
Review Essay

Post-Agrarian Biopolitics**Andries du Toit**

Keith Breckenridge, *Biometric State: The Global Politics of Identification and Surveillance in South Africa, 1850 to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 266 pp. £72.00 hardback

James Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2015. 280 pp. £20.99 paperback

Deborah James, *Money from Nothing: Indebtedness and Aspiration in South Africa*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014. 304 pp. £18.99 paperback

INTRODUCTION

How does one make sense of the incorporation of millions of South Africa's poor and landless black people into a political and economic order that cannot deliver on its promises — and what are the implications?

The path of economic and political change that South Africa has followed in the last 70 years has led to an alarming and fateful state of affairs. Here, as in other parts of what we can perhaps no longer call the 'developing world', millions of people have been induced to leave land-based livelihoods and agricultural employment without any real prospect of finding decent alternatives in the formal or informal non-farm economy (Du Toit and Neves, 2014). While Apartheid is partly to blame, the underlying factors leading to this 'stalled agrarian transition' (Li, 2009) relate to longer time scales, extending both before and after National Party rule. Since 1994, a growth path characterized by high levels of financialization and capital intensity, deregulation and retail sector concentration has created a food system that squeezes farming incomes, puts pressure on employment, and continues to push people off the land. In addition, the formal economy generates few

jobs for the under-educated and poorly skilled landless poor, and the small, constrained and over-traded 'informal sector' provides scant opportunities for self-employment or for small and micro-enterprises (Black, 2010; Greenberg, 2016; Philip, 2010; Seekings and Nattrass, 2005).

South Africa's black rural and migrant people are thus caught in a double bind; a situation both post-agrarian *and* post-industrial. Partly because of Apartheid and colonial dispossession, and partly because of the direction of post-Apartheid policies and economic growth, they lack access to the productive sources that can enable food security through own provision. At the same time, participation in the capitalist economy does not allow the vast majority to thrive or prosper. Thoroughly dependent on the market economy, they are marginalized as farmers, producers, workers and entrepreneurs. However, while they are thus excluded (or, more accurately, adversely incorporated) economically (Hickey and Du Toit, 2007), they are central as citizens. At the same time as the post-Apartheid order denies them real economic opportunity, it depends for its legitimacy (and perhaps its political stability) on promises of universalistic social inclusion and economic empowerment (Du Toit and Neves, 2014).

A striking aspect of this situation is that while these realities are painfully evident to all the main participants in the political and policy process, there seems to be at present no coherent political counter-narrative that can provide an account of how these tensions can be contained or resolved (Marais, 2011). In this context, a contribution can be made by social scientists who seek to push beyond sweeping and teleological narratives about the virtues (or dangers) of 'inclusion', and who choose instead to pay careful attention to details and consequences of *how* people are in fact incorporated into the political and economic formations of post-Apartheid society.

Three recent contributions to the study of Southern African capitalism are particularly useful. Jim Ferguson's *Give a Man a Fish* (2015) is a wide-ranging collection of essays dealing with various aspects of the social and economic lives of poor and marginalized black people in Southern Africa. These essays are loosely linked together to construct a provocative argument about the politics and potential of emergent social policy and welfare programmes in Southern Africa. Keith Breckenridge's *Biometric State* (2014) is a long and detailed account of the technocratic arrangements, political calculations and racial ideologies that shaped what might at first appear to be a grey and practical aspect of Apartheid's history: the rise of biometric identification and the many (and mostly failed) attempts to use fingerprinting in the control and identification of populations. Deborah James's *Money from Nothing* (2014) is a careful anthropological study of finance, credit and indebtedness in post-Apartheid South Africa's black middle class. On the face of it, these three books are very different in their focus as well as in their approach. However, read together, they raise interesting questions about the nature of late-capitalist biopolitics and the terms and implications of inclusion into the post-Apartheid economy.

