

Review

Thomas Blom Hansen (2013) *Melancholia of Freedom: social life in an Indian township in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press

Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed (eds) (2013) *Chatsworth: the making of a South African township*. Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press, and Princeton: Princeton University Press

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It has become a standard cliché in South Africa today that people respond to behaviour that they cannot otherwise justify or explain by announcing that they do things according to their ‘culture’. This is intended to silence any criticism: the idea that one’s culture might be confining or tedious is not part of the discourse. As under apartheid, escaping one’s culture is hardly a good thing today in this way of thinking. You rarely if ever hear white people now, however, use the word in this way; this assumption that there is something, whether liberating or immutable, about one’s ‘culture’ is not theirs. This notion of cultures as silos can be adapted to fit the Tutuesque idea of a rainbow nation stitched together but it also fits well into the way apartheid ideologues saw the world.

At the same time, it is striking that one social science discipline, anthropology, especially in its American garb, is also hooked on ‘culture’. The positive thing about anthropology is that it has become a home for those justifiably repelled by the economic and positivist trends that are so powerful in most other social sciences professionally. The negative thing is

that, amongst many anthropologists, reifying a ‘culture’ as the key explanatory factor becomes equally problematic. As Bourdieu wrote, people respond to life in terms of a *habitus* but *habitus* can be contradictory and complex and it does not prevent change, even drastic change, in a capitalist world where everything solid melts into air, to take Marx’s phrase.

The two books under review are both recent substantial studies of the former Indian township of Chatsworth, the first major new creation of the Group Areas Act in Durban and the most populous Indian group area in the country. Does Chatsworth have a distinct culture in these respects or perhaps a culture emblematic of a broader Indian culture in South Africa? This issue is handled differently in these two projects. The Desai and Vahed volume is open-ended and diverse. It is edited by Goolam Vahed, the noted Durban historian, and Ashwin Desai, sociologist-journalist who sometimes writes (enjoyably) as though he wants to hark back to the Damon Runyon school of hard-boiled sagas of American guys and dolls. This volume is a mix of human interest stories of hardship and triumph against the odds by plucky individuals constructed from rich sociological and historical material. Many of the interviewed live or lived in ‘the flats’ where life has always been hard; respectable success stories in the bungalows are also showcased in a different category of narratives about achievement. Some of the personal testimonies are less nostalgic, don’t fit the stereotypes and there is much that is revealing and three-dimensional.

Initially the early settlers of Chatsworth were often plucked with abandon by the local state from non-descript housing, typically on the urban periphery, where they could practice a complex kind of mixed livelihood in a large family setting. Individuals would be involved in fishing, market gardening, petty commerce and wage employment, pooled together in families that emerged out of the indentured immigrant population. The location of these homes was often convenient, and a series of temples, mosques and other institutions, solidly constructed, dotted these areas, which benefited from interaction with black and white Natalians. However, home conditions were often squalid and insanitary and many of the forcibly removed were not sad to say farewell to exploitative landlords, usually Indian as well. As one poor Zanzibari told Vahed:

‘I should have been... five or six. I remember when they just load [sic] us into trucks and they brought us to these big houses. They were empty but the lights were there. There was so much of [sic] excitement. We clicking [the light switch] off-on, toilet was there, flushing water, you

know, it was like, America, here I come. That was the experience I had'.
(87)

In the 1950s, moreover, the Indian population consisted largely of poor to very poor people with high levels of unemployment, severe conditions of deprivation prevailed and they were ruled by a government that heartily wished they could return to their Asiatic cultural home. This was not just apartheid; it was promoted also by the provincially dominant United Party and its predecessors.

At first barren and forbidding, the former Indian owned farmland in Chatsworth developed quite quickly into a homely environment with people of varying class status, tenants in flats and homeowners, who recreated a rich range of institutions, reconstituted social networks and made a community to which inhabitants came to feel very attached. By 1990 Chatsworth was the site of the throbbing Bangladesh market, RK Khan Hospital, one of the major health facilities in Durban, the tourist-friendly Hare Krishna temple, a profusion of mosques and churches, Silverglen nature reserve and a large sports stadium although its business life remained very limited.

The contrast to the criminalised, drug-ridden wasteland of the Cape Flats, despite some of Desai's tales, is remarkable and is actually what needs explanation. Some of it is here although contributors to the collection largely feel obliged to reiterate the sad narrative of Group Areas too uncritically. In reality, after 1960 the National Party abandoned this policy of would-be Indian cleansing and worked to create a segregated system whereby Indians could become junior partners in South Africa with educational and professional opportunities opening up that fitted a period of boom conditions and gave them a stake in apartheid of a little influence but no power.

