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## ***Producing The Poor: The World Bank's new discourse of domination***

*The object of lumping all Negroes together under the designation of 'Negro people' is to deprive them of any possibility of individual expression. What is attempted is to put them under the obligation of matching the idea one has of them. – Frantz Fanon (1967b:17).*

### **Introduction**

This essay seeks to investigate the World Bank's representation of the poor via a close reading of The Bank's *Voices of the Poor* and a critical comparison between this book and Ashwin Desai's *We Are the Poors*. The essay argues that The Bank's book is an attempt to represent the majority of humanity as The Poor and that this othering produces The Poor as a category of people who are politically inert, largely responsible for their own circumstances and whose suffering justifies the position and work of The Bank and other social forces with similar agendas. The essay also suggests that there are familial connections between this project and colonial discourses that sought to other people via a process of racialisation.

The World Bank's *Voices of the Poor* is the first volume in a three part series. It was conceived, researched, written, designed and published by the World Bank with the support of researchers at Cornell University, the University of British Columbia, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and various NGOs. The chief editor Deepa Narayan is Senior Adviser in Poverty Reduction and Economic Management at The Bank. This is a well-funded, multi-national and multi-sector elite project based on a series of research projects that, together, interviewed over 40,000 people in 50 countries for 81 Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) reports. In most countries the research was carried out by The Bank itself but where possible local consultants were used. The South African research was conducted by a team lead by Julian May, a Professor in Development Studies at the University of Natal in Durban. Amongst other sources, funding for this project came from the Bank itself as well as Cornell University and DFID. In their foreword Clare Short, Secretary of State for International Development in U.K. and James D. Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, state that the aim of *Voices of the Poor* is to extract and convey the 'recurrent themes' that emerged from the interviews in order to present 'very directly, through poor people's own voices, the realities of their lives'. Short and Wolfensohn commend the book for its

'authenticity' (Narayan 2000:p.ix). Yet the findings are grouped around thematic nodes selected by The Bank, the authorial/editorial voice actively seeks to delegitimize much of what emerges from the interviews and the book concludes with The Bank's recommendations for 'The Way Forward'. The publication of *Voices of the Poor* is an important moment in the Bank's movement towards participation and empowerment as key ideas in its development rhetoric. Some commentators see this shift as a consequence of 'genuine institutional learning' while others see it as new ideological cover for the same old neo-liberal<sup>1</sup> policies resulting from widespread opposition to those policies.<sup>2</sup> Many who hold the latter view argue that The Bank's shift to a rhetorical commitment to participation and empowerment matches the shift in U.S. foreign policy, also consequent to popular struggles, away from creating and supporting overtly authoritarian regimes towards supporting formally democratic governments and civil society organisations that are loyal to the substantively anti-democratic neo-liberal project.<sup>3</sup>

Ashwin Desai's *We are the Poors* was written by a sociologist who had been fired and banned from the premises of the University of Durban-Westville (UDW) in Durban, South Africa, for organising workers and students at that University against the closure of unprofitable departments, the retrenchment of workers and the exclusion of poor students. These pressures on the University followed the African National Congress (ANC) government's adoption of a self-imposed structural adjustment programme<sup>4</sup> which was strongly influenced by The Bank<sup>5</sup> and which resulted in a continuing assault on South African universities similar to that inflicted, often with the direct involvement of The Bank, on universities across the continent.<sup>6</sup> The only budget for Desai's project was the inadvertent grant of the decommodified time that comes with misfortune of unemployment and the good fortune of enough savings to eat, drive and type for a few months. The book began as a personal account of the militant opposition to neo-liberalism in two poor neighbourhoods in the Durban township of Chatsworth and was initially published in a community-funded edition from which the pages begin to fall after one reading. It was later expanded to include accounts of the growing and increasingly interwoven resistance in other communities in the city and the country and republished by Monthly Review Press in New York and then Novita<sup>7</sup> Librarie in Bologna and so ended up as part of an international counter-hegemonic project. The publication of *We are the Poors* is an important moment in both the presentation of militantly anti-neo-liberal and anti-ANC movements of the poor to South African society and in the weaving of these South African movements into the global movement of movements against market fundamentalism and imperialism. Some commentators see these movements as having the potential to effect systemic change while others see them as fragmented and unsustainable and conclude that they have limited transformative potential. Joseph Stiglitz, formerly Chief Economist at the World Bank, and Mamphela Ramphele, currently Managing

Director at the World Bank have both conceded that The Bank has changed policies as a direct result of the pressures from these movements.<sup>7</sup>

History is not over. Social problems are not purely technical. On the contrary material realities render ethics and politics urgent. In this regard William Robinson argues that the emerging transnational order is characterised by 'novel relations of inequality' resulting from 'the rise of truly transnational capital and the integration of every country into a new global production and financial system' that functions in the interests of 'a new transnational capitalist class' into which 'a portion of the national elite has become integrated ... [i]n every country in the world'. This process has been driven by 'the rise of a transnational state, a loose but increasingly coherent network comprised of supranational political and economic institutions, and of national state apparatuses that have been penetrated by transnational forces' that serve 'the interests of global over national accumulation process' (2003:2-3). Robinson adds that:

In most countries, the average number of people who have been integrated into the global marketplace and are becoming 'global consumers' has increased rapidly in recent decades. But the absolute number of the impoverished - of the destitute and the near destitute - has also increased rapidly and the gap between the rich and the poor in global society has been widening steadily, and sharply, since the 1970s. (p.3)

For Robinson the emerging transnational order is best characterised as global apartheid. He notes that 'Ruling groups and their organic intellectuals tend to develop both universalist and particularist discourses to legitimate their power and privilege in conformity with their own cultural and historical realities' (p.7) and concludes that 'Political confrontation is inevitable' (p.11).

The Bank and Desai are on opposite sides of the growing political confrontation<sup>8</sup> and have not written their books for the same audience. The Bank's book has an epigram from Wolfensohn asserting that 'These are strong voices, voices of dignity' and the third sentence of the book states that 'The poor are not lazy, stupid, or corrupt' (2000:3). This theme is echoed in the blurbs on the back cover. The Bank's book presents itself, piously, as being for the edification of elites who may think that the poor are undignified, lazy, stupid and corrupt.

Desai's book is upfront about its agenda. It is clearly written for an international left audience which its author assumes will share his critique of neo-liberalism but which he hopes to persuade to reject any residual faith or hope in the ANC's desire or potential to oppose neo-liberalism. Desai's book is therefore primarily written against what Robinson calls 'particularist' ideological support for neo-liberalism which, in the case of South Africa, includes the authoritarianism of both conservative nationalism and the claim of the ANC and its alliance partners to be the sole material incarnation of the hopes of the poor. In Desai's sometimes sarcastic and sometimes enraged analysis the party has been captured by reactionary nationalists who have made 'self-serving deals ... with local white elites and international capital' (2002:10) with catastrophic consequences for poor and working class South Africans. Desai's not

altogether unspoken implication is that the new social movements that have risen to oppose the ANC's embrace of neo-liberalism must now take the place of the ANC within the global left.

The Bank's book moves from the implicit assumption that poverty is ultimately an ontological condition that can be transcended via transformation at the level of being. There are no criticisms of the transnational capitalist class or the transnational state. There are lots of statements about the multi-factorial origins of poverty and lots of denouncing of the exploitation of the poor by the not quite so poor, the venality and inefficiency of local bureaucracies and law enforcement agencies and the failure of local and national governments to sufficiently deregulate the economic spaces in which the poor seek livelihoods. But at the core of all this is the conviction that 'we' must develop the nobility of spirit to have compassion for the poor, as Christians are supposed to love the lambs that have strayed from the flock, despite 'their' responsibility for their position in moral and social space.

Desai's book moves from the explicit view that poverty is ultimately a historical condition that is a consequence of relations of domination that can only be challenged via the capacity of the poor to constitute counter power and thus generate a capacity to make history. He sees local feudal lords, contemptuous bureaucrats and vicious police and security officers as agents of structural domination or as parasites able to feed off a social body weakened by the vampiric extraction of resources at the hands of global capital in alliance with local elites.

