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

A. Peter Castro Ph.D.

Maxwell School, Syracuse University, ahcastro@syr.edu

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Providing money directly to poor people has emerged as a major, if controversial, policy strategy for addressing global poverty. Cash transfers as social assistance have occurred for decades in industrialized countries, but these programs have recently taken-off worldwide, including in African nations once regarded as too impoverished to become welfare states. Joseph Hanlon, Armando Barrientos, and David Hulme reported in *Just Give Money to the Poor* that 45 countries in the Global South had cash transfer programs by 2010, reaching 110 million recipients. These programs often involve conditional transfers requiring recipients to fulfill certain economic and behavioral criteria, usually related to child health and schooling. Yet some programs are unconditional when identifying beneficiaries. Substantial evidence exists that poor people put these cash transfers to efficient use. This finding surprises those who regard the poor as feckless, irrational, or too hand-to-mouth to manage money effectively. It supports, however, a large body of research, once mainly the domain of anthropologists but now enriched by a new generation of field-oriented economists and others, on the dynamic capacities and activities of the poor. For the most part, these programs appear very well operated, especially compared to typical development interventions. The success of these cash transfers now raises questions and debates about the nature of these programs and their implications for development interventions. Do they embody a “quiet revolution” in development policy and practice from within the Global South, as depicted by Hanlon and colleagues? Are the transfers simply neoliberal trickery aimed at placating the poor with paltry payments as the rich relentlessly grab as much wealth as they can? Could the programs be the harbingers of some form of universal basic income? Or do these cash transfers signify something else about global, regional, and national political economies?

James Ferguson, an anthropologist, joins these debates in *Give a Man a Fish*, which focuses on the southern Africa's experience with cash transfer programs. A long-time ethnographer of the region, Ferguson is also well known for his critical analyses of development and neoliberalism. This project originally started with his Lewis Henry Morgan Lecture at the University of Rochester in 2009 and has been published as part of its series. His starting point is the rapid growth of what are called “social grants” in South Africa – payments for child support, the disabled, the elderly, those in dire need, and others. About one-third of South Africa's population now receive these grants, and the rate reaches nearly double that figure in the country's poorest provinces (p. 6). Studies suggest that these programs reduce extreme poverty, and do so in a highly cost-effective manner. Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, and other countries in the region, as well as places elsewhere in Africa, also offer forms of cash transfer. Ferguson is not interested in directly examining or evaluating these programs, however, and his book draws on the region's rich scholarly literature rather than on original field investigation in depicting them. He devotes attention to the programs' meaning and significance within the context of a region, if not world, where millions of people appear increasingly excluded from capitalist production systems and yet now can lay claim to social protection schemes and other support. The book reflects on what is likely happening as the “old networks” of social support based on wage earnings and remittances are supplanted by “new circuits of distribution and dependence” (p. 47). His exploration of these new circuits draws extensively from both ethnographic and historical literature, rooting his argument specifically and deeply within the region's political economy and socio-cultural experiences. In doing so, Ferguson attacks what he perceives as an entrenched orthodoxy of patriarchal productionist fundamentalism at the heart of political

economy theory and public policy. He proposes replacing this structure with a political economy that recognizes the ubiquity and centrality of distributive processes (*e.g.*, sharing, gifting, claim-making, clientage, etc.) that increasingly shape how people negotiate livelihoods, personhood, social relations, social protection, political affiliation, citizenship, and other vital aspects of life. This framework of analysis is expected to help foster a new politics that can fortify and mobilize the distributive claims of the poor and socially marginalized groups.