LAND AND BIOPOLITICS

These insights appear particularly interesting when considered from the point of view of a concern with the role of land ownership and land tenure, and of the course and implications of South Africa's agrarian transition. Critical agrarian scholarship, drawing from a largely Marxist and materialist analysis of Southern African capitalism, has in recent decades produced valuable insights into the politics of agro-food restructuring. Particularly useful has been its detailed critique of mainstream accounts of economic transformation and agricultural modernization (see e.g. Aliber et al., 2010; Bernstein, 1996, 2013; Borrás et al., 2011; Cousins, 2013; Hall, 2012; Kepe, 2001; Tapela, 2013; White et al., 2012). However, these analyses have tended to remain focused on the relations and systems of agricultural production. Ferguson's book provides a critique of and corrective to this narrow 'productionism'. Both Marxist and Liberal analyses, Ferguson argues, have conflated *land* reform with *agrarian* reform. It is true that farming remains economically important (else, why would more than two million households continue to invest labour and resources into it?). However, as Ferguson has reminded us elsewhere, land also has many other critical uses besides the production of agricultural goods. These include its role as the territorial base for networks of reciprocal aid, as a key component of the social organization of networks of kinship and other kinds of solidarity, and as a resource in the informal and private production of welfare (Ferguson, 2013). While this may seem an obvious truism, the implications often are not followed through. Rural landholdings and homesteads, situated far from the geographic centres of the core economy, are often relegated to the margins of South African economic history. However, from the point of view of the systems of reciprocal exchange on which most poor black South Africans depend for survival, they are central; the linchpins and hubs of the 'stretched households' and many-centred networks that connect people across vast distances (Du Toit and Neves, 2008; Ngwane, 2003; Spiegel, 1995).

By focusing on these connections and the 'distributive labour' (pp. 94–102) that they enable and on which they depend, Ferguson helps connect the study of agrarian transformation to the broader analysis of what can be variously termed (depending on one's theoretical affiliation) biopolitical or distributional regimes. The latter tradition, of which the work of Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass is a prime example, draws inter alia on the work of Esping-Andersen and focuses on the distributional impacts of welfare systems, labour markets and industrial policy (Davy et al., 2013; Seekings and Nattrass, 2005). The former derives from the thought of Foucault and looks at the forms of knowledge production and technological rationality characteristic of modern bureaucratic government (Davie, 2015; Du Toit, 2015; Foucault, 2010; Li, 2009). Both traditions are concerned with the implications and modalities of the incorporation and government of vulnerable populations in modern, bureaucratically governed social formations. Both

are concerned, not only with productive relationships but also with other aspects of distributive politics and welfare production. Most importantly, both pay careful attention to the *differential* inclusion of such populations into regimes of government and social investment: the politics of ‘making live and letting die’ (Li, 2009).

These concerns play a central but often disregarded part in the history of South African capitalism. As Seekings and Natrass have demonstrated, many of the key considerations shaping 20th century labour market, social and economic policy related not only to the political economy of South African capitalists and their need for cheap black labour (a factor of declining importance in the post-war years), but also to the design of South Africa’s welfare and distributional regime. The reserve economy may or may not have consistently played a key role in subsidizing urban African workers’ wages (Wolpe, 1972), but it was essential as a locus of political control and a site of welfare production. This issue loomed large in the minds of South African politicians and policy makers throughout the 20th century. The initial wave of de-agrarianization following on the mineral revolution and the intensification of commercial production in the countryside led to high degrees of social mobilization and unrest. This threat was temporarily neutralized by the creation of a racial welfare state that protected ‘civilized labour standards’ for white workers but excluded the rural African poor, subjugating them to the tutelage of chiefs and tribal councils, and referring the poor, old, sick and infirm to the institutions and solidarities of ‘native life’ (Mamdani, 1996; Seekings and Natrass, 2005).

