Book Review Symposium


Editor’s Introduction

James Ferguson’s work needs no introduction to readers of *Antipode*. His 1990 publication *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* has been pivotal in shaping the field of post-development. His 2010 piece in *Antipode*, “The Uses of Neoliberalism”, presented a cogent critique of much of the academic engagement with neoliberalism (and could thus be said to be pivotal in shaping the field of post-neoliberalism). *Give a Man a Fish* continues in the vein by interrogating the expansion of cash transfers and the move towards a universal Basic Income Grant in places such as Southern Africa. These shifts can all-too-easily be read as the extension of neoliberalism but as demonstrated by Ferguson can also be shown to reflect much, much more—including new political and economic possibilities.

On my initial reading, I was immediately taken by the way that Ferguson tries to think in new ways about things such as money, work, and family, rather than presuming that we already know what they are and how they operate. He does this by drawing on rich empirical work, which offers invaluable insights into the growth of cash transfer programs as well as the impacts that result. There are strong resonances between Ferguson’s approach and the Community Economies approach in which I am trained. Both could be characterised as venturing into ideological territory with an open, inquiring mind and using associated strategies such as “reading for difference rather than dominance” (Gibson-Graham 1996:xxxii). Both work on the assumption that things don’t necessarily “line-up” (as Eve Sedgwick would say), and so Ferguson is interested in the “radical political indeterminacy that always attends any specific governmental technique” (p.31) just as a Community Economies approach is interested in the “radical economic indeterminacy” that always attends economic relationships, including so-called capitalist ones (Gibson-Graham et al. 2016:208). Both are interested in empirical questions such as the role of the state in enabling
diverse economies. An Author-Meets-Readers session at the 2016 AAG Annual Meeting in San Francisco was therefore an opportunity for fellow Community Economies scholars to engage with *Give a Man a Fish* as well as those scholars familiar with the Southern African context. Unfortunately, I did not hear the first of these readers’ engagements with the book. A pre-session afternoon tea with Jim resulted in an encounter with a North American example of “survivalist improvisatory labour” (p.100). I gave a man a bag–replete with passport, copy of *Give a Man a Fish*, notes on the book, and a bottle of “bubbly” to toast the book. The latter was probably the item most appreciated by the recipient in this transfer arrangement. Most of what I gave was relatively easily replaced–but I do miss my copy of the book with the underlining and margin notes that are stock-in-trade of an academic readership.

This published symposium brings together the thoughts of the readers from the AAG session: Sophie Oldfield, Katharine McKinnon, Colin Marx and Katherine Gibson. Also included is the contribution of Maliha Safri who was unable to attend the AAG session. The symposium concludes with a response by James Ferguson. Thanks to all the contributors and to Andy Kent for his support and forbearance.

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Review 1

James Ferguson’s *Give a Man a Fish* challenges us to engage with a world where there is little formal work and where the majority of ordinary people depend on others in complex, often precarious, family and neighbourhood networks. In this context, Ferguson draws our attention to the extension and development of state social welfare programmes, forms of social protection, and cash grants and transfer schemes developing in Southern Africa and across the global South. These schemes provide a mix of child and disability grants, and old-age pensions, critical sources of cash, often the only regular sources of income that are reliable, predictable, and on which many families survive. These programmes distribute cash transfers to 30% of the South African population, and, in varied forms worldwide—from Brazil to Iran—extend a state-led form of support to close to one billion people.

Whatever anti-neoliberal rhetoric might suggest about market dominance, this is clearly a world where the state remains essential. Ferguson asks that we “learn from, and take inspiration from, the rich world of actual social and political practice that is unfolding in the new welfare states of the South … a world full of invention and surprise, where the landscape of political possibility and constraint that we have come to take for granted is being redrawn even as we speak” (p.62). To do so, he draws on programmes for cash transfers in South Africa, experimentation with basic income grants in Namibia, and the introduction of pensions in Lesotho and Botswana, giving us a laboratory of sorts to reflect empirically, analytically, and theoretically.

How should we read this massive experimentation and extension of social transfers, beyond narrow notions of welfare? *Give a Man a Fish* suggests three ways. Not a “gift”, a form of charity, or a market exchange, Ferguson conceptualises grants as a rightful “share” that in small but significant ways can be a spring board, as well as a foundation, that enables survival and allows for dependencies on others to be sustained. They are not a substitute for income (unlike the “dole”, these grants are financially too small) but “catalysts” that enable a rendering and a recognition of active people. He suggests these innovative new schemes represent a *distributive turn*, which recognises the reality that distributive practices, rather than traditional forms of economic production, have become most significant. The centre of Ferguson’s analysis is this “distributive genius” that pushes us to shift our economic and socio-political analysis from production to distribution: from policies for job creation to policies, for instance, for basic income grants, a programmatic basis on which people can
survive. Perhaps most important, Ferguson challenges us to focus on the distributive politics evident in Southern states creating and extending cash transfer policies and programmes. Ferguson argues that this politics creates a different figure of the social: “not the abstract membership, citizenship, and social contract of the nation state, but a concrete and embodied presence” (p.215).

*Give a Man a Fish* opens up a research agenda on distributive practice and politics. At the heart of this distributive turn are theories of the state that render ordinary people “active”, that rework problematic and inadequate characterisation of the majority as “lumpen”, “informal”, or “the poors”. It is a research agenda in which we need to creatively and innovatively theorise the state, its projects, and its encounters with citizens.

What are ways of productively re-imagining and theorising Southern states as distributive? Ferguson suggests there is a lot that is new: “new modalities of distribution are associated with both new kinds of political claim-making and new possibilities for political mobilisation, even as they are also bound up with new ways of thinking and new rationalities of poverty” (p.14). While he opens up terrain in this broad claim, his provocation also highlights the need for empirical work that examines carefully and qualitatively what the expansion of cash transfers entail.