And so The Bank's book begins, if we can say that books begin with their covers, with an ahistorical, deindividualised, childlike and therefore pejoratively ontological drawing of 'happy natives' dancing around a fragile hut. It ends with the observation that its (South African) subjects (natives?) sing well: 'It is really amazing how they used songs to express themselves ... The words of the final song were: "Here they are, yes we agree, here they are, our visitors who were sent by the World Bank, yes here they are, they are here to help us ... and we hope they won't forget us"' (2000: 283). Desai's book begins with a picture of an insurgent step into history – a man, his children looking on, is confronting a policeman in an armoured car. It ends with the declaration that 'We will not make the mistakes of the past, when all too often we trusted leaders or parties or nations to save us. We now know that only the freedom and justice we the people build together, has the strength to resist oppression' (2002:153). A reified mass. Individuals. They. We. Faith in The Bank. Tending the growth of our courage. These are two very different books. It is true that The Bank and Desai both know that poverty is as corrosive as children prostituting themselves in a hopeless attempt to keep their family in a damp hovel. And The Bank and Desai do both conclude that the poor have another burden to take up. But for The Bank that burden is to transform the self with a view to becoming a winner in the system that turns citizens into consumers and spits out losers. For

Desai that burden is the need to transform the self with a view to being able to beat back the system enough for everyone to survive and perhaps even prosper.

### **They Must Be Represented**

The evident failure of both Hegel's children – Marxist and neo-liberal – as well as the technicist and postmodern over-reactions to both varieties of historicism has given a new urgency, most dramatically and popularly expressed in Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, to the phenomenological challenge to weave thought and lived experience together. But because The Bank and Desai seek to achieve this for others both books raise old but still urgent questions about the ethics and politics of representation. The Bank's book claims to be based on a programmatic commitment to 'start with poor people's realities' (p.274), ends by asserting this as the first principle of the way forward and assures its readers 'the process did not start with a presumed set of answers – the patterns emerged through objective analysis of poor people's descriptions of their realities' (p.266). This anthropological attempt to develop an account of the experiential and, I would argue, ontological condition of the poor is presented as an ethical as well as a strategic endeavour: ethical because it is seen as democratic and respectful and strategic because the book is presented as part of a broader project of empowering the poor by creating and mediating access to elite spaces. Desai's project is very different. He does not claim the legitimacy of science or to be a neutral channel for the voices of the poor. He describes his book as 'an account from the frontlines of the establishment's undeclared war on the poor' (p.14), has written his book in a style that makes it clear that he has been a witness to the events described and makes no attempt to hide his subjectivities. Desai's book certainly does have things to say about the experience of poverty and it does carry ontological ideas but they are about the broad human condition. Desai's book is essentially a narrative which means that it has movement and change at its heart. His story starts in Chatsworth. He shows that for many in the poor neighbourhoods in this township the new South Africa meant unemployment after 10,000 jobs in the clothing industry were sacrificed to The Market when tariffs protecting the South African market from sweatshop imports were removed four 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 City Council began to reorganise the provision of basic, life sustaining services in accordance with The Bank's '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 2001 UN conference on racism in Durban and became part of the global movement of movements against the subordination of all aspects of society to The Market.

### *us and them*

The Bank write about 'us' and 'we' – which we can assume to be people in the academy, NGOs, the media and so on – and 'they' and 'them' – the poor. The implications of the subject-object relation implied in this sentence are not addressed. We are given technical information about the sampling techniques and software packages used but almost nothing about the profound ethical and political issues regarding which questions were asked to the interviewees in what manner and by whom or how the answers were recorded, translated, selected, edited and so on. In the text itself there is a firm boundary between italicised direct quotes from anonymous interviewees, usually identified only by year, country and sometimes gender, and the plain text general exposition of, and comments on, the ideas that emerged from the interviews. The poor emerge as The Poor – a deindividualised and othered category.

Desai also invokes the 'us'/'them' binary but his 'us' includes all people that resist neo-liberalism and his 'them' targets people and social forces complicit with neo-liberalism. His 'us' therefore speaks to and of a chosen community. Nevertheless he is writing about movements of the poor and the standard critique of engaged intellectuals could be mobilised against Desai for inserting his authorial voice, with its PhD and potential to return to academic employment, into a movement of the very poor, many of whom have no realistic potential of finding employment. One response is to cite Fanon's commitment to the dialectics of personal choice fleshed out most thoroughly in *A Dying Colonialism*<sup>9</sup>, and to argue that Desai has become part of the collectivities about which he writes because he makes the choice to put his body in harm's way; suffers arrest; has, on at least one occasion run a serious risk of death at the hands of an enraged police officer<sup>10</sup>; is clearly seen as part of an 'us' constituted by these movements<sup>11</sup> and has, therefore, earned his 'we'. But there is a second critical difference between the representation in The Bank's 'they' and Desai's 'we'. In The Bank's book not one of the people represented as 'they' is given a name. Desai's book overflows with names and the dates and places of meetings, marches, court hearings and so on. Anyone with any questions about the accuracy of Desai's description of events can simply look up and speak to the people included in Desai's 'we' or for that matter his 'they' – government officials, academic consultants, police officers, judges, local feudal lords and so. Desai gives us the means to look at the events he narrates from other perspectives and is, therefore, telling his story with exemplary respect for subjectivity and, therefore, sincerity of purpose.

In *Orientalism* Edward Said writes that 'we note immediately that "the Arab" or "Arabs" have an aura of apartness, definiteness, and collective self-consistency such as to wipe out any traces of individual Arabs with narratable life histories' (1995:129). It is also worth taking note of John Holloway's thoughts. He argues that in mainstream social science society is assumed to be the object and the social scientist the subject with the consequence that the

best scientist is furthest away from the object of his study. For Holloway this is not only problematic because it is impossible – it is impossible to ‘express a thought that excludes the thinker’ (2003:60) – but it also carries an inherent contradiction in that:

The subject is present, but as a viewer, as a passive rather than an active subject, as a de-subjectified subject, in short as an objectified subject ... Society presents itself to me as a mass of particulars, a multitude of discrete phenomena. I proceed by trying to *define* the particular phenomena that I want to study and then seeking the connection between those defined phenomena. Identity implies definition. Once the flow of doing is fractured, once social relations are fragmented into relations between discrete things, then a knowledge which takes that fragmentation for granted can only proceed through defining, delimiting each thing, each phenomenon, each person or group of people ... Definition fixes social relations in their static, fragmented reified is-ness. (p.62)

The problems attached to this mode of producing academic analysis are ethical as well as epistemological. In Sartrean terms this way of working constitutes sadism which is the attempt to evade judgement by seeking to make dialogical modes of interaction impossible by abstracting oneself into pure subjectivity and ossifying other human beings into pure objectivity. As Lewis Gordon argues the sadist ‘fancies himself a pure, disembodied anonymous subject – pure mastery, absolute negation of specificity. He fancies himself God. But since the human being is neither thing nor God, his fancy manifests an oblique reference to an eliminated humanity. The sadist is fundamentally mistanthropic’. (1995: pp.19-20) And Holloway makes the additional point that while this way of working claims subjectivity for the objectifying researcher in actual fact:

The subject in capitalist society is not the capitalist ... It is capital ... the leading members of society are quite simply its most loyal servants, its most servile courtiers. This is true not only of capitalists themselves, but also of politicians, civil servants, professors and so on. (p.34)

This seems to be an accurate account of the nature of the work that Deepa Narayan *et al* have done on The Bank’s project. It is certainly the case that ‘the poor’ emerge as a fixed ontological category in their analysis. There is no meaningful sense of multiplicity or movement.

But while The Bank’s researchers are objects above objects Desai is, explicitly, a subject amongst subjects. This makes his book a radically more sincere but inevitably messier, and in equal proportion more useful, attempt to grope towards some truth. As with all openly subjective accounts, our assessment of the usefulness and validity of Desai’s narrative has to be conducted through the prisms of the same ethical and epistemological questions that inform assessments of journalism or poetry and which are ultimately philosophical rather than assessments about the work’s conformity to research methods held to be scientific and therefore authoritative.

