Give James Ferguson a Fish

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ABSTRACT

When James Ferguson's *Give a Man a Fish* was published in 2015, it seemed to many that the anthropologist was continuing his trailblazing work in critical development research and pioneering a new imaginary for a progressive left politics of welfare. This article argues that such enthusiasm is misplaced and that we need to devote ourselves to a more rigorous and ambitious project if we are to forge a social theory for the future that holds any kind of genuinely emancipatory potential. First, the article shows how Ferguson's diagnosis of global development is analytically flawed in that it is articulated at a strictly empirical and descriptive level. As a result, Ferguson fails to probe into the underlying power relations that have generated the developmental scenario that is the context of his reflections. It then moves on to show how this absence of any sustained conceptual and analytical engagement with questions of power in the political economy of capitalism leads Ferguson to a deeply flawed argument about welfare. The article concludes with a brief reflection on what an alternative and genuinely socialist form of welfare might look like in the context of a conjuncture of sustained neoliberal crisis.

INTRODUCTION

James Ferguson has been a pioneer of critical development research since the publication of *The Anti-politics Machine* (1990) three decades ago. Above all, his work has been pathbreaking because of how it has enabled scholars to discern the workings of power in a field that, in Tania Murray Li's (2007: 7) words, is far too often 'rendered technical' and as a result also 'rendered nonpolitical' (see also Nilsen, 2016). When his most recent book, *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution*, which makes the case for cash transfers as a harbinger of a new politics of distribution, came along in 2015, it seemed to many that Ferguson was continuing his trailblazing — both within and beyond the academy. 'This highly original book', writes one reviewer, 'is likely to leave a lasting mark not only on contemporary anthropological debates around poverty and development, but also policy and activist thinking in southern Africa and beyond' (Laterza, 2015: 3–4). According to another, the book is 'an outstanding contribution to contemporary debates on inequality and social justice' (Callebert, 2016: 198). Richard Ballard (2015: 129) argues that the power of *Give a Man a Fish* (henceforth GMF) 'is that it dispenses with conventional justifications of welfare which cite a virtuous relationship between production and social reproduction'. Some have hailed the book as 'a bold reframing of the anthropology of work' (Jeske, 2016: 116) and others again credit it with 'making visible and rendering questionable the unreflective mental habits shaping modernist thought about development, economic growth, employment and progress' (du Toit, 2017: 1469). Reading the book, Jason Hickel (2016: 211) says, leaves the reader 'with the distinct impression that Ferguson is feeling his way into a social theory of the future'.

In this article, which interrogates Ferguson's argument in GMF in some detail, I suggest that this enthusiasm is misplaced, and that we need to devote ourselves to a more ambitious project and exercise greater rigour if we are to forge a social theory for the future that holds any kind of genuinely emancipatory potential. At the heart of my critique is the proposition that we must do so by attending more thoroughly to power, both from above and from below — and especially the way in which the dynamics of power relations shape the political economy of capitalism — than Ferguson has done in his work on the new politics of distribution.

In what follows, I first present a detailed review of Ferguson's argument, before developing a critical response along two axes of thought. Firstly, I propose that the diagnosis of global development that Ferguson grounds his argument in — the swelling of surplus populations relegated to 'wageless life' (Denning, 2010) as a result of jobless growth — is analytically flawed. This is because this diagnosis is articulated at a strictly empirical and descriptive level, and fails to probe into the underlying power relations that have generated the developmental scenario that is the context of Ferguson's reflections. Secondly, I show how the absence of any sustained conceptual and analytical engagement with questions of power in the political economy of capitalism leads Ferguson to a deeply problematic argument about welfare. Finally, I conclude by reflecting briefly about what an alternative and genuinely socialist form of welfare might look like.

FERGUSON AND THE NEW POLITICS OF DISTRIBUTION

The lineage of the argument that Ferguson presents in GMF stretches back to a short comment piece from 2007, which reflects on Jane Guyer's book *Marginal Gains* (2004). Discussing the tendency of post-colonial states to impose formalization on informal economic activities and informal modes of living, Ferguson noted that the neoliberal turn in South Africa has been accompanied by the proliferation of cash transfers. And cash transfers, Ferguson (2007) argued, are particularly interesting because they break with the entrenched logics of both neoliberalism and conventional social assistance. Most importantly, the South African campaign for a Basic Income Grant (BIG) suggests that cash transfers fuse different forms of governmentality that can be appropriated and 'put to work in the service of pro-poor and pro-welfare arguments' (ibid.: 80).

Two years later, Ferguson (2009) had come to link his curiosity about cash transfers to a critique of what he perceived to be the negativity that suffuses left discourse, both in academia and in politics proper. In their one-sided concentration on articulating their disdain for what they oppose, he argued, progressive voices and forces fail to consider what 'genuinely progressive arts of government' (ibid.: 167) might look like. According to Ferguson, older forms of welfare politics are no longer an option, and the Left will therefore have to appropriate neoliberal forms of governmentality as means to progressive ends. Cash transfers are paramount in this regard, and will, in the expanded form of a universal basic income decoupled from work, occupy a central part of any left art of government. This is especially so given that a new politics of welfare will have to respond both to the disappearance of work and to the declining centrality of the state in the delivery of social assistance. A left art of government, Ferguson (2011: 63) asserted in a subsequent intervention, would have to 'decentre the two sacred touchstones of 20th century progressive politics — the worker and the nation-state'.

Give a Man a Fish (2015) builds on these arguments by presenting what is effectively a book-length reflection on what Ferguson considers to be a 'new politics of distribution' (ibid.: xii) emerging throughout much of the global South. This politics is centred on 'direct distribution of cash to the poor' (ibid) in a context where livelihoods based on wage labour are eroding. And significantly, this development counters the neoliberal market logic and heralds the coming of 'a new kind of welfare state' (ibid.: 3).

