

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

James Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5895-4 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-8223-5886-2 (paper)

“Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” It’s a proverb that has guided the thinking of mainstream Development institutions for many decades, even if its gender bias has been questioned. Rather than giving “handouts” to the poor, the priority has been building skills and capabilities that will allow them to become productive, wage-earning members of society. In this lively and provocative new book, James Ferguson proposes an alternative way of thinking about poverty and inequality. What if, instead, we focus on the politics of distribution?

This is not some abstract question plucked out the air. It emerges out of a set of material changes in southern Africa, where Ferguson has been conducting ethnographic research for three decades. The first will be familiar to most critical geographers. In the postwar years, both modernization theorists and structural Marxists anticipated that the economies of poor countries would undergo a transformation as agricultural labor migrated to cities to be absorbed by a growing industrial sector. Today, the idea of the “informal sector” as a temporary stopgap on this journey is no longer tenable. Even in countries that have experienced high GDP growth rates, the number of new formal sector jobs created remains pitifully low. Millions of people have been rendered surplus to the requirements of the global capitalism (see also Jeffrey and Young 2014; Li 2010).

If the problem of mass un/underemployment is now widely recognized, a second development is perhaps more surprising. Spending on social assistance in much of southern Africa has actually increased significantly over the last decade. But this is not

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

welfare as we knew it. A growing proportion of public expenditure is being funneled into a variety of non-contributory cash transfer programs that do not have strong conditionalities. These programs primarily target those who care for children, who have disabilities, or who qualify for a pension. But this is hardly an insignificant population. Indeed, 3.4% of South Africa's GDP is currently being redistributed through cash payments that are received by more than 16 million individuals, or 30% of the total population (p.5).

Why has this apparent revolution in social assistance failed to attract much attention from critical scholars? One argument offered by Ferguson is that the academic Left tends to know what it is "against" but not what it is "for" (see also Ferguson 2010). Since the 1980s, innumerable studies have denounced the dismantling of the Keynesian welfare state and the rise of market-mediated forms of poverty management. When cash transfer programs emerged in Central and South America in the late-1990s, recipients were required to first fulfill certain responsibilities, which meant that they were generally seen as working with the grain of neoliberalism (Peck and Theodore 2010; cf. Ballard 2013). Ferguson, however, follows scholars such as Stephen Collier (2011) in arguing that the presence of elements of neoliberalism should not be grounds for wholesale dismissal. If we just subscribe to a "politics of the anti-" (p.4), we risk missing the progressive potential of cash transfer schemes. He points out that Foucault himself argued that in order to challenge neoliberalism, the Left would have to develop its own "arts of government" (p.27). If we are interested in such a project, Ferguson suggests that cash transfers offer a rich site for experimentation and innovative thinking, not just more critique.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Rather than tracing a global policy network, the book is attentive to the specific regional history that has given rise to cash transfers in southern Africa. Whereas the mid 20th century saw the expansion of welfare programs in the West, such interventions were restricted to a privileged minority of formal sector workers in much of colonial Africa. For the rest of the population, social security was premised on the idea of a “traditional”, rural extended family supported by a male wage laborer living in the city (p.69). This model began to falter in the 1970s due to deindustrialization and the casualization of labor. However, the end of apartheid also meant that access to pensions and grants was dramatically expanded in the 1990s. It was from this conjunctural moment—wherein millions of black South Africans found themselves included politically but excluded economically—that cash transfers began to expand across the continent.

Ferguson goes on to examine the livelihoods of people in cities across southern Africa, noting that those who make a living in the informal sector are usually involved in various forms of “survivalist improvisation”. Crucially, he argues that these improvised livelihoods are not usually aimed at producing goods and services; rather, they are oriented toward capturing a piece of the wages earned by those who do receive a salary. The window washer, the panhandler, the pickpocket, and the rural mother visiting her family in the city are all examples of what Ferguson calls “distributive labor” (p.101). If we recognize the full significance of this labor in the regional economy, it becomes clear that livelihoods based on practices of distribution rather than production are already an established reality for the majority of southern Africans (p.116).

Could cash payments be a Trojan horse that will allow money and market logics to dominate the lives of the poor, destroying altruistic social bonds in the process? Ferguson argues that this critique stems from a romanticized reading of non-capitalist

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

economies. In reality, as Mauss' (1967) work demonstrated, forms of "gifting" are never free from conflict or expectations of reciprocity (see also Graeber 2011). Likewise, the presence of money in social relations does not prevent them from also being sites of caring, cooperation, and sharing (p.127). Mark Hunter's (2010) superb ethnography of AIDS and intimacy in contemporary South Africa shows how ideas of love are intricately interwoven with economic concerns. Read through this lens, Ferguson argues that cash transfers may actually "enable less malevolent sorts of dependence to take root and a circuit of reciprocities to unfold within which one-sided relations of dependence can become more egalitarian forms of interdependence" (p.138).

Ferguson also engages with liberal arguments that valorize individual agency and view cash transfers as creating new forms of dependency. He argues that economic restructuring has effectively "freed" many southern Africans from the wage labor system but this has hardly been an emancipatory experience. Indeed, to the discomfort of liberals, many of the poor actually seek out dependent, hierarchical relations with those who are better off. This is hardly surprising considering the alternative, and Ferguson argues that we could learn much from studying how poor people seek to negotiate social inequalities that, however reprehensible, are a reality of life. Cash transfers might not eliminate inequalities, he concedes, but they could promote more "asocial" forms of interdependency premised on a guaranteed income rather than the patronage of those who have money and power (p.156).

To be sure, Ferguson is aware that there are many existing and potential problems with cash transfer schemes. What makes this book so refreshing is his refusal to simply throw in the towel in the face of these limitations. The politics of cash transfers, he insists, are emergent and still up for grabs. Why should mineral wealth be seen as a

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

resource to be shared but not the wealth generated by financial transactions? Why frame programs in national terms rather than thinking of regional or global transfers of wealth? Why exclude working-age men on the outdated assumption that they can access waged labor while women care for the family? In Namibia, the campaign for a Basic Income Grant (BIG) is already raising many of these questions. Rather than seeing cash transfers as a substitute for wages, a reward for good behavior, or as charity, the BIG campaign understands them as a means of giving citizens—or returning to them (p.195)—their “rightful share” of the collective wealth. This is the kind of political movement that Ferguson believes can drive cash transfers in a more radical direction.

This is an extremely important book and one that will no doubt find a wide readership. It challenges conceptions of Africa that see the continent as either falling behind or catching up to the West. It pushes critical scholars to question their productionist bias and take seriously questions of distribution. Perhaps most importantly, it is *for* something, even if Ferguson’s optimism is tentative and provisional. Read alongside work on the living wage campaign in London (Wills 2011) and workers’ cooperatives in Buenos Aires (Chatterton 2005), it demonstrates that there are spaces where different economic relations are being imagined and enacted. Some might see these efforts as localized and, no doubt, compromised. However, as genealogies of economic globalization have shown, neoliberalism did not emerge as a set of cohesive, ideologically-pure policy prescriptions, but through a series of disparate experiments in market governance (Brenner et al. 2010). Could these new experiments in redistribution also coalesce into a wider, more radical movement for social justice? This book does not have all the answers but I think it certainly pushes the debate in the right direction.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

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Antipode

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