

NICE RAINBOW, BUT WHERE'S THE POT OF GOLD

Book review

Desai, A (2002) **We are the poors**. New York: Monthly Review Press.
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Many critical psychologists whose thinking was shaped by participation in the broader anti-apartheid struggle seem, even a decade later, to have not quite fully recovered from being made redundant by the emergence of non-racial democracy. Three competing tendencies can be noted: a return to the business as usual of mainstream psychological and academic practice, a focus on pragmatic problem solving within an acceptance of the overall social structure, and a retreat to theory. The first and last of these options are hardly worth discussing, but the second option warrants some reflection. While the ethical impulse to tackle pressing local problems - HIV/AIDS, violence against women, and the like - is a noble one, there is a danger. Too close a focus on the immediacy of the problem can lead to a collapse into the dangers traditionally associated with liberalism. One ends up applying bandages to a growing line of casualties without addressing the underlying causes of the damage. It is precisely here that a double movement is required, a simultaneous focus on the specific experiences of individuals and a more abstract analysis of the underlying processes which shape the social worlds in which those individuals exist.

It is here that Ashwin Desai's timely and important book makes a vital contribution. Desai is not a psychologist, but as a sociologist and community activist his simultaneous grasp of the interconnections between individual experience and social process maps exactly the area that critical psychology should already have explored. The immediate focus of **We are the poors** is the everyday lives of the most marginalised people in the community of Chatsworth in Durban, but it spills over into other regions and issues. Desai is as much a storyteller as a social analyst, and his narration of individual case histories is sensitive, powerful, and emotionally engaging. He portrays lives bruised and broken by retrenchments, evictions, water and electricity cut-offs and the daily brutality of poverty, but sees also the extraordinary resilience and collective strength and support which emerge out of these nightmares.

This has nothing to do with the Oprah Winfrey school of sentimentality and the wishful ideology of self-help sloganeering. Desai's individuals bear the full weight of history, and their hopes lie in collectively challenging and transforming that history. It is here that his

sociological insights are most powerful. He shows how the “Rainbow Nation” has failed the poorest and most vulnerable, making clear the links between the seemingly most abstract economic decisions of government and the lives of ordinary people. The underside of the government’s embrace of economic policies designed to suit local and international business interest is shown with devastating clarity. Cutting taxes for the wealthy while allowing minimum wages to drop below the threshold of survival, abandoning import tariffs that protected local industry from impossible competition with foreign sweat shops, privatization of basic services leading to water and electricity cut-offs: all of these are shown to have a human cost, an inhuman cost. While foreign investors and shareholders might be full of praise for current economic policies, what remains hidden is the everyday lives of those who bear the real costs of these decisions - ordinary working people and the unemployed. Desai provides a powerful counterpoint to this repression, simply telling those invisible human stories with an engaging compassion and analytic clarity which gives the lie to the rhetoric of economic management.

This book is not a catalogue of tragedies and suffering, but also an unrelentingly optimistic vision of emerging social movements. Desai shows how the period of confusion and paralysis produced by people’s disbelief that the new democratic government was behaving almost as cynically and brutally as the old one has given way to new forms of resistance. There are the struggle plumbers who voluntarily reconnect water supplies after the council has disconnected them, the neighbours who obstruct evictions, the sympathetic strikers, through to the new community organisations that transcend historical racial divisions and the increasing co-ordinated resistance to privatization and neo-liberal economic policies. In all of these there is a powerful and heartening sense that people will not simply be victims of their brutalization or spectators to their own demise, that they will continue to resist - not simply on their own behalf but collectively and in mutual support and solidarity. And it is here that Desai so powerfully persuades us that humanity is more resilient and ingenious than the appalling social conditions might initially have indicated.

We are the poors presents two specific challenges to critical psychologists. Firstly, it makes clear that although we have made an industry of articulating the connections between the individual and the social, the one area where we have simply failed to deliver the goods is perhaps the most important area of all - the connections between global economic systems and everyday life. Notwithstanding the continuing contribution of those who have sustained a critique of capital, it is clear the field has hardly begun being mapped within psychology. Secondly, this books challenges psychology to reconceptualise collective action, not in the traditional conservative model as a threat to individuality, but as an essential element of autonomy, dignity and human life. Neither of these ideas are new to critical psychology, but this book brings them into focus in an urgent and compelling way, providing an exceptionally lucid and challenging sense of what it means to live in South Africa today. As such it is essential reading for anyone trying to make sense of their life and work in this context.