The principal empirical point of departure in the book is South Africa, which has pioneered an innovative form of social protection through 'an enormous system of non-contributory social benefits' (ibid.: 5). Amounting to a total expenditure in the 2017/18 financial year of some ZAR 150 billion (US$ 9 billion), South Africa's social grant system — which consists, most importantly, of disability grants, pension grants and child support grants — reaches approximately 17.9 million beneficiaries, and helps sustain, directly or indirectly, as many as one-third of all South Africans (Rossouw, 2017). The significance of the social grants system, Ferguson (2015: 11–12) points out, is that it offers a measure of social protection and ensures the reproduction of those that are excluded from the labour market. In a country where 29 per cent of the working-age population is unemployed, this is no mean feat (Smit, 2019). The South African case, furthermore, is a microcosm of a wider Southern reality, in which surplus populations have expanded steadily. In this context, Ferguson (2015: 13) argues, cash transfers have had a positive impact on social development indicators. And even more importantly, emergent new welfare regimes in the global South are linked to 'new kinds of political claims and new possibilities for political mobilization' (ibid.: 14).

Ferguson begins his reflections by laying out a sharp criticism of what he believes to be the 'productionist fundamentalism' of conventional welfare politics — a fundamentalism that is most evident in social assistance being orientated towards reintegrating workers in labour markets, and deeply averse to the creation of dependency among those who are able to work for a living (ibid.: 38–41). This leads to a dismissal of distribution and 'distributive livelihoods' (ibid.: 44) that is also common among radical leftists, who continue to see labour rather than distribution as the principal source of value. 'It is time', Ferguson argues, 'to recognize these peculiar dismissals and devalorizations of distribution for what they are: prejudices grounded in social realities that no longer exist' (ibid.: 45). For one, wage labour — especially the kind of unskilled work that has typically been the main source of livelihood for male workers in South Africa — is rapidly contracting. What is more, distribution, rather than being a derivative of production, has always been integral to the political economy of southern Africa as a region. According to Ferguson, the emergent welfare states in the region are making it possible to develop a progressive politics around distribution, and this politics, in turn, is grounded in the idea of the rightful share — that is, the inherent right to 'a universal share in socially produced wealth' (ibid.: 57).

Ferguson proceeds to explain how welfare politics in South Africa and the southern African region more generally is grounded in a particular configuration of the social that is quintessentially different from that which came into existence in the global North during the 19th century, and which constituted the main target of classical welfare state interventions. During the colonial era, rural development stood in for welfare in the context of 'the African social' — that is, the social as a domain for policy intervention in the African colonial context — and sought to conserve and improve peasant agriculture, while phenomena such as poverty and crime were understood and responded to, above all, in moral terms (ibid.: 64–73). Of course, the state did offer social protection in settler colonies like South Africa, but in a profoundly racialized manner. With the demise of apartheid, welfare was deracialized at the same time that it had to respond to the dual crisis of deteriorating agrarian livelihoods and jobless growth. In this context, it was no longer possible, Ferguson argues, to base welfare policies on romantic conceptions of extended rural families or urban nuclear families sustained by male breadwinners. Concomitantly, social assistance was delinked from employment histories, insurance rationalities and family situations (ibid.: 76–83).

GMF then moves on to focus on the nature of distributed livelihoods among the southern African poor. In a context where wage labour is scarce, the livelihoods of surplus populations have increasingly come to depend on securing 'distributions of goods produced elsewhere by accessing or making claims on the resources of others' (ibid.: 90). Distributive livelihoods are underpinned by what Ferguson refers to as 'distributive labour' — that is, a kind of labour that 'seeks to secure a transfer of resources from those who have them to those who don't' (ibid.: 101). Examples of this kind of labour range from the windshield washer and the panhandler, via the pickpocket, to the mother making a family visit and returning home from her relatives with money and gifts enabled by someone else's wages. The dynamics of this 'distributive political economy' (ibid.: 104) — a political economy that comprises social domains as diverse as land and landholding, movement and migration, sex and love — in turn impacts on the workings of social grants. Those who can access resources as dependants of the state become a source of income for others yet again, as grants are shared: 'Distributive flows, that is, are themselves distributed' (ibid.: 117).

Next, Ferguson turns to the role of markets in the new welfare policy regimes that are emerging in the global South. A central target in his argument is the opposition that has tended to prevail among socialists to markets and market forces and the way in which this opposition is reflected in criticism of cash transfers as a lubricant of commodification. Contrary to what left imaginaries have long assumed, markets are not animated by atomizing dynamics, and do not corrode social relationships. Indeed, according to Ferguson, the fact of the matter is that 'money, meaning, and mutuality are entangled rather than antagonistic' (ibid.: 123). Markets, especially in the southern African context, he argues, are vital to the organization of social life, and participation in social relations of care and dependence is inextricably intertwined with participation in markets. This warrants a rethinking of 'how to do things with markets' (ibid.: 128) when it comes to welfare. Cash transfers are a good example of just this, given that cash and its circulation both sustain the mutualities that undergird social life and enable livelihood strategies that are responsive to the actually existing needs of low-income people in the southern African region (ibid.: 136–40).

Following this, Ferguson historicizes his arguments through an investigation of the centrality of dependency in southern African social formations across time (see also Ferguson, 2013). Dependency, he argues, should not be mistaken for a state of bondage or unfreedom. Rather, in the regional context, the dependency that flows from insertion into relationships of 'hierarchy and obligation' has always both enabled and constituted 'social personhood' (Ferguson, 2015: 146). It is only natural, then, that the present-day disappearance of wage labour has spawned a search for 'new dependencies' (ibid.: 153) — and dependencies, in turn, are a crucial part of the ethic that sustains the distributive labour and livelihoods of poor people: 'To be dependent on someone is to be able to make at least some limited claims on that person' (ibid.: 153).