What are the state technologies and bureaucracies involved? In South Africa, grants are run in part via biometric-enabled cash cards, and grantees access the monthly cash payment in South Africa at local, neighbourhood-based outlets, run by the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA). Access requires approval and registration, engagement with SASSA’s and the state’s bureaucracy. How do these systems work in practice? How do ordinary people experience them? How can people-citizens provide evidence, a regularly updated archive, so-to-speak, of need, from whom and where, and via what form of state institution? In other words, what are the state encounters that shape this critical set of policy innovations? And, as importantly, how do transfers of cash reshape household dynamics, the powerful hetero-normative assumptions that shape our understandings of them? Suggestive and provocatively posed in Ferguson’s work, these are rich veins of qualitative and ethnographic work that require attention.

Welfare-cash transfer schemes fit somehow into a broader development state project. Yet, how in practice, for instance, do cash transfers co-exist with other parallel but challenging, often contentious, state projects, such as the delivery of housing, access to
schooling, and higher education? These are issues that generate intensive mobilisation and politics in the region, reflected in the hard but powerful lesson that access to state resources requires mobilisation. Ever more frequently violent action that shapes state-citizen politics across the region as an urgent, savvy, mix of negotiation and opposition (Benit-Gbaffou and Oldfield 2011). At the same time, the vast majority of citizens continue to wait for housing and access to services such as water or improved education. They wait for contracts to be signed, to be on the list, to get approval, for the state to deliver (Oldfield and Greyling 2015). Grants—and a distributive Southern state able to “deliver” them—sit alongside this contention and stasis, this complex material-bureaucratic and political terrain.

Built in old and new forms of political and social recognition that are contentious and legitimate, legal and illegal, this is a set of critical empirical and theoretical questions that beg to be “unpacked” and explored further. As Craig Jeffrey (2010:146-147) suggests in an Indian context, ordinary people operate with a split notion of the state, as “a craven, partial, and disorganised set of institutions” and as “a sublime institution and source of authority, rationality, and power”. In other words, the granting of cash transfers, the promise of housing, and waiting for state “delivery” are all products of the state’s commitment to the poor. Yet, as Akhil Gupta (2012:33) reminds us, state programs to address poverty produce “structural violence … enacted through the everyday practices of bureaucracies”. These are concerns central to what this distributive political turn might mean.

These intertwined, yet politically different, registers provide a critical and provocative terrain to understand the broad politics of distribution at play in Southern contexts. This is a poignant challenge in the South African context at present—a context where we openly and publicly speak of state capture, a re-distributive agenda of a different nature, immersed in powerful layers of patronage and clientelism. Although different from those technologies and politics of access and redress celebrated in Give a Man a Fish, it is these broader state contexts in which social welfare agendas operate across the global South from South Africa to Lesotho, Iran to Turkey, and Brazil. Give a Man a Fish appropriately reminds us that questions are not purely theoretical or for empirical interest, they are at the heart of the social project and its politics in countries across the South. It is in this context that Ferguson challenges us to “advocate and advance” innovative new programmes, a practice of academic research in which critique is necessary but not sufficient; a refreshing and critical way of framing our theoretical and political project.
Review 2

I’d like to admit right away that I came to this book a sceptic of its basic premise that Basic Income Guarantees (BIG) held radical potential, and that they were even feasible. Rather soon into the first chapter though, when Ferguson deconstructed the aphorism “give a man a fish”, the scepticism started to dissolve. At the end, I found myself changed, a rather uncommon experience for any book, and one that recommends it on those terms alone. I offer my comments here both to make connections to relevant work, as well as to raise some questions originating from a friendly stance willing to take the political “experiment” of BIG seriously as he urges us to do.

There is no doubt that what Ferguson argues here is right: we are facing a foundational transformation in production as momentous as when humans first shifted from agriculture to industry. In the dawn of industrial production, labour scarcity required dramatic and painful strategies such as the enclosure movement and the “poor laws”. Marx describes both in the bloodiest passages of *Capital, Volume 1* (Chapters 26-28) to show how early capitalists desperately sought to fill an increasing need for labour power through primitive accumulation. Today though, there is a massive surplus of labour power with the widespread growth of labour-saving technologies. The fourth, current-day industrial revolution is of a completely different character than the first three industrial revolutions in this regard by permanently reducing the need for workers across all sectors, not just shifting them to new ones.

As Ferguson writes, either this surplus humanity receives basic income or they receive nothing at all, since there is no great surge in the demand for labour waiting around the corner during the next business cycle upswing. He is not alone in either the diagnosis or the solution. Tech capitalists from Silicon Valley and the New York corridor are on board with BIG in a big way: they are at the helm of massive reductions in labour demand as a result of automation, and seek to address this shift in a positive way. Referring to self-driving cars, venture tech capitalist Albert Wenger says:

I think it’s a bad use of a human to spend 20 years of their life driving a truck back and forth across the United States… That’s not what we aspire to do as humans—it’s a bad use of a human brain—and automation and basic income is a development that will
free us to do lots of incredible things that are more aligned with what it means to be human. (quoted in Manjoo 2016)

A venture capital fund (Y Combinator) has announced a massive five-year research experiment where it will provide BIG to poor US residents and follow their activities to disprove the “laziness” critique. At the same time, there is also interest in BIG coming from the Cato Institute, a right-wing research centre in the US. Libertarians “make the case for a Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) as a replacement for the current welfare state” (Zwolinski 2014). Conservatives argue that BIG would allow a dramatic reduction in the state, and place everything in the market, so we could imagine a world in which education was finally fully privatised, as well as health and retirement, reducing what libertarians consider to be an awful “paternalist” welfare state.

Ferguson provides a rejoinder to the libertarian concern (but also leftist one) about paternalism and dependency in Chapter 5, demonstrating that dependency is actually normal and even something people seek out. Ferguson also persuasively argues against dogmatic leftists bemoaning the expansion of the market, as though a different way to distribute goods and services were in our immediate or even long-term future. Aside from the horror of strange bed-fellows,¹ i.e. philanthro-techcapitalists and right-wing libertarians, certain questions remain, one in particular concerning the libertarian dream. Their dream entails the elimination of production by the public sector altogether, since whatever the welfare state produces as a public good would be better commodified and privatised since all would have access to BIG to purchase what they require. For all but the fervent pro-market ideologues, there is a preference for mixed provision (market for many things and public provision of some), over a free market for all things. Could BIG end up supporting a politics of the latter, rather than the former? It does not have to, but that should be spelled out, if only to show that BIG does not lead to decimating the public sector for the sake of “choice”.

