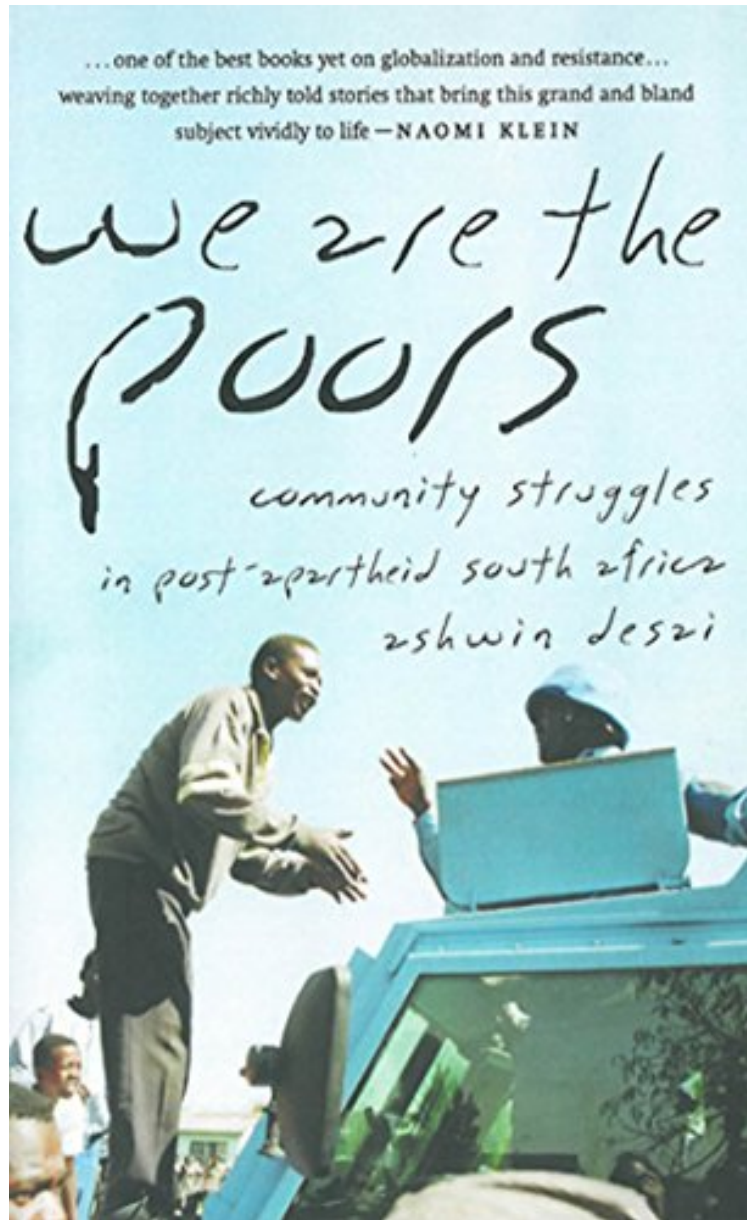


# We Are the Poors: Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Ashwin Desai

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**Ashwin Desai : We Are the Poors: Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised We Are the Poors: Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa:

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Good topic, slow read  
By Brigitte Burton  
As much as I wanted to know about the conditions in post-apartheid South Africa, I found this book impossible to get through. It was just too dull and, at times, confusing. It seemed individuals came into and went out of the story at random. They weren't quite presented as brief case studies; it seemed the author intended a coherent narrative throughout, but individuals never stuck around long enough for me to piece it together. About halfway through the book the setting abruptly changed for reasons that were unclear, and a whole new cast of characters arrived, at least three of which had the same name but were apparently unrelated, a situation the author made little attempt to clarify for the reader. I had a difficult time figuring out how much of the information presented related to the author's central theme. I gave up on the book halfway through.

