on an anti-globalization basis in line with a vision of international struggles to match the international reach of capital will probably find that Desai offers them a largely chimerical if inviting spectacle in his gripping book.

The Power of Continuity: Ethiopia Through the Eyes of Its children
Eva Poluha

Children play a vital role as a source of information on politics but have been neglected as political actors in research contexts. In this study, children are used as a window to an Ethiopian society where hierarchical relations persist, despite the numerous political and administrative transformations of the past century. With data gathered through participant observation the book examines how young, Addis Ababa school children learn to adapt to and reproduce relations of super- and/or subordination based on gender, age, strength and social position. The children's experiences are viewed in the historical context of state-citizen relations where hierarchy and obsession with control have been and continue to be dominant. The discussion focuses on the power of continuity in the reproduction of cultural patterns and political behaviour, and on how change towards more egalitarian relations could come about.

Eva Poluha has a PhD in Social Anthropology from Stockholm University, 1989. She is Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at Dalarna University.

Reviews
In this gracefully written book Dr. Eva Poluha wrestles with important issues of Ethiopian political culture and cultural continuity and transmission in general. Drawing upon her years of experience in Ethiopia, she has produced a stimulating and thought-provoking work for those interested in problems of cross-cultural education as well as in Ethiopia.
Herbert S. Lewis, Professor Emeritus, Department of Anthropology, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Keywords
Children, Childhood, Child rearing, Cultural identity, Ethnicity, Family environment, Gender roles, School environment, Social norms, Ethiopia

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AFRICA’S MEDIA, DEMOCRACY AND THE POLITICS OF BELONGING
Francis B. Nyamnjoh

‘This is an extremely rich and thought-provoking work. Nyamnjoh gives us a vivid well researched picture of the new African media landscape, while asking probing questions about both journalistic practice and the meaning of democracy.’
Professor James Ferguson, Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology, Stanford University

‘Nyamnjoh’s analysis innovatively develops a new conceptual framework in asserting studies on, and the state of, African media and how people use them. His theoretical achievement is to critique African essentialism on the one hand and developing an indigenized critical theory on the other. His study is a breakthrough.’
Professor Keyan G Tomaosell, University of KwaZulu-Natal and President, South African Communication Association

‘Nyamnjoh combines the anthropologist’s eye for the patterned behaviour and the journalist’s nose for social criticism. The result is a delicious rendition on the complex role of communication in democracy. This should be required reading in journalism, political science, and sociology.’
Professor Charles Okihgo Department of Communication, North Dakota State University

‘This book presents a detailed analysis of the role and place of Africa’s media in its search for democratization and cultural identities. Nyamnjoh neither is apologist about the major problems Africa faces, nor does he join the western power bashers. Africa’s Media should be core reading for anyone with an interest in Africa.’

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