

## “Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution”, by James Ferguson [Book Review]

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## **Book Review**

**Review of “Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution”, by James Ferguson, Duke University Press, 2015, 264 pp.**

Development policy and discourse have long shied away from the idea of giving money directly to the poor. In his latest book, anthropologist James Ferguson argues that this reluctance is slowly giving way. He documents a veritable ‘cash transfer revolution’ taking place in the Global South, with countries such as South Africa, Brazil and Namibia in the vanguard. Drawing on a rich empirical and ethnographic literature on cash transfers and the livelihoods of the poor, with a focus on southern Africa, Ferguson delivers a thought-provoking analysis of the genesis, limitations and radical potential of these programmes. At its most original, the book is a meditation on dependence, distribution and the future of work and radical politics.

Cash transfer programmes in the South are not a catch-up version of the Northern welfare state, Ferguson emphasises. They are the product of specific regional histories and they constitute a pragmatic response to local conditions of impoverishment and persistent unemployment. Welfare states in the North were historically built on the model of full male employment, with benefits reserved only for those temporarily or permanently unable to participate in wage labour. Benefits were largely tied to contributions a person makes over the course of their working life. In contrast, cash transfer programmes in the Global South are non-contributory and extend benefits to large swaths of the population on the basis of a single selection criterion – age or disability. For instance, over a third of the population of South Africa receives some type of state grant (child grant, old-age pension, disability grant). Amid persistently high and long-lasting unemployment, benefits are allocated on grounds divorced from any reference to wage labour or employment.

Their innovativeness notwithstanding, cash transfers in southern Africa and elsewhere still carry remnants of the productivist rationale underpinning Northern welfare states. Able-bodied young men are excluded from the distribution of benefits on the assumption that they should be able to find paid work. In this respect, cash transfer programmes are as yet not attuned to a reality where there is a permanent scarcity of jobs and little demand for the low-skilled labour of the poor.

A number of more radical initiatives have recognised and proposed to remedy the above limitation by advocating for the introduction of a universal basic income grant (BIG). The most sustained of these have been in Namibia and South Africa, although neither has so far been successful. For Ferguson, BIG projects herald new ways of thinking that could finally decouple our ideas of distribution and social recognition from ‘issues of labour and labour supply’ (Ferguson, 2015: 29). This would be a promising development, given the ever

growing job deficit worldwide and the ineffectiveness of production- and work-based distribution of resources in meeting people's needs.

Ferguson calls for a politics of distribution, where each person would receive a share of the collective wealth by virtue of being a rightful owner of the common heritage, and not by having participated in production. The idea of the share goes beyond abstract individual rights and is grounded in the common sense understanding and claim-making of impoverished people in southern Africa, as well as in some non-Marxist sources of socialist thought that Ferguson explores. At the moment, cash transfer programmes still do not fully approximate this ideal, but Ferguson seems convinced that important strides have been made. To criticism arguing that cash transfers can only palliate but cannot change the status quo, he counterposes ethnographic evidence of how small amounts of money go a long way in helping people avoid abject poverty and become more, rather than less, self-reliant. He suggests that a small degree of income security could actually empower people to become more politically active and to seek new ways to articulate their demands.

Perhaps the most insightful part of the book is Ferguson's discussion of the question of dependence. A key point he makes at the beginning is that the long-standing reluctance to give money to the poor, and attendant fears of welfare-induced 'dependence', stem from the privileging in Western political imaginary of production as the main source of livelihood for the majority of people in society. Yet, in actuality, most people, even in highly industrialised societies like the US, survive by way of direct or mediated distribution of resources away from those actually engaged in production. To a much larger degree than in the North, distribution is especially key to life in the Global South.

Ferguson demonstrates that in southern Africa, dependence and distribution form part and parcel of the poor's day-to-day experience. The ability to make claims of dependence on others increases one's chances of survival. Seeking relations of dependence is thus a fully rational strategy on the part of the poor. Ultimately though, they might prefer to be equally provided for by a state through some form of guaranteed income rather than subsist on highly uneven networks of distribution, as at present. However, Ferguson points out, for ideas like the basic income grant to take hold, we will need to find other sources of recognition, self-worth and personhood that depart from the glorification of production and 'independence', and do not hinge on the work that we do.

With an ethnographer's attentiveness to empirical realities, Ferguson lends timely treatment to a phenomenon that has been noticed and studied by many in recent years, but never before in such a comprehensive and analytical fashion. Ferguson does not offer guidelines for the practical realisation of the radical possibilities he suggests, and he might well be mistaken about the meaning of the cash transfer revolution. His point, however, is that social scientists need to study actual developments rather than keep recycling well-known critical narratives. When purportedly neoliberal states routinely hand out money to an ever-increasing number of citizens, the time has come for social science to revise its theoretical labels. *Give a Man a Fish* makes a valuable step in that direction.

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