

# GIVE A MAN A FISH

## Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution

*James Ferguson*

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«Give a Man a Fish» is the latest, cunningly entitled book by James Ferguson. In this work, his long-standing interest in development and governance has shifted to conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs in southern Africa. These state-administered cash transfers, which usually entail «nominal» conditions such as school attendance for children, have proven to alleviate poverty and are spreading throughout the region.

The title attempts to turn on its head a long-held development wisdom epitomised by a «Chinese proverb» that invites teaching a man to fish instead of giving him a fish. «Give a Man a Fish» is also Ferguson's response to what he sees as «increasingly empty [...] politics of «opposing neo-liberalism»» (p.26) that lead to a theoretical and political dead-end. Thus, his main theoretical contribution is intertwined with a political contribution: Ferguson outlines the emergence of a «new politics of distribution» that is changing economic moralities and potentially engendering a post-neoliberal world. To support this vision, Ferguson, through historical and ethnographic detail, unveils a «productionist» bias that has haunted not only politics but also critical thought.

Although each of the book's chapters can be read as a stand-alone piece (some of which have been published previously as journal articles), in this review I shall focus on the construction of Ferguson's overarching argument. In order to lay the ground for a new politics of distribution, Ferguson shows how CCTs differ from northern welfare states and how the CCTs merely go half-way in proposing a solution to the ills of neoliberalism. He then argues that the empowerment of CCTs as a transformative tool requires a revalorising of distribution as something that is not secondary to production. Finally, he discusses some practical problems that such transformative distribution schemes – something that he proposes to imagine as a «rightful share» – must address.

Ferguson argues that CCTs have little to do with northern welfare states because the two are guided by different moralities. The social grammar of the welfare state emerged in the 19th century. It saw personal vice through Durkheimian «social fact» being transformed into a «social problem» dislocating the cause of a problem to the society at large. Modalities for dealing with social problems were built around the wage-labourer and his nuclear family. Contrarily, in colonial Africa, a moralising, personalised understanding of poverty prevailed, and a far-reaching welfare state never developed. Social security was seen to be provided «naturally» by the rural «homeland» and welfare programs were, therefore, considered simultaneously expensive and unnecessary. Curiously, lately, at a time of increased unemployment, in southern Africa, CCTs have increased in volume and extended in scale. Although CCTs to a limited extent are modelled around wage-labour – they are not extended to able-bodied men (that are supposed to be working) – they nonetheless do not signify a «catch up» with the northern welfare states. CCTs are not conceived as a safety net for temporary unemployment and the southern African social morality has remained distinct from the 19th century European one.

Ferguson contends that, in southern Africa, sociality is configured around «distributed livelihoods». These livelihoods are not made primarily through the market or wage labour but rely on multiple sources of provision, from love relationships to migration. To make a claim for distributed livelihoods as equally important and not secondary to wage-labour, Ferguson pursues a double displacement of the idea of «dependency», one directed at liberal and the other at critical thought. First, he reminds us that dependency has not always been understood the same way. In pre-industrial Europe, it was wage-labour that was described as dependency, i.e. being dependent for work on somebody else. Then he attempts to

shatter critical thought's «productionist» bias for a well-functioning society. He emphasises that historically African political power was built around the ability to attract followers. In such a worldview, goods become mere means for building power and dependence becomes an activity or «distributive labour». Conceiving dependence as labour requires severing its usual association with production processes. Such a conception permits seeing a common thread in a wide variety of informal activity pursued by the urban poor, and it demonstrates that, instead of leading to passivity, distribution can create new social and economic activity.

Nonetheless, money transfers are not winning general support. CCTs are neither extended to able-bodied men, nor do people widely endorse the idea of a basic income grant (BIG). Ferguson argues that this is due to CCTs failing to provide a frame for social membership and personhood. While in southern Africa much attention has been paid to «race membership», «work membership» has remained neglected. Work membership marks a continuity across pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. Instead of substituting personalistic, quasi-kinship relationships, wage-labour inherited them, thus, becoming the new frame for dependence and membership. For Ferguson, as long as CCTs and BIG propositions fail to provide an alternative political recognition to work membership, the transformative potential of the «new politics of distribution» will remain limited.

Ferguson sees a possibility to politicise CCTs by cross-fertilising them with another currently present demand in southern Africa, i.e., distribution claims over non-monetary resources, such as land and minerals. If CCTs have failed to overcome their apolitical, gift-like aura, distribution claims have come short in proposing a practical solution. As a response to this double-problem, Ferguson proposes the idea of a «rightful share». As a concept, «share» is different from a market-based solution or charity in that it constitutes claim-making that is not linked to labour or need. Ferguson remarks that thinking along the lines of «rightful share» is empirically emerging in diverse fields: from humanitarianism and philanthropic giving to natural resources and climate change. What seems to be unifying all these cases in claiming «rightful share» is that the stakes in question do not depend solely on individual action. Ferguson gives an example from mineral mining where produced value is out of proportion to invested individual effort.

What would such a «rightful share» look like in practice? Ferguson's answer is rent or some sort of BIG. For him «nationalisation» remains too vague an answer, since it does not tell us much about how distribution would take place. In order to

argue for a monetised distribution scheme, Ferguson shows that markets do not equal capitalism and reminds us that money has become central for living dependence as «distributive labour». For financing such a scheme, Ferguson points to a diversity of potential internationally sourced tools – from a new international currency to a levy on mineral extraction or currency exchange.

For Ferguson, a trickier question concerns the political community and governance of the «rightful share». Usually, governance is imagined around nation-states, but that implies exclusion, a demarcation of outsiders. Ferguson estimates that contrary to emancipatory ideals, at present a project beyond nation-state remains unrealistic. Thus, he urges us to think of other possibilities. One such possibility could be mere «presence», i.e., belonging not linked to birth right. Technically, this could be achieved with ATMs that work with an iris and a fingerprint scan. Yet, as mentioned above, the question remains, how to move beyond mere technical recognition to social membership providing a basis for personhood. Again, Ferguson suggests that southern African history of «incorporated subject», political power based on attracting followers instead of goods, provides an important axis of reflection for conceiving new systems of membership, inclusion and obligation.

In conclusion, one can praise Ferguson not only for his attempt to make his research on southern African CCTs socially and politically relevant, but also as an anthropological exercise. Creative displacements of familiar terms stretch our imagination; re-organising the interdependence of political and economic spheres in novel ways clears the way for a new politics of distribution. Ferguson invites us to imagine wage-labour as dependence and (another) mode of distribution, CCTs as shares (and not distribution), and dependence as activity or «distributive labour». This underlines that post-colonial, modern states are holistic social institutions. It also permits imagining a social contract where questions of social equality play a more prominent role.