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**Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution:**

**A Book Review**

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Book Title: Give a man a fish: reflections on the new politics of distribution

Author: James Ferguson

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Lewis Henry Morgan Lecture that Professor James Ferguson conveyed at the University of Rochester (UoR), New York, in October 2009 provided the foundation for this book. It contains eight chapters coherently linked with and encompassing several social, cultural, economic, and historical facts that the author claims provide justifiable grounds for the emergence of direct cash distribution. Pointing to the weaknesses of the productivist view on development, Ferguson primarily shows his concerns and emphasizes the need to promote what he regards as the New Politics of Distribution emerging in various parts of the global South, including South Africa and Namibia Brazil, India, and Mexico. The book has come up with a very brief and sharp foreword by Thomas Gibson, the Editor of Lewis Henry Morgan Monograph Series.

In the book, Ferguson approaches the Southern African regional history from his long academic engagement, which has come up through the efforts of review and synthesized works aiming to bring forth the essence of the regional literature for consideration into the wider sphere. In doing so, he has reexamined and sometimes reinterpreted some of his prior ethnographic research. Unlike many other anthropologists, Ferguson has presented his critical axiological position showing the possible path to envisioning futures through the advocacy of direct cash distribution. This axiological stance places him clearly in the position of radical anthropology.

To reach the advocacy, he begins to criticize the productionist ideology and the associated practices inherent in neoliberal capitalism and Marxist approaches. Capitalism always shows the primacy of people in labor, and working-class “able-bodied” men are considered capable of supporting themselves through their labor. Any plan to distribute resources beyond it goes against the “incentive to work.” Considering the increasing size of the unemployed population, he is not satisfied with such an ideological position; the

assumptions of Marxists also fall into this, that only the wage-earning workers are entitled to a share of the social product. For Marx, distribution was “completely determined by the production structure,” a “product of production.” However, Ferguson sees that “before a man can produce, he must be nursed, i.e., the receipt of unconditional and unearned distribution and care must always precede any productive labor.” Here, Ferguson weighs the notion of direct cash transfers and basic income to unveil a mediating theoretical approach to the nature of state, money, justice, value, society, and welfare.

For Ferguson, the real big “development” story of the last 20 years is not microcredit but “the rise and rise of social protection” (p.2) manifested as providing small amounts of money to needy people. This has happened away from the imagination of marketization and neoliberalism. Moreover, such a system of cash grants to the poor is expanding mostly with the support of established development institutions like the World Bank, which are repeatedly taken as the prime advocates and pillars of neoliberalism. Ferguson regards this as a new politics of distribution’ which openly contests the central idea of the classic welfare states, which has, in essence, expanded the “Quiet Revolution” across the globe.

He is not happy with the critics and political parties that they were only articulate towards the ills of neoliberalism but could not emerge advocating any substantial policy departure. The newly introduced direct cash transfer system, what Ferguson regards as a viable alternative path, also demands new ways of thinking in the context of South Africa. Despite considering black populations as sources of labor, the state control of black movement, and residents made efforts to solve the problems compelling the labor to remain “migrant”. This implied the cost of social reproduction, such as raising children and caring for the sick and aged in the rural areas, creating a condition of “super-exploitation,” which

aggrieved the workers in their destination and their family and communities at their place of origin. Therefore, Ferguson strongly argues that a new beginning to replace the apartheid should commence at the place of those working for the capitalists and with the poor in the rural margins.

One's ability to get access to cash depends largely not on his/her ability to work but on the ability to claim a condition showing the need. This approach of direct cash transfer is novel and a path breaker in a sense it is non-contributory; it is paid to the beneficiaries out of national treasury funds without any reference to their prior "contributions." on the other hand, it is not meant to substitute for other economic activities but functions as a catalyst. It provides security to the livelihoods of the marginal people and access to wage employment. Even the "less developed" countries could adopt this measure extensively nationwide as welfare institutions. Likewise, it is not meant to govern or police the structure of domestic life; it supports the individual without considering his marital, age, and gender status. Ferguson links this kind of distributive practice with how other societies have organized differential distributive institutional arrangements across time and space. He sees that sharing and caring were there among the hunters and gatherers through obligatory rules, whereas gift-giving/receiving and ceremonial gifting institutions like *Kula* and *Potlach* were also cultural norms for some others. They all look different from what is presently considered the usual way of accessing goods and services via the market. Even in the US, many people get support from distributive provisions. Therefore, distributive practice and distributive politics are acquiring a new centrality.

Ferguson examines the famous Chinese proverb, "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime" (p.35) in chapter one. Here, he shows that the proverb sums up certain development philosophies rooted in productionist fundamentalism, "the object of

development work is transformation, not charity, and that recipient of aid should get productive skills and the opportunity to work, not handouts and dependency” (p.35). Moreover, he points out numerous discrepancies inherently accompanying the proverb, such as gender inequality, underestimating the ancient indigenous knowledge and thus diverting the shortcomings into the sphere of knowledge from that of the material means, and indirectly disparaging the significance of distribution.