GMF then develops one of the key arguments presented in the articles that preceded the book, namely that a new left political imagination — or a left art of government — has to be cultivated by appropriating 'the distributive practices … of the region's new welfare states' (ibid.: 164). Ferguson develops this argument against the foil of resource nationalism as it is embodied in the politics of the South African Economic Freedom Fighters.[1] Resource nationalism articulates a notion of universal public ownership that is particularly powerful in the context of a settler colony. However, it is also limited, he suggests, by the fact that universal public ownership tends to be equated with nationalization, and this entails the risks of corruption, in which the people at the core of populist politics 'become nominal owners of all, but actual owners of precious little' (ibid.: 171). According to Ferguson, the idea of the rightful share as 'allocations properly due to rightful owners' (ibid.: 178) offers an alternative that can overcome these limitations. This is so, first and foremost, because it is an idea that challenges the stigma that often attaches to social assistance, and pushes towards a 'society of sharing' in which the provision of welfare is 'a matter of *sharing* what is properly a national birthright' (ibid.: 181). Returning, in the concluding chapter, to his quarrel with existing socialist imaginaries, Ferguson argues that the current concern on the left with precarious work and concurrent demands for decent work fails to grasp that labour can no longer perform a distributive role in society. A better alternative, then, is to centre political alternatives on 'forms of distribution grounded in principles other than labour altogether: in short, a radically *distributional* politics' (ibid.: 198). For sure, this entails overcoming the limits of the nation state, addressing the institutional and fiscal capacities of the state, and challenging our political imaginations in all sorts of ways. 'But', Ferguson exhorts us, 'surely it is time to start trying' (ibid.: 213).

CLASS POWER AND WORK UNDER CAPITALISM

As pointed out above, in Ferguson's (2015: xii) argument, the new politics of distribution responds to a particular context in which 'large populations find that they have no access to wage labor — the form of livelihood that has long been understood both as a historical telos of economic development and as an anchor of progressive politics'. Indeed, it is this context that provides cash transfers with much of their novel rationale, evident above

1. The Economic Freedom Fighters is a South African political party that was established in 2013 under the leadership of Julius Malema, the former president of the African National Congress Youth League. The politics of the party is defined by economic nationalism and left populism (see Mbete, 2015).

all in the delinking of social assistance from ambitions of returning surplus populations to waged employment (ibid.: 17, 77, 183, 198).

Strikingly, though, this context is rendered only in purely descriptive terms in GMF. For example, Ferguson tells us that, in the South African context, 'a restructured capitalism has ever less need for the ready supply of low-wage, low-skilled laborers that the migrant labor system generated' (ibid.: 11) — but he says nothing about how or why capitalism has been restructured, and why this restructuring has had these effects. More generally, he postulates that new developments in 'the spatial and social organization of production' (ibid.: 89) sever the links between livelihoods and production — but again, the how and the why of these changes are left unaddressed and, significantly, untheorized, beyond a fleeting remark that 'more and more things in the world are produced by smaller numbers of people who specialize' (ibid.: 90). At a later point in the book, Ferguson refers to 'massive new waves of urbanization' that come up against the limits of an economy in which 'the demand for low-skilled and manual labour has sharply eroded' (ibid.: 191). However, rather than exploring why the present has come to be characterized by such a disjuncture, he provides us instead with what he believes to be the inescapable political conclusion that flows from this fact — namely that a left art of government must vindicate 'direct distribution not as charity but as liberation' (ibid.: 203).

The problem with this approach is not so much the description itself. As Aaron Benanav (2015: 11, 25) has pointed out, the global surplus population — workers who cannot regularly sell their labour power at the established market price — numbers approximately 1.3 billion people worldwide, or 40 per cent of the global workforce. This scenario, Benanav argues, results from the confluence of three processes that have boosted world labour supply: population increase — or what he refers to as 'demographic proletarianization' (ibid.: 34) — compounded by deagrarianization and deindustrialization (ibid.: 33–37; see also Benanav, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). This might sound incongruent with those accounts of the contemporary world system that emphasize the expansion of working classes as a result of the relocation of manufacturing, through global value chains, from North to South (see, for example, Ness, 2016; Selwyn, 2018; Smith, 2016). However, Benanav's (2015: 43) point is that the global economy is characterized by low rates of economic growth and overcrowded markets, which in turn erode demand for the labour of which there is so much: 'This is an economy with low labour demand, overall, which tends to have much of surplus labour underemployed or informally employed in services'.

The problem with Ferguson's account resides in the fact that, by operating on a strictly descriptive terrain, he fails to consider what this scenario is symptomatic of at a deeper level, and therefore ends up proposing a shallow diagnosis of global development in the current conjuncture. This also has ramifications, as I will show in the next section of this article, for his idea of welfare and his proposals for a left political imagination.

How is Ferguson's diagnosis of global development shallow? A beginning to an answer to this question can be found by considering the implications of Benanav's (2015: 8) argument that the global surplus population, having few options to fall back on, very often 'have to work — regardless of the fact that there is little work available for them'. The consequence of this compulsion is underemployment: 'Rather than being put out of work by the low demand for their labour, people are forced to work for lower than normal wages, and in worse than normal working conditions' (Benanav, 2019c: 125). Underemployment, in turn, is of course one of many facets of the precarity that has increasingly come to define work under capitalism in the 21st century (see, for example, Standing, 2011: Ch. 1). And more than that, it is also a driving force for the further deepening of that precarity due to the fact that 'a growing oversupply of labor reverberates throughout the entire labor market, with implications for non-surplus workers as well as surplus ones' (Benanav, 2015: 14). These reverberations are manifest in downward pressures on wages and working conditions, or what in United Nations development speak has come to be known as 'decent work deficits' (see, for example, ILO, 2019: 6).

