James Ferguson, *Give a man a fish, reflections on the new politics of distribution*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2015, ISBN 10 0822358867, ISBN 13 9780822358862 (pbk), 296 pp

James Ferguson’s most recent book concerns an emergent politics of distribution he suggests is taking place across much of the Global South. He argues that a fundamental shift has taken place, away from a productionist logic grounded in a labour-scarce economy, and that in the context of labour-surplus economies people have been ‘abruptly cut out of a distributive deal that used to include them’ (37). Ferguson grounds his analysis in the historical perspective of Southern Africa, where he has worked as an anthropologist on the politics of development for the past thirty years. He draws on radical social theory past and present to re-think ideas of distribution and substantiate his central idea of the ‘rightful share’.

The expansion of social welfare in the Global South forms the basis of this new politics of distribution. Most concretely, this is demonstrated by the widespread proliferation of cash transfers, first implemented in Latin America in the 1990s and now described by some as ‘21st century welfare’ (Lavinas 2013). In South Africa, over 30 per cent of the population receive non-contributory benefits and Ferguson argues that dominant narratives of neoliberalism and the decline of the welfare state have hidden the emergence of such welfare apparatuses.

Throughout the book, Ferguson carefully attends to criticism levelled against the emergence of cash transfers from across the political spectrum. Objection on the right to ‘giving’ money to the poor follows familiar narratives of laziness and dependency (xi). However, Ferguson notes that most objection comes from the left, at least in an academic context. Objections range from a general aversion to poor people receiving cash (120) and a ‘nostalgic workerism’ (157) to what he sees as a more legitimate argument, that there is nothing radical about cash transfers. They do not bring about any structural change and remain within the remit of capitalism, being at best ‘ameliorative’ and at worst ‘tokenistic’, ‘a cheap way of managing the most outrageous of capitalism’s depravations’ (139). Ferguson concedes that the current landscape of cash transfers is limited—in the amount of money they offer and by conditions attached (for example, that children attend school). Furthermore, they are limited by their conventionality, modelled as they often are on the idea of a primary wage earner with women as key beneficiaries.

The point of Ferguson’s book, however, is to reflect upon, hint at, suggest that ‘something more interesting might be going on’ (201). His notion of a new politics of distribution moves beyond cash transfers and he skilfully negotiates objections to address the ‘possibilities and dangers’ of what a broader picture of this might be (2).
In Chapters 2 to 5, Ferguson counters myths that have sustained social policy (the ‘great fantasies of familism’ [79]) and understandings of how poor people live their lives, before addressing how emergent kinds of social protection might articulate with the reality of those livelihoods he describes. In Chapter 3, his analysis of relations of dependence supports his discussion of ‘distributed livelihoods’ and, in Chapter five, he develops this discussion to examine the implications of social personhood in a labour-scarce economy; crucially, that people (men) experience a ‘social void’ (155) in which they are unable to find ‘work membership’ (150). He aims to challenge liberal thought by showing how it is precisely through ‘declarations of dependence’ that people achieve a kind of social membership, or ‘incorporation’ (159). It is the wrong question to ask whether emergent forms of social welfare promote dependency; instead we should recognise how they point to the need for new forms of socioeconomic membership.

In the final chapter, Ferguson asks whether we might rethink the meaning of cash payments, to understand them ‘not as aid, assistance, gift, or charity but instead as a kind of share’ (174). More precisely, he means a ‘rightful share’ in the nation’s wealth, and approaches this by bringing a broader distributionist politics on resource nationalism into discussion with the social apparatuses he describes. Ethnographic research on a campaign in South Africa and Namibia for a ‘basic income grant’ (BIG) provides a concrete example of these ‘linked potentialities’ (188), where demands for basic income are directly linked to a demand for ownership in the country’s mineral resources. Though the idea is referred to earlier in the book, it is here that Ferguson expounds on how basic income could work to overcome many of the arguments outlined above. The inclusion of working-age able-bodied men challenges the idea that they should be able to support themselves and their families through labour alone.

Parallel arguments for universal basic income in developed countries centre on a projected decline in labour demand in a ‘postcapitalist’ world of automation and robots. One reading of Give a man a fish resonates with a recent review of two leading texts in this field: ‘The optimism … that big problems can be solved, is infectious, but in the end postcapitalism … is the name of an absence, not a positive programme’ (Hatherley 2016, 6). Ferguson’s essential message, however, is to suggest instances such as the BIG campaign to be ‘preliminary flickers’ (168) of what an emergent politics of distribution might be. Other flickers are more subtle and found in the incremental, ‘back door’ way in which social protection programs are coming into being (205). Whilst cash transfers may be limited—‘creatures of their time’ (27)—Ferguson shows how they are expanding and losing conditionalities. Certainly, in Senegal, where there is a conditional cash transfer, conditions are often not enforced in practice. True to the inspiration he declares early on, in Foucault’s commitment to a ‘process of discovery and invention’ (33), Ferguson is committed to the idea that if big problems are to be solved, then we need to pay attention to what is happening on the ground. The relevance of Give a man a fish extends beyond the academic interests of anthropologists, Africanists and development studies to those working on these problems within social and economic policy.
References
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Hugo Slim, Humanitarian ethics. A guide to the morality of aid in war and disaster, London, Hurst, 2015, ISBN 10 184904340X, ISBN 13 9781849043403 (pbk), 300 pp

One of the striking revolutions in international relations of the last three decades is the rapid expansion of an organized international ‘humanitarian system’. This system represents the self-conscious effort of mainly Northern states and civil societies whose objectives range from relieving the suffering of distant strangers to containing crises that pose a threat to peace and security. Humanitarianism has emerged as a potent form of contemporary governance: a set of institutions, norms, policies, ideologies and representations that are geared to addressing assistance and protection needs in times of disaster and crisis. The humanitarian system functions as a moral community; public opinion in the West and increasingly elsewhere has become used to the global spectacle of suffering and the global display of succour. It faces unprecedented challenges in trying to assist and protect untold numbers of survivors of simultaneous crises, including disasters and armed conflicts, around the world.

The qualitative and quantitative transformations since the end of the Cold War are unparalleled: organized humanitarianism has mutated from a relatively marginal and specialized activity to one that is at the centre of contemporary international cooperation and governance. From US$2.1 billion in 1990, the combined formal humanitarian expenditure of states, United Nations (UN) agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the Red Cross movement has increased more than twelve-fold and is likely to reach US$30 billion dollars in 2017. This does not include the contributions of local charities, religious groups and the myriad local responders who are the first on the scene when war or disaster strikes. The visible and structured humanitarian enterprise now employs a quarter of a million people, the vast majority of whom are nationals of the affected countries. With the multiplication of funds has come a simultaneous process of