Central to the design of this ‘political fix’ was the imagined capacity of the communal areas and the structures of rural African social systems to serve as bulwark against what was, at the time, called ‘detrribalization’ and the threat of a rapidly growing and unruly population of landless urbanized blacks making demands for social and political inclusion (Du Toit, 2014). These institutions were already under visible strain in the 1940s, a time when eventual integration and the inclusion of a black working class came to be considered as an option in Liberal quarters (Dubow and Jeeves, 2005). Indeed, from this perspective, Apartheid can be seen as a gigantic rear-guard action — a strategy of rural containment aimed at holding back the tide of black urbanization. Whites and a small category of urban black workers could be included but the African unemployed and the rural poor would be kept out. This strategy of selective and differentiated biopolitical inclusion was doomed to fail and could only be shored up via an unsustainable economic growth path and an enormous but ultimately futile investment in state repression. The new political order that took shape in 1994 based its political legitimacy not only on the extension of the franchise but also on the promise of universal biopolitical inclusion.

As Seekings and Natrass (2005) and Franco Barchiesi (2011) have shown, this new distributional regime did not however involve a radical break with what had come before. Rather, it amounted to the de-racialization and

extension of a framework that had emerged in South Africa in the 1930s: a liberal (in Esping-Andersen's sense) welfare state for whites in which claims to entitlement were based on one's identity as worker-citizen (Barchiesi, 2011; Marshall, 2009). On the one hand, there was surprisingly wide agreement — across racial and ideological divisions — about the legitimacy of some policy planks (high degrees of redistribution, including through social grants; lip service to the notion of a developmental state; the primacy of job creation; the need for modernization and global economic integration). On the other hand, both right and left continued to accept the productionist assumptions of the previous dispensation. COSATU, through its focus on full employment and the rights and entitlements of the core working class, still practised a distributional politics based on the notion of the 'worker-citizen'; the neoliberal right advocated inclusion through the economic empowerment of 'enterprising citizens' operating in free markets (Bernstein, 2010). However, as in the time of Smuts and Hofmeyr, both sides agreed that the rights and entitlements due to South African citizens would accrue to them through full participation in the productive economy (Barchiesi, 2011).

Ferguson's book exposes the blind spots and inadequacies of this tradition of high-modernist productionism. In some senses, his arguments are deeply pessimistic. The notion that biopolitical inclusion can be attained on the basis of advantageous incorporation either as a 'citizen worker' labouring in the formal sector, or through self-employment and entrepreneurship in the informal sector, are dismissed by him as fantasies. While 19th and 20th century capitalism needed the poor, the present-day variety evidently does not — not as producers, in any case. The path taken by capitalist development means that large numbers of Southern Africa's poor people (and, given current trends in automation, even larger numbers of the working and middle classes everywhere!) may spend much of their lives completely outside the realm of formal employment. At the same time, the strategies of 'survivalist improvisation' that might allow them to eke out a living on the margins of the economy cannot be argued to constitute anything one might call 'a job'.

In other ways, his long-term views are curiously upbeat. For Ferguson the failure of high-modernist narratives of progress do not mean that, as Achille Mbembe has recently argued, the humanist project of universal inclusion is ending (Mbembe, 2016). Rather, their collapse makes space for alternative politics. These are based not on the productionism of European ideologies of capitalist development (or of its overthrow) but on new policies and politics of *distribution*. For Ferguson, these politics are evident both in various social practices of informal redistribution that can be found in everyday South African life (pp. 91–114), and in the formulation and development of redistributive social policy (pp. 119–40). The most significant example of these formal programmes is provided by the salience of proposals for universal citizens' grants (or 'basic income grants') that, while stillborn (for now) in South Africa, have found traction in many other contexts. Even less ambitious policies, such as the South African Old Age Pensions and Child

Grants, come in for very optimistic assessment. These distributive policies seem to Ferguson at times to become liberated from the narrow conceptual assumptions of ameliorative social welfare within which Western and liberal social thought have been entombed. For Ferguson they seem to embody, or at least to 'allow us to imagine (and perhaps see some preliminary flickers of)', a new approach to distributional issues. He terms this as the politics of the rightful share: an approach that involves neither compensation for work nor an appeal for help but rather a sense of 'rightful entitlement' stemming from membership of a political and economic community (p. 168).