15 of 15 people found the following review helpful. A powerful account of resistance to market fundamentalism  
By Rm Pithouse  
Desai's book is about elderly women who will put their bodies between their neighbour's house and the men with guns and dogs and sunglasses who have come to effect another eviction. It's about the ecology of the neighbourhood and the struggles to constitute the people stuck on the wrong side of the razorwire into movements. It is about fighting and tenderness and coming to Durban. Desai's story starts in Chatsworth, Durban. Here the new South Africa meant unemployment for the poor after 10 000 jobs in the clothing industry were sacrificed to The Market when tariffs protecting our market from sweatshop imports were removed 4 years ahead of the WTO schedule. For many this was followed by disconnections from electricity and water and then evictions from their homes as the Durban Metro began to reorganise the provision of basic, life sustaining services in accordance with 'international norms' and under the cold logic of profit. Desai tells us how a movement of the poor was built in Chatsworth, how it spread to other townships in Durban, drew in students and workers, made connections with similar movements developing in Johannesburg and Cape Town, put somewhere between 20 000 and 30 000 people on the streets outside the UN conference on racism in Durban last year and became part of the global movement of movements against the subordination of all aspects of society to The Market. All these years after Machiavelli and Sartre and Fanon much academic work continues to flee the disorder and mess of life for the more comfortable worlds of abstracted empiricism and theory where the sterile manipulation of numbers or words becomes a self-referential end-in-itself. Desai's book has no elaborate graphs or references to Homi K. Bhabha. Numbers and theories are only employed to illuminate lived experience. This book, with its stories of children prostituting themselves to stave off their family's eviction and mothers fighting off the police, can not be reduced to a power point presentation. Desai describes it as "journalism - an account from the frontlines of the establishment's 'undeclared war' on the poor." Scholars like Patrick Bond and Hein Marais have published valuable critiques of the herding of the energies and hopes of the democratic movements in to the Market's corral. And David McDonald and James Kilgore (writing as John Pape) have shown that in the post-apartheid era up to 10 million South Africans have been disconnected from water; the same number have been disconnected from electricity; a further 2 million people have been evicted from their homes and 1.5 million have had their property seized for failure to pay their water and electricity bills. McDonald and Kilgore have also found that the majority could not pay their water and electricity bills, that many of those who do pay do so at the expense of things like school fees and health care and so the idea of a 'culture of non-payment' should be seen as, at best, a myth. They also show that none of this is necessary and that this assault on the poor it is a direct consequence of the shift away from policies based on the principle of cross-subsidisation to ensure sustainable access to services by poorer citizens and towards policies that aim to generate profit by recovering the full cost of the services provided to each customer, including installation costs. The rich had the installation of their basic services subsidised by apartheid many years ago and so what the World Bank calls 'good public fiscal practice' means that electricity costs 30% more in Soweto than in Sandton and schools in poor communities in Durban have their water disconnected in the midst of cholera epidemic. Radical thought usually takes the oppressive power of the state and the market as its focus. And explaining the nature of the structural violence in and from which the oppressed must make their lives is important work. But Desai, like Frantz Fanon and the Italian Autonomist School, does something different. He begins with the creative energies of the oppressed. And so he gives us storms and tributaries and rivers of struggle. We discover the Hindu festival of light, Diwali, re-imagined with the electricity disconnecting Durban Metro cast as the villain of darkness. And there is Psyche, the rapper who makes beautiful the heroes of the latest ugly clash with the police; Sifiso Sithole a polite young man who usually reconnects a few people to the electricity grid before settling down to his homework in the afternoons; the UDW students, steeled by the murder of one of their number by the police while protesting the exclusion of poor students from their university, who defend fragile new born spaces for critical thought and action from "the goons from the ANC youth league" and the mothers and grandmothers across the country, like Mama Manqele in Chatsworth and Mevrouw Samsodien in Taflesig, who rebel because obedience can mean disaster and even death. The movements encountered in this book are familiar in that they are a return to the non-racialism of the UDF (as opposed to the longstanding multi-racialism and more recent bougoise nationalism of the ANC) but excitingly strange in that their aspirations are not to seize political power but rather to diffuse it with the aim of creating neighbourhoods in which individuals and communities can flourish. But the movements in this book are perhaps at their most unfamiliar and challenging when, in the words of Mpumalanga township activist Maxwell Cele, it becomes clear that "No one is in charge of the protests, except the anger and hunger in every person." There are a

few flaws in the editing and the layout of the book. The misphrasing of a sentence in the introduction that results in the number of people who lost jobs between 1996 and 2001 appearing to be a statistic for 2001 alone is particularly unfortunate. But the significance of this book, with its urgent, occasionally poetic and probably rushed passion that has evoked the feel of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* for more than one reviewer, is not exhausted by its novelty as the first book on the social movements of the post-apartheid era. This book matters because in an age where the human is deeply buried under a dead but respectable technicism it pulsates, rudely, with life.<sup>4</sup> of 4 people found the following review helpful. A significant and timely contribution

By Midwest Book Review

*We Are The Poores: Community Struggles In Post-Apartheid South Africa* by South African educator, journalist, and community activist Ashwin Desai is an informed and informative explanation of how the end of apartheid and the election of Nelson Mandela as President of South Africa in 1994 failed to end the conditions of economic, social, and political inequality for the oppressed majority of South African blacks. Nonetheless, new forms of solidarity and resistance to conditions of inequality have emerged, principally in the form of new and dynamic political identities as reflected in the growth of community movements, eventually coming together in massive anti-government protests at the time of the 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism. *We Are The Poores* is a significant and timely contribution to contemporary South African studies.

When Nelson Mandela was elected president of South Africa in 1994, freedom-loving people around the world hailed a victory over racial domination, injustice and inequality. The end of apartheid did not change the basic conditions of life for the majority of oppressed South Africans, however. Material inequality has deepened and new forms of resistance have emerged in communities that have discovered a common oppression and solidarity and forged new and dynamic political identities. Desai's book follows the growth of the most unexpected of these community movements, describing from the inside the process through which the downtrodden regain their dignity and defend the most basic conditions of life. His book begins with one specific community, with local government enforcing cut-offs of water and electricity, and evicting families from their houses whose breadwinners have lost their jobs. As the Chatsworth community begins to organize and discover leaders among its ranks, so their example spreads to other communities in Durban and the KwaZulu-Natal region, and their struggles build links with those in other parts of the new South Africa. *We Are the Poores* was a major event in the life of the South African Left when the first edition was published there in 2000. This new edition follows the ongoing course of events to the present.

An exceptionally vivid and precise account of daily experiences in the new class apartheid ... Desai's book tells the story of how desperation and powerlessness have turned into organized opposition and an articulate, sophisticated language of resistance.-Mail Guardian

One is transported from barricade to courtroom to communal cooking-pot to dance-floor. You get to see the struggle from the inside out ... All I know who have read it, feel in fighting form after putting it down.-Natal Mercury

About the Author

Ashwin Desai teaches at the Workers' College in Durban, South Africa, and is a newspaper columnist. He is the author of *Arise Ye Coolies* and *South Africa: Still Revolting*.