ON THE NEW POLITICS OF DISTRIBUTION

A Conversation with James Ferguson

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The Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Bern inaugurated its new lecture series *Anthropology Talks* in September 2015. The first guest was James Ferguson, professor at the Department of Anthropology at Stanford University. The lectures and workshops focused on the questions of poverty and (re)distribution that Ferguson, a scholar with a pronounced political commitment, deals with in his new book *Give a Man a Fish* (2015a). Ferguson's thinking involves, within a context of widespread unemployment, a creative tension between ethnographic curiosity and political concerns about poverty reduction. Through projects that «just give money to the poor» (2015a: 2), his work examines what such interventions do in people's everyday lives, and how they might direct us towards a new politics of distribution, or «proletarian politics today,» as the main lecture's title suggested (Ferguson 2015b).

Instead of large-scale, top-down, anti-poverty development schemes that often miss the real needs of the target population, the idea of cash transfers is to hand out small amounts of money unconditionally to the poor. In *Give a Man a Fish*, Ferguson illustrates how these social welfare programs have been on the rise in recent years in southern Africa. These programs, Ferguson argues, undermine the dominant discourses around neoliberalism that either criticise or defend the dismantling of the welfare state. These discourses have diverted attention away from a new kind of welfare state emerging in the global South, and distracted us from understanding the new rationalities of direct cash transfers. These new forms of social assistance differ in important ways from the state paternalism of the past – enacted through development projects – whose failure in reducing poverty Ferguson has analysed in his well-known book *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1990).

Based on anthropological research examining these new welfare programs, *Give a Man a Fish* elaborates on the effects of cash grants on the lives of the people who receive them. Giving people the means to solve their problems in a way they understand, cash grants have proven efficient in contributing to poverty reduction. In South Africa, as Ferguson details, almost half of all households receive cash grants for the pension and childcare. In a situation of mass unemployment and economic decline, cash grants are often the only means available in order to survive, maintain social relations, and fully participate in interdependent «distributed livelihoods» (2015a: Chapter 3). In poor communities these grants are further distributed among relatives and other members, and people's income can subsequently depend less on their ability to find employment than on their ability to access these payments.

Ferguson argues that pension and childcare grants in South Africa introduce a novel understanding of social payments. Welfare programs in the global North have been anchored in an ideology of the *fully employed* (male) breadwinner, and based primarily on people's employment histories and previous contributions to unemployment assurance schemes. Social assistance then provides a kind of a safety net to the breadwinner and his dependents in situations where he, due to death, accident, or disability, can no longer work. From this perspective, full employment is the norm, and social assistance

addresses the exception. However, in times of mass unemployment the norm has become the exception. Cash grants address this reversed situation in South Africa, providing people with payments according to non-contributory and employment-independent criteria; such as age and the number of children to be cared for. Although many people – most notably unemployed young men – are still excluded from cash transfers, the programs have prepared the ground for discussions on more inclusive and radical programs; such as the provision of a Basic Income Grant to all citizens and non-citizens (irrespective of their age and whether they care for children or not).

With the notion of dependence as a social relationship that entails a sharing of everything with everyone, Ferguson argues that the direct transfer of cash grants constitutes a new politics of distribution. This entails a relationship of dependence that ensures people «a rightful share» in the wealth of the state, rather than having to fall back on the safety net. However, it remains an empirical question whether these welfare programs in southern Africa will trigger new kinds of claim-making and political mobilisation. Ferguson also contends that poverty as a question of distribution calls for a real commitment from anthropology to the new politics of distribution, not as «a set of normative certainties that one brings to bear on an issue,» but, as «a process of discovery and invention» (2015a: 33).

In the following conversation, conducted during Anthropology Talks 2015, Ferguson engages with some of the key ideas guiding his thinking on the new politics of distribution.

Anthropology Talks (AT): Your book The Anti-Politics Machine*, originally published in 1990, is one of the key texts in the anthropology of development. It analyses the effects, and failures, of development projects. How does that work relate to your recent book examining direct cash transfers,* Give a Man a Fish*?*

James Ferguson (JF): Well, in both cases I was motivated by a certain curiosity about what was going on. I became aware of an unproductive way of posing the questions that was getting in the way of really understanding what was happening. I wrote *The Anti-Politics Machine* a long time ago and a lot has changed in the way I think, but one of the reasons I was curious about development projects is because I had a set of political commitments. That meant it was important to understand things like local poverty and ways in which it might be overcome. So, normative motivations were there from the start.

