Preface and Acknowledgments

In the course of doing critical studies of "development" over a period of many years starting in the early 1980s, I was often asked by would-be "developers" some version of the question "Well, then, what *should* we do?" I felt this was in important ways the wrong question (see epilogue to Ferguson 1990). But seeing the way money was being poured into project after project with little positive effect on the lives of the supposed beneficiaries, I was sometimes tempted to answer the question by suggesting that better results could be obtained if the project funds, instead of being spent on Land Cruisers and foreign consultants, were simply handed over directly to the "target population." Over the years, several other anthropologists have confessed to me having had the same impulse. I remember one who even proposed, half-seriously, that the money spent on development projects be simply scattered out of helicopters, so that local people could harvest it.

The fact that such thoughts could only take the form of suppressed impulses or cynical humor reflects the power of a long-standing anxiety about simply "giving" money directly to poor people. From the time of its birth, a key imperative for capitalism has been to drive people into labor, and any plans to directly distribute resources to those who lack them have been met by powerful worries about undermining what is politely called "the incentive to work." Such considerations have long made it self-evident that development projects should prepare people for such work,

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not provide them with sources of livelihood independent of it. Handing out cash was simply not in the cards, and proposing such a thing could only be understood as some sort of joke.

It is no longer a joke. I began to notice this as I watched the steady expansion in recent years of a system of paying cash grants to the poor in South Africa. As I puzzled over the apparent paradox of a "neoliberal" regime sending monthly checks to a steadily expanding roster of citizens that now exceeds 30 percent of the population, I gradually realized that the new willingness to "just give money to the poor" (as the title of a recent book has it [Hanlon, Barrientos, and Hulme 2010]) was not a South African peculiarity but an emerging reality across much of the world. As this book details, recent years have seen the spread of major programs of direct distribution of cash to the poor (so-called cash transfers) all across the global South, often with the support of established development institutions (such as the World Bank) that would not long ago have recoiled in horror at the very idea. This has happened at the same time that increasingly large populations find that they have no access to wage labor—the form of livelihood that has long been understood both as a historical telos of economic development and as an anchor of progressive politics.

How are we to understand this new situation? And what is the significance of the global trend toward cash transfers to the poor, in southern Africa and beyond? This book is, in the first instance, an attempt to answer these questions, and to propose at least some preliminary ideas about how we might think about the emergence of what I call a new politics of distribution. The argument that unfolds in the following chapters is that the current conjuncture is pregnant with both new political possibilities and new dangers. At the same time, I suggest that a sustained reflection upon certain practical puzzles and impasses of the present political moment reveals that some of the foundational assumptions that have guided critical social theory for generations are in significant ways out of step with our new realities. Moving the question of distribution from the periphery of our theoretical concerns to the center, I will argue, both opens up new political possibilities and sheds new light on a host of analytical issues ranging from labor and livelihoods to markets and money to dependence and personhood.

I approach these questions through a long engagement with a specific regional history. While the empirical cases that will be most fully

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explored here are those of South Africa and Namibia, the account I seek to provide of distributive processes extends to much of the wider southern African region and has involved pursuing lines of investigation I have worked on for years while revisiting (and in some cases reinterpreting) some of my own earlier ethnographic research in Lesotho and Zambia. But far more important than my own work here has been the work of countless others. The book is, in no small measure, an attempt to review and synthesize that work in hopes of bringing the insights of an exceptionally important and high-quality regional literature into a wider circle of discussion. Studies of the southern African region (especially the detailed and richly empirical accounts that feature in the best of its ethnographic research) are, I suggest, of broader significance and import than has sometimes been recognized. And if, as I will argue, our ability to conceive of real political alternatives in these neoliberal times has suffered from a certain poverty of the political imagination, this rich ethnographic archive may contain resources that might be of some use as we seek to find new ways both of understanding the present and of envisioning possible futures.

Beyond my intellectual debt to this outstanding body of literature, I also have personal debts to many of the scholars who have produced it, scholars who have in one way or another inspired or assisted my work over the years. Some I have known for decades now, and many have been directly supportive of me and my work. Especially helpful have been Patrick Bond, Jean and John Comaroff, Ben Cousins, Donald Donham, Andries du Toit, Harri Englund, Gillian Hart, Achille Mbembe, Donald Moore, Nicoli Nattrass, David Neves, Francis Nyamnjoh, Stephen Robins, Jeremy Seekings, Andrew Spiegel, and Eric Worby. I am very pleased to have held honorary appointments in recent years at both the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cape Town and the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at the University of Stellenbosch, and I am grateful for my wonderful colleagues at both institutions.