¹ Interestingly, Sarah Palin also emerges as a supporter of the Alaska Permanent Fund, an example Ferguson points to in the book as an American instantiation of universal income assistance. It was when she was governor (in 2008) that the largest payment to date was given to Alaskans. The payment was so much higher because of a one-time rebate of increased taxes on the oil sector, raising the issue of which industries will face higher taxation rates to fund something like BIG. It is difficult to imagine an even increase in corporate taxation that would strike at labor-intensive industries with narrow margins in the first place. Which industries would bear the burden? Or will it be funded be through higher income taxes? Both routes have political implications.
Within the private sector, many point out that there has been a massive reordering within capitalism itself, such that productive capital is shrunken relative to financial capital, real estate, and merchant capital. Today, the latter unproductive sectors of capital assume the greatest share of surplus and command their distribution (Duménil and Levy 2011). If before surplus was predominantly extracted in production, today it is extracted at the point of realisation in the market (Harvey 2015). More than ever, we need to develop a politics of the market that does not rely on wishing it away, as Ferguson argues leftists are apt to do. Here though, I would suggest that equipping people to engage in the market (via BIG) may be challenged by severe imbalances in how market prices are set, a process deeply marked by the ascendance of financial capital. For instance, in the US, Turing Pharmaceuticals (a company formed by hedge fund investors) infamously acquired a unique cancer and AIDS medicine, Daraprim, and raised its price from $13.50 to $750 a pill. Interestingly, insurance companies did not lead the objection, since they are able to adjust insurance premia and pass on the price to consumers—the protest instead came from public quarters. It is easy to see how BIG could be undermined by collusive price-setting, and extraction of value by other means.

Lastly, I turn to who exactly receives basic income. Ferguson argues for universal basic income, rather than means-tested income assistance, which would fix the grant to the income of the recipient in a progressive manner. He says that means-testing creates a bureaucratic apparatus resulting in greater waste than if the income was given to all. Tellingly though, his justification for BIG is framed in terms of the poor: “What if a poor person could receive a distributive payment neither as a reciprocal exchange for labour (wages) or good conduct (the premise of conditional cash transfers) nor as an unreciprocated gift (assistance, charity, a helping hand) but instead as a share, a rightful allocation due to a rightful owner?” (p.178). I put aside the fact that I am in agreement with the idea of BIG as a share, and focus instead on how he frames the share as a right of the poor, not the wealthy. It is not clear why the wealthy need BIG, since they have no problem laying claim to wealth and income, or justifying their receipt. Indeed, implicit in Ferguson’s framing above is a kind of progressive redistribution of income (from the wealthy to the poor by the poor laying claim to their rightful share of the wealth), not a universal distribution.

Ultimately though, Ferguson’s book is engaging and superbly well-written. It is the kind of book that contributes towards generating a new common sense on a topic that most have too easily, perhaps ignorantly, taken a position. Ferguson forces us to examine what is
discarded as impractical: what is our rightful share? Why does life-endangering poverty even exist, and can it be eliminated? We need more of this type of book, quite simply.

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Review 3

In *Give a Man a Fish*, Ferguson argues for radical new distributive politics, in which he suggests to do away with the insistence on entrenched ideas about “jobs for all” as the solution to poverty. He argues instead that the current situation demands a radical paradigm shift. Citing conditions of mass unemployment and a global economic structure which is unlikely to every provide jobs for the unemployed, Ferguson looks to new practices emerging in Southern Africa, and elsewhere, in which direct cash payments to the poor are being recognised as an effective means of delivering aid. Ferguson demonstrates how these contemporary examples of distributive programs could be harnessed to inform a rethink of aid and productivity, and to reconsider whether we should be thinking of the foundations of economies in terms of relations of production. In this piece, I focus on the radical feminist potential of Ferguson’s proposed “politics of distribution” and explore how it presents an exciting challenge to entrenched conceptualisations of the distinctions between productive and reproductive labour.

Ferguson’s overall argument is demonstrated beautifully in his deconstruction of the old adage “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” Ferguson offers an insightful critique, based on post-colonial and feminist objections to how this adage informs an ethic of development assistance: Why does the man need to be “taught” when surely he will know his own environment better than any outside “teacher”; and, Why is it a “man” we assume is responsible for providing food “for a lifetime” when in most places women bear the burden of procuring the majority of food for family and household? The main point that Ferguson makes, however, is that under current economic conditions (and ecological crisis in many fishing grounds), when we “teach a man to fish” what we are creating is an unemployed fisherman. While the “teach a man to fish” adage informs much contemporary aid and development investment, Ferguson argues that the focus placed on skills training, capacity building, and job creation has had its day. There is simply no possibility that the marketplace can create employment opportunities for all the unemployed young men in South Africa—a different solution is required.

Ferguson finds a possible path forward by shifting away from production oriented accounts of the economy towards consideration of distribution as the core process. This entails challenging a Marxist obsession with the material act of production as the foundation of all else. Ferguson argues that distribution for Marx was explicitly secondary and
derivative, and that production-centred stories of economic exchange often constitute dismissal and devalorization of distribution. He points out that this may have something to do with who is it that has historically been in charge of distribution, at least at the household level—women:

As a long history of feminist critique has pointed out, “housewives” and other women who perform non-waged work in domestic settings are not only among society’s hardest workers, they have always been charged with “contributing” many of the things that are most highly valued by society (not least the society’s—and the labour force’s—own reproduction). (p.40)

Feminist geographers have been at the forefront of work to better value women’s contributions to society and economies, and much of this work has focused on challenging a masculinist vision of productivity and recognising the value of reproductive work (see Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006; Katz 2001; Mitchell et al. 2003; Morrow and Dombroski 2015). As yet, the radical potential of considering the value of women’s contributions to distributive labour has not entered the literature. *Give a Man a Fish* suggests that the valuing of “women’s work” as reproductive rather than as productive remains insufficient. Indeed, “reproductive labour” seems doomed to be perpetually undervalued while primacy is still given to the value of production.

