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# Give A Man A Fish: Reflections On The New Politics Of Distribution (The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures)



## Synopsis

In *Give a Man a Fish* James Ferguson examines the rise of social welfare programs in southern Africa, in which states make cash payments to their low income citizens. More than thirty percent of South Africa's population receive such payments, even as pundits elsewhere proclaim the neoliberal death of the welfare state. These programs' successes at reducing poverty under conditions of mass unemployment, Ferguson argues, provide an opportunity for rethinking contemporary capitalism and for developing new forms of political mobilization. Interested in an emerging "politics of distribution," Ferguson shows how new demands for direct income payments (including so-called "basic income") require us to reexamine the relation between production and distribution, and to ask new questions about markets, livelihoods, labor, and the future of progressive politics.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Give a Man a Fish is a vitally important book that aims to unsettle often-unspoken commonplaces about the contemporary politics of social welfare. Its wide-ranging and provocative investigations in southern African countries—which raise fundamental questions about the changing relationships among autonomy, dependency, and security—are of global relevance and importance." (Stephen J. Collier, author of *Post-Soviet Social: Neoliberalism, Social Modernity, Biopolitics*) "Give a Man a Fish disentangles the confusion of languages in which we talk about work,

welfare, and distribution. Some of these languages are old and anachronistic, others new but inchoate. James Ferguson himself speaks with clarity and grace, compelling us to inspect long-held intuitions and inviting us to explore a genuinely new politics." (Jonny Steinberg, author of *Little Liberia: An African Odyssey in New York*) "What's to give away money? In this clear and cogent discussion of the politics of cash transfers, James Ferguson urges us to reconsider our basic ideas on states' responsibilities to their citizens. *Give a Man a Fish* will stimulate new thinking both within and beyond the academy. Distribution may be the new way to empower the poor, he argues—but only if we can work our way past conventional economic truths." (Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, coeditor of *Words in Motion: Toward a Global Lexicon*) "Half comparative ethnography, half political pamphlet, Ferguson's impressive narrative is a tour de force questioning, deconstructing and reconstructing classic and contemporary notions of poverty, development and the welfare state in the region and beyond. With his creative and flexible analysis, he provokes thinking for action beyond narrow ideological boundaries. One could imagine enthusiastic endorsements of his work by Marxist campaigners, World Bank technocrats and traditional leaders alike. This highly original book 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." (Vito Laterza *Anthropology Book Forum*) "The book offers an exciting challenge to many of the default ways of thinking in development and social policy. ... *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." (Sarah C. White *Journal of Development Studies* 2016-02-16) "This is an extremely important book and one that will no doubt find a wide readership. It challenges conceptions of Africa that see the continent as either falling behind or catching up to the West. It pushes critical scholars to question their productionist bias and take seriously questions of distribution. Perhaps most importantly, it is for something, even if Ferguson's optimism is tentative and provisional." (Stephen Young *Antipode* 2015-12-08) "This fascinating and ground-breaking book is, on the face of it, an enquiry into the new cash transfer programmes which are growing fast in Southern Africa. But in the end it's much more: Ferguson looks deep into the politics of transfers and the way in which they may be linking to demands for a fair share in national wealth. The result is a radical and practical agenda for addressing the extreme poverty and inequality that persist in the world today." (Justin Williams *Development Book Review* 2016-03-11) "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." (A. Peter Castro Journal of International and Global Studies 2015-11-01)"[T]he 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.... 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." (E. Fouksman Basic Income Studies 2015-12-01)"James Ferguson's latest book makes an important contribution to the basic income literature. The book draws its empirical ballast from cash transfer programs in southern Africa, but this is not an ethnographic text; rather, Ferguson leverages the idea of cash transfers and basic income to launch a theoretical meditation on the nature of money, value, society, welfare, justice, and the state. The end product is reflective, thought-provoking, and beautifully written. One is left with the distinct impression that Ferguson is feeling his way into a social theory of the future." (Jason Hickel Anthropological Forum 2016-06-08)"Like the best kind of anthropology, James Ferguson's latest book, Give a Man a Fish, invites readers to see the world differently, questions taken-for-granted truisms, and reasserts the significance of lives considered peripheral to the concerns of powerful elites.... In a world of radical inequality and chronic unemployment, few development agents are willing to spend time 'translating' anthropology into action. Ferguson has done this work with the sensibility of an anthropologist." (Ilana van Wyk American Anthropologist 2016-09-01)

James Ferguson is Susan S. and William H. Hindle Professor in the School of Humanities and Sciences and Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Stanford University. He is the author of Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order and the coeditor of Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology, both also published by Duke University Press.

I had been looking forward to this book for a while, having read a few of the chapters as journal articles. But the book is a revelation. Ferguson, known to many for his deep critiques of international development discourse (particularly in *The Anti-Politics Machine*) asks us to reconsider the cash transfer schemes that have gained prominence in political debates in the Global South (and particularly in southern Africa) in recent years. He invites readers to see them neither as

dependency-fostering giveaways (as opponents on the right have) nor as politically-demobilizing crumbs for the poor (as detractors on the left have). Instead, Ferguson says, "the present political moment reveals that some of the foundational assumptions that have guided critical social theory for generations are in significant ways out of step with our new realities." He argues that the insistence--common to almost all teleologies of modernization--that the only answer to poverty is to get everyone into waged labor has blinded us to more immediate solutions to desperate poverty and massive inequality. There is much more to the book, of course, including an amazing synthesis of Africanist anthropology and political histories of welfare regimes. I was left convinced that I have been harboring a too-constricted sense of the possible. Though I have read or skimmed hundreds of books in the last year in preparation for oral exams and in dissertation research, I have not felt as jolted by a book in years. This is a must-read for historians and anthropologists of Africa, but also for anyone concerned with the urgent work of discerning solutions for the long-standing and global but entirely tractable problem of extreme poverty.

A helpful, thought-provoking book. Worth reading if one wants to rethink the structures of the world.

An interesting and thought provoking approach to the post-apartheid context. Through different essays, Ferguson illustrates the limits of a pure neoliberal critique of Southern Africa and particularly the current South African crisis, that is, unknown levels of social inequality and perpetuating poverty. Additionally, he masterfully suggests an alternative view of Southern Africa's active social welfare system, gaining increased traction despite neoliberal fashioned economic policies. A great piece of scholarship - Ferguson at his best.

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