But it is important to note that Desai's book is permeated by an obvious elision: aside from a photograph<sup>12</sup> of the author addressing a meeting against water disconnections in Mpumalanga township there is no formal acknowledgement that he has been an active and often crucial participant in the movements described in his book. Desai's work cannot be understood in terms of the model that Edward Said recommends in *Representations of the Intellectual* (1996) which is that the intellectual should preserve her autonomy in order to be able to speak truth to power. Desai is more fruitfully understood in terms of Frantz Fanon's recommendation that the intellectual take a side *with* the people. For Fanon theory only has value as a tool in the service of action aimed at the creation and destruction necessary to create a more human world: 'To educate man to be actional, preserving in all his relations his respect for the basic values that constitute a human world, is the prime task of him, who having taken thought, prepares to act' (1967:222). Hence Desai's memorable remark elsewhere that it will sometimes be necessary to lie to power. Desai adds that, while Nietzsche recommended that we philosophise with a hammer, in neo-liberal South Africa, where people, and even whole schools and clinics, are regularly disconnected from water by the state and radical social movements 'illegally' reconnect people it is necessary to 'philosophise with a pair of pliers' (2002b).

Desai's unfortunate omission of his roles in the movements discussed in his book does not disguise the extent to which they have arisen in what Fanon calls the 'zone of occult instability' (1976:182) that is created when radical intellectuals join the people in 'that fluctuating movement which they are just giving a shape to, and which, as soon as it has started, will be the signal for everything to be called into question' (1976:183). Desai does make some remarks about the role of activist intellectuals with access to lawyers, the media, photocopying machines and so on. But as Fanon notes the occult zone is an unstable zone of creation and destruction and a more direct exploration of its dangers and promises would have added significant value to the book.

### ***pain and anger (open hands and fists)***

The Bank's book begins with the pain of poverty. Its second sentence observes that:

Poor people suffer physical pain that comes with too little food and long hours of work; emotional pain stemming from the daily humiliation of dependency and lack of power; and the moral pain from being forced to make choices – such as whether to use limited funds to save the life of an ill family member, or to use those same funds to feed their children. (p.3)

Much of the rest of the book explores the immediate causes of this pain – unemployment, hunger, exclusion from social services and so on as well as its immediate consequences – depression, sickness, migration, prostitution and so on. The italicised quotes, that represent the direct (but translated) comments of the



interviewees, often speak of extreme horror. But they are all presented in a strangely dispassionate tone. Consider the following examples:

- ‘If you don’t have money today, your disease will lead you to your grave’. Ghana 1995a (p.52)<sup>13</sup>
- ‘I am old and I can’t work, and therefore I am poor. Even my land is old and tired, so whatever little I manage to work does not give me enough harvest for me and my children.’ Togo 1996. (p.52)
- ‘At night you wake up because of a stomach ache and because of hunger’. Moldova 1997 (p.67)
- ‘After the death of my husband, I tried to make money in different ways, but prostitution was the most cost-effective.’ Widow with two children, Macedonia 1998 (p.110)

The transcripts of the original interviews are not referred to so it is not possible to do more than speculate about the translation and editing.<sup>14</sup> But the tone of dispassionate resignation without anger or desire is a constant and striking feature of the way that the ‘voices of the poor’ are presented in this book. The first sentence of the book proper states, in the authorial/editorial voice, that ‘Poverty is pain’ (p.3). This beginning seems to be an echo of the same impetus that lead John Holloway to begin his recent book with a similar sentence: ‘In the beginning is the scream’ (2003:1). But there is a critical difference. For Holloway

Our scream is a scream of horror-and-hope. If the two sides of the scream are separated they become banal. The horror arises from the ‘bitterness of history’, but if there is no transcendence of that bitterness, the one-dimensional horror leads only to political depression and theoretical closure. Similarly, if the hope is not grounded firmly in that same bitterness of history, it becomes just a one-dimensional and silly expression of optimism. (p.8)

And for Foucault: ‘Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable. It is the connection of desire to reality (and not its retreat into the forms of representation) that poses revolutionary force’ (2002:109).

But traces of anger and consequent capacity for agency only emerge via an acknowledgement that The Bank’s researchers encountered some hostility and on the two occasions where it is acknowledged that people ‘steal’ services from which they have been excluded – in these cases medicine (p.111) and electricity (p.156). In neither case is it even considered that these acts could be political. The presentation of the poor as resigned to their fate is a presentation of the poor as defeated and without any possibility of marshalling the agency to issue any kind of challenge – local or systemic. It is as politically banal as it is aesthetically banal and closes down the acknowledgement of the possibilities for movement and agency to the point where it appears that all that is left is a void to be filled, via the charitable agency of the rich, with the superior values of the rich. This presentation is typical of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call the ‘charitable campaigns and mendicant orders of Empire’ and

which they understand to be 'some of the most powerful pacific weapons of the new world order' (2000:36). It presents poverty and its overcoming as ontological rather than political problems and implies that the poor and not the structures of domination, with their consequent exploitation and marginalisation, are the problem. Moreover we do well to remember that, in *Orientalism*, Said observes that colonial discourses produce an idea of the colonised as 'inviting [colonial] interest, penetration, insemination – in short colonization' (1995:229). Is it not the case that pain – so present in The Bank's book – is a softness, an openness, while anger – which only gets into The Bank's book by implication and by mistake – is a hardness, a hardness that can be both a defensive closure and an offensive thrust?

Desai also gives us lots of direct quotes from the poor. But in Desai's book the quotes vary radically in tone, form and content and range from utter resignation to militant defiance and include humour, anger, grief, sarcasm and so on. There is multiplicity and individuality. Desai does not fall into the old left trap of turning some group amongst the marginalised or exploited into the fetishised vessel of his personal hopes by projecting some sort of dehumanising ontological priority or revolutionary purity on to the chosen group. Consider just these three quotes. The first quotes the failure of man, evicted from his home, to speak. He just sits. The second is a direct quote from a rapper from Bayview, Chatsworth. The third is a quote, in its context, from an avuncular shopkeeper who became an activist when he noticed that children were beginning to steal beans instead of sweets and was then branded a 'counter-revolutionary' by the local ANC:

When the reporters arrived they found Harinarian on a pavement surrounded by the family possessions. He held onto a pet tortoise. (p.23)

Women of Chatsworth unite  
 Women lead the fight  
 Pick up the stones  
 Break Council's bones (p.63)

Mlaba and Cele have been deemed worthy of personal attack, being branded 'counter-revolutionaries'. Cele laughs. 'Everybody in Mpumalanga can see, the real counter-revolutionaries are in this government.' (p.88)

### *out of time*

The Bank's production of the poor as inert and resigned is compounded by the presentation of their voices in a strange mixture of corporate-speak and the very same contrived archaism that colonial writers consistently attributed to the colonised. As J.M. Coetzee notes in the context of Alan Paton's presentation of Zulu-speaking characters in English: 'the archaism of the English implies something else too: an archaic quality to the Zulu behind it, as if the Zulu language, the Zulu frame of mind belonged to a bygone and heroic age' (128). There is clearly a similar implication here. The corporate-speak compounds the

implication that the speakers are bewildered and out of time, and therefore requiring help, by the forcefulness of the contrast between both it and the archaic language and the The Bank's evident power and the speakers' evident disempowerment.

In this regard Desai's book is, as the quotes above show, radically different. The voices he quotes are contemporary, individual and diverse in tone, content, context and mode of expression.

### *ideology*

The Bank consistently and inappropriately imposes corporate and neo-liberal jargon on what has been reported. The sometimes bizarre use of jargon begins in the epigram where Wolfensohn writes that 'in order to map our own course for the future, we needed to know about our clients as individuals'. The first claim may well have some truth to it. The last has none – this book produces an idea of the poor as a generic ontological category. There are no individuals in this book – there is just 'the poor' and 'us'. It is ludicrous for Wolfensohn to claim that he aspires to know, in the manner of a village grocer, his billions of 'clients' as individuals. But to suggest that the world's poor are The Bank's clients is just dishonest. Elsewhere Wolfensohn has fumed that 'I have a job to do and I don't want to be instructed by someone else, unless my shareholders ask me to' (Bretton Woods Project 2002: 5). Companies provide goods or services to clients in order to generate profit for shareholders. In the case of the World Bank the poor are actually the raw material from whom wealth is extracted via privatisation and cost-recovery policies. The Bank's actual clients are multinational corporations, the Western governments that represent their interests and the national elites that facilitate corporate access to their human and natural resources.