The notion of precarity, interestingly, gets short shrift in GMF. In fact, Ferguson (2015: 198) seems to think of concern with precarious work as distracting from the analytical and political focus that need to be put on 'non-labour based forms of distribution' — indeed, according to him, conceptions of precarious working classes as a political subject evince 'a nostalgic yearning for some sort of new class … that might take the place of the mourned vanguard proletariat of old' (ibid.: 198). This is a pity, because if he had been more willing to explore the relationship between superfluity and precarity, he would arguably have been in a position to dig deeper into the structural causes of uneven and unequal development in our time.

What are these structural causes? Simply put: the ever-more asymmetrical balance of power between capital and labour. At a conceptual level, the significance of this asymmetry can be understood in the terms suggested by Michael Lebowitz (2003). Capitalism as a whole, he argues, comprises and is animated by two political economies — that of capital on the one hand, and that of the working class on the other (ibid.: 73–81). While these political economies are intrinsically related, they are also energized by diametrically opposing imperatives: for capital, it is to increase surplus value; for the working class, it is to secure its own need for development, which pushes in the opposite direction of the 'accumulate, accumulate!' that is 'Moses and the prophets' for capital (see Marx, 1990: 742). The political economy of capital, Lebowitz argues, finds expression in competition — that which is engaged in between individual capitalists, and that which capital encourages between individual workers. Conversely, the political economy of the working class is expressed in collective and organized negations of competition (Lebowitz, 2003: 82–84). These negations, crucially, take place on multiple economic arenas: more specifically, in the labour market, in the form of struggles over wages; and in production, in the form of struggles over working hours and working conditions (ibid.: 89–94).

Now, if we train this conceptual lens on the actually existing capitalism of our time, and specifically on the precarity of which the global surplus population is a part and which it also reinforces, what emerges is the insight that global development has come to be more and more one-sidedly defined by the political economy of capital. And thanks to the kind of left academic critique of neoliberalism that Ferguson has so little time for, we know that this has not happened by accident. Far from it, it is a result of how neoliberalization has worked, since the 1970s, as a political project to restore the class power of capital (Harvey, 2005). This restoration was achieved by reversing the victories that had been won by social movements from below — among them, the movements of working classes, both North and South — during the middle decades of the 20th century (Cox and Nilsen, 2014: 136–53). This has been brought about, in no small part, through the concerted making of a new geography of production, populated by Southern workers and coordinated through global value chains in which capital can leverage market power to achieve what Ness (2016: 33) refers to as 'a higher intensity of labour commodification' — which essentially means lower wages, longer working hours, poorer working conditions, less social protection and, crucially, underemployment (see also Phillips, 2017: 433–38; Selwyn, 2019). This is why it is ultimately also wrong to conceive of surplus populations as being irrelevant to capital. As Ana Dinerstein (2014: 1048) points out, the term refers to 'a surplus of labour capacity still subordinated to the value-creating logic' of capital, and which enables 'capital's drive to exploit and dominate the workers' (Marx, 1990: 792).

It is these processes and dynamics, in turn, which have given rise to the inequality that is the principal hallmark of global development in our time (Benanav, 2019c: 128). The same world economy in which the richest 1 per cent holds 47 per cent of a mass of global wealth that is estimated to total US$ 435 trillion by the middle of 2020, and the richest 10 per cent earn 48.9 per cent of all income, is also a world economy in which the labour share of income has been falling steadily and significantly, across the North–South axis of the world system, since 1980 (Credit Suisse, 2019; Karabarbounis and Neiman, 2014; Kollewe, 2019). In the global South, these trends are evident in the form of a paradoxical new geography of poverty, in which 70 per cent of the world's poor live in middle-income countries — that is, countries that have experienced relatively strong increases in mean GDP per person since the 1990s (Sumner, 2016, 2019). In this context, poverty can obviously not be attributed to an absolute lack of resources. Rather, it is due to unequal distribution, above all as a result of the fact that relatively little of the value generated in national economies is captured in the form of wages. Indeed, as Hoy and Sumner (2016) point out, much of this poverty — whether measured at US$ 1.90 a day or US$ 2.50 a day — can be ended through redistribution. But redistribution entails redressing the asymmetrical balance of power between capital and labour by asserting the political economy of the working class.

To make this argument is not — as Ferguson would most likely have it — to hanker nostalgically after a more-mythical-than-real era of full employment and Nordic-style welfare states. Rather, it is to assert the political importance of transforming those asymmetries of class power that have made the present what it is for precarious workers and surplus populations across the global South. And here, the crucial point is this: the politics that Ferguson proposes will do little — if anything at all — to achieve this, precisely because it fails to reckon with these asymmetries, and confines itself, instead, to treating their immediate empirical manifestations as a given. This becomes very evident if we interrogate his conception of welfare.

CASH TRANSFERS: A WELFARE STATE BY ANY OTHER NAME?

Cash transfers, Ferguson (2015: 12) argues, enables the social reproduction 'of precisely that class of people who have increasingly slim prospects of ever entering the labour market at all'. Crucially, he asserts that the available evidence 'strongly indicates that these programs do in fact yield powerful improvements to a range of measureable "development" goods' (ibid.: 13). On the one hand, he asserts, these anti-poverty programmes break new ground because they do not make use of 'credit, securitization, or any other sort of neoliberal predation but the startlingly simple device of handing out small amounts of money to the people deemed to need it' (ibid.: 2). On the other hand, the policy of giving money to the poor also marks a rupture with the 'calculations about wage labour and family structure' (ibid.: 17) that were at the core of conventional social protection regimes. As such, Ferguson maintains, cash transfers signal the emergence of a new form of welfare state, which 'may open up the possibility of imagining new kinds of politics — perhaps even new kinds of socialism' (ibid.: 189). Here, his argument seems to be closely aligned with what Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass (2015: Ch. 6) have proposed in their work on poverty and public policy in South Africa, in which they argue that the proliferation of cash transfers after the transition from apartheid to democracy amounted to a departure from neoliberal principles and even to a kind of unintended social democratic approach to public welfare.[2] Is this really what cash transfers amount to, though?