Living standards improved dramatically and the gap between African and Indian, formerly slight, widened greatly although certainly there remained a stratum of poor Indians. The many life stories feature the once prevalent availability of industrial employment for men which mopped up most of the unemployment. Of course, the most ambitious and highly-educated bitterly resented the stark racial barriers and they had a political vocabulary to express it but they could themselves make a materially reasonable, if hemmed-in, life under these conditions. This in turn engendered a kind of social security that created a grudging hegemony. The racial restrictions mattered less tangibly to the majority; by contrast, class prejudices within Chatsworth are illustrated in profusion in the collection.

Highlights of Vahed and Desai are the many stories of Chatsworth where urban legends are given elucidation and attention. We learn about the pensioners' attempt to get Checkers to restore pensioners' day discounts. When they failed, the Bangladesh Market was created. We hear the story of the train boycott which led after a long hiatus to the restoration of more convenient and practical bus service as a result of a court decision. The terrible Throb nightclub (actually daytime club) disaster is discussed, an incident where rival businessmen caused a panic that killed a number of Chatsworth teenagers. A chapter is devoted to the famous SBV R31 million heist, the biggest ever in South Africa, made possible by a pioneering use of cellphones on the part of some renegade Indian policemen, which was a perverse source of pride to Chatsworth residents just as were for a while the Manning Rangers football team with whom the current national coach first made his name. This is a volume sometimes expressing bland pieties, notably about sport and religion, but its wonderful photographs and its ability to breathe contradiction makes it a welcome source that should be valued for a long time to come by social historians and other social scientists. It has a rather problematic acceptance of the rose-coloured ideal of community but the many interesting loose ends and the lack of theoretical ambition make this a lesser sin.

Thomas Hansen's book is quite different while covering much of the same material in a coherent monograph. It provides also a plausible and rather affectionate look at various aspects of Chatsworth life. However, this American-based anthropologist, grasping in many directions for some kind of theoretical penumbra, is all too inclined to drop the contradictions and indices of change for a kind of essentialist view of culture. His core subject is the *charou*, a well-honed Durban term for the quintessential unpretentious local Indian, and the *charou* universe (287) which always seeks, but fails to find, self-sufficiency and completion. The word is used in the Desai and Vahed collection once or twice but for Hansen it is everything.

Both books largely avoid figures like the plague but there are two that might be mentioned here. The first is the one (or, better put, set of figures) that shows that economic mobility has continued unabated among Indian South Africans since 1990; they have been far more statistically successful than Africans or Coloureds taken as a whole in seizing the opportunities of the new South Africa, and this often without the heavy hand of state patronage. They have moved far closer to whites in terms of education and income on average although it is true for them, as for the rest of the

population, that inequality has also widened and poverty has become worse for some, those who can no longer rely on factory employment in a changing urban economy. Others suffer from the weakening of family bonds, unequal as they were. There is clearly a submerged group with little access to mobility with which indeed the stories in Vahed and Desai are replete. It is however another thing to assume that the poor and desperate are the large majority. Indeed Desai/Vahed highlight many stories of mobility and life amongst the lower middle class especially despite tales of drug addiction and true grit. In reality Hansen's affluent and outsider *lahnees*, another prevalent local expression, are not a tiny bourgeoisie but a large proportion of the whole – and hardly outsiders. There are plenty of very successful business and professional people in South Africa of Telugu and Tamil origin who are not the descendants of passenger Indians.

The second figure to mark out is one related to changing religious practice. The latest figures show that only a minority of South Africans of Indian origin still claim to be Hindu, in good part because of the 'mass exodus' (in the words of one informant) to Christianity mainly in one or another Pentecostal form. Hansen's expertise in Indian religion and his knowledge of the 'saffron wave' of chauvinist Hindu nationalism in the sub-continent about which he has written impressively informs his narrative but may be in the end – and one suspects he is tempted to turn the *charou* into a variant would-be BJP supporter – a distorting element. In fact, in exploring connections, he writes himself that the ethnic visitor to India grasps little, rarely knowing the spoken languages and confines him or herself to 'sightseeing and shopping' (203). And the children don't like it much! Of course here Hansen inevitably shifts into the experience of the large South African middle class of Indian origin that can afford foreign holidays.