He has beautifully presented how “the invention of social” took the place of what previously used to be considered “moral problems” to understand the (problematic) social situation. This process expanded with the emergence of Durkheim’s idea of “social fact,” in which he pointed out the need to understand a social phenomenon through other social phenomena. This process was further accelerated once it got the real substance of the “avalanche of numbers” in the twentieth century to look at the pattern in the social sphere. Ferguson argues that “welfare states” were invented with the set of techniques for managing “the social” and family became the key sites of intervention. Later on, “the death of social” opened the pathways for the market to take part in adding the shortcomings of the state. He sees that Southern African society is also not ideologically different from the above characterization of society which he critically regards as Eurocentric mainly because of the colonial and Christian ideological influence. But, he shows that the welfare state has a distinctive history in Africa, mainly in the settler-colonial societies of southern Africa, and this typical and extremely racialized history provided ground for the emergence of a new kind of social protection. To get rid of the white biased and moral policing approach, the direct cash transfer measure to the individuals comes out as a remedy to the income deficiency of the individuals who may not be found in the conventional form of a proper family. He optimistically claims that the use of

biometrics and smart cards can facilitate providing cash directly and transparently to the deemed beneficiaries. I have found that, in chapter two, Ferguson is capable of showing how the notion of society is rooted in the Southern African historical context, and thus new distributive measure becomes culturally relevant for the future distributive programs as well.

It is a general idea that people make their livelihood by being “productive” (p.89). However, the reality for all people in all the regions may not be that. Therefore, Ferguson states that distribution is also an important social activity, not only an economic one. In this pretext, in chapter three, he shows how distributed livelihood has become a major source of survival for significant numbers of people across the world who are not embraced within the conventional production sphere. Fast-growing cities and massive migration of people to cities have created a situation in which only small portions are involved in the formal employment sector in Southern Africa. He is not satisfied with the Marxists' labeling of “lumpen proletariat” and the “informal economy” as these terms and concepts are not able to capture the ground reality of these larger folks. Thus he proposes to use the term “survivalist improvisation” to denote the livelihood of people such as beggars, thieves, and visiting employed kin who rely more on direct distributive practices making claims of others' resources. As shown by the many scholars, Ferguson presents that different ways of distributive labor can broadly be divided into six, unlike clusters that include land and landholdings, migration and movement, sex and love, kinship and sharing, work and business, and death and funerals. The sphere of distributed livelihood embraces even beyond the people at the margin and it has been a key foundation for livelihood in Southern African regions and thus offers a solid historical and cultural base for the direct cash payment approach.

Often the academic left makes objections to the direct cash transfer approach as reformist agenda, arguing that it ultimately supports the neoliberal process that eventually erodes other social relations. Ferguson regards that it is easy to say that traditional or pre-capitalist societies were founded on virtuous relations than market relations. Borrowing the idea of Mauss, Ferguson argues that a modern society without market relations is inconceivable and claims that nonmarket relations were never inherently altruistic but were filled with “powerful elements of egoism, self-interest, competitive striving, and antagonism”. Here, Ferguson reminds us that an error committed by the political left is that they regard money and the market as capitalism. Instead, in chapter four, he argues that markets are a great source of information to know about the need of others. And, in fact, along with the political left, aid mechanisms and the state machinery time and again failed to understand this. Moreover, he strongly believes that money and the market do not erode intimate social bonds; rather, cash relation facilitates the maintenance of social bonds. Therefore, he regards the minimum quantum of income as social relations and bonds lifeline.

Chapter five traces a regional history linked with Ngoni invasions in which the defeated people were incorporated into their band but the form of the dependent. Desire to have more followers continued rooted in such historical context, later became the marker of one’s higher status even in the “liberated” and postcolonial societies, and the latter actively sought such “hierarchical and dependent relationships” with the elites, power holders, and propertied class of people. One can assume that becoming “dependent” shakes the imagination of “independent” and “autonomous” masculinity. On the contrary, emerging from such a long history, the willingness to have a dependent relationship with well-placed people is not the story of the inapt old-time and bigoted vestige of the

authoritarian past but a contemporary response to current social and economic conditions situations.

One of the most elusive proclamations expressed in The Freedom Charter of South Africa for Ferguson is the provision that “the people shall share the country’s wealth”. It is because it does not say how to materialize this. Initially, people regarded this as the nationalization of the national resources and the resources owned by the White propertied classes, but the African National Congress, the leading political force, did not take the country in that direction. The people, especially those excluded from wages, were not satisfied with what came in the form of social support based on some criteria like citizenship, residence, identity, and political loyalty. Millions of excluded continued widespread demonstrations demanding their pie from the national resources led to the emergence of direct cash transfers to the needy. Ferguson argues that “Rightful Share” is the better terminology that captures the essence of this provision that provides a minimum form of recognition of the social self of the beneficiaries and the obligation towards them. In chapter six, Ferguson claims that sharing is not a political choice but simply the most elementary form of social order. Moreover, he optimistically quotes Morgan that “human intelligence will rise to the mastery over property”. He also suggests learning from the rich experiences unfolding in new welfare states of the global South, being open to “increase the experiments whenever possible,” and being ready for the unexpected.

I found that the strength of this book lies primarily in historicization, through his empirical studies, and based on a larger set of data from secondary sources. He lucidly engages and links sufficiently with prominent anthropological contributions from scholars such as Foucault, Mauss, and Morgan. The significance of the book lies in its usefulness not only for academics but also for



people involved in policymaking, implementation, and advocacy as well. Additionally, the organization of the book in various chapters, which can be grasped on their own or as the whole text, makes it very useful for the need of different categories of the readers.