These are big and optimistic claims. The cold water Ferguson pours on the optimistic assumptions of productionism is obviously merited. His book works effectively as a 'gadfly' intervention, making visible and rendering questionable the unreflective mental habits shaping modernist thought about development, economic growth, employment and progress. He is probably right about the often-disregarded importance of reciprocal support, 'care chains' and distributive labour — and the ethos underlying them. However, any attempt to imagine a whole new distributional politics on this basis needs to have at least one foot on the ground.

CAPITALIST INFRASTRUCTURE

Breckenridge's analysis of the history of biometric identification in South Africa is in many ways tangential to Ferguson's arguments. His concern is not with the politics of distribution, but with how policy makers and government officials wrestled with the promises and problems of technologies of identification and documentation and their role in the control of subject populations. The implications of 'detrribalization', the collapse of agrarian economies, and the prospect of managing large numbers of footloose workers and unemployed poor people disconnected from the social systems and paltry archival resources of rural government posed distinctive challenges to the bureaucratic systems of the 20th century South African state. Breckenridge chronicles how successive generations of Southern African officials and politicians (first Galton, then Gandhi, then Verwoerd) engaged with the promise of technologies of fingerprint identification. Biometric means offered the prospect of basing strategies of control not on the resources of the archival state, but on the distinguishing marks of peoples' own bodies. He also shows how these hopes were repeatedly dashed by the sheer magnitude of the task. He reminds us that Verwoerd's homeland policies represented, in some ways, the defeat of Grand Apartheid, as his plans for control through a centralized fingerprinting system failed and he was forced to 'subcontract' problems of control to systems of traditional authority in the notionally independent Bantustans (p. 160).

Interestingly, Breckenridge also describes the links between this long history of flirtation with biometric identification and the social policies

implemented by the African National Congress (ANC) after 1994. As mentioned above, the roll-out of cash transfers, perhaps one of the most direct and effective ways in which the post-Apartheid distributional regime has benefited the marginalized poor (Leibbrandt et al., 2010), is not a creature of core ANC policy but an extension and broadening of what had been there before. A key part was played in Apartheid's dying years by homeland leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who sought to shore up his power by implementing an old age pension, diverting moneys from the Apartheid fiscus to the rural areas on which his rule depended. A group of feminist activists and scholars allied to the Black Sash made a fateful intervention, seizing hold of what was initially a crude form of patrimonial politics and turning it, through legal challenges and press exposés, into a vehicle for serious social policy. The considerations of end-game Apartheid *realpolitik* drove Buthelezi to ally himself with their demands, appointing the Natrass Commission of enquiry and putting his weight behind the standardization and regularization of pension payments in KwaZulu. Key among the Natrass Commission's recommendations was that government should create a system of payment points to ensure access to grants. To the company entrusted with this task, a little-known First National Bank subsidiary called Cash Paymaster Services (CPS), this was an enormous challenge. Not only were beneficiaries widely dispersed across often inaccessible countryside, but a system had to be developed to track payments and link them to unique recipients identified by the KwaZulu government's fragmented archival systems. In this context, South Africa's long history of experimentation with biometric identification — and the rapid development of relatively reliable new technologies of voice and fingerprint verification — came to be useful. By the early 1990s, CPS's partner Datakor had developed a world-leading system of fingerprint-authenticated pension payment that became the practical model for the implementation of social grants by the post-Apartheid government (pp. 181–88).