2. It needs to be pointed out here that Seekings and Nattrass's (2015) argument appears to be based on an exceptionally reductive understanding of what neoliberalism actually is. While this is an argument that will have to be developed more fully elsewhere, they seem to be oblivious to the fact that neoliberalization, like any accumulation strategy, also requires a degree of legitimation, and that this in turn requires some kind of public policy intervention to put in place at least a modicum of poverty management. And crucially, as Jamie Peck (2011: 168–72) pointed out, cash transfers are a key element of global policy models

To answer this question, it is useful, first of all, to put things in perspective by reminding ourselves of some basic facts about social development in South Africa, which is the locus of Ferguson's discussion of and claims about the virtues of cash transfers. Now, it is a fact that social grants have been hugely important in terms of keeping people out of the most abject forms of poverty — indeed, in a context where unemployment soars at close to 30 per cent of the workforce, social grants are the second most important source of income for households after salaries (StatsSA, 2019a). However, this being said, it is necessary to recall that social grants are not an unemployment benefit per se. In 2019, out of a total of approximately 17.8 million social grant beneficiaries, the vast majority — some 16.1 million — were children, old people, or disabled people (SASSA, 2019). What this means is that, to the extent that unemployed members of the workforce benefit from social grants, they do so indirectly, via the kind of distributional dynamics that Ferguson discusses at some length (see also Frye, 2019). Moreover, despite the fact that social grants are a crucial source of income, 55 per cent of the South African population lives below the upper-bound national poverty line of ZAR 1,227 (US$ 73) per month (Chutel, 2017). With a Gini coefficient of 0.63 — a score which reflects the fact that the richest 10 per cent hold 71 per cent of all wealth and earn two-thirds of all national income — it is also the most unequal country in the world (see Alvaredo et al., 2018; Scott, 2019; see also StatsSA, 2019b). In other words, important as social grants may be, the South African welfare regime is not one that is capable of addressing 'the way power produces and reproduces the conditions that facilitate growing inequality' (Francis and Webster, 2019: 789). What is more, as I argue in my concluding remarks, even in the expanded form of a universal basic income that Ferguson advocates, cash transfers are unlikely to do much to fundamentally address the root causes of the problem of poverty among surplus populations.

Beyond this, there is also every reason to question the claim that cash transfer programmes steer clear of neoliberal predation in the form of credit and securitization. In making this argument, Ferguson (2015: 2) contrasts cash transfers to 'such paradigmatically "neoliberal" things as microcredit and microfinance schemes'. As critical development research has established over the past decade or so, microfinance has not worked primarily to advance poverty reduction through entrepreneurship, but to expand the frontiers of 'bottom billion capitalism' by pushing 'the integration of the billion or so people living under conditions of extreme poverty into global circulations of finance capital' (Roy, 2012: 132). By financializing poverty, these interventions have, in fact, constituted the burgeoning surplus populations of the world system as a much-needed new market for capital accumulation (see Bateman and Chang, 2012; Beck and Radhakrishnan, 2017;

in which poverty management is constructed in 'market-centric terms' (see also Ballard, 2013).

Mader, 2015; Roy, 2010; Soederberg, 2013, 2014).[3] Being a form of social protection, Ferguson argues, cash transfers do not follow this logic.

Except that they do. This much is plainly evident from some of the best research currently available on this subject; Erin Torkelson's (2020) work on social grants in South Africa is particularly revealing in this regard. Cash transfers, Torkelson argues, constitute a source of regular and secure payments that amount to a kind of surety, which can then be put to use 'to transform social entitlements into collateral for credit' (ibid.: 1). More specifically, the financial technology firms that are contracted to disburse cash payments can combine this with selling financial products and services to the beneficiaries whom they service. And as a consequence, cash transfer payment systems have the potential to make poverty alleviation a secondary goal relative to the expansion of finance capital by conscripting 'individuals and households into regimes of credit' (ibid.: 2).

In South Africa, this has happened in the following way. In 2012, the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) contracted Cash Paymaster Services (CPS) to disburse social grants across the country. CPS on its part set in train an enrolment drive, in which personal information was collected from some 17 million beneficiaries and bank accounts were opened for 10 million grants recipients. CPS's parent company — Net1 UEOS Technologies — then proceeded to use its subsidiary companies to sell a range of financial products — loans, insurance, utilities and payment portals — to social grant beneficiaries. Naturally, the company was in a hugely advantageous position: it was a monopoly service provider, profiting from a government contract and holding unlimited access to recipients of social grants, to whom it could sell financial products, and, crucially, from whom it could extract repayment for these products without any significant risk of default (ibid.: 2).

'The social grant income', Torkelson argues, 'opened up a new market for formal creditors to tap into'. It did so by making it possible for a 'parallel banking system' to emerge — with SASSA's approval (ibid.: 5). Within this system, social grants became collateral for credit, and credit was sorely needed due to the fact that grants tend to be the only source of income for poor households. Credit of course means debt, and this debt was repaid through deductions from social grants before these were disbursed: 'The grant meant to be given to the most vulnerable people for basic needs was transferred instead to a private corporation through the repayment of

3. Ferguson (2015: 217n) presents his readers with a footnoted engagement with Ananya Roy's *Poverty Capital* (2010) in which the major takeaway seems to be that Roy finds that microfinance programmes 'have in fact been less about investment and interest than about public subsidies to the poor'. This is at best a partial representation of Roy's argument, which has been pioneering precisely because it illuminates the ways in which microfinance works to create a 'subprime frontier where development capital and finance capital merge and collaborate such that new subjects of development are identified and new territories of investment are opened up and consolidated' (Roy, 2010: 30).

debts' (ibid.: 9). Poor households whose income streams were eroded by these repayments turned to other formal and informal lenders, many of whom had begun to formalize their operations by using Net1's payment platform to collect what was due to them, for additional loans. In short, for the poor, cash transfer programmes often entailed a deepening of indebtedness (ibid.: 9).