In Lesotho, I was overwhelmed by the amount of development interventions that were going on. I totalled up the money that was spent on development projects and divided it by the number of people in the country. It turned out that it was actually quite a bit of money. And if you could hand the money to the people directly it would have had a huge impact, whereas these projects were not having much of an impact at all. At that time, it was just a thought experiment to consider how little impact these projects were producing for the amount of money they were spending. In a certain way, it anticipated what I am working on today.

Regarding cash transfers, it is now a perfectly accepted argument in the development world that giving money directly to the people is likely to produce better development outcomes than a lot of structured interventions; based on the idea that recipients can decide what social transformations need to take place and make them happen.

In this context, southern Africa is a particularly interesting and important area; social grants have come to be such an important part in people's livelihoods. But I do not want to reduce the idea of a politics of distribution to a question of cash transfer and social policy. I would like to put this form of direct distribution from states alongside a whole range of other ways in which people are making distributive claims, and, I am particularly interested in the kinds of distributive claims that are not based on labour on the one hand, or misfortune on the other. Those are older and better understood. These newer forms of direct distribution are where the interesting new research is likely to come.

AT: To a large extent, development projects are still happening in the way you described in The Anti-Politics Machine *twenty-five years ago: development depoliticises poverty and the unequal distribution of resources, turning political questions into technical issues. This undermines the possibility of political challenges to inequality. Now, discussing direct cash transfers to poor people in southern Africa, you argue that these programs not only eliminate the worst forms of poverty, but that they furthermore create new possibilities for political mobilisation and political challenges to the unequal distribution of resources. But why do these new cash transfer programs necessarily operate as new politics of distribution, and not as another anti-politics machine?*

JF: I do not think there is any guarantee that they will. There is nothing essential in the nature of these projects. In the end it is an empirical question and nothing you can deduce theoretically. The anti-political effects of development interventions were an empirical finding for me. I was just observing what is going on. Turning everything into a problem of development

took a lot of things out of the domain of politics. There is the same danger with cash transfers, I agree on this point. At the same time, I think there is at least some evidence for the idea that giving people directly small amounts of money activates them politically, and gives them the idea that maybe there is something one ought to expect the state to do for you. People who may not have expected so much from states before are suddenly put into the position where they have legitimate claims, and these claims are worth something to them. If you look at the situation, which is called service delivery in South Africa, it does not look to me as if the delivery of basic services to the mass population has demobilised the population in any way. On the contrary, there are service protests every day, every week, all across South Africa, precisely because people have high expectations. They expect that if their sanitation is not working, someone should do something about that. I am trying to hold open the full range of possibilities and suggest that rather than deciding we already know that service delivery is anti-political or demobilising, we should treat it as an open question and try to find out because there is actually a range of possibilities here.

AT: Regarding these expectations, one could argue in a very similar way with respect to development interventions. But why did these projects not raise such expectations, for example in Lesotho where you conducted research over a long period of time? When projects fail and their promises are not kept, it could be a reason for political mobilisation as well.

JF: Indeed. In some context, it probably could have this effect. But in order to produce that effect, people would have to feel that they have some prospect of getting something valuable out of it. This is not how people experienced these development projects in Lesotho. These were not projects that came in and gave people something, and then left them wondering why they are not getting more. These were projects that came in and lectured people, and made arguments to them that did not make sense to them. Or they tried to do things that they were fiercely opposed to, like reducing the number of cattle that they kept. These kinds of projects are part of a long history of being harassed by the state. And in many parts of the world, development projects have been perceived as part of that long history of being harassed by the state.

AT: One important notion in your recent work is the term dependence. For instance, in the context of distributed livelihoods you are reflecting on dependencies between people. You are also talking about dependence on the state, and you mention a notion of dependence that implies a rightful share in the nation's wealth. There are at least two different notions of dependence: on the one hand interdependence between people, and on the other hand dependence on the state. The first one is a personal dependence, it refers to a personal relationship between individuals. The second one is a rather impersonal relation between citizens and the state. How does this interdependence between individuals relate to citizens' dependence on the state?