Breckenridge's account raises three significant points. Firstly, it highlights the contingent political and material conditions of possibility underpinning the new 'distributional politics' heralded by Ferguson. These policies did not flow straightforwardly from any coherent political philosophy held by the ruling party. (Kropotkin, Ferguson's personal point of reference for the justification of radical distributionist politics [p. 54], certainly had no say in it!) Certainly, welfare played only a subsidiary role in the ANC's Reconstruction and Development Programme, and cash transfers were hardly mentioned (ANC, 1994). Rather, the strong orientation of the new Child Support Grant towards primary caregivers, the lack of the conditionality recommended by World Bank advisers, and its disregard of the patriarchal views of family life prevalent within the ANC, were the result of what Breckenridge calls a 'feminist coup' in welfare policy. As in the 1980s, a series of coincidences allowed a small group of activists, scholars and decision makers to push policy in a more inclusive and pro-poor direction than might otherwise have been the case (Lund, 2008). It may have helped that welfare

policy was at that time a somewhat neglected terrain, far from the glamorous headlights of national concern (jobs, BEE, land reform). The broadening out of social grants and the resultant massive transfer of economic resources towards rural women was not a matter of coherent policy making. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that the new South African government's most effective pro-poor policy measure was developed through improvisation and accident rather than design.

Secondly, the book highlights the dependence of the course of social and political incorporation on the technical and practical particularities of bureaucratic systems of governance. Much depends on the history, materiality and design of the systems by which the bureaucratic state recognizes (or not) people as citizens and whereby they are allocated (or denied) rights and entitlements (Chipkin and Meny-Gilbert, 2012). This has implications both for the possibilities of control and coercion and for the terms of inclusion into the South African distributive regime. Breckenridge's book thus allows for a much more careful evaluation of the prospects of a politics of 'equitable shares' than Ferguson's rather bold and sweeping argument. Most importantly, he moves the argument on from a general, in-principle discussion of its philosophical basis, desirability or viability, to focus attention instead on the practical details of how it might actually work, and on the implications of the particular kinds of 'capitalist infrastructure' on which it turns out to depend.

Thirdly, he shows how the expansion of these technologies has been closely allied to the incorporation of large parts of the population into the databases and records of the financial services companies involved. The fantasies of effective biometric purview over large, undocumented populations that eluded earlier colonial governments have at last been realized in the neoliberal age. Financial entrepreneurs have developed effective and resilient technological assemblages that can connect mobile telephone networks, retailers' informatics systems, banks, financial service companies, and cheap fingerprint and retinal scanners in order to construct robust, mobile and spatially extensive electronic identification and payment systems well suited to cost-effective financial transfers in sub-Saharan Africa. At least some of the dreams of the proponents of 'financial inclusion' have come true. The technical innovations required for getting money to pensioners in the rural backwaters of KwaZulu seem now to have made it possible to 'leapfrog' the obstacles in the way of extending banking services to the poorest of the poor all around the world. This new formation of financial capital and surveillance technology Breckenridge dubs 'biometric capitalism'.

FINANCIAL INCORPORATION

What are the implications of this conjuncture of distributive social policy, technological innovation and opportunistic finance capital? Here, useful

insights are provided by Deborah James's discussion of the history of credit and indebtedness in South Africa. *Money from Nothing* is a wide-ranging book, dealing with the massive and rapid transformation of the financial lives of black South Africans in the years since the end of Apartheid. Unlike Ferguson, James's concern is not primarily with the large numbers of economically marginalized landless and jobless poor, but with what for want of a better term we could call South Africa's black middle class. Her analysis touches on many issues I will not discuss here — identity and religion, aspiration and social reciprocity. All the same, one of the strengths of the book is the care with which she teases out the ways in which the pre-history of what she calls 'credit Apartheid' has cast a long shadow on current policy and practice, leading to troubling forms of present-day economic disenfranchisement. James charts the relationships between the financial lives of black South Africans on the one hand, and the networks of reciprocal aid that were central to survival strategies under Apartheid. These networks of informal welfare provision had an ambiguous role, serving on the one hand to cushion shocks and distribute gains, but also, on the other, functioning as conduits for pressing demands and claims. Often they became sites of conflict. In this context, where social connections are at one and the same time vitally important safety networks *and* function effectively as drains on accumulation, access to formal financial services (e.g. savings accounts, lay-by accounts and the like) served to help isolate 'pools' of money *from* social claims; working to impede, not to facilitate, monetary flows.