Ferguson’s focus on distribution provides a new avenue for considering what it is upon which our means of living are founded:

Since childhood (and before that infancy) always precedes adulthood, the slogan of a distributive radical politics might be this: before a man can produce, he must be nursed—that is, the receipt of unconditional and unearned distribution and care must always precede any productive labour. (p.45)

Ferguson goes on to explain in some detail through the rest of the book the grounds for a distributive politics that could displace a “productivist” perspective. His engagement with three key concepts strikes me as particularly useful for unlocking the nexus of reproductive and productive work: commons, dependence, and sharing. Below, I reflect on how
Ferguson’s thinking on each of these themes has exciting implications for a rethink of feminist conceptualisations of reproductive labour and in particular care work through the lens of distributive politics.

**Commons**

In his consideration of the commons Ferguson cites Peter Kropotkin, who argued that every member of society has “before everything, the right to live, and that society is bound to share among all, without exception, the means of existence it has at its disposal” (p.54). For Kropotkin every member of society is an inheritor of a great common estate, formed (as Claude Levi-Strauss suggested) “from a millennia of experimentation and innovation” (p.55).

The vast commons that we inherit is not only the material wealth of a society. Injustices, the legacy of colonisation, generations of social exclusion are also passed on. I would argue that what is also passed on are the social and bio-physical benefits of love and care. One of the things that the work of childrearing can (but does not always) produce is a commons of well-being: seeded in the healthy microbiome of babies with future implications of good health, seeded in the foundation of love and empathy that are linked with the mutual release of oxytocin in birth, seeded in the learning of how to give loving care that comes from growing up under a regime of loving care (see Buckley 2010; Dahlen et al. 2014; McKinnon 2016).

None of these things are visible in a productivist vision, and the category of social reproduction barely allows us to value them appropriately. By focusing instead on distribution, perhaps Ferguson provides a way to properly value the distributive work of care, and make space for it in our calculations of what is important in “life’s work”? To do so would require fresh engagement that asks a new set of questions: What are we distributing when we care well? How would we think about the product of care beyond, for example, the healed and healthy body? What inheritance might different kinds of care work “produce” as a future commons?

**Dependence**

As Ferguson points out, thinking of distribution rather than production also requires a repositioning of dependency. A distributive politics necessitates a revaluing of dependency that displaces the characterisation of distributive payments (such as welfare cheques, rent
subsidies, or basic income cash transfers) as “handouts” that substitute for the more “genuine” contributions to society that come from productive work.

In Chapter 5 Ferguson addresses the discomfort of the Left towards declarations of dependency. The rejection of “dependency” as a legitimate position contrasts with the high value placed on “freedom and independence” defined particularly around individual freedom and autonomy (Amartya Sen’s equation of development with individual freedom is one example of this; p.143). The focus on individual freedom is problematic on many levels, but Ferguson focuses on the fact that in many places personhood is defined as precisely not being an individual (unclaimed, truly independent), but being located in relationships, even relationships of dependency. A desirable form of dependency is surely, Ferguson argues, a recognition of our interdependence. A politics of distribution that would replace the primacy of “freedom and autonomy” with “interdependence and relationality”, seems to me a wise move in this age of the Anthropocene.

A refocusing on interdependence and relationality is also a way of according greater recognition to care. Much of “reproductive” and caring work takes place at the nexus of interdependence. Care work is predicated on the care of people who are dependent in some way, usually as children, the sick, the elderly. Furthermore, social life, kinship, friendship, collegiality, neighbourliness, all require us to invest care. A lot of childrearing work, for example, is about building and maintaining a foundation of relationality, teaching empathy and the importance of contributing to reciprocal relationships with siblings, friends, classmates, and beyond. Using a language of distributive politics perhaps provides a starting point for acknowledging that this realm of care work is not just important as the reproduction of the means of production. The care work of families and households creates a vital facet of the interdependent relationships upon which society depends, and contribute in diverse ways to local and global economic flows (see Cameron 1996; Safri and Graham 2010).

Sharing

Ferguson’s distributive politics is also founded on an idea of sharing. He asks us to think of the distribution of shares in a whole to which all members of the group have a right, as with the distribution of dividends to shareholders. Reconceptualising the nation, and all its citizens, as inheritors of a commons upon which the national wealth is based requires us then to consider the sharing of that wealth across all citizens as a legitimate distribution of the
proceeds of a shared endeavour. One of the problems here is in how membership of the group is defined, and the reliance upon the nation to stand in for the “company” in which all citizens own “shares” and thus have a legitimate claim on profits. The politics of nations and citizenship are fraught, and Ferguson acknowledges at the end of the book that the step of creating “concrete forms of recognition and practical mechanisms of distribution” requires a “politics yet to be invented” (p.216).

Leaving that debate aside for another moment, what I wish to focus on here is the radical shift Ferguson offers for how we might conceptualise the legitimacy of a claim to share, and the repositioning of a language of “sharing” and “shares” within that. I don’t think we need to wait for a new politics to be invented in order to begin a process of experimenting with a new distributive ethic. What Ferguson provides is a language, and plenty of empirical grounding, that can help shift how we think about the fundamentals of economic relations and the roles of sharing (and caring) within them. Where a vocabulary of productive/reproductive has proved an unsatisfactory way to adequately value and account for diverse kinds of caring work, a politics of distribution provides a way to place at the centre the “central yet undervalued” practices of care in the household and beyond. A politics of distribution creates a new conceptual space for care work to no longer be “Other” to the “core” foundational practice of material production.

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Review 4

I examine the implications of how this superb book deftly shifts the debate about the role and potential of the economies of poor women and men to a different terrain. For many scholars and activists working against poverty and inequality, notions of informal economies inevitably appear in some relation to the processes of impoverishment. Although well-known, it still needs to be clarified that poverty and informal economies are not coextensive and that the relationship between poverty and informal economies is rarely unmediated and simple. Acknowledging these complexities, the book also engages with the role of informal economic activities in relation to poverty and develops a concept of “distributive labour” rather than “labour in an informal economy” in order to sustain the broader argument.