JF: First of all, I think one should not make a too sharp distinction between person and state. The latter can easily be envisaged as a type of person. I talked about this situation in the old Roman proletariat (see Ferguson 2015b). Direct distribution from the state was understood as a gift of the emperor. This established a kind of personal relation and you were in fact a client of the emperor in an important way. Modern politics are not entirely different. The role of the head of state in many African countries is a very personal one. People think of the head of state as a kind of father. Hylton White has written about this beautifully, how people are talking about Jacob Zuma in South Africa (see White 2012). So many men, especially Zulu men, consider themselves not just to be followers of Jacob Zuma, but to have an affective relation with him of love and care. So first of all, the state is a complicated thing.

The other thing is that there are not just two cases here. You distinguish personal relations of dependence and institutional relations with the state: one of the things I point out is that the very image of the independent man, that stalks these discussions, is someone who has a job and works for wages. But this person is extremely dependent on the company for which he works. And if you are working for a mine and then the mine closes down, you realise how dependent you were. This is a kind of dependence too. We live in a world of dependencies. They can be more or less one-sided. They can be more or less equal or unequal. But it is the fabric of social life to be dependent on others. This is why I try to contextualise the whole discussion: first, it is important to understand how people live, and more precisely, how poor people live in southern Africa. They live via dependencies, right. I am looking at distributed livelihoods. And when we understand how people are actually living in a world that is saturated with dependencies, then the question is: what does having a little bit of money in your pocket do to you in that world? It does not turn you into a passive leach that sits on the couch waiting for the next cheque. It gives you money to afford taxi fares to go across the town and perform an important task for your little business. Or it allows you to go to a funeral and make the appropriate contribution. In important ways, it enables you to play a more active role in this world of dependencies.

AT: This means the social fabric of dependencies is the indispensable ground for making distributive claims, or claiming a rightful share. How do you describe the relation between the right to a share and the need for dependence, or more generally, of belonging?

JF: There are many ways of thinking about that. I am talking about one of those ways, which is the image of the citizen as an owner. But this needs to be put alongside other figurations of rightful shares that depend on other kinds of images of what it is that makes it rightful. One is the image of the nation as a family. The idea that if the nation is really a family, then people who are in need are like family members in need, and they must be cared for because they are depending on you. The state is like a parent and the parent-child relation is what warrants the payment.

In the citizen owner model, dependence figures much less because you figure as someone who has a share because it is your property. Therefore, you are entitled to it by right. I do not think that one of these models exists and the others do not. They are co-present and they are mixed up with each other in complicated ways. People evoke them in situational ways in different contexts.

A further model is Christianity as a kind of paradigm for sharing, and that is also very strongly embedded in southern Africa. In other parts of the world you will find other ways of thinking about rightness and dependence and sociality. Therefore, I prefer to talk about rightfulness rather than rights. Rightfulness evokes this whole moral cosmological kind of cultural way of thinking about what is right, and I think you have to dive right into that if you are going to understand what are the compelling kinds of arguments that can be made in favour of things like direct distribution. That is why I think it is such a rich area for anthropological research.

AT: Although you consider dependence as the indispensable interdependence between people for the claims on a rightful share of each other's product, you also emphasise that the rightful share is not based on a relation of exchange. In our understanding, however, dependence as interdependence implies some sort of exchange, and at least a generalised form of reciprocity. How is dependence in your understanding related to reciprocity and exchange?

JF: Dependence does not imply reciprocity, but mutuality. We have to think about mutuality in ways that are not this-for-that transactions like exchanges. This is why I talk about this economic anthropology literature of sharing. The foragers from the forest come into the village; they bring the meat from the forest. The agriculturalists are growing agricultural crops (see Grinker 1994). The sit down and the agriculturalists get some meat and the forest dwellers get some grains. Then they go their separate ways. We tend to look at this and believe they are exchanging, therefore it is bargain. But the ethnography tells a different story. It says each agriyculturalist household is associated with a forager family. They are members of the same house. When they come together, they are putting together all the things that belong to the house and then they are dividing them up. They are dividing up a common whole, a whole to which all have rights. There is a deep mutuality in this that says: «We all are in this together. It is not your meat, it is our meat because you are one of us and when I hunt, the hunted will be our meat, not my meat.» But it is not understood as gift giving.