The Bank even tells us that 'the woman in a village who takes a stand on behalf of her neighbor being beaten up by her husband' is a 'development entrepreneur' (p.281). This crude attempt to associate, without any argument or evidence, social virtue with capitalism is as blatantly ideological as saying, under the BJP, that a woman who takes such a stand is being a good Hindu or saying, under Stalin, that she is a good communist. And so it goes throughout the book. A family in Mali that chooses to go hungry rather than to sell a bicycle in the pre-harvest season are deciding to 'diversify investments' (p.52); in Maldiva 'women have increasingly broken into the formerly male domain of seasonal labor migration' (p.191) etc, etc. Then there is the radical ideological bias. Consider the following chunk of text:

Women who enter the labor force may find work in non-traditional or traditional occupations. Women are engaged in trade, migrant labor, and to some extent in the sex trade as well as in traditional occupations such as domestic worker and maid.

### ***Trade: A Growth Opportunity for Women***

I was not brought up to be a smuggler, and in the former system such activity was punishable and rightfully ridiculed. – Macedonia 1998 (p.188)

The sub-headings for the following sub-sections are 'Domestic Workers and Maids', 'Female Migrant Labour' and 'Migration and Sex Work'. Tanzanian women working as maids are quoted as saying 'We are not living. We are just surviving' (p.189). It is obvious, and utterly so, that these are survivalist strategies that would not be chosen if there were not a social crisis and the interviewees confirm this. Yet the authors/editors breezily impose the description of 'growth opportunity' on this suffering. This takes lived experience about as seriously as the description of the Gulag as a re-education camp.

Leftist thought has often subordinated the complexity and movement of lived experience to its own fetishes – The Party, The Working Class, The Revolution, The Future, The (ontologically pure) Militant and so on. The consequences of this have generally been disastrous. But leftist thought and activism has been given new vitality, perhaps even a new youth, via writers like Sub-commandante Insurgent Marcos, Arundhati Roy, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and movements like the Zapatistas that seek to oppose transcendent categories, cultivate, as Fanon puts it, a 'voracious taste for the concrete' and move from the view that 'the unemployed man, the starving native do not lay a claim to the truth; they do not say that they represent the truth, for they are the truth' (1976:38). Desai's book is firmly and self-consciously part of this movement to subordinate theory to lived experience.

This means that while Desai has the ethical certainty to avoid postmodern impotence in the face of evil – he approvingly quotes the militant humanism<sup>15</sup> of an activist shot by the police while resisting evictions 'We are not animals, we are human beings' (p.142), his ethics has an openness to movement and multiplicity (human beings differ and change) as well as a firm point from which to exercise leverage (human beings require the basic means to a viable life). Desai does not subscribe to any ontological fetishes or totalising meta-narratives. He is committed to an analysis that employs theory strictly for illumination and never seeks to make reality conform to theory. He makes this most explicit when he writes that:

If I was a traditional leftist, I would have to spend all my time first engineering the content of the life of people in these communities so that it accorded with the insights of socialism. That would be the struggle! But this is not the way things are. There is a rich, complex, imperfect, and sensuous collectivity existing in these communities I have written about. And the way certain of these needs are expressed and stubbornly held onto as the basis for action is not frowned upon by people in the DSF [Durban Social Forum] as it is, even if secretly, by many socialists. (pp.145-146)

It is important to note that this anti-ideological approach refuses the subordination of lived experience to the fetish of the pure militant as much as any other. This fetish is so common on the left and is so seductive that even Hardt and

Negri succumb to it in the final paragraph of their book in which they celebrate the example of Saint Francis of Assisi. Desai understands that resistance is ordinary and ubiquitous and always partial and compromised and from within and must be seen and encouraged as such.

*these voices of the poor were bought to you by, The Bank*

Perhaps the most serious problem in *The Bank's* book with regard to its claim to represent the voices of the poor is that there are often no clear boundaries between views ascribed to the interviewees, and imbued with the 'scientific' legitimacy of a massive social science research project commended for its 'authenticity' by Wolfensohn in the introduction, and the editors'/authors' comments on those views. The apparent legitimacy of the former leaks into the latter and is used, in a variety of contexts, to justify the view, which is often directly contrary to that of the interviewees, that 'Social norms and institutions are the key obstacles faced by poor women and men' (p.266). Consider the following two paragraphs, both referring to the results of interviews in the former Soviet republic of Georgia:

[F]unerals take on important symbolic and social significance, serving as occasions in which families demonstrate social solidarity to themselves and others. It is a time to display a family's prestige, honor and prosperity. Friends of the deceased and the deceased's extended family are expected to attend the funeral and bring gifts. During the socialist period most elderly Georgians were able to save funeral money to offset the considerable costs, but now most have lost the bulk of their savings. (p. 69)

People may also compare themselves to those wealthier than they are, ascribing that wealth to corruption and dishonesty. Particularly for people over forty, the rules of the new market economy seem to violate the values by which they were raised. Because of the belief that in the former system 'business was "speculation", and 'speculation was a dishonest and even criminal way of making money', they compare themselves with their neighbors who have overcome their own psychological barriers to get involved in street trade and commerce (that has come to symbolize the new market relations). They claim they would rather retain their self-respect and the respect of their peers by working for meagre salaries in the state sector or selling personal possessions. (pp. 72-73)

The first paragraph contains declarative statements of fact. It is reasonably easy to believe that the editors/authors are giving us the best sense that they can of what the interviewees told *The Bank's* researchers. But the second paragraph is riddled with qualifying punctuation and words and phrases like 'may', 'ascribing', 'the belief that' and 'claim' that set up a critical distance between what the interviewees have said and the authors'/editors' transmission of it. Moreover there is also a direct assertion that the reported ideals of self and peer respect are actually indicative of a failure to overcome a psychological barrier. It is clear that the second paragraph is designed to persuade readers to reject the validity of the interviewees' comments. This pattern is consistently repeated wherever the interviewees' comments move against the consensus that neo-liberalism is trying to create which means that the poor are taken very seriously when they

point to the slightly less poor or corrupt and inefficient elites and national governments as the cause of their problems. But whenever they point to larger structural forces or neo-liberal economic policies like privatisation their voices are immediately delegitimated and the blame is shifted on to the inefficiencies and corruption of local elites and governments.

Desai makes no attempt to claim scientific legitimacy for his project. On the contrary he presents his project as an eyewitness account of particular movements of the poor in particular times and places. As always a close examination of the particular yields insights that, with reflection and comparison, may develop universal value but Desai is creating the circumstances for this reflection and comparison to be possible rather than attempting to legislate universally in the name of science.

### *dangerous men, willing women*

The Bank's book devotes a lot of space to abuse of women by men. Male and female interviewees, from around the world, consistently assert and often with overt sympathy that men are under particular social pressure as they have been bought up to identify manhood with a role, employment, that no longer exists. This is reflected in some of the overviews gleaned in the country reports. e.g.:

many men, unable to keep with the socially mandated role of breadwinner, find that 'their sense of emasculation and failure often leads to a host of physical ailments and sharply increasing mortality, alcoholism, physical abuse of wives and children, divorce and abandonment of families'. (Georgia 1997) (p.194)

But there is just one editorial recognition that part of the solution to the problem of abuse must lie in creating viable lives for men. But this recognition is limited and subordinated to neo-liberal orthodoxy. i.e.

both poor men and women need greater access to economic opportunities, especially for profitable self-employment. This is difficult in an environment of corruption, lack of organizations of the poor, lack of support to battered women, and the breakdown of law enforcement agencies. (p.205)

The creation or, in many cases, recreation of employment is not even considered. Instead the burden to create self-employment and survivalist solidarity organisations is shifted onto the poor and the usual suspects – corrupt states and poor law enforcement – are, without evidence, deployed to explain why this is so difficult. But the overwhelming view of the book, sustained over pages and pages is that poor men are just bad and need both to be taught, via deliberate projects, that their norms are bad and to be better policed while women are just good and need to be affirmed as such:

Many men are collapsing, falling into domestic abuse and violence, turning to alcohol and drugs, or abandoning their families. Women, on the other hand, seem to swallow their pride and hit the streets to do demeaning jobs to bring food to the family table. (p.269)

In the concluding recommendations for change at the end of the book we are informed that ideas about gender have 'become such a deep part of the psyche that they are resistant to change and hard to overcome' and so 'innovative approaches are needed to assist men with their fears of "emasculatation and social impotence" when women step outside of the house' (p.280). Not one of the interviewees is reported as having said that the problem was women 'stepping outside of the house'. They are consistently reported as having said that the problem is that men were raised to provide for their families and that now the only means to scrape a living together – street trading, migrant work, domestic work, prostitution etc – are the lot of women. Yet the authors/editors breezily assert that the task is just to prepare men to cope with the reality that they world they were raised to inhabit no longer exists. The possibility of changing both the world and men is not even acknowledged in the authorial/editorial voice.