The concept of “distributive labour” means the “work” that people do to secure a transfer of resources from those that have them to those that do not. This idea of “distributive labour” is used to help sever the concept of labour (understood as “wage labour”) only being a relevant term in relation to formal, capitalist production. By breaking this link, it is possible to arrive at new understandings of labour and distributions of wealth. The logic of the argument is that, in turn, new understandings of labour and distribution are needed to legitimate institutionalised forms of (cash transfer) distributions. It is also needed to legitimate frames of political and ethical reference that allow for the distribution of shares in a common national wealth to be considered rightful in the first place. And, if this is accepted, then it becomes possible to conclude that “wealth, being the product of social labour, social suffering, and social innovation, should be in some way shared by society as a whole” (p.55) based on “an unconditional claim of ownership” (p.56). The book’s persuasive argument is that through a claim on the rights in common with others in the wealth of the nation there is a legitimate reason to distribute it. That is, importantly, the basis for a differently, enriched political claim for redistribution is established.

In making this argument, the book is effectively cutting across a range of literature that addresses a question that has remained at the core of work on informal economies since Keith Hart’s (1973) seminal paper: What is the productive potential of the informal economy? This was/is an important question to ask because the nature of the answer determines how policy makers can interact with informal economies in order to address broader social injustices. In order to appreciate the contribution of the book, I briefly sketch out an existing trajectory of critique.
For a long time, the common response has been to see the informal economy in terms of the (productive) potential of the formal economy. In such a configuration, there is clearly little potential in the informal economy. Unless, of course, these informal economies are transformed into the image of the formal economy. Leaving aside important critiques of dichotomous approaches to economies, a key strategy in contesting this common response has been to challenge the understanding of “the economy” that underpins such a view.

Taking a lead from radical feminist economics, an important contribution has come through the notion of “diverse economies” in decentring formal, capitalist economic activities and proliferating the range of economies that exist in order to keep sustain everyday life societies (Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003; Gibson-Graham 1996). In such scenarios, formal capitalist economies could be dominant but are not automatically so. Within this view, it becomes possible to see a broader range of economic activities as being “productive” as well as to see forms of interdependence between economic activities that can legitimate different forms of distribution. Indeed, there are many commonalities in these arguments and positions in the book on this diversity. As part of this diversity there is an important distinction that Ferguson builds on, which is that being in a monetary economy does not necessarily mean always automatically being in a capitalist economy.

Working with a sense of a monetary economy and drawing on Milton Santos (1975), we can see that credit, financial middlemen, and cash are important features of being poor. In this view, being poor is related to a scarcity of cash, many different forms of indebtedness, and being caught up in multiple sets of relationships where certain groups can take advantage of systemic disequilibria between the supply and demand of commodities. In such scenarios, the circulation of goods, services, and money, and indeed the acceleration of circulation, is vital. Through this people gain and use money for consumption and partially pay off some of the indebtedness in order to continue to renew relations of indebtedness. This is consistent with an important strand of Ferguson’s argument about the sociality of indebtedness and dependence that poor people require to get by.

But what Santos also points out is that the circuits that the poor are caught in tend to be exploitative because the effect of the circuits and economic interdependencies is to collect up the savings of poor women and men and pass it on to other wealthier groups. This is very much consistent with the notions of relational poverty which suggests one person’s gain is
another’s loss (Mosse 2010). One of the advantages of this view is that it, perhaps, introduces a sharper edge to the notions of “distributive labour” than the book acknowledges.

Thus, the activities that the book draws attention to are important in many more ways than just a productivist register of “the economy” but they also remain caught in impoverishing relationships that, if not through design, have the effect of stripping them of cash. As Ferguson notes, this is no reason not to pursue cash transfers but it does raise the question of what potential the cash offers for change as it circulates. Can the money be a positive source for change along the way and before it is accumulated in more and more concentrated hands? Following Ferguson’s logic, the potential must at least exist. Excitingly, this raises the question of how that potential might undermine or challenge the “structural inequalities”?

Equally, a critical value of Ferguson’s argument is that it injects a much needed, enriched account of the role of the state in relation to informal economic processes and, in particular, how it injects cash into this economy. We gain a much clearer view of the importance of the state. One that has been overlooked, amongst other things, in a neoliberal myopia and through writing off the capacity of states in developing countries. But here we come back to an important issue. A distributive politics relies on something and somebody to generate the wealth to distribute. If the source of that wealth still remains the formal capitalist production system, and if that system anchors a “melancholia for wage labour” then how far is it possible to break free? So, we confront an old question, but in a decidedly new light: What is the nature of “the economy” which generates the wealth to be distributed and to what extent do we need to remain wedded to formal capitalism as the ultimate source of generating wealth? And what are the politics of this with an enlarged, enriched sense of distribution? This book makes a compelling argument for one way in which to start.

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Review 5

There are many points of sympathetic connection between James Ferguson’s *Give a Man a Fish* and the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham and this made reading the book a wonderfully stimulating exercise for me. Perhaps the strongest alignment is with his critique of the productionism of Marxian political economy and the productivist common sense that permeates much Left political discourse. For more than one-and-a-half centuries the figure of the exploited wage labourer has occupied the centre stage of leftist politics, carrying the flag as a member of the proletariat, and more recently, the precariat (Hardt and Negri 2001), at the forefront of societal change. But today, as Ferguson points out, waged labour does not support the livelihoods of the majority of people around the world. In the US, for example, there are 90 million adults who are neither employed nor unemployed but simply not in the labour force. For this vast body of people a model of politics that focuses on struggles over exploitation at the point of production is irrelevant.

Yet productionism still taints Left political agendas. Take, for example, respected Left strategists Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin (2015:18), editors of *After Neoliberalism? The Kilburn Manifesto*, who position distributional politics as only ever “ameliorative”, not system changing, while at the same time bemoaning neoliberal attacks on the redistributive powers of the state. In her essay in the collection Massey calls for a “new vocabulary” of the economy that nevertheless fails to dislodge the prime positioning of productionism. She suggests that the term “predistribution” be deployed to point to “the need to design a system of production which, in its own very workings, is not productive of intolerable levels of inequality” (2015:25) that then need to be mitigated by redistribution.

Ferguson is also interested in generating a new vocabulary with which to talk about economic matters, but he heads right into the territory of so-called “ameliorative” politics to suggest that a language of the “rightful share” be used to reframe distributive politics. It is this concern with a new politics of distribution that I wish to focus on in these short comments. Building on our shared commitments, I want to revisit production and distribution from an anti-essentialist Marxist perspective to explore where a queering of these terms might lead.