Why do we assimilate everything that is not a market exchange to this paradigm of the gift? There are all sorts of processes of allocation, of dividing things up, that do not depend on this figure of the gift. This is especially important in things like social policies, because the obligation to return a gift makes the receipt of social payment into a kind of insult sometimes. I am suggesting there are other framings, which would turn that same payment into something that had a very different social significance. So there is a pragmatic argument about why this is a helpful move in the sphere of social policies.

And there is a wider analytical dissatisfaction with the way anthropologists are so quick to suppose that everything that is outside of the market is a gift, rather than to draw on our own disciplinary history to have a more expansive set of analytical tools for thinking about all the ways in which you can arrange things in a non-market way, without reducing all that to the one figure of the gift. For this reason, I like the word mutuality rather than reciprocity.

AT: When we look at the different notions of rightful share, it is always connected somehow to membership, citizenship, or some other form of belonging. In contrast, wage-labour based claims of a rightful share are not based on membership, but on one's active contribution to the nation's wealth, at least conceptually. It tends to be more open and inclusive. Therefore, emphasizing the importance of membership and belonging for making distributive claims bears the danger of bringing essentialising arguments about membership and belonging back into the political discussion?

JF: This is true. But it is very important to realise that this is just as true of wage labour-based distribution as it is of social payment. We sometimes act as if this is a problem unique to the world of social assistance, where labour is in surplus. However, where jobs are hard to get, they become treated exactly as the sort of property-like possession of the members of a nation state that social payments do. In fact, the fiercest xenophobic violence in South Africa in recent years has been driven by a sentiment that these foreigners are taking the jobs. That is what people say in the streets. So the problems of nation-based exclusion are general to the problem of distribution. They are not specific to direct distribution in a form of social payments. This is the first thing.

The second thing is, nation state membership is not the only basis on which one can construct people who are entitled to receive shares. In South Africa, I was surprised to find that many of the people I talked to in the Ministry of Social Development said that they would just as soon not worry about whether people were citizens, because that is actually very difficult to decide. And for pragmatic reasons, all welfare states in fact deliver services to noncitizens of one kind or another. It is not because they have a legal right to them. Rather it is because of the problem of governance. They are here and something has to be done. People who have no legal rights will still send their children to school because nobody wants their children to be out on the streets. People will receive certain sorts of medical interventions because nobody wants epidemics to sweep through the population.

There is a whole bunch of pragmatic arrangements that are being worked out dealing with the accommodation of what some people have called denizens rather than citizens. This is a really important contemporary area of politics. Maybe we have gotten too hung up on this idea of citizenship. Maybe the more important thing is what I have called presence, and we need to elaborate what that would mean. What does it mean to be here? What does it mean to have a kind of social recognition that is based on something like presence? I use the word presence because it comes out of the stuff on demand sharing. When you bring back the meat: Who gets meat? It is whoever is there. If you are not there, you do not get it. If you are there, you have an absolute claim to it. This kind of a notion of presence scaled up to the level of nation state: What would that look like? That is something I am trying to think about now.

AT: Nonetheless, if we look at the empirical situation, would you actually claim that the Ministry of Social Affairs, for example in South Africa, is not in danger of contributing to a kind of nationalisation of benefits?

JF: Most of the poorest people are not South African citizens. Most of the poorest people are Mozambicans or Zimbabweans. Given what you are trying to accomplish if you are doing social policy, it is really quite counter-intuitive to ignore people who are at the heart of the problem, to say, the largest part of the poorest segment of the population. It is really a different way of conceiving the society. Is the society composed of those people who hold South African citizenship? And all the other people are somehow not part of the society? Or is the society that set of people who are all here, and are sharing a social space and interacting with each other? In this case the legalities of who has a citizenship and who does not might be secondary.

