



Citation for published version:

White, SC 2016, *James Ferguson, Give a Man a Fish. Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution. Book review.* *Journal of Development Studies.*

Publication date:
2016

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

University of Bath

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

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

Sarah C. White, University of Bath

Accepted by *Journal of Development Studies* 11.01.16

The idea behind 'Give a Man a Fish' is as simple as it is radical: that labour given in exchange for a wage can no longer be the basis of entitlement to resources even for able-bodied adult men: there is simply not enough work to go round. As Tanya Li (2014) argues in Indonesia, there are increasing numbers of people whose labour is irrelevant to capitalism, while capitalist expansion has simply eroded their former bases of livelihood. This context, Ferguson proposes, brings an 'emergent politics' of claims for 'a rightful share', a basic entitlement of all citizens to share in the nation's wealth, independent of their employment status.

This idea builds on the widespread rise of social protection through many forms of (conditional or otherwise) cash transfer, most famously in Latin America (*Oportunidades* in Mexico and *Bolsa Familia* in Brazil) and Southern Africa. In South Africa, Ferguson reports, more than 30% of the population receive some form of non-contributory cash transfer and 44% of all households get some form of grant. This is critical in mitigating the effects of extreme poverty and enjoys broad-based political and popular support. The resurgence of social protection is itself a remarkable reversal of the 'roll back the state' policies of 1980s and 1990s structural adjustment programmes, despite the continued dominance of neo-liberalism. Ferguson argues we face a 'powerful conjunctural moment' of demand for a rightful share based on democratic citizenship politics, with the development in many states of the technological and bureaucratic apparatus to make direct payments to the poor.

The origins of the book lie in the Lewis Henry Morgan lectures which Ferguson delivered at the University of Rochester in 2009. Consistent with his career-long preoccupation, it focuses primarily on Southern Africa. It draws on the ethnography of the region to challenge historical and contemporary thinking on social and welfare policy with analysis of how people are actually managing in situations of scarcity, and the broader understandings and practice of socio-economic relations in Southern African contexts. While it does not present primary data directly, the book reflects many discussions with development and social policy professionals over the years, and is grounded most immediately in Ferguson's observations of South Africa during a fellowship at Stellenbosch, 2011. In particular it considers mobilisation for a basic income grant in South Africa and Namibia. While the full force of the book is appreciated when it is read as a whole, the aim is that each chapter may also stand alone. Inevitably this means a fair degree of overlap and repetition.

The book offers an exciting challenge to many of the default ways of thinking in development and social policy. Introduced almost casually, one theme is the structuring role that gender continues to play, despite widespread claims of progressive gender policies. Ferguson points out that the definition of 'the social' that underlies the notion of social policy has historically been limited to population groups seen as falling short in some way from the ideal of independence embodied in adult manhood: women, children and old people, people with disabilities. The radicalism of the idea of a basic income grant to be given to all is that it would expand the realm of 'the social' to include men of working age – the 'man' of the title, who must not be given a fish, but taught to fish for himself. This leads to one of the major arguments of the book, that

development is predicated on a 'productionist premise', in which the supreme value is getting more people into work, rather than raising levels of consumption. This prioritisation of production is characteristic, Ferguson argues, as much of left-wing commitments to 'the workers' as of right-wing promotion of 'enterprise'. Its corollary is the (again gendered) broader devaluing of the domestic/consumption sphere. This also has a cultural dimension, as African socialism places much greater emphasis on consumption or wealth distribution.

The idea of a rightful share also challenges individualised notions of merit, seeing current generations as inheritors of suffering and shared experience and social innovation of the past. It also challenges the dominant thinking on rights. The argument is not that people 'have' rights on the basis of which they receive a 'share', as in the view that children have a right to education and so must be given a place in school. Rather, it is that the sharing itself is rightful, something that should be done 'because it is right'. The anthropological motif for this, Ferguson argues, is not the expectation of reciprocity of gift-exchange, but the recognition of shares in commonly held goods, as in the division of meat in hunter-gatherer societies. This does away with the shame and stigma that are associated with notions of hand-out, or indeed aid. No-one is giving anything to anyone, people are simply receiving what is their due. It also has the potential to dissolve the association of welfare provision with the policing of the poor. Child-care grants in South Africa, for example, are due to those who care for children regardless of their relational status.

Two major objections are the argument (mainly from the left) that cash transfer programmes simply ameliorate poverty, without addressing its structural roots; and (mainly but not only from the right) that they introduce dependency which fundamentally undermines human wellbeing. In relation to the first Ferguson suggests that the disincentive effects of cash transfers is unproven and they may on the contrary become the focus of new forms of mobilisation. Against the demonization of dependency, Ferguson argues that people in southern Africa tend to seek dependence, rather than try to avoid it, that having someone on whom you can depend is often critical to getting by. Cash payments enable activity, rather than supporting inactivity. He further argues that dependency is not a passive state, but making successful claims on others involves significant work. Subverting the 'productionist bias' of academy and policy, Ferguson therefore suggests that 'distributive labor' should form a new focus for investigation.

Give a man a fish is a remarkable combination of realism and idealism. The argument for realism is strong: Ferguson is clearly tired of set-piece confrontations between 'right' and 'left', and particularly the pervasive tendency on the left to settle for what he describes as 'the politics of anti-'. Instead he argues the need to identify and mobilise around potential positive alternatives. Nonetheless, the idea that resources might be distributed according to the notion of 'a rightful share', and particularly that such resources might amount to anything more than very small sums, does seem remarkably idealist. Perhaps most critically, in a world where increasing numbers of people are losing the basic grounds of entitlement by fleeing their countries of origin, the questions of belonging that seem inevitably to undergird claims to a share, seem increasingly problematic. While Ferguson of course recognises these problems, for example in admitting that xenophobia seems an inevitable accompaniment of generous state welfare programmes, he is not able to resolve them. The suggestion, for example, that claims should be made on the basis of residence not citizenship certainly simplifies bureaucratic processes of determining eligibility. But it does not do away with 'policing', only shifts it, from the welfare office to the border control agency.

Give a Man a Fish is a remarkable combination of scholarly breadth, intellectual challenge and grounded reflection on the realities of people living with hardship. Avoiding the easy characterisations of left or right, it is a thoughtful, stimulating and ultimately hopeful book, which deserves to be widely read, discussed and acted on.

Reference:

Li, Tanya Murray (2014) *Land's End. Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.