Early on in the book Ferguson introduces us to the myriad ways in which we all live off distributed allocations of funds. In my diverse economy imaginary he sketches out an iceberg of distributed payments. Above the waterline we have cash incomes derived from
invested capital—what flows to “shareholders” of companies, to those with private pension funds, and to those who are members of trusts. We find parental transfers by the “well off” to the next generation (e.g. housing deposits), and institutional grants and scholarships. Here we could also locate the financial flows to those who speculate on real estate, futures, derivatives, etc. These distributed payments and allocations are usually represented as providing the springboard for growth and development as traditionally defined. Below the waterline we have all the cash incomes derived from transfer payments largely orchestrated by the state or philanthropic agencies. Here we have the disability payments, child support, food stamps, single mothers’ pensions, rent subsidies, unemployment benefits, and support for the prison population. We also find the more suspect “demand payments” associated with transactions in the informal sector and underground or “black” economy. All these distributed payments and allocations are represented as providing the formal and informal social safety net that catches and carries along those left behind by growth and development as we have known it.

The “springboard to growth”/“safety net for the losers” division is linked to language that refers to people as either Independent or Dependent, as Givers or Takers, or, in the lingo of a recent Australian Federal Treasurer, Lifters and Leaners (Hockey 2014). Yet it is a productivist bias that codes the top floaters as independent and the bottom feeders as dependent. We don’t see those benefiting from payments above the waterline as dependent takers and leaners, because their distributed payments are traced back (in a rather circuitous route) to production—“working” not free loading.

Ferguson’s book argues, if not exactly for a reversal of this binarism, for a revaluing of what lies below the waterline and for the “rightful share” owed to the so-called leaners and takers. This new politics of distribution draws on a moral language of ownership, rights, and the claim “not to be without a share”. While I fully support this prospect of reinvigorating a politics of distribution and for the role that state policy can play in this intervention, I would like to broaden the horizon of a distributive politics to address the radical heterogeneity of distributive payments including those above, as well as below, the waterline. This means not only queering distribution, but de-essentialising and diversifying what we mean by production.

Marx’s contribution to a politics of language was to introduce the idea of “social theft”—grounded in the idea that labour should have property (i.e. ownership) rights to the
surplus labour it produces. He proposed that the “rights of man” vested in liberal freedoms and market exchange obscured the way that surplus labour (in the form of surplus value) was wrested from its producers and “rightful” owners. The politics that formed around this act of theft largely focused on reducing rates of exploitation for those in waged employment and allowing workers to claim at least a part of their “rightful share” of the spoils of industry. Anti-essentialist Marxist political economists have, however, pointed out that the distributive moment of the class process has been under-theorised and under-activated as a focus of politics (Gibson-Graham and O’Neill 2001; Resnick and Wolff 1987). The class process involves producing, appropriating, and distributing surplus labour and each of these moments provoke questions of class justice. George DeMartino (2003:8-9) defines these different moments as follows:

Productive class justice: fairness in the allocation of the work of producing the social surplus.
Appropriative class justice: fairness in the processes by which some individuals and groups in society receive the social surplus produced by themselves or by others.
Distributive class justice: fairness by which social surplus is divided among society members.

Marx’s social theft analysis provides the grounds for theorising an appropriative class justice focused on the workers/producers of surplus and their right (rather than the capitalists’) to own, distribute, and benefit from that surplus. But his wider analysis opens the conceptual and political space to theorise multiple moments of class justice—thus broadening the horizon of class politics.

In a similar broadening move we note that Marx focused his analytical powers on theorising the capitalist class process, but did so by distinguishing it from feudal, independent, and communal class processes. Our anti-essentialist vision recognises multiple class processes coexisting at any one time in industrial, community, and domestic sites. All these class processes involve some kind of production which produces forms of social surplus—surplus that supports the public goods and services that are shared by a community, and the young, old, and infirm who cannot participate in production. Surplus is what fuels
social possibility and being connected to the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus is how we negotiate living together in a “becoming community”.

Ferguson points out that “how people actually gain access to the things they need turns out to be far more complicated than simply exchanging their labour” (p.21). This is something that the diverse economy iceberg represents—those involved in waged labour, commodity markets, and capitalist enterprise represent just the tip of a huge iceberg of economic practices that support survival. Indeed, in the diverse economy people are involved in myriad forms of self-provisioning, domestic production, sharing, hussling, thieving, bartering, reciprocating, and more to get by. From the perspective of multiple class processes, each of these exchanges could be interrogated for how they are performing productive justice, appropriative justice, or distributional justice.

Take, for example, the huge productive injustice that is performed when young men and women with the greatest ability to produce surplus and make a valuable contribution to their community are denied any recognised role in contributing to social surplus. Or the appropriative injustice when women, old and young, provide caring labour for families and communities that is unrecognised, unremunerated, and unsupported by social infrastructure, such as clean water or public transport, that could ease the burden of this work. And with respect to the so-called lifters in society—the investors in property or futures whose money makes money—consider the deep distributional injustice that allows them to evade making contributions via taxes to building that very social infrastructure. Donald Trump’s heralded “legal” tax evasion strategies come to mind.

With this perspective on class justice and a vision of a diverse economy (in which multiple class processes coexist, producing, appropriating, and distributing surplus in different forms) we might slightly reframe the Basic Income Grant (BIG) that Ferguson discusses so persuasively. A BIG can be construed as a universal survival payment—a way of returning to citizens a “rightful share” of that portion of social surplus that has been harnessed and collected by the state. But this is only one moment in the life of this share. The BIG need not only be a survival payment that is expended in consumption goods—it can also, especially when pooled with family, community members, or co-operators, take the form of a capital investment in a small business or social enterprise or cooperative. Here it enables access to productive justice—providing the wherewithal for a wide range of people to engage in purposeful work that produces and contributes to social surplus. When invested in this way
it has the potential to contribute to appropriative justice—by allowing for individuals and groups to share directly in the new wealth they have created. And perhaps if there is surplus over and above what is needed to keep new enterprises afloat, there is the possibility for direct distributive flows to those with-out the enterprise to support community or environmental wellbeing.