When viewed in the light of these findings, Ferguson's claims that cash transfers are quintessentially different from development interventions that advance neoliberal predation appear less than credible. Moreover, Torkelson's work also suggests that the argument made by Seekings and Nattrass (2015), that cash transfers represent a kind of unintentional form of social democracy, is rather inconsequential, given the way that actual on-the-ground dynamics have in fact worked to expand financialization. After all, financialization, as David Harvey (2005) pointed out some time ago, is one of the main ways in which neoliberalization has been enacted and one of the main ways in which the neoliberal transition has brought about a radical redistribution of wealth in favour of capital (see also Duménil and Levy, 2004: Ch. 12; 2011: 69).

This becomes even clearer when we consider that this trajectory, in which cash transfers do in fact enable neoliberal predation, is not unique to South Africa. A similar situation can be found in Latin America, where the cash transfer revolution, as Ferguson (2015: 12) notes, first began in the late 1990s. Cash transfers, Lena Lavinas (2013) argues, constitute a form of '21st century welfare' in which universal and unconditional access to public goods and services has come to give way to the exchange of individualized rewards in return for the fulfilment of behavioural obligations.[4] And crucially, she points out, cash transfers have also come to serve as 'a powerful instrument for drawing broad strata of the population into the embrace of financial markets' (ibid.: 7). True, the spread of cash transfers in Latin America was associated with the onset of the Pink Tide throughout the region, which saw left-of-centre regimes attempt to mitigate some of the most egregious consequences of neoliberal restructuring. This brought increased social spending and reduced levels of extreme poverty.[5] However, as Lavinas notes, economic growth, job creation and, with it, 'the revalorization

4. In the Latin American context, cash transfers are commonly subject to conditions related to school attendance, medical check-ups and inoculations, and so on (see Lavinas, 2013).
5. Whereas Latin America did register reduced poverty and inequality levels in the 2000s and 2010s, it is useful and sobering to remind ourselves that, as in the South African context, the region remains deeply unequal (see Gasparini and Cruces, 2013). In fact, according to ECLAC statistics, Latin America is still the most unequal region in the world: 'In 2014 the richest 10 % of people in Latin America had amassed 71 % of the region's wealth' (Bárcena, 2016). In terms of poverty, the share of people in the region living on less than US$ 4 a day registered a decline from 45 per cent to 25 per cent between 2000 and 2014, but since then poverty levels in Latin America have been reported to be on the rise again (Levy, 2016; UNDP, 2016; see also Rigirozzi, 2020).

of the real minimum wage' (ibid.: 25) seem to have been more important drivers of poverty reduction in the Latin American context in this period. This is also true for Brazil, which is home to the much-celebrated Bolsa Familia cash transfer programme (ibid.: 32).

At the same time, the emphasis on cash transfers over the universal provision of public goods and services has created a situation in which poor individuals and households seek private alternatives to state provision in the form of credit. As Lavinas's work shows, the Latin American region has witnessed an 'expansion of the financial sector down the income hierarchy' (ibid.: 34) — and, as in South Africa, this process of expansion has been enabled by the collateralization of the income streams provided by cash transfers. In Brazil, the social policies of the Lula regime were hugely important in this respect. Families with low or unstable incomes were incorporated in financial markets through a new form of credit instrument that pegged consumer loans to social benefits, rather than just earnings and wages. Creditors can withdraw repayments from both wages and social benefits — the latter, of course, being guaranteed by the state (Lavinas, 2017a: 637–38). The collateralization of social benefits has been coeval with both a boom in the Brazilian credit market and a steep increase in levels of consumer debt (ibid.: 638–40; see also Lavinas, 2017b, 2018).

Cash transfers, then, seem to be far more 'paradigmatically neoliberal' than Ferguson claims. There is a very real sense in which this should come as no surprise, given that cash transfers have tended to replace or substitute for the 'decommodified forms of direct public provision' that were characteristic of post-war welfare regimes (Lavinas, 2017a: 633). To properly understand the significance of this, it is necessary to reflect on how welfare is related to the essential conceptual point that I focused on in the section above — that is, the structuring of class power.

Gøsta Esping-Andersen's (1990) seminal work on welfare capitalism provides a useful point of departure for such reflection.[6] Welfare states, Esping-Andersen argues, are built through the extension of social rights, which 'push back the frontiers of capitalist power' (ibid.: 16). The frontiers of capitalist power, in turn, are pushed back because the extension of social rights advances decommodification — that is, it reduces people's dependence on the market and market forces both by ensuring a certain standard of living regardless of levels of demand in labour markets and, crucially, by making goods and services available as a right that flows from social citizenship

6. Esping-Andersen's work is the subject of another footnoted engagement in GMF. In this engagement, Ferguson (2015: 219n) confines himself to noting that the relevance of Esping-Andersen's notion of the welfare state is constrained by its northern provenance and reference points, and pointing to the distinctions that Esping-Andersen makes between different types of welfare state regimes. At no point does he engage with the concept of decommodification, which is odd given its evident relevance to current debates about distribution and redistribution in global development.