AT: Gender is another important category throughout your recent work. You start your book with a reflection on feminist contributions to the debate of distributed livelihoods. Concerning the empirical examples you discuss in Give a Man a Fish*, and now in our conversation, men are virtually absent in processes of distributed livelihoods. It seems that masculinity undergoes a fundamental transformation with this new politics of distribution. This raises the question of: what does it do to young men, for example, to those who were expected in former times to be responsible for the household's well-being?*

JF: This is a complicated question. It is absolutely the case that the cash transfer programs that are sweeping the world are very much focused on the mother-child kind of figure. The assistance comes to families. In Brazil, it is families that are targeted. In South Africa, it is people who are caring for children who are targeted. But strikingly, there is almost no provision for working-age men unless they are disabled. This is an unfinished business. It is a huge challenge for the whole social protection project. And we are only beginning to really think it through. For a long time, people have just fallen into the old habit of supposing that men are not the problem, because after all, men are workers; which has not been the case for a long time in southern Africa. But the programs are still designed as if that was still the world into which they were inserted. The consequences have to be studied empirically. But we know that there are enormous numbers of working-age men who find their ambitions – to become the kind of matured adult men that their father and grandfathers were –frustrated. In Lesotho, it was always about working abroad. So young men would go and they would work abroad, mostly in the mines. They would do that for a certain amount of years. They would build up some cattle. They would be able to get married. They would be able to build up their homestead having children who were affiliated to their lineages. They would come back and retire in the village. There was a whole idea of life course that involved a process of maturation, acquiring economic power, marrying, and creating a patrilineage, and so on. And all of that has really hit a brick wall.

And so you have got large numbers of people who are considered as the youth. Some of the youth are not that young. But in a sense youth is the right term because they have not been able to achieve what has conventionally been thought of as a kind of social maturation. This leaves them in a very insecure and precarious place. This crisis of masculinity is not just in the region. It is in a lot of places around the world. In the United States, we have got all these people who cannot move out of their parents' houses. You finish your education, then you go out and get a job, and then you start your own house, you move into your apartment or into your own house; this whole thing no longer exists.

This has been frustrating for a lot of people. A lot of this has to be rethought, and one of the reasons I have switched to basic income is because that is one of the places where people are willing to set aside some of these old assumptions, and think in a more far-reaching way about what it means to live in a world where being an able-bodied man, and being a wage labourer, do not necessarily go together.

AT: We have been talking about distributive politics. And we have been talking about an anthropological account of questions of redistribution. To bring these two strands together in a last question: how do you understand anthropology's contribution to political discussions on social inequalities and questions of redistribution, for example to the actual discussions on basic income grants?

JF: I find basic income grants enormously interesting. It is something that really opens up a set of conceptual and political issues that I find really fascinating. In many ways, it is also appealing as a political strategy. I think this comes out in the book. However, there is a risk of reducing this larger set of questions that I am interested in to the much narrower issue of basic income grants. I am not at all sure that basic income is going to take off anywhere in the world. We are all talking about it a lot right now, but this may change. In five to ten years, this may not be the thing people will be talking about anymore. One thing I am quite sure about is that people are going to be talking about the politics of distribution in one way or another. All these people who are not able to make distributional claims based on labour, they are not just going to curl up and die. They are going to find other ways of making claims. And those other ways of making claims have to be attended to in one way or another. It may be based on claims of citizen ownership, it may be based on claims of humanitarian obligation, it may be based on claims of Christian solidarity, it may be based on ideas of reparations, it may be based on the idea of ecological stewardship. There are all sorts of ways in which people will be able to make those kinds of claims. Some of them will be successful, some of them will not. There is no guarantee that a politics of distribution yields egalitarian distributive outcomes. To be clear, it is highly unlikely that it would, but the stakes are high. It matters whether or not people do get their distributive claims met, and to what extent, and it matters what kind of political language comes to be effective and which one does not. The strong claim I want to make analytically is that it is important and we need to study it. The strong claim I want to make politically is that we have to find a kind of politics that will be effective here. What I get impatient with, in a certain kind of left politics, is a refusal to give up the old conceptual apparatus which says: no, we must wait for the working class to organise. I think we have to achieve a conceptual and political openness and realise that half of the things have changed. We need to revise our thinking. And we need to learn new ways of thinking about what kind of politics is both analytically and politically adequate to the times.

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