

Neoliberalism's Strange Bedfellows and the Limits of Distribution

Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution. By James Ferguson. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

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In January 2016, the well-known Silicon Valley startup incubator Y Combinator issued a call for research on what it called “basic income”—that is, “giving people enough money to live on with no strings attached.” “50 years from now,” Y Combinator President Sam Altman (2016) wrote, “I think it will seem ridiculous that we used fear of not being able to eat as a way to motivate people.” This odd joining of venture capitalism and social assistance, technology entrepreneurialism and anti-work politics might be easy to dismiss: as disingenuous, ideological, simply misguided, ignorant of long traditions of thought and organizing from feminist wages-for-housework campaigns to autonomist refusals to work, Paul Lafargue’s *The Right to Be Lazy* (1883) to Kathi Weeks’ *The Problem with Work* (2011). In his new book, however, James Ferguson would have us pause. Against this familiar critical impulse—which he has elsewhere called a “politics of the anti-” (Ferguson 2010) and which he, of course, himself effectively deployed in interrogating the “anti-politics” of international development (Ferguson 1994)—Ferguson insists that we remain empirically and experimentally open to, and willing to be “surprised” by, “a world still full of invention” (32, 62). Y Combinator’s call certainly surprised me. But Ferguson’s book shows how it might be placed among myriad other experiments with

(re)distribution: strange bedfellows of the political economic formations—neoliberal, financial, late capitalist—for which we have elaborated our most powerful critical vocabularies.

In *Give a Man a Fish*, Ferguson shows how global narratives of neoliberalism ascendant have run up against state-led efforts across the global South to address poverty through direct, often-unconditional cash transfers—that is, to echo Y Combinator, by simply giving money to the poor. In these initiatives Ferguson identifies the germ of an emergent politics that makes distribution itself into a site of struggle, debate, intervention, and mobilization. In Ferguson’s account, this new politics of distribution has emerged most forcefully in southern Africa within a particular historical conjuncture: As persistent poverty and inequality sabotages the extension of nominal political and legal rights in places like post-Apartheid South Africa, and as mass unemployment undermines the promise of wage labor as a pathway to economic security and sociopolitical membership, state officials and development professionals have become newly receptive to government cash transfers as a poverty-alleviation strategy and controversial, even utopian proposals for universal basic income have surfaced.

Ferguson contrasts the incipient cash transfer consensus with a widespread “anti-distributionist sentiment” rooted in gendered (even misogynist) assumptions about work and welfare (24). These assumptions frame social assistance as appropriate for women, children, the elderly, and disabled—traditional “dependents”—but dangerous to the autonomy of male “breadwinners.” Hence the admonition against, the *disdain* for, giving a *man* a fish. The “productionist premise” that associates wage labor with heteronormative household provisioning is, Ferguson argues, at the center not only of the conventional Marxian privileging of work and workers, but also more

general Eurocentric models of “the social” as a source of collective, state-shepherded solidarity; of money and markets as socially corrosive forces; and of non-market distribution as engendering dependency and therefore politically enervating (36).

The interest in direct distribution disrupts these received frameworks. It also opens up the possibility of re-imagining and remaking the forms of distribution *per se*, to embed the allocation of material resources not in the exchange of labor for wages, nor in gift-giving or charity, but in forceful demands for a “proper or rightful share” to common or collective wealth (176). In support of this argument (laid out in chapters 1, 2, and 6), Ferguson marshals a heterogeneous archive of heterodox Left thought and practice—drawing especially on Peter Kropotkin’s arguments for distributive justice and a Namibian basic income grant campaign—alongside a variety of other discourses, from African socialism to Christian philanthropy, the resource nationalism of the South African populist Julius Malema to hunter-gatherers’ demand sharing.