In the course of this project, I also came to realize how much can be learned from the people I came to think of as "policy intellectuals"—sophisticated thinkers engaged with pragmatic issues of social policy in settings as various as NGOs, think tanks, universities, government departments, trade unions, and political parties. I have interviewed many of these people, formally and informally, over the last decade. For the most

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part, they are not named in the text, either because they were promised anonymity or simply to avoid causing them embarrassment. But I am grateful to all of them. In South Africa, I am especially grateful to the busy officials at the Department of Social Development who so generously took the time to share their perspectives with me, while in Namibia I have special debts to Dirk and Claudia Haarmann and Uhuru Dempers of the Basic Income Grant Campaign for their kind assistance and generosity.

The heart of this book was originally presented as the Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures at the University of Rochester in October of 2009. I am grateful to the Department of Anthropology at Rochester, and especially to Tom Gibson and Bob Foster for inviting me and providing warm hospitality during my visit, as well as to Dan Reichman and Eleana Kim. I am also indebted to the discussants for the lectures—Douglas Holmes, Dunbar Moodie, Mary Moran, Marina Welker, and John Western—who provided a host of valuable suggestions and questions. In developing this volume for publication, I have tried to keep the feel of a series of lectures. As its subtitle suggests, the book is intended less as an authoritative report on research than as a series of "reflections," whose goal is less to explain the new distributive programs I describe than to reflect on their meaning and significance. The chapters are envisaged as an ordered sequence of independent essays. While they are meant to fit together into an integrated whole when read in sequence, my intention is that each chapter can also be intelligible if read separately. My hope is that the reader will forgive a certain amount of redundancy that must inevitably accompany this strategy.

Support for this project was provided by the Stanford Humanities Center, where I held the Ellen Andrew Wright Fellowship in 2010–11, as well as by the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study, where I was a fellow in the spring of 2011. I am grateful for the intellectual stimulation of the colleagues with whom I shared fellowship time at both institutions, and especially to members of the research group with which I worked at Stellenbosch: Ben Cousins, Henry Bernstein, Bridget O'Laughlin, and Pauline Peters. I am also grateful to the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam, where I had the opportunity to serve as international fellow from 2008 to 2010. Of those colleagues who generously hosted me while helping me to refine my ideas, I would especially like to thank Freek Colombijn, Marjo de Theije, Birgit Meyer, and Oscar Salemink. I also benefited from

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being part of the seminar “Markets and Moralities” at the School for Advanced Research, Santa Fe, New Mexico, which was held in May 2009. I am grateful to all of the seminar participants, who pushed my thinking forward in important ways, and especially to the seminar organizers, Ted Fischer and Peter Benson. A version of chapter 4 appeared in the volume that emerged from this seminar, *Cash on the Table: Markets, Values, and Moral Economies*, edited by Edward Fischer (Santa Fe: School of Advanced Research Press). A version of chapter 2 appeared in *Registration and Recognition: Documenting the Person in World History* (*Proceedings of the British Academy* 182, 495–516), while a version of chapter 5 appeared in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (2): 223–42.

Tania Li has been a wonderful source of ideas and questions for many years now, and I have greatly benefited from her comparative thoughts about distribution and what she once called “worlds without work.” Liisa Malkki, as always, has been a font of insightful questions, inspired suggestions, and new ideas. I have received very valuable comments from many other readers of sections of the book, including Keith Breckenridge, Jean and John Comaroff, Harri Englund, and Hylton White. I also benefited from an extensive discussion with Lawrence Cohen, Stephen Collier, and Tobias Rees. Austin Zeiderman and Sarah Ives both did very valuable work as research assistants and have my thanks.

I continue to benefit from being in the intellectual company of a stellar group of scholars in the Department of Anthropology at Stanford. I am grateful to them for providing such a supportive and intellectually engaging home base from which to work, and especially to Thomas Blom Hansen and Lynn Meskell for their stimulating reflections on the South African scene. In the wider Bay Area, a group of colleagues was kind enough to read the entire manuscript at a late stage: Don Donham, Gill Hart, Donald Moore, Lisa Rofel, Anna Tsing, and Sylvia Yanagisako. I am deeply grateful for their insights and encouragement. As always, Ken Wissoker has been the best of editors, whose good judgment and unflagging support have been assets I could count on throughout the process.

Finally, I wish to observe that, like any human production, this book has only been possible thanks to a long series of prior enactments of material distribution and social and emotional care. I therefore dedicate it to all those who have supported and nurtured me through the different stages of my life, and especially to my parents, Jane and Jim Ferguson.

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