Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime. Clichés such as these seem so intuitive that one seldom thinks twice about where our intuitions come from. James Ferguson gets us thinking about the logic of this saying in his new book. We can recognise, for instance, that the cliché conveys liberal aversions to the dependency of the poor on charity. Ferguson asks whether the primary objective of development work is ‘teaching people to fish’, or whether in fact the principal goal is to make sure people have access to the things they need to survive. And if ensuring that people have access to the means of life is the end of development, and learning to fish no longer gives people the means to that end, then it is appropriate, after all, to ‘give a man a fish’.

The paradox which drives Ferguson’s book is that even though we are supposedly in a neo-liberal era in which the very idea of welfare is taboo and ordinary people are expected to take care of their own needs, entirely new cash transfer systems have been put in place that now help support large populations within dozens of countries in the global South. The particular intervention he seeks to make with this book is to interrogate the potential roles of cash transfer systems in addressing poverty.

Ferguson proposes that teaching to fish presents the problem wrongly as one of production; that if only people worked to produce something they would lift themselves from poverty. He points out that there is not only an oversupply of workers, but also an oversupply of many products in the world, and that poverty could be solved with the existing output of many global industries. The problem, he suggests, is not a lack of production per
se but the nature of distribution. There is no shortage of wealth, but only a small percentage is able to benefit from this wealth fully.

He develops an important philosophical justification for systematic distribution through cash transfer programmes, saying that they need not be thought of as charity at all if one reconceptualises ‘ownership’. One might say that the wealth produced in a nation is owned by all who live in it by virtue of past sacrifices and collective efforts, not simply those who formally own property, wealth and productive assets by virtue of legal title. Thus the ‘fish’ is not so much given as it is value already owned by those to whom it is then allocated through a system of distribution. Cash transfers can be thought of, then, as something like dividends from shares, rent, a birth right, and as liberation itself.

This gesture allows us to get away from a notion that recipients of cash transfers are helpless, passive and dependent. After all dependency is a given where people cannot sustain themselves from wages. Indeed he argues that under even the most rosy of job market conditions, being sustained through wages is in fact far less the norm than is often assumed. Many people are sustained not only through pay cheques but through all sorts of distributional flows. This is all the more the case in many parts of the global South where large populations are unemployed, yet they find ways to survive. Poor people labour extremely hard to try to create opportunities that will allow them to benefit from distribution, for example through remittances, romantic relationships, and some kinds of activities within the informal economy. For Ferguson the policy challenge is to recognise the importance of distribution in people’s survival and to support systems of distribution that help achieve more equitable outcomes.

Ferguson’s target is as much the left as it is the right. He does not claim that cash transfers in their present form represent a socialist nirvana. He acknowledges that they have many neoliberal underpinnings and do not exactly threaten to undo the present status quo. Yet he pushes the left to go beyond a politics of ‘opposing neoliberalism’ (26) to consider the kinds of governmental systems that might serve as vehicles for social justice. In this spirit, cash transfers are experiments which create openings that the left might explore more than it has. He argues some of the leftist suspicion of cash transfers derives from the way in which markets are readily associated with capitalism and the unravelling of mutuality. He suggests rather that markets are distinct from capitalism and can be put to the service of a variety of leftist endeavours.
The frontier that Ferguson seeks to push is the way in which social protection continues to be structured around the model of the male breadwinner. Grants are offered to carers of children, pensioners and disabled but not to unemployed adults. He argues that this productivist interpretation of welfare fails to apprehend the structures of both production and distribution. Cash transfers would become more progressive the more they can target not just conventional categories of the deserving poor but also working age adults who are poor through no lack of wanting to work but are unable to find work. Another modification would be that they are universal and not means tested, since these are not acts of charity to those in need but the distribution of wealth already owned by the recipient. A further challenge is to consider ways of establishing systems of social protection that do not depend on citizenship, since many are not citizens of the place in which they reside.

The power of Ferguson’s book is that it dispenses with conventional justifications of welfare which cite a virtuous relationship between production and social reproduction. Spending money on the welfare of people (social reproduction) was justified as an investment that generates returns from an educated, healthy and generally productive work force which achieved progressively better wages as a result of its productivity, and also generated economic growth over time, drawing in more and more workers. Ferguson’s distinction between production and distribution, rather than production and reproduction, helps us to think beyond justifications that rest on the investment in human capital for industry.

But we do not live in an entirely post-jobs world. Although Ferguson states he does not wish to dispense with the role of labour, he doesn’t talk too much about it. We might turn, then, to the thinking of the International Labour Organisation for a synthesis. Here the apogee of progressive social protection is not be simply a basic income grant but extending and deepening many different forms of social expenditure including labour market reforms and social services such as health care and education. The ILO shows that countries in Western Europe spend an average of 25 per cent of their GDP on public social expenditure, Central and Eastern Europe 25 per cent and North America 20 per cent. Meanwhile countries in Latin America and the Caribbean spend 12 per cent of their GDP on social public expenditure, Asia and the Pacific spend 10 per cent and Sub Saharan Africa spends 9 per cent (ILO 2010:29). Countries with poor populations need, in the final analysis, to spend more on the welfare of people both in absolute terms and in ways
that articulate with actually existing livelihoods in all their forms. In this broader project, Ferguson’s book is an excellent consideration of the place of cash transfers.

Reference