The book’s ethnographic core (chapters 3, 4, and 5), meanwhile, describes how cash transfer programs intersect with enduring practices of distributional claims-making integral to people’s improvised livelihoods around the world: the everyday demands of family, friends, and neighbors; the payments that accompany funerals, sex work, or patron-client relations; state transfers like grants and pensions. Such practices are not simply symptoms of neoliberal precarity, nor can they be dismissed (as Marx himself did) as “living on the crumbs of society” (92). They are, Ferguson insists—echoing longstanding feminist efforts to publicize the gendered work of care and reproduction undergirding capitalist economies—a kind of “distributional

labor,” generative of what Julia Elyachar (2010) or AbdouMaliq Simone (2010) might call the social infrastructures through which distributive claims can be made and value circulate (97).

In this world, cash does not draw the poor into circuits of commodification, dissolving social bonds in a wash of egoistic calculation; the social is not a pure realm of moneyless solidarity, but an uneven fold of competition and cooperation, interest and obligation. In southern Africa in particular, cash-based distributional practices are central to social personhood, even when they reinforce unequal or hierarchical relationships of dependency. Southern Africans’ reliance on or even desire for such dependency may boggle liberal fantasies of autonomous subjectivity, but they are embedded in historically specific cultural repertoires, including the anthropologically famous “wealth-in-people” model. Dependency here is not simply unfreedom; rather, finding a way to make oneself dependent on others entails being able to make distributional demands of them. Dependency is both achieved and agentive. (Indeed, the independence offered by wage labor is but a disguise for a particular form of distributional dependence; other kinds of (seemingly illiberal) dependency afford other kinds of agency.) Thus, as Ferguson puts it, “the task is not to eliminate dependence but to construct desirable forms of it” (163).

Now, to be effective, new distributional demands must be accompanied by what I would call new distributional *technics* and *pragmatics*. There is room here for more research into the practical and material mechanisms of resource allocation in both communities and bureaucracies, as well as their cultural meanings. Ferguson gestures to the “technical methods of identifying, recognizing, and paying recipients of cash transfers,” from documentary forbearance to ATMs and (potentially alarmingly in the South African context) biometrics (83). But in his account, *the*

state may offer the most “realistic available mechanisms for achieving genuinely distributive outcomes” (199). *Give a Man a Fish* builds on new approaches to neoliberalism in anthropology that show how its political economic project, intellectual genealogy, and diverse technical and practical forms need not align in predictable ways; that internal unevenness and variation may open it up to manipulation, appropriation, and transformation. But in Ferguson’s book, we can also glimpse the beginnings of a parallel attempt to reclaim the state’s non-monolithic bureaucratic forms and administrative capabilities for radical political and theoretical ends—even if, or indeed because, “we do not yet know how it ends” (20).

At the same time, new distributional demands also require new frames of political and ethical reference to legitimate them—by, for instance, reconfiguring the frontiers of solidarity and boundaries of membership. Sensing the dangers of grounding the “moral credential[s]” of distribution in the exclusions of nationalist citizenship, Ferguson proposes instead the universalizing frame of “co-presence,” not as “political choice but simply the most elementary sort of social fact” (99, 215). I wonder, however, what such an ostensibly neutral distributional order might miss—if, by internalizing difference, it might sidestep the very politics that would bring it into being. Is not difference—and specifically the colonial and postcolonial injuries of racialized inequality—what is fundamentally at stake? It is telling, as Ferguson himself emphasizes, that some of the most powerful arguments for distribution—such as those in South Africa that center on the ownership of land and natural resources—are actually demands for *redistribution* oriented explicitly to the rectification of particular racialized wrongs: the historical accumulation and reproduction of white wealth through racialized dispossession and exploitation. *These* distributional demands are not simply calls for an expanded or revitalized

welfare state; they are calls for moral, political, and economic reckoning. Socioeconomic security and poverty alleviation are deeply worthy objectives. But if a politics of distribution is to address the inequities and injustices that animate its demands, then it must be not just (re)distributive, but reparative. Neither analytically nor politically are these the same.

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