Reading The Bank's book reminds one of prescient comments in the established critiques of capitalism and colonialism. It is quite some time since Karl Marx's observed that the development of capitalism results in the replacement of 'skilled laborers by less skilled, mature laborers by immature, male by female...' (Comaroff and Comaroff: 784). Marx's observation leads to deep suspicion of The Bank's optimism that the movement of women into areas of work like migrant labour is driven by their desire to unshackle themselves from patriarchy. It is also necessary to return to Said's observation that in orientalisng discourses the 'male was considered in isolation from the total community in which he lived' and 'viewed with something resembling contempt and fear.' Said goes on to note that these discourses view women as 'above all willing' (1995:207) and in The Bank's book poor women do seem, above all, willing to step into domestic work, prostitution etc. Women never, once, appear as refusers or fighters. One is also reminded of Fanon's remarks about how the immobility to which colonialism condemns the native in a Manichean world initially results in the colonised man expressing the 'aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people' (1976:40) before turning it on the coloniser. The Bank's book does acknowledge, in a brief section on methodology, that, in Bangladesh, 'youths' and a Mr. Munna and 'five or six others' were 'aggressive' (p. 20) to the Bank's researchers in Aga Sadek Sweepers colony in Dhaka and that the researchers were driven out of Chitabatoli village in Hathazari by 'men of the village' (p. 21). In moments like this hope escapes through the intentions of the authors/editors and dances across the page.

Desai's largeness of vision is a world away from The Bank's bad men/willing women dichotomy. In Desai's book some women are driven to prostitution, some women fight and it is entirely possible that some inhabit both positions or move from one to the other. Some men beat their wives, some men put their bodies in harm's way when the men with guns and dogs and

sunglasses come to effect an eviction and it is entirely possible that some men do both or move from one to the other. Through struggle men and women grow and develop new solidarities in and across neighbourhoods. A gangster becomes a struggle plumber and reconnects a widow's water. A single mother, timid in the sweatshop, becomes a fighter and leads a throng jamming her neighbour's stairs to stare down batons and teargas and keep out the evictors and disconnectors. What's more, and so very much more, Desai shows us (p.144) that some women escape prostitution by wresting resources from the state through a refusal to conform to the World Bank's injunction, backed up with the armed force of the state, to pay for services like water. Desai's representation of men and women who are poor is as much about creating openings and instability in objectifying bourgeois projections as The Bank's is about creating closures and stability.

### *crime*

And then there is crime. Around the world social panics about crime are able to legitimate increased surveillance, coercion and incarceration of poor people and forms of racism and xenophobia otherwise considered unacceptable. The interviewees in The Bank's book consistently assert the structural relationships that editors/authors seek to rule out of consideration by making direct links between crime and poverty. 'In country after country – Ethiopia, Jamaica, Kenya, South Africa and Thailand – poor people draw strong links between crime and unemployment. This is most extreme in the countries of the former Soviet Union' (p.273). Interviewees are also quoted as considering neo-liberal policies like privatisation as crime. Yet in the final chapter on *The Way Forward* the only suggestions with regard to crime recommend strengthening law enforcement. Desai's book makes the same point as the interviewees in The Bank's book but he does add, largely by implication, that there is a positive potential to turn violence and disrespect for the law away from the innocent and on to the iron fingers of the state's right hand.

### *the unsaid – history*

The Bank's book inhabits the perpetual present against which Winston Smith struggles in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*. There is an astonishingly complete refusal to take history seriously. Interviewees consistently explain that historical events caused or exacerbated their poverty. A story may start with 'When my father was made a *jeune retraite* (forced early retirement, as part of structural adjustment policies) back in 1985...' (p.120) or 'When we lost the fish to the big companies...' (p.222) The interviewees consistently assert that life was better under communism or before privatisation. This is acknowledged in the editorial/authorial voices:



After decades of steady employment guaranteed by the state and subsidized food, housing education, medicine, and standards of living that, if not lavish, were for most at least adequate, the collapse of communism has resulted in the rapid erosion of virtually all social support systems, and has bred mass insecurities among the people of this region as they have watched their savings and accumulated assets dwindle and disappear ... The transitions to a market economy, to 'independence', and to 'democracy' have become equated in the minds of many poor people with unprecedented vulnerability and social justice. (p.66)

But these views are immediately psychologised and delegitimated.

People from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union tend to think about their current economic position by comparing it with both their earlier standard of living and the current situation of others. Both are ways of attempting not only to rationally comprehend the transformations of their social status, but also to psychologically mediate their experiences. This is one of the most consistent features of the reports from this region. Comparing the present situation with the past is a way for respondents to externalize responsibility for the current situation. By pointing to specific events that impoverished everybody..., or the criminality and duplicity of the wealthy, respondents feel that, at least to a certain extent, their impoverishment is not the result of personal failings, but of events utterly beyond their control, such as the transitions associated with independence. (p.71)

The editorial/authorial voice never enquires into the social forces that produced the arrangements that channel millions of complex lives into its twin categories of 'us' – readers of World Bank books and actors with the potential to effect social change – and 'them' – 'the poor', objects of our paternalistic sympathies. The gaze is locked into the present. With neo-liberalism we are always at the beginning of year zero. And without history poverty is naturalised as is, by implication, wealth. You are poor because you are The Poor just as under colonialism 'The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich' (Fanon 1976:31).

At this point it is worth a brief return to Holloway: 'The crystallisation of that-which-has-been-done into a "thing" shatters the flow of doing into a million fragments. Thing-ness denies the primacy of doing (and hence of humanity). Thing-ness is crystallised amnesia' (2003:34).

Desai's approach is very different. His first sentence is historical rather than ontological. He writes that 'Chatsworth came into being forty years ago with the passing of the Group Areas Act' (p.15). He goes on to tell us how the community he is writing from came into being and how generations of people struggled to make their lives against the structural forces of colonialism, apartheid and the ANC implemented post-apartheid structural adjustment programme. He gives us the larger stories of the neighbourhoods about which he writes and in each case splices the stories of a number of individuals into the larger story. We get an immediate sense that individuals, communities and movements make themselves within and against history and thus become history makers themselves.