(ibid.: 21, 22, 35–55). Decommodification strikes at the heart of capitalist power precisely because this power is embodied and condensed — first, foremost, and above all — in the commodity form, and the way in which the commodity form enables the creation of surplus value in production and the realization of this surplus value, as monetary profit, through market transactions (Harvey, 2017: 8–13). This power is constrained and rolled back when living standards are decoupled, to some extent, from the compulsion to sell labour power and to buy goods and services. This, most fundamentally, is the kernel of welfare and welfare regimes in capitalist societies.

But this insight eludes Ferguson. Nowhere in GMF is this more evident than in his discussion of markets. As I showed above, Ferguson holds no brief for left critiques of markets. Market exchange, he argues, 'is not the negation of sociality; on the contrary, it forms a vital — indeed, irreplaceable — part of the coordinated social life of any modern society' (Ferguson, 2015: 126). Markets 'have no essential attachment to capitalism' and their workings cannot be reduced to 'mere egoistic calculations of advantage' (ibid.: 132, 120). This is also, according to Ferguson, why money and markets will have to play a role in 'any socialism worth wishing for' (ibid.: 140). Ferguson is of course entirely right in making the claim that markets are a perennial feature of human societies. His argument, however, is framed entirely around an ahistorical and abstract conception of markets — the market, seems, on Ferguson's reading, to be the market regardless of context. This framing is profoundly flawed as it ignores the specific character of *capitalist* markets, and what Ellen Meiksins Wood (1994: 15) referred to as 'the peculiarity of the capitalist market as a compulsion rather than an opportunity'. Karl Polanyi pinpointed this specificity in his 1944 masterpiece *The Great Transformation*. 'No society could, naturally, live for any length of time unless it possessed an economy of some sort', Polanyi (1944/2001: 45) wrote, 'but previously to our time no economy has ever existed that, even in principle, was controlled by markets'. In other words, capitalist markets are distinct from non-capitalist markets by virtue of their dominant position in social organization, as a result of which the 'commodity fiction' — the fiction that anything and everything can and should be subject to market exchange — becomes 'a vital organizing principle' for society as a whole (ibid.: 76). As a consequence, livelihoods and social reproduction under capitalism come to be characterized by what Robert Brenner (2007) refers to as 'market-dependence' — that is, livelihoods and social reproduction come to depend on the selling and buying of commodities, and are subjected to market imperatives. It is in this sense that capitalist markets work as 'a direct instrument of class power' (Wood, 1994: 39). And any socialism worth wishing for must aim to curb that power in fundamental and decisive ways.

The absence of this insight in Ferguson's argument is made even more apparent by his account of the emergence of the welfare state in the advanced capitalist countries of the global North, which is, to say the very least, extremely partial. In GMF, Ferguson (2015: 64–69) discusses the emergence of the welfare state primarily in terms of the invention of the social that unfolded during the course of the 19th century, and which revolved around the idea that it was possible to intervene in society as a system with regular and calculable properties in order to redress social problems. The welfare state, in this account, is an ensemble of techniques for managing the social, invented and implemented from above. It involved numerous new institutions and occupations — social work, statistics and social policy experts, for example — and the development of 'techniques of social insurance' (ibid.: 66).

What is missing from this picture is of course the processes of decommodification that took place in the post-war era, and the fact that these processes were directly related to a steady escalation of working-class organizing and mobilizing from below from the 1880s through to the middle of the 20th century (Cox and Nilsen, 2014: 123–25; Silver, 2003: 134–36). Working-class movements fundamentally altered the balance of power between capital and labour, and it was this that ultimately brought about 'the development of social citizenship in capitalist democracies' (Mann, 2012: 281). Pointing this out does not amount to a 'left melancholy' (Brown, 1999) for a bygone welfare state. It serves, rather, as a reminder that a socialism worth wishing for — a socialism that seizes 'possibilities for radical change in the present' (ibid.: 20) — is a socialism that will have to be fought for, collectively, against the power of those social forces that stand to gain from the prevailing configurations of power in capitalism. This will entail, to borrow a phrase from another of Esping-Andersen's (1985) interventions, mobilizing politics against markets and against the ways in which the power of capital animates the workings of capitalist markets.

A SOCIALISM WORTH WISHING AND FIGHTING FOR

All said, Ferguson's account of the new politics of distribution reads like something of a panegyric to a moment that has been described by some as 'post-neoliberalism' (see Grugel and Rigirozzi, 2012; Peck et al., 2010; Ruckert et al., 2017; Sandbrook, 2011). Originating in debates about Latin American developments in the 2000s, the term itself referred to efforts to 'reclaim the authority of the state to oversee the construction of a new social consensus and approach to welfare' coupled with economic policies geared towards rebuilding 'the capacity of the state to manage the market and the export economy in ways that not only ensure growth but are also responsive to social need and citizenship demands' (Grugel and Rigirozzi, 2012: 2–3; see also Yates and Bakker, 2013). For some observers, the post-neoliberal moment signified a tangible political and economic shift across the global South towards 'a "welfare first" approach to development' (Harris and Scully, 2015: 417).

Whether or not one agrees with such assessments, the basic point is this: post-neoliberalism was a *short-lived* moment that ultimately gave way to an authoritarian populism which fuses market-based governance with majoritarian cultural politics of different hues in a bid to stave off the crisis of neoliberalism a little longer (Boffo et al., 2019; Goldstein, 2019; Grugel and Rigirozzi, 2018; Nilsen, forthcoming; Peck and Theodore, 2019).[7] What this signifies is that the departures from neoliberal orthodoxy that characterized this moment were not grounded in any kind of decisive shift in power relations between social forces. Pia Rigirozzi's (2020) analysis of the Latin American trajectory is instructive in this regard. The welfare policies associated with the Pink Tide, she argues, were enabled above all by the revenues that accrued from increased economic growth fuelled by the 2003–07 commodity boom (ibid.: 515–16). This in turn created a situation where left-of-centre governments gradually became unable to sustain welfare spending, while elite groups were able to block further progressive economic reforms — a situation which ultimately paved the way for a new wave of right-wing regimes across the region (ibid.: 516–17). Consequently, post-neoliberalism 'undermined more radical transformation' (ibid.: 516; see also Houtart, 2016). My own research on India, where the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance governed from 2004 to 2014 on the basis of a project that fused neoliberal accumulation strategies with expanded welfare, but then lost power to the Bharatiya Janata Party and its distinctively Hindu nationalist brand of authoritarian populism, suggests that such dynamics are not unique to Latin America (Nilsen, forthcoming).