The rapid spread of modern financial services has transformed this picture. A situation where credit and finance were fragmented and diverse (linked to individual store accounts, hire purchase agreements, store cards, and so on) is being replaced by a consolidated system in which everyone's credit history and debts are collected in a single flow, and in which key economic operators (credit rating agencies, debt collectors, financial services companies) have enormous powers of surveillance and intervention. Linked to the ease with which debit orders and emolument orders can be attached to the bank accounts of particular account holders, this creates a situation in which financial inclusion rapidly shades into adverse incorporation. From a situation in which banks and savings accounts served as ways for people to accumulate money, they now are geared towards the rapid *enablement* of flows in a context in which few checks and balances exist to safeguard poor and vulnerable people.

At the time of writing, the full implications of these developments are becoming clear. At the vanguard of the experiment in capitalist organization, biopolitical incorporation and financial inclusion described by Breckenridge and James is Net1 UEPS, the global logistics and financial services company that now owns CPS. CPS has in turn progressed from its relatively obscure beginnings to become the sole agent for the disbursement of social grants in South Africa on behalf of the South African Social Security Agency (Sassa). The tender by which this contract was awarded was found to be illegal by the

South African Constitutional Court in 2013. At the time of writing, Sassa's failure to ensure the issue of a legal tender (or, failing that, 'insourcing' of payments) was threatening to engulf the entire social grants payments system in crisis. A central aspect of this crisis is Sassa's dependence on Net1's proprietary Universal Electronic Payments System (UEPS). As Breckenridge points out, the convenient 'fix' provided to the Department of Social Development by CPS and Datakor's technical innovation has produced an unprecedented state of affairs. The biometric authentication and payment systems on which the South African government relies for the payment of grants to 17 million of its poorest and most vulnerable people, and the associated biometric data and records, are privately owned and controlled. Not only did this lead to a desperate stalemate, in which Net1 could effectively hold Sassa and its beneficiaries to ransom. Adding fuel to the fire, there were allegations that Net1 had used its position as 'gatekeeper' to this vast and captive client base to market the services of its other subsidiaries, which include financial services companies such as MoneyLine, EasyPay, Manje Mobile Solutions, Smart Life and others. Reports suggested that they may even have profited from their role by sharing beneficiaries' private information and facilitating illegal and unauthorized deductions from their accounts (McKune, 2017).

Thus, by a strange turn of events, the processes that were intended to turn the abstract entitlements flowing from citizenship of the social state into concrete reality seem instead to have turned South Africa's poorest and most vulnerable people into the captive clients of predatory financial companies. The most effective form of biopolitical incorporation in modern day South Africa is not COSATU's worker-citizen nor the independent entrepreneur of neoliberal fantasy, but the debtor-beneficiary. The material and institutional forms of citizenship have become the mechanisms of exploitative inclusion into credit markets, and the bank accounts of social grant recipients have been converted into financial conduits between the coffers of the welfare state and the pockets of the financial services industry (Du Toit, 2015).

EMERGING STRATEGIES

These developments seem particularly significant when seen against the backdrop of the longer history of the politics and political calculations around the terms and conditions of differential social inclusion. It may be that we are witnessing the emergence of a new and resilient form of late capitalist governmentality — one not constructed around the promise of universal biopolitical inclusion, but rather around the financialization of social policy, proceeding in close alliance with the capture of the state by kleptocratic elites and the rise of new forms of populist patrimonialism. In the increasing prominence of the *ad hoc* use of state repression and in the revival of rural development strategies that aim to entrench, once again, the power of

unelected traditional leaders, the Zuma presidency seems to be redeploying many of the strategies and tactics of ‘rural containment’ that characterized earlier attempts to deal with the challenges and crises created by South Africa’s agrarian transition (Beinart, 2014).