*also unsaid – the role of The Bank*

These two books handle the issue of the larger political and economic context very differently. The Bank's book ignores, completely in its editorial/authorial voice, both the macro-economic context in which the World Bank has such influence and the social movements that oppose The Bank, its policies and market fundamentalism in general. This reads very strangely for two reasons. The first is that the authorial/editorial voice takes a very firm line against micro-local elites that behave in the same ways that The Bank is often accused of behaving – such as trapping people in debt; water management strategies that result in salination; raising costs of medicine, water and housing; insisting the proposals been rewritten until they fit the agenda of the powerful; encouraging corruption and so on – without ever acknowledging the fact that The Bank is accused of precisely these practices on a global scale. The second omission is that while the interviewees are allowed to say that job losses consequent to privatisation or exclusion from education or basic services as a result of cost recovery policies have resulted in personal disaster the authorial/editorial voice never once acknowledges any connection between these policies and The Bank or any other social forces that advocate or demand these policies. On the contrary these policies are naturalised to the point where it seems that, like the weather, they just happen without any human agency. For example the authorial/editorial voice is quite happy to detail the suffering consequent to exclusion from access to clean water and to observe that 'Access to clean drinking water and water for irrigation frequently emerges as a characteristic difference between the poor and the rich' (p.267). But there is no acknowledgement in any form, at all, that The Bank is a key player in water policy and that The Bank explicitly seeks to pressurise African governments to commodify the provision of water with a view to shifting the costs of water onto 'consumers' with the consequent exclusion of the poor from water provision. In South African this process has resulted in 10 million people being disconnected, often at gun-point, from access to safe drinking water (McDonald 2002). In its *Sourcebook on Community Driven Development in the Africa Region*, published a few months after *Voices of the Poor*, The Bank wrote that 'work is still needed with political leaders in some national governments to move away from the concept of free water for all ... [and to] ensure 100 percent recovery of operation and maintenance costs.'<sup>16</sup> In Ghana The Bank's 'support' in the area of water policy included a recommendation, a year before the publication of *Voices of the Poor*, that the cost of water be raised by 95 percent.<sup>17</sup> Moreover in Uganda and Burkino Faso where new Bank Poverty Reduction Support Credits (the new name for structural adjustment loans) have been approved, the 'reform agenda' that goes with the loans includes water privatisation.<sup>18</sup> The Bank also advocates and closely supports the process of setting up of 'tri-sector partnerships' of state, business and specially invented and funded organisations that are then called 'civil society' to win legitimacy for the commodification of

water and the consequent disconnection of former citizens who cannot afford to become consumers.<sup>19</sup> In South Africa, as in other countries where there have been mass exclusions from access to clean water, this has resulted in a cholera epidemic<sup>20</sup>. The South Africa government, like the Indian government<sup>21</sup>, has dutifully followed The Bank's 'initiative' and launched a campaign to persuade poor people to wash their hands more often. An 'initiative' which, as Mandisa Mbali shows<sup>22</sup>, reaches back to enliven a set of very old prejudices against the poor.

Desai is in continuous critical conversation with the successes and failures of the movements discussed in his book, the liberation movements and the left in general. We may disagree with his assessments but he does not hide the agency of the social forces of which he is part. There is an explicit recognition that his book is intended to be a contribution to an ongoing conversation and, again, the sincerity of purpose that drives this commitment to dialogical examination of social issues is entirely lacking in The Bank's complete failure to acknowledge, let alone examine and invite discussion around, the consequence of its agency and of the agency of the allied social forces.

### *the radical unsaid – the political agency of the poor*

The only reference to social movements in The Bank's book is brief and on the third last page. The authors/editors opine that 'Social movements bring about realignments of power, change social norms, and create new opportunity structures. Out of this will emerge a mindset that 'applies liberalization not only for the rich but also the poor' (p.281). The only evidence adduced to support the startling conclusion that, against all the declared intentions of most major national and international social movements, the consequence of this mobilisation will be liberalisation for the poor is the observation, completely unconnected to anything to do with social movements, that in Ethiopia 'poor people in some rural areas' report that regulations around firewood cutting and trading in the streets and at the local market have 'made the search for a livelihood more difficult' (p.281).

Desai's approach to the power of the poor to constitute counter power is exemplary. Radical thought usually takes the oppressive power of the state and the market as its focus. To be sure, explaining the nature of the structural violence in and against 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 City Council cast as the villain of darkness. And 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 Mevrou Samsodien in Taflesig, who rebel because obedience can mean disaster and even death. All this attention to micro-struggles is explicitly set into a broader account of the rise of community movements against evictions and disconnections within the context of both the global class project of neo-liberalism and the growing global resistance to it.

### The Way Forward

The Bank's book makes recommendations for change throughout the text and in a dedicated final chapter titled '*The Way Forward*.' Almost all of the suggestions in the general text can be included in three broad themes – achieving good governance, changing social norms, and strengthening social capital. Good governance is about strengthening the coercive right arm of the state, law enforcement is the key focus, and learning to use the withered developmental/welfare left arm of the state more effectively. In this regard reducing corruption and inefficiency are the key focuses. No consideration is given to the possibility of strengthening the left arm. Changing social norms is about doing away with certain prejudices about and amongst the poor, and in particular prejudices against groups like widows and people living with AIDS which result in people having to make demands on, or become a problem for, the state. This project also seeks to persuade the poor to accept responsibility for their condition rather than blaming structural factors and then to form survivalist solidarity organisation and to seek self-employment to improve their condition. This is where The Bank appears most optimistic. The authors/editors observes that 'Much can be learned from the market penetration strategies<sup>23</sup> of the private sector' and go on to note that 'changes in social norms about cigarette smoking in the United States' (p.278) indicate that this can be achieved in broader society. Social capital is a key theme in the book and it is clear that The Bank sees social capital as a means for achieving an anti-politics of co-option via 'conflict resolution, and management of relations with outsiders' (p.143) and for shifting the responsibility for undoing poverty onto the poor via '[h]arnessing the potential of local-level associations and networks for poverty reduction' (p.150). The authorial/editorial voice does accept the regular comments from interviewees to the effect that what the Bank Refers to as social capital is corroded by poverty, does acknowledge that '[t]he social fabric, poor people's only "insurance" is unravelling' (p.7) but still holds it out as a key strategy for poverty alleviation and recommends organising the poor into collectives in order to cope better with their poverty and to bureaucratise conflict. There is no attempt to resolve this contradiction. Four 'strategies for change' are identified in the final chapter. They are:

1. Start with poor people's realities
2. Invest in the organizational capacity of the poor

3. Change social norms
4. Support development entrepreneurs (p.274)

As is evident no consideration is given to macro-economic policy. All four of these 'strategies for change' shift the responsibility for poverty onto the poor without questioning the economic and political arrangements that have produced and exacerbated poverty. Poor people are being told to cope better with the current system and the possibilities of structural reform or revolution are not considered at all.

Desai, like The Bank, is interested in changing social norms. But for Desai taking the ecology of the neighbourhood seriously is not just a way to survive the onslaught of neo-liberalism. It is also a way to, at the same time, develop what Fanon called a 'fighting culture'.<sup>24</sup> Consider Desai's account of celebration of Diwali in Chatsworth:

Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights was celebrated. The festival had a relevant bent. The slogan raised was 'lights for all' and the Satanic villain was cast as the city council, which was disconnecting lights. Old mythologies from India were being reinterpreted in neo-liberal South Africa. All religious groups and races living in the mosaic of Chatsworth participated. Indeed, about 30 percent of the area is African and strong bonds between neighbours were being forged in the context of the struggle against the city council. In this way, Diwali in South Africa was being rethought, politicised, and made accessible to all the community. (p.41)

Desai makes no suggestions for alternative policies. His politics is essentially a politics of refusal which he explicitly presents as a beginning with unknown outcomes. His suggestions do not go beyond recommending that the poor constitute themselves into movements of counter power and join the movements of movements against neo-liberalism globally. He seems to imply that the aspirations of these movements are not to seize political power but rather to diffuse it with the aim of creating viable neighbourhoods in which individuals and communities can flourish. His opposition to vanguardist politics is well captured in the words of Mpumalanga (township) activist Maxwell Cele: 'No one is in charge of the protests, except the anger and hunger in every person' (p.88).

But Desai does bring his intelligence to bear much more explicitly on the question of what can be learned and copied from the neighbourhood struggles he discusses. 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' (p.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 Fanon, that communities rather than unions are likely to lead any challenge to the tyranny of the market.

## Conclusion

The Bank sets out to convey the universal pain of poverty and anyone who knows anything about poverty anywhere will recognise that *Voices of the Poor* captures much of this pain well. Given that (substantially generic but allegedly particular – the good African and the good Hindu are both required to obey) claims about the particular aspirations of national governments, and the particular pathologies of their critics, are universally advanced to provide ideological cover for the near universal nature of local elites' accommodation with international capital there is some value in The Bank's universalism. If poor Indians and South Africans and Ghanaians and Georgians suffer in the same ways it must be potentially possible for counter-hegemonic international networks of the poor to begin to oppose the rival networks of the transnational capitalist class and state. Of course this is not recommended or even mentioned as a possibility and is, in fact, *a priori* excluded as a possibility by The Bank's naturalisation of poverty and exclusion of anger and desire from its focus. But the acknowledgement of generic forms of suffering does, nevertheless, make the book a useful corrective to nationalisms that allow a networked elite to ghettoise 'their' poor via particularist valorisations and stigmatisations. The book is also a useful corrective to the tendency for national panics about the apparently particular moral failings of particular societies. For example it emerges that almost every social panic about 'moral degeneration' in South Africa – street children, chronic teacher absenteeism, corruption and sexual abuse in schools, dangerous and corrupt police officers, endemic violence against women and so on – is linked to pathologies that accompany poverty everywhere. The book draws very different conclusions but, despite its intentions, the universal emergence of these pathologies in the context of acute poverty constitutes useful evidence that poverty, rather, that the attitudes of the poor is the problem.