What, then, might a socialism worth wishing and fighting for look like? First of all, it would hinge on a radical agenda of decommodification. Beyond simply ensuring universal and unconditional access to public goods and services, this would entail asserting the political economy of the working class against that of capital, and against the power that capital holds as owner of the process of production. After all, as I have argued above, it is this power that gives rise to inequality, to precarity, and to surplus populations, and it is highly unlikely that the politics of distribution propounded by Ferguson will do anything to rein in this power. Indeed, as Benanav points out, even in the form of a Universal Basic Income that Ferguson advocates, cash transfers are unlikely to have a transformative impact on the power of capital in production: 'The profit motive would remain the driving force of the economy because capitalists would retain their power over investment decisions, which would continue to determine whether the economy grows or shrinks' (Benanav, 2019c: 135; see also Dinerstein, 2014: 1050–53). It is here, in the inability to propose a politics that challenges that power of capital in a fundamental manner, that the problems that flow from

7. Authoritarian populism, of course, is not incommensurable with welfare but, as recent research on the topic suggests, under right-wing populist regimes social protection tends to work as 'an instrument for political control' (Ramos, 2020: 500; see also Bugra, 2020).

Ferguson's failure to adequately diagnose the structural origins of the problem of swelling surplus populations become most evident.

Significantly, the fundamental objective of a political project centred on radical decommodification would not be 'a return to normative forms of work' (Millar, 2017: 8). On the contrary, by challenging the power of capital, its objective would be to separate work as human social activity 'from its commodified form of existence' (Dinerstein, 2014: 1049). To think in these terms is not to be hopelessly utopian. On the contrary, it is to think seriously about what Ferguson (2019: 17) has referred to as 'a politics of the propertyless' might look like, and to do so in light of the prefigurative politics that has already crystallized in the oppositional collective action of those whose labour capacity has been rendered surplus by the vagaries of neoliberal capitalism, and who, as a result of this, endure precarious life. The Argentinian Movement of Unemployed Workers is a case in point here. Originating in organizations of unemployed workers that were formed in the 1990s, this movement erupted on a large scale in the context of Argentina's financial crisis in the early 2000s, and developed an extraordinary repertoire of resistance, in which bankrupt factories were taken over and run by workers' collectives, while neighbourhood assemblies were established to advance collective self-government (Dinerstein, 2014; Schaumberg, 2013). Dinerstein's (2014) analysis shows how the politics of this movement goes beyond merely a demand for inclusion in labour markets or for access to social security. First of all, by mobilizing and organizing unemployed workers, it has spawned 'a new labour subject' (ibid.: 1041) rooted in a capacious and autonomous collective identity. Secondly, by implementing cooperative and productive neighbourhood projects based on direct democratic participation (ibid.: 1043) — many of which revolve around the collective provision of public goods such as housing and education — the movement has begun carving out a post-capitalist commons. And thirdly, by politicizing issues related to unemployment and winning social policy reforms, the movement has asserted itself in relation to the state in important ways (ibid.: 1044–46).

Now, as Dinerstein (2014: 1046) rightly observes, gaining policy influence can be considered as a form of institutionalization that blunts the edge of the Movement of Unemployed Workers and its pursuit of dignified non-capitalist work (see also Hirtz and Giacone, 2013). Such a view, however, would be predicated on conceiving of reforms as concessions that can only ever work to preserve the existing order of things. An alternative way of looking at reforms, and one which, it seems to me, is eminently relevant in relation to a socialism that is worth wishing and fighting for, has been proposed by Andre Gorz. Gorz (1967: 7) made a distinction between, on the one hand, 'reformist reforms' that are subordinated to the parameters of an existing political and economic system and, on the other hand, 'non-reformist reforms' that are conceived of not in terms of what is commensurable with such parameters, but in relation to 'what should be made possible in terms of human needs and demands'. In strategic terms, non-reformist reforms are not conceived of as specific public goods and services being delivered from above by the state. Rather, non-reformist reforms are oriented towards 'stimulating the development of structures of popular power' (Gorz, 1975: 144) in order to curb the power of capital. Non-reformist reforms 'are to be regarded as a means and not an end, as dynamic phases in a progressive struggle, not as stopping places' (ibid.: 148).

In short, what I propose as an alternative to Ferguson's notion of a new politics of distribution is an oppositional political project centred on radical decommodification and advanced through a counter-hegemonic process of non-reformist reform. Our present conjuncture, I think, demands nothing less. We have lived through a decade that began and ended with waves of protest against the perverse inequalities and rampant waste of a crisis-ridden neoliberal order. And that decade has also revealed just how little political and economic elites have to offer in response to these protests. Rather than any kind of decisive departure from hegemonic policy regimes, we have seen instead persistent resorts to austerity, which indicates that, among those who own and those who govern, there is no plan B — no coherent and persuasive alternative to neoliberalism. What have proliferated instead are authoritarian populisms that fuse neoliberal policy regimes with coercion and cultural nationalism. The further consolidation of this political tendency would only perpetuate and amplify the pathologies of our time. Moving out of this twilight of neoliberalism and towards futures of greater equality and freedom requires far more of the left imagination than is enabled by Ferguson's recent work and by the practices and policies that are the reference points for this work.

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