In making his case, Ferguson not only takes to task inequalities rooted in the patriarchal production paradigm of global capitalism but also classical Marxism (also devoted to the primacy of production), while drawing inspiration from Peter Kropotkin's anarchocommunist. The latter's value, however, is diminished in Ferguson's view by its denigration and devaluing of the state and bureaucracy. Ultimately, the big political question contained in *Give a Man a Fish* is "What might a radical contemporary politics look like if it were grounded in *both* a lively appreciation of the growing importance of non-labor based forms of distribution *and* a strategy for turning the administrative capacities of states more fundamentally toward that task?" (p. 199; emphasis in the original). He offers an upbeat outlook for this emergent distributive politics, finding "many things in the air" (p. 195), ranging from South Africa's Department of Social Development's reportedly firm commitment to the cash transfer programs to the growth of the regional basic income grant movement and from the expansion of social protection programs worldwide to the rise of unconditional cash transfers in philanthropy and even to Pope Francis' pro-poor statements. Ferguson does acknowledge possible limitations as well, including sustained funding concerns and issues of exclusion based on citizenship and other criteria. Overall, this is an ambitious, imaginative, and hopeful book. Although the notion that distributive processes must be understood and appreciated is already widely accepted in African studies, Ferguson's achievement is in analyzing the dynamism and implications of these claims and relations within his chosen region's shifting political economy. He also highlights the unique history of southern Africa's cash transfer programs, which are not simply replications of those found in Europe and North America but outcomes of colonial, apartheid, and post-apartheid settings. Furthermore, Ferguson's treatment of the political dimensions of these programs will undoubtedly spark further debate about their value and impacts.

Despite its clear achievements, *Give a Man a Fish* contains surprisingly many rocky moments, Ferguson's strident approach and style sometimes served to undermine, rather than enhance, the power and legitimacy of his arguments. A notable example is his coverage of the old "give a man a fish . . . teach a man to fish" adage, which Ferguson refers to as "perhaps the world's most widely circulated development cliché," which, he claims, has been further inflated into a "development ethos" (p. 35). He holds this cliché responsible for "implicitly" 'scoffing' at distribution and instilling a "production premise" that demeans people long identified as dependents by society (p. 36). It also supposedly results in global over-fishing (!). Besides questioning why Ferguson feels the need to erect and then pound the stuffing out of such a straw man, I find it ironic that as a college professor, he does not find some minimal merit in the adage's highlighting of learning. I appreciate the book's effort to promote a greater understanding of distributive processes but perceive its vilification of "productionism" as more an exercise in theoretical and political acrobatics rather than the fulfillment of an analytical necessity. This is especially because the relationships between production and distribution are more intertwined and complex than Ferguson admits. It is also puzzling that consumption largely gets left out of the discussion, given its powerful motivating role, as observed by writers as diverse as Thorstein Veblen, Mary Douglas, and John Bodley. Ferguson occasionally inserts

anecdotes into the text to support or illustrate his arguments, and while these anecdotes often prove effective, I am troubled by one of them. In trying to emphasize the isolation of South Africa's poor from its production system, Ferguson repeats the claim of a South African researcher that "the fact is that there are at least ten million people out there who could drop dead tomorrow" without having an impact on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (p. 11). Well, it is not true; it is not a fact, and beyond conveying a highly speculative opinion that may contain an implicitly neo-Malthusian view of the country's poor, we really do not learn anything. This is not evidence of poor people's exclusion. The value of the anecdote might have been enhanced had the text elaborated on the supposed disconnect between the stock market and the poor, but this opportunity is not pursued. Instead, Ferguson assumes that the point is accepted ("Under this circumstance..." is the text that directly follows) and moves on. Finally, anthropologists used to write quite a bit about positionality, and in reading this book, I reflected several times that Ferguson is an individual with a job for life (a benefit of earning tenure), trying to imagine and portray the future 'new' politics for those largely assumed to have little chance of employment. At times, I wondered whether his reflections might be, to paraphrase a speech I once heard by Richard Leakey, "the haves telling the have nots what they should not have." Some reflections by the author on this situation might have helped dispel these thoughts. Meanwhile, as I finish this review, the news website "The Daily Beast" features an article critical of presidential candidate Donald Trump, as his "swag" is produced in Lesotho instead of the United States (Daly, 2015). The politics of production still matter, too.

References

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A. Peter Castro PhD
Maxwell School, Syracuse University
ahcastro@syr.edu