It is not surprising that throughout the book the interviewees are allowed to describe how it is to be poor and to say that their poverty is worsening without any authorial/editorial attempts to delegitimize their views. After all, The Bank presents its mission as the achievement of, in the phrase under the logo on the back cover of the book, 'a world free of poverty'. Whether we see this claim as a true reflection of The Bank's aims or as ideological cover for another agenda we must agree that an organisation that seeks to win legitimacy and influence through claims about opposing poverty has a direct interest in presenting poverty as a bad thing. Consequently it is no surprise that this book is filled with unmediated accounts of the horrors of poverty. It is also not surprising that the interviewees are allowed to say that their suffering is getting worse. The Bank routinely admits this itself.<sup>25</sup>

The Bank retains its commitment to increasing the scope and pace of the integration of more aspects of more societies into the global market. The voices of the poor in *Voices of the Poor* are not allowed to issue unmediated challenges to this project. When ethical or political ideas contrary to neo-liberalism are

expressed they are immediately, implicitly or explicitly, presented as illusory or pathological. This blatant and unacknowledged double standard means that this book is, in Noam Chomsky's terms, propaganda.<sup>26</sup> Wolfenson's claim that this book is a channel for the 'authentic' expression of the views of the 40,000 people interviewed is a lie.<sup>27</sup>

If the social forces described by Robinson are pushing us towards something like Hardt and Negri's Empire that defines its others in vertical social space rather than horizontal geographic space we should be mindful of Said's observations about the production of the Orient by European colonialism. There are crucial differences between the way in which European colonialism and Empire produce and discipline their subjects – one of which is that there was much more overt animus in colonialism's public discourses on its Orientals, Africans and so on than in Empires' discourses on its Poor. But this does not necessarily imply progress. Empire is replacing colonialism's reliance on indirect rule in the name of tradition with governmentality in which, Foucault has shown us, sovereignty is legitimated not by territoriality but by the population that becomes the end of government 'and which refers and has resort to the instrumentality of economic knowledge, (that) would correspond to a society controlled by apparatuses of security' (2002: 221). We care for you therefore you should accept our discipline. But one of the many continuities is that Empire, like colonialism seeks to produce amongst its subjects 'an intellectual elite with which we can work ... who would thus form a link between us and the mass of the natives ... with a view towards preparing the way for agreements and treaties which would be the desirable form taken by our political future' (Said 1995:245). A further continuity that we need to take equally seriously is Said's observation that eventually 'the modern Orient, in short, participates in its own Orientalizing' (p.235).<sup>28</sup> After all The Bank's strategic moves towards becoming a 'knowledge bank' and to 'harmonising' and seeking further 'coherence' between its policies and those of the IMF, the WTO and donors<sup>29</sup> means the seduction of massive funding and endless NGO organised workshops and conferences with the direct aim of capturing extant movements of the poor and creating others under the guise of supporting 'civil society'. For example, Julie Hearn cites convincing evidence to show that in Mozambique 'Aid is being deliberately directed to assist in the construction of new social groups committed to the market economy' (2000:19). Moreover she quotes a USAID report which openly states that, in Ghana:

[P]olitical risks include growing polarization within the Ghanaian polity and perhaps an associated risk that a legally sanctioned change of government could have totally opposing development views and reverse long-term policies. USAID assistance to civic organizations that develop and debate public policy, and US support for consultation on government policies have been useful in shaping a vision for Ghana's future which is developing broad, bipartisan support. (p.20)

In Zimbabwe Hopewell Gumbo writes that the Movement for Democratic Change started out opposing both the Mugabe dictatorship and neo-liberalism but that 'Massive funding was poured in to the civic movement, mainly from the West' with the result that

the intellectuals now largely subscribe to the neo-liberal agenda and grass roots activists, many of whom have suffered as a direct consequence of neo-liberalism, are just bought in to toyi-toyi when numbers and credibility are needed. The middle class MDC leadership, together with the labour bureaucrats and big white bosses believe that giving actual power to grass roots activists would bring 'instability' in to the movement. (2002)

So while there are some important benefits in The Bank's recognition of some of the ways in which the pain of poverty is universal there is a simultaneous attempt to produce an image of the poor that seeks to turn the majority of humanity into The Poor. In The Bank's discourse the primary casual factor in producing and sustaining the condition of poor people is their attitude. We do well to recall that colonialism's discourses of domination asserted that 'ultimately, the problem with other races is the races themselves' (Gordon 1994:29). The connections between colonialism's racialised discourses of domination and The Bank's non-racial othering<sup>30</sup> of poor people are clear. And The Poor, as produced by The Bank, are a resource to be exploited for profit, a potentially rebellious majority to be made safe and co-optable, and a source of fresh legitimacy to the increasingly questioned tyranny of capital under the fetish of The Market.

If existential and humanist thought is correct then the objectification of what should be subjective is always mutilating and dishonest, and more of the unstable, diverse nature of human reality will emerge through a self consciously subjective engagement with subjective realities than through delusional attempts at objectivity. And, indeed, we see that while The Bank's book speaks of The Poor and produces a generic image of The Poor as other, passive, defeated, inert and lacking, Desai's book invokes the idea of the multitude and produces an image of the multitude as multiple and including – with in its flesh – hope, anger, desire and the capacity for agency and change. The Poor wait to receive. The multitude produce.

Not all of the poors (and the plural is important) in Desai's book are disciplined, corralled or resigned. They have not all subjected themselves to surveillance. Many refuse to know their place and accept their fate. They are a living, fractious, divergent, choosing, changing multitude. They know their desire. Instead of The Poor we have Psyches, 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; Prava Pillay the street fighting philosopher, Thulisile Manqele unemployed guardian to seven children and litigant against water disconnections, etc, etc. Desai's book is alive with the energies and



desires of the multitude. Political platitudes, orthodoxies and abstractions dissolved in a flood of actually existing humanity.

Desai has a politics to go with his ontology and it is a politics of refusal. While conceding that this is only a beginning we could connect this to the noble philosophical tradition that moves from the assertion that the rebel is the person 'who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation' (Camus 1984:14). But even in the midst of neo-liberalism's brutal assault on the poor<sup>31</sup> defensive struggles are not inevitable.

Various forms of what used to be called false consciousness can and do 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. This is why every act of refusal matters and why negativity, sheer refusal, is such a generative act.

Struggle is constant. The world is constantly being remade, moment to moment. Every time that counter power strikes a blow its language and concerns are appropriated in order that they can be co-opted and their simulacra can be manufactured across the razor wire and velvet ropes that separate the dominated from the dominators. The books reviewed here speak to the leading edges of the two great movements of our time. The World Bank's book is a response to the crisis of legitimacy confronted by the transnational capitalist class. It seeks to turn the fractious, suffering, angry, desiring, resisting, accepting, self-destructing, self-creating, border crossing multitude into The Poor – lost lambs who need to be guided home by its shepherds. Desai's book is a response to the emergence of movements of the poor that refuse the shepherds, the tunes they whistle and the encouragements they murmur, their dogs and crooks, and their promise of eventually joining the flock that spends its days with the fenced in sweet grass. Desai seeks to incite rebellion. To 'blast open the continuum of history' (Benjamin 1999:254).

Criticism of The Bank's policies is usually met with the outrageous rejoinder to present an alternative. It may well be a mistake to accept the logic of this and to take on the burden of labouring to show that there alternatives to the barbarism of millennial capitalism. After all, shouldn't the burden of proof rest with the people that seek to defend the arrangements from which they profit so extravagantly? Nevertheless I hope that this essay has shown that The Bank's representation of poor people in its *Voices of the Poor* is deeply inaccurate, unethical and self-serving. Ashwin Desai's book shows that there are other and much better ways of writing about poor people.