Hansen's essentialism is problematic because of where it leads him in various directions. He is hardly able to mention the word Muslim without adding that these (and indeed even Gujarati Hindus) were/are rich and *outside* the self-sustaining world of the *charous*. There is in fact a big Muslim minority in Chatsworth and there are plenty of poor Muslims to be found. Whites can only be referred to as a kind of evil enemy force. It is as though he cannot bring himself to see South African whites as role-models and guides into desirable globalised consumerism more than ever, with whom perhaps the Indians should or could identify. Indeed it is interesting that Desai/Vahed mention several interesting cases where white mentors were critical to Indian self-realisation even quite far back: the aid given to Denny

Veran as a classical musician by white symphony players, the influence of retired white footballers pre-1990 on nurturing Indian sporting talent, are both deeply appreciated and acknowledged. This is not that this is to deny the intensity of white hostility, a hostility that had little to do with Afrikaners or apartheid theory, in the old days. Yet with no evidence whatsoever, Hansen states more than once that their implacable racism is more or less unchanged, a judgement I would describe as bizarre. It is also striking and important that after 1990 Indian families worked hard to get their children into formerly white so-called Model C schools if they could afford it. Only amongst Muslims was there a preference for reconstituting the existing township racially defined schools into quality institutions for pay. The magnet of white-inflected affluence and consumerism is very strong.

To a remarkable extent, Hansen seems to see Christianisation as a kind of displaced Hinduism, a new way of fighting off the bad spirits and devils that plague folk Hindu belief. He rejects as inadequate the sensible but common garden variety view that Christianisation has to do with the weakening hold of folk Hinduism and the need to connect with wider patterns of economic and cultural forces. The more ethical and philosophical forms of the religion which were brought to South Africa mainly in the interwar years, found some traction but today they run into the same problem as the traditional Christian denominations. Karin Willemsse and Vahed's chapter on Pentecostalism in the collection is willing to accept the conventional view and is considerably more convincing.

Hansen's work falls prey to what Edward Said defined as Orientalism setting forever apart the 'other' in a culturally founded ontology (punctuated with some impenetrable theorising about the 'body', a new trope fashionable since Said wrote). Yet it can be argued, even on the basis of some of Hansen's own observations, that the most interesting things about *charou* culture are its febrile openness and creolised elements: the cars, the music, the new religious enthusiasms, the enthrallment of boys to organised sport.

I found the strongest analytical contribution here, stated as boldly as Hansen does, in the recognition that Chatsworth cannot possibly be understood as some kind of apartheid freak show that people hated. Indeed it served as a home to which most of its residents were happy to relate positively with time. In this sense both books undermine the conventional anti-apartheid view that wants to equate apartheid with fascism, racial theory, etc rather than a working out of powerful social trends that had beneficiaries in the population outside the dominant whites. Hansen insists

with some justification that uneducated Chatsworth residents never liked the Natal Indian Congress (those Muslims again) and that their favourite politician was the late Amichand Rajbansi. Rajbansi did not have majority support even within Chatsworth but he was an able patronage politician who was unique in making the transition from the pre-1994 House of Delegates to becoming the leader of a small frankly Indian party that made good deals with the ANC. Rajbansi was a bit of a buffoon and a scoundrel – he liked to play himself in popular satirical plays by local authors – but he was much like hundreds of ethnic brokers in US urban political life who negotiated the immigrant experience and nativist prejudices, albeit operating within the racialised state system of South Africa which gradually made more space for his operations. He realised early on that ANC pieties would get most of his clients very little beyond the fine words about ‘freedom’.

Hansen stresses the fear and hostility most Indians have felt for Africans in South Africa. One contributor to the Vahed/Desai collection, Vijay Hamlall, shows beautifully the extent to which Indian schoolboys in a disfavoured school have been concerned to make African students feel like outsiders and how rarely an interest in the opposite sex crosses racial lines. Hansen is right that the Vahed/Desai collection tends to sweep this too much under the carpet in favour of examples of cooperation and friendship but his sense of cultural impermeability makes it hard for him to conceptualise a changing Chatsworth where a mixed population seem to be finding some tentative ways to share space as they once did in pre-Group Areas times despite the suspicion and hostility on both sides. It is after all still Chatsworth; the neighbourhood didn’t die when Africans started to move in and invest the schools. Hansen’s title characteristically still calls Chatsworth an Indian township but this simply is only a historical and not an actual fact.

His book is rich enough to contain many examples that one can use against the drift of his main argument, in fact which could have been used in a different way. I cannot share Hansen’s view that looking at the Indians of Chatsworth must be seen in terms of some kind of melancholy as his peculiar title suggests. Are they upset by drugs, social upheaval and weakening family bonds? Yes. Do they regret the changes that the opening of society brings? Yes, often and sometimes forcibly. Is this different than thousands of working class communities with a Fordist pedigree in Europe, America and elsewhere as the global nature of capitalism changes fast? Not much. On the contrary, as even Hansen shows in his very enjoyable chapter on car culture, one of many businesses increasingly dominated by men of

Indian origin at various levels in Durban, and as so many of the collection contributions show, working class South Africans of Indian origin have been and continue to be people who are dynamic, adaptable, often exuberant and in your face, anything but melancholy. Culture is an extremely important construct but it needs to be measured against political economy and against historic change.