The BIG is thus not only a “rightful share” of what has been produced but the means to involve everyone in what is to be produced as a social surplus. In this sense the BIG becomes a societal trigger for commoning—for including ever greater numbers of people in the process of making, sharing, and repairing that which supports us, i.e. social surplus and our environment.

Lastly, can the BIG also contribute to distributive class justice—that is, to fairness by which social surplus is divided among society members? The success of the BIG rests on challenging the ways social surplus is enclosed and privatised within corporations and by corporate traders who exert their exclusive right to harness and own surplus and evade any attempts to pay for the commonwealth that underpins their privately appropriated profits—whether it be gifts of the earth, of muscle, of intellect, or of public infrastructure. Corporate tax evasion reduces the share of social surplus that can be utilised and distributed by democratic means in a society, thereby undermining the potential of a BIG to trigger mechanisms for economic justice. Meanwhile we are seeing invigorated claims by affected communities and environments, social groups and species, on privately appropriated surplus that signals a decidedly un-ameliorative, extra-state, politics of distribution (Gibson-Graham and O’Neill 2001). This enterprise focused distributional politics pursues a rightful share of surplus for the purpose of repair and reparation directly—but is only viable where there is a responsible entity upon which to press a claim.

James Ferguson’s book has broadened the horizons of an economic politics for our times. I am grateful for the opportunity it has afforded to seriously consider the BIG and expand my thinking about its potential. *Give a Man a Fish* is an important contribution to liberating new thinking around distributional politics and economic justice. From the point of view of community economies research, it contributes to a much-needed queering of the production/distribution binarism that has so hog tied progressive economic politics.
Author’s Response

I must begin with a profound expression of thanks. All of the commentators have read the book in the way that every author hopes to be read: with care, insight, and deep engagement. Such careful and committed reading is hard work, and rarer than we would wish. Even more impressive is that these acute readings have here been combined with great intellectual generosity. At every point where critical appreciation gives way to the pointing out of gaps in the argument and unanswered questions, these have unfailingly been approached not as nits to be picked but as invitations and opportunities for new research and new thinking. This generosity enables what I regard as the most generative and rewarding sort of intellectual engagement, the kind that dispenses with empty academic point-scoring in favour of an earnest search for new insights and better conversations. For this intellectual open-mindedness, generosity, and good faith I am enormously grateful.

Sophie Oldfield offers a deeply informed set of remarks that point toward many of what I think of as the most pressing questions for future research. She begins with a short summary of some of the main arguments of Give a Man a Fish (hereafter, GMF). Some nuances are necessarily lost in any such radical condensation, of course, but it might be useful here to add just two minor clarifications, as they point toward a larger issue of some importance. First, it is not so much that, as she puts it, I “conceptualise” grants as a “rightful share”–what I mean to say is that the “rightful share” conception is one among a number of other conceptions that can be found “out there” in the social world. It is true that I regard this conception as especially interesting, and especially promising (in political terms), but I prefer to treat the question empirically (i.e. it is not a question of whether the analyst conceives a grant as a rightful share, but of whether the people who receive or demand such grants conceive them in that way). Similarly, the claim that “this politics creates a different figure of the social” founded in “presence” rather than membership needs to be qualified by noting that I regard such a politics as much more aspirational than actual; actual distributive politics still rely very heavily on highly exclusionary notions of (national) membership. I mention these points not to be pedantic, but to emphasise the extent to which the book is seeking to identify a set of emergent possibilities, rather than achieved realities or ready-made “solutions”.

Oldfield uses the second half of her commentary to point to some key areas where new empirical work can push GMF’s account further. I agree entirely with her sense of where the interesting questions lie here. The question of state encounters around social transfers is
extremely important, and not at all well researched yet. We have lots of studies of how recipients of cash transfers spend the funds they receive, but very little on what a transfer is understood to be (what is it, where does it come from, why is one receiving it?) or on how distributive bureaucracies become recognisable actors engaged in social transactions. Equally pressing is the question of how cash transfers reshape household dynamics. Here, only high-quality empirical (and especially ethnographic) work can really allow us to make progress in our theoretical discussions. Finally, the question of how cash transfers relate to other sorts of state service delivery is indeed a crucial one, and a political danger-point for distributive politics. I will return to this issue shortly.

Maliha Safri displays an appealing intellectual openness in opening her comments by remarking that the book caused her to change her mind. Such open-mindedness seems to me the most essential virtue for progressive thought at a time when it faces so many setbacks and impasses. But being open-minded does not imply ceasing to be critical, and Safri raises several important worries and cautions, both about the book, and about the political program of basic income. Regarding basic income, she notes the way that its recent appeal has cut across traditional Left-Right divisions, leaving progressive advocates of a radical distributive politics as “strange bedfellows” with certain libertarians and Silicon Valley capitalists who are also toying with ideas of basic income. Worse than embarrassing, she suggests, this may in fact reveal a fundamental flaw in the progressive basic income program, insofar as “no strings” cash transfers risk being used as a way to replace other sorts of state commitments. Might basic income not end up being a way of in fact reducing (rather than expanding) state commitments—the mother of all voucher schemes?

As for the strange bedfellows, one response would simply be to say that we had better start to get used to it. The political ground is shifting beneath our feet, and the old binary of “Left” versus “Right” may be of diminishing value or purchase. But the danger of basic income being appropriated by anti-state corporate forces is a real one, and requires us to revisit the issue raised by Oldfield of how cash transfers stand in relation to other state services. To be clear, neither I nor any basic income advocate I have encountered in Southern Africa thinks that basic income cash payments should take the place of free or heavily-subsidised state provision of things like health care, education, housing, and so on. Cash is rather conceived as one of a long list of things that must be provided if people are to have secure lives (see p.204). In such a conception, using cash grants to replace other state
commitments makes no sense—no more than one would suppose that providing someone with health care warrants cutting off their water supply. Of course, there is nothing intrinsic to the social technology of cash transfers that requires such an understanding, and no doubt there are circumstances under which the technical form of basic income could indeed be yoked to libertarian and anti-welfare-state projects. But this is only to say that basic income, like any other sort of distributive politics, is a site of struggle, not a pat “solution”.