## Notes

1. William Robinson defines neo-liberalism, or the Washington Consensus, as a 'revolution from above' involving 'twin dimensions rigorously pursued by global elites with the backing of a powerful and well organized lobby of transnational

corporations. One is worldwide market liberalization and the construction of a new legal and regulatory superstructure for the global economy. The other is the internal restructuring and global integration of each national economy. The combination of the two is intended to break down all national barriers to the free movement of transnational capital across borders and the free operation of capital within borders, and, in this way, to open up all areas of society to the logic of profit-making unhindered by the logic of social need.' (2003:4)

2. This tension is discussed with insight and depth in Susanne Schech and Sanjuga Vas Dev's *Governing Through Participation? The World Bank's New Approach to the Poor*.
3. See William Robinson's book *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US intervention and hegemony* and Arundhati Roy's essay *Democracy, Who's She When She is at Home?*
4. For many years the ANC denied that this policy, referred to as the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy, was a structural adjustment programme but World Bank Managing Director Mamphela Ramphele agreed that GEAR was a structural adjustment programme at an IDASA conference in Cape Town on 11 August 2003.
5. See Patrick Bond's *Elite Transition* pp. 155-191.
6. See *A Thousand Flowers: Social Struggles Against Structural Adjustment in African Universities* edited by Silvia Federici, George Caffentzis and Ousseina Alidou for an excellent account of the impacts of the World Bank's structural adjustment programmes on African universities.
7. Joseph Stiglitz acknowledged this in his *Globalization and Its Discontents* (2002) and Mamphela Ramphele acknowledged this, far more forcefully, at the same IDASA conference referred to above.
8. See Peter Dwyer and David Seddon's *The New Wave? A global perspective on popular protest* for an international overview of growing resistance to neo-liberalism and Leo Zeileg's *Class Struggle in Africa* and Patrick Bond's *Embryonic African Anti-Capitalism* for an account of African resistance.
9. In *A Dying Colonialism* Fanon presents five case studies, including the famous examples of the changing role of the veil and the radio in Algerian society, each of which shows that there can be a shift from constraining Manicheism to dialectical progress with, in Gibson's words, 'its opportunity for radically new behaviour in both public and private life, a chance for cultural regeneration and creation where positive concepts of self-determination, not contingent upon the colonial status quo, are generated' (1999:421).
10. See my account of this in *The Aunties Revolt*.
11. Over 400 people from anti-neo-liberal movements attended and celebrated the launch of this book in Durban.
12. There are no photographs in the Italian edition, *Noi siamo i poveri. Lotte comunitarie nel nuovo apartheid*.

13. This quote is repeated on page 110 in a slightly different form: 'If you don't have money today, your disease will lead you to your grave'. – Ghana 1995a and again in the original form on page 267.
14. Although we are informed that 'some of the poor who contribute to the PPAs are verbally expressive. They use wonderful turns of phrase, and describe their world with freshness and simplicity' (23).
15. For an analysis of what this means see Pithouse (2003) *That the Tool Never Possess the Man: Taking Fanon's Humanism Seriously*.
16. Quoted in 'World Bank Water Policies Undermine Public Health', *Results*.
17. See 'World Bank Water Policies Undermine Public Health', *Results*, and 'Bearing the Burden of IMF and World Bank Polices', *Public Citizen*.
18. See 'World Bank Water Policies Undermine Public Health', *Results*, and 'Bearing the Burden of IMF and World Bank Polices', *Public Citizen*.
19. See Fiona Lumsden and Alex Loftus's *Inanda's Struggle for Water Through Pipes and Tunnels*.
20. See Tracey Mkhize's *Cholera and the Water Business* and Patrick Bond's *The World Bank in the Time of Cholera*.
21. See Sharma, S. and Shiva, V. *Of World Bank, Toilet Paper and Washing Soap*.
22. See Mandisa Mabli's *A Bit of Soap and Water, and Some Jik: Historical and Feminist Critiques of an Exclusively Individualising Understanding of Cholera Prevention in Discourse around Neoliberal Water Policy*.
23. Again, a comment as crass as this demands a return to Said's critique of colonial discourses: 'the space of the weaker or underdeveloped regions like the Orient was viewed as something inviting French interest, penetration, insemination – in short colonization' (1995:219).
24. See Nigel Gibson's *Fanon and the Postcolonial Imagination* for a superb account of this idea in Fanon's work.
25. And although this book does not recognise any connection between worsening poverty and The Bank's policies some officials have acknowledged this connection. For example Giovanni Arrighi has noted that World Bank economist William Easterly has recently admitted that 'a significant 'improvement in policy variables' among developing countries since 1980 – that is, greater adherence to the agenda of the Washington Consensus – has been associated, not with an improvement, but with a sharp deterioration of their economic performance where the Bank's policies have been followed most directly; median rate of growth of their per capita income falling from 2.5 percent in 1960-79 to 0 per cent in 1980-98. (Arrighi 2002:17) In Arrighi's analysis recognitions of this sort have not lead The Bank to fundamentally rethink its policy prescriptions or to abandon its claim to be acting against poverty. On the contrary they have lead The Bank to seek more effective ways of implementing its central policy prescriptions by abandoning its demand for a minimalist state in favour of a demand for 'effective bureaucracies and activist states in the implementation of structural adjustment programmes' (p. 4).

26. The model, which Chomsky develops in *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*, argues that when there is a systematic double standard, revealed by close analysis of the treatment of paired examples, we have a case of propaganda.
27. There is also evidence from outside the text that strongly suggests that the sudden departure of the project's initial leader, Ravi Kanbur, was a result of pressures from above to channel the voices from below in particular directions and that 'the final drafting of the report indicated that much of the information gained through consultation and dialogue with the poor and their advocates was not utilized' (Schech and Vas Dev: 6). Moreover while the South African PPA report, one of the reports on which this book drew, is primarily framed within neo-liberal orthodoxy (e.g. it advocates privatisation, cost-recovery policies for basic service provision etc) and is obsequiously uncritical of the ANC, it does argue for some non-liberal measures like welfare, effective and rapid land reform, cutting interest rates on the basis that an increase in inflation will be a price worth paying for increased employment and so on. Not one of these recommendations appears in The Bank's book.
28. Most of the reports on African countries were conducted by The Bank itself. But the following Africans co-operated in this project: David Nyamwaya in Kenya; S. Agi, S. Ogoh, H. Bin, A. Damarola, M. Uchenna, D. Nzewi and D. Shehu in Nigeria; Heidi Attwood, Peter Ewang, Francie Lund, Julian May, Andy Norton and Wilfred Wentzel in South Africa.
29. See *Harmonisation and Coherence: White Knights or Trojan Horses?* Bretton Woods Project.
30. Of course all kinds of racisms are still being produced at the heart of Empire – consider the American discourses that legitimate the occupation of Palestine and the American prison system. However it is necessary to acknowledge that there are very influential forces that are seeking to drive a shift from colonialism's horizontal domination premised on race to Empire's vertical domination premised on class and that The Bank's book is part of this project. But it is equally necessary to acknowledge that this shift has been necessitated by struggles against racism; that while it seeks, in a conveniently ahistorical manner, to avoid racialising discourses it is not anti-racist because it does not seek to address the legacy of centuries of racism and is, therefore, racist; and that the shift away from racialised discourses of domination does not mean that domination is threatened – on the contrary as Marx argued 'The more a dominant class is able to absorb the best people from the dominated classes, the more solid and dangerous is its rule' (Spivak 1999:84).
31. This is no exaggeration. In South Africa research by David McDonald (2002) has shown that in the post-apartheid era that along with the disconnection of 10 million South Africans from water referred to above the same number of people have been disconnected from electricity, 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. This assault on the poor, which is a key focus of Desai's book and is completely ignored in The Bank's book, is hardly unique to South Africa – remember that Arundhati Roy's (1999) conservative estimation is

that in India 33 million people have been displaced by dams, often World Bank projects.

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