What, then, can we say about land and land politics in this context? Perhaps the first thing to point out is that one of the most striking features of the present-day land debates in South Africa is the extent to which they appear to be divorced from many of the realities described above. Discussions on land and land politics seem either to pivot on highly generalized moral arguments about colonial and Apartheid dispossession or on totally unrealistic estimations of the ability of land reform policy to address the deep transformations of agrarian structure that have been ongoing since the mid-20th century (Bernstein, 2013). In this context, Ben Cousins has recently argued that one key problem is the enormous symbolic and ideological importance of land as a political signifier. Much popular discourse around the need for land reform, he has argued, is in a sense not about the real economics of land at all; rather, land serves as a symbol of broader economic exclusion and the lack of transformation. Valid as they are, he has argued, these symbolic concerns should not be an excuse to ignore the need for a sensible discussion on the practical merits of policies for the redistribution of productive agricultural land towards commercially oriented smallholders (Cousins, 2015, 2017).

The arguments marshalled in these three books suggest, however, a different and rather bleaker view. Firstly, there is a risk of relapsing into productionism. While a properly designed pro-smallholder land reform programme could probably make an important difference to its 200,000 or so possible beneficiaries, it would clearly be mistaken to think that it could make any real change to the broader economic and social dynamics that have brought about South Africa’s stalled agrarian transition. As John Sender and Deborah Johnston have rather nicely put it, it would be a grievous mistake to seek in smallholder agriculture Africa’s missing ‘weapon of mass production’ (Sender and Johnston, 2004). Ferguson’s warnings about the risks of focusing land reform policy exclusively on the production of agricultural goods have clear relevance. Rather, policies around land access and land tenure should be focused on better understanding their key role in supporting survivalist improvisation and distributive labour: a key component in, but not the sum total of, fragmented and diversified livelihood strategies. This suggests at the very least that debates on land policy should focus less on ‘smallholder farmers’ as a distinct and privileged constituency, and more on the very diverse populations that constitute South Africa’s marginalized poor, and the ways in which they weave land-based and other activities into more or less coherent strategies to survive and thrive.

Secondly, Cousins’s proposal should not lead to the notion that we can simply set aside or ignore the political and ideological meanings of land as metaphor. In the context of the enormous depth and persistence of marginalization brought about by South Africa’s stalled transition — post-agrarian

and post-industrial — the metaphorical and symbolic power of land as a signifier of economic and political exclusion and injustice is not easily dismissed. Rather, it needs to be confronted in its own right as a discourse that names and frames general conditions of political and economic disempowerment. Here, land as signifier plays a very particular role in shaping new and often authoritarian populist political narratives and identities. This is an issue for another essay, but at the very least I will point out that the key role of land as a signifier of a lost plenitude is connected to deeply essentialist constructions of race, identity and national belonging, and raises important questions about the implications of the collapse of neoliberal hegemony for the project of imagining and constructing African modernity.

Even if we leave these questions aside, we still need to consider the nature of a democratic politics of the rightful share and whether it has the potential to challenge the extractive forms of rule evoked by James and Breckenridge. The central question posed by Ferguson's notion of the 'rightful share' is: who is this 'we' to whom the 'rightful share' accrues, and on what basis do we adjudicate claims? It is not clear how far one can go with a distributive politics rooted not in the abstract notion of citizenship or the nation state but in 'concrete and embodied presence and the obligation it implies' (pp. 213–15). Ferguson himself points out that moving from the politics of presence to national and supra-national relations (from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*, as a now mostly forgotten German philosopher would have put it) poses daunting challenges. This is something of an understatement. In complex, post-industrial societies bisected by differences of class, identity, history, national origin and access to repressive resources, the ability to make strong claims on common resources depends on the political and social narratives that define membership and the forms of entitlement that follow. How do these work? Ferguson's book invokes the potential of distributive policies, and Breckenridge and James highlight the risks that can undermine the benefits of biopolitical inclusion. But what we do not have yet is an analysis that allows us to start linking policy with *politics*. This is the challenge with which they leave us: the need to start thinking about the kinds of political narrative that can address and resolve questions of distributive desert in the context of present-day African states, hollowed out by corporate power and fragmenting under sectional claims.

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