Safri also urges attention to the way that the pricing of commodities provides a point of distributive extraction—funds distributed to low income people may be promptly taken back via predatory pricing. This is certainly true (and, indeed, it is only one of a great many channels through which resources are routinely “distributed” upward—away from, and not toward, “the poor”). But this is all the more reason, as I insisted, to focus on markets (and not “the market”, fetishised as unitary and all-powerful) as sites of social coordination and political struggle. Finally, on the question of means-testing, I think there are convincing philosophical and political reasons to favour the universality of a basic income grant for all. But there is another, more pragmatic reason that is perhaps even more convincing: means testing is only possible if the state has an informational basis for assessing people’s “means”. If the state has no way of knowing what someone’s income is, a “means test” can hardly be applied. Where such circumstances obtain (most of the global South, I would suggest, as well as the expanding “informal” domains of Northern economies), the “no strings” universality of an unconditional payment has considerable appeal.

Katharine McKinnon reminds us of the long and distinguished history of feminist thinking about the limits of productivist views of society. But she shares the scepticism that I voiced in GMF about the adequacy of the concept of “reproduction” to solving the problem. Focusing on the valuable work of (social and biological) reproduction done by women was a valuable way of rendering women’s work visible and valuable. But reproduction was generally linked to capitalism (and ultimately subordinated to production) via the concept of “the reproduction of the workforce”. In GMF, I noted that this old move has less force in a world where capitalists are ever-less concerned with finding enough ready workers to meet their needs. McKinnon points to a different problem: there is more to the sort of care work that she wishes to valorise than can be subsumed under the “reproduction” concept. Rather than just producing new generations of labour, care deals with the limits and frailties of life, and nowadays copes with the injuries and insults of not being wanted as a labourer at all. In
illness, in death, in unemployment—here care deals less with making new workers to produce “goods” than with providing the social response to life’s “bads”.

McKinnon points out that the care literature finds important points of connection with GMF, around themes of commons, dependence, and sharing. The challenge, I think, is to work toward stronger connections between the sorts of intimate, interpersonal relations that are so prominent in discussions of care, and the institutional and political-economic relations that dominate treatments of social protection programs and welfare state policy. There is a lot of important work to be done here.

Colin Marx addresses a theme that I think of as central to the book, which is the idea of distributive labour and the way that it can give a different perspective on the old “informal economy” concept. He provides a clear and very useful overview of the history of the way questions of production have figured in the informal economy literature, and nicely links this to the arguments in GMF. As he notes, the circuits of dependence in which poor people are engaged are often antagonistic and exploitative. I tried to emphasise this by noting forms of distributive labour (thievery, beating up old people) that involved coercion, but there is always the danger of romantic ideas of sharing creeping in. And of course Milton Santos is a useful reminder that financial extraction via credit has always been a key form of exploitation to which poor communities have been subject (and not some new, “neoliberal” development, as sometimes seems to be suggested these days).

Colin Marx’s greater worry is that a distributive politics may not be able to make much progress as long as what he calls “the formal capitalist production system” remains the source of the wealth to be distributed. I understand the worry. But is it really the case that “merely” changing distributive arrangements cannot alter the fundamentally “capitalist” nature of the production system that produces the wealth to be distributed? If we follow (the other, i.e. Karl) Marx, the answer is clearly yes. But if we were to turn to Kropotkin instead, we would say that it is the entire productive apparatus that is the source of our wealth. And by opening up the question of who rightfully owns that apparatus, we open up the possibility of people making distributive claims not as workers, but as owners. Now a production system that was really collectively owned could hardly be called “capitalist”. So if people really did somehow come to have effective claims to shares (even rather small ones) based on a claim of ownership, might one not start to hesitate over the word “capitalist” in the phrase “formal capitalist production system”? (The idea that a production system might be “mostly
capitalist” or “partly capitalist” rather than simply “capitalist” is of course a familiar one from the long history of theorising social democratic welfare states, though the issues are there posed rather differently.)

Finally, I was delighted and honoured by Katherine Gibson’s very thoughtful review. I have long been a “Gibson-Graham” fan, and was pleased to see that Gibson identified a fundamental sympathy (of which I have also been aware) between G-G’s assault on “productivist common sense” and GMF’s own argument for giving greater weight to issues of distribution. Indeed, I think it would be possible to systematically translate most of what I wrote in GMF into the language of Gibson-Graham, and I do not doubt that it would be in many ways improved for the effort. I very much appreciated, too, the attention to the “above the waterline” distributive payments to holders of invested capital—a useful supplement to GMF’s “below the waterline” focus. Indeed, the top of the “iceberg” is very relevant to the current basic income discussion. As Matt Bruenig (2017) has recently pointed out, the rich already have their “basic income”: fully 30 percent of all income in the US, he notes, is paid out as return on capital investment in the form of interest, rents, and dividends. But because the recipients of this “passive income” are generally very rich (instead of very poor) there are no worries about the supposedly soul-sucking, meaning-destroying effects of getting money without working for it.2

Gibson also raises a crucial set of questions about what people might in fact do with an unconditional cash payment like a Basic Income Grant, and observes that we might expect that such funds would enable not only consumption of needed goods but also a range of different activities, perhaps becoming “a societal trigger for commoning”—“including ever greater numbers of people in the process of making, sharing, and repairing that which supports us”. There is, indeed, some evidence of such “triggering” from the BIG pilot project in Namibia that I discuss in GMF. But this is an empirical matter. Funds can also be used in ways that damage or destroy social and environmental resources, and they can trigger conflicts and jealousies as easily as they can enable caring and collectivity. Here, as elsewhere, we find ourselves not with a settled solution, but with a problem to be investigated, and a stimulus to new research.

2 As Bruenig (2017) notes, “the average person in the top 1% receives a UBI equal to 7.5 times the average income in the country. If passive income is so destructive, then the income situation of the 1% surely is a national emergency! Where does the 1% get its meaning with all of that free cash flowing in?”
Once again, my thanks to all of the authors for taking the time to develop such thoughtful and collegial responses to the book, and especially to Jenny Cameron and Katherine Graham for organising the panel that gave rise to this exchange. I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to participate.

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