

Book Review

What Shall the Fishermen Become? A review of *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution*, James Ferguson. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015, pp. 280, \$24.95 (paperback). ISBN: 978-0-8223-5886-2

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Why would teaching a man to fish be a good idea, if the fishing industry has become largely mechanized, controlled by large corporations and requires ever fewer workers? If fishermen have been out-priced and replaced by machines, might it make more sense to focus not on teaching people to fish, but rather on making sure that all the wealth of fishing is not captured by those few who are lucky enough to own these fishing-machines?

This is the parable and the question that starts off James Ferguson's *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution* (Duke University Press 2015). The ways that Ferguson makes ridiculous the frequently intoned virtue of teaching the poor to fish rather than giving them fish encapsulate many of the key arguments for a universal basic income grant (BIG) – the ever growing automation of labour, rising rates of unemployment in much of the world, and increasing social injustice of rising wealth inequality between those who own labour-replacing capital and those who do not. Ferguson's thesis in this book is that some countries in the Global South, particularly in Southern Africa, are implementing social policies that come close to a BIG in practice if not in name. The exemplar of this is South Africa. South Africa's system of social grants gives some form of cash transfer to a third of its citizens, despite the fact that the South African government simultaneously follows neoliberal economic and political models. To Ferguson, this signals a willingness to engage in redistributory politics that are not "workfarist" – that do not require one to have been a worker to receive various forms of social insurance.

Ferguson is an anthropologist by training and profession, but this book is far indeed from a classic ethnography. This is not a work of thick description or participant observation – rather, much of the book deals with political arguments and descriptions of broad trends, instead of particulars or lived experience. Nor is it a work of moral or political philosophy – Ferguson does not give much space for the social justice case in favour of social grants or a universal basic income,

and rarely points out or appeals to South Africa's extreme wealth and income inequality that could be the basis of such arguments. Yet despite the lack of personal narratives or descriptive details, the book is beautifully written, and a pleasure to read. Ferguson seamlessly weaves together data, a wide range of social science literature, anecdotes, historical details, and a sprinkling of anthropological theory. Indeed, it is when drawing on anthropological theory and concepts that Ferguson moves from the descriptive to more ideational realms.

Ferguson makes the case that social grants need to be understood not as charity, but rather as citizens' "rightful shares" of national wealth – be it natural resource wealth or technological capital. He points to the difference anthropology draws between the gift and the share, and the differences in social relations and expectations that arise around these two forms. Gifts are never guaranteed. To fail to give is no fault on the part of the giver; the only fault is to fail to be grateful on the part of the recipient. Yet a share is given as a matter of course – to fail to distribute a share is a dereliction of duty, in light of which the recipient can rightfully be incensed. Ferguson not only makes the case that seeing redistribution as a share rather than charity or gift is both more just and more pragmatic, but argues that this is already happening in southern Africa. Grants recipients in South Africa often greet grant distribution with criticism (about the length of the lines, the small amounts, et cetera) rather than gratitude, and Ferguson's claim is that this demonstrates that grants are seen as rights rather than privileges. Using anthropological theory to explore the distinction between a political claim to a rightful share in contrast to charity is perhaps Ferguson's greatest original contribution to the theorization of basic income grants.

Yet despite frequent references to and mentions of BIG, Ferguson pulls a slight-of-hand by bundling together universal basic income grants with the existing social grants in Southern Africa, which are in fact quite different. They are not universal but means tested, and they are far lower than the levels proposed by most BIG proponents. Indeed, they are explicitly workfarist, and exclude able-bodied men and women who are not child-carers. Despite a third of South Africa's population receiving these grants, inequality continues to widen, and 54% of the population remain in danger of regular or intermittent hunger. Ferguson moves fluidly between the BIG ideal and the workfarist reality of Southern Africa's current social grants, as if they currently stand on the brink of bursting into full universal basic income grants. Yet while these grants may be slowly expanding to cover an ever-larger proportion of the population, they are not BIG.

Indeed a key weakness of the book is Ferguson's disregard of BIG's history in South Africa. A universal basic income grant was on the political table in the early 2000s, and was rejected by the ANC government. This is not the case in South Africa alone – other countries have considered BIG as well, but chose

instead to continue implementing means-tested conditional social grants (in the case of Brazil) or public works programs (for instance, in India). Why are these governments rejecting BIG after serious consideration?

Ferguson never addresses this point, but he does bury some hints to the answer in his chapter on dependence and social grants. The key argument of the chapter is that the spectre of dependence, so often used to argue against welfare grants, is really not such a bad thing, nor is it limited to the recipients of grants alone. Ferguson goes out of his way to prove this, pulling on examples from history to show that people seek out relationships of dependence, be it with political and social superiors, family members, or employers. Ferguson argues that these social relations bring stability and social inter-reliance, as well as the possibility of powerful political relationships between citizens and state. It reads as a rather belaboured defence – what he is talking about is perhaps better described as inter-dependence rather than the paternalism and passivity that so many fear. In any case, surely Ferguson has already made a stronger argument that entirely dispels the dependence myth. This is the argument detailed above that citizens should see social grants as a “rightful share” and thus a duty of the state, leading to no more or less dependence than our current reliance on the state to provide roads.

Yet what this argument just begins to point towards is the powerful social and meaning-making role of wage-labour. Recently, I had a conversation with three women in a small village in South Africa’s North West Province. All three relied on social grants from the South African state to survive. And yet all three were put off by the idea of every South African citizen receiving a grant, and the grant being big enough to ensure basic wellbeing. They were concerned about “lazy people” who would benefit from the system and get even lazier if they were given a grant. What they wanted instead of grants were jobs or free tertiary education. This reluctance to cede work as a central moral and social category seems to be prevalent not only in South Africa’s middle class, but also in the very people who receive grants and would benefit most from a BIG.

As Ferguson hints, wage-labour is a crucial factor not only in the way people understand themselves and their “occupation” or place in the world, but also in the way they fit into social hierarchies and relationships, be they between men and women, parents and children, youth and elderly, managers and managed, leaders and led. In a near-future world where many people’s basic wellbeing is not predicated on wage-labour, but rather ensured through a “rightful share” of national wealth and thus redistribution, how do we create meaning? What will be our occupations? How do we mediate and create hierarchies and social relations without the moral and relational tools of “hard work”, “providers”, or “bosses”? Could it be that the reason a universal basic income was shunned

by the South African state (in favour of workfarist social grants combined with training programs, work-guarantee programs and a rhetoric of job-creation) is that we rely so heavily on wage-labour as a form of social and personal meaning-making? Could the state's reluctance stem from an inability to imagine of a world without the reliance on work for basic welfare?

These are the questions that need to be answered for universal basic income to become a viable political alternative. Ferguson's book is an erudite, enjoyable, and important synthesis of facts, stories and ideas, bridging a wide range of topics around the rise of social grants in Southern Africa. However, while it hints at the questions above, it does not interrogate them. In order for the "new politics of distribution" to evolve, we must engage with the relationship between work and the social imagination. This is where the book leaves us, the project to be taken up by the next anthropologist interested in work, social grants and the political project of a universal basic income.