Interview

From Antipolitics to Post-Neoliberalism:
A Conversation with James Ferguson

Humanity co-editors Nils Gilman and Miriam Ticktin spoke with James Ferguson on May 31, 2013, at Stanford University.

Humanity: Your book The Anti-Politics Machine (1990) has become perhaps the single most influential text in the historiography of development. Its thesis is that the latent function of development is to extend the bureaucratic power of the state, which explains why, despite the endless failures of development to achieve its overtly stated ends, the practice of development continues to be pursued. Let us begin by discussing the genesis of this thesis: where did this framing come from?

James Ferguson: It began with my dissatisfaction: with the very repetitive policy-focused discussions going on at the time (in the academy and outside it) concerning “development failure.” The question was always, “Why do development projects fail?” and “How can we do it better the next time?” But these did not seem to me very productive questions. Lesotho was knee-deep in “failed” development projects, and to come in and say that they were failing seemed to me to be not actually saying very much—that was obvious on its face.

So I instead found myself more and more interested in a new question, which was, “What is it that these projects are in fact doing?” I said, let us set aside these normative questions of success and failure, and let us be good anthropologists and be descriptive: what is going on here? Once I started asking that question, I found that the intellectual work that was being done in these development agencies and development reports and in development discourse generally was quite substantial. There was a tendency toward academic snobbery, I think, to look at these development intellectuals as people who were just being really bad anthropologists, to point out that what they were saying was not very well supported, and to pick it apart. What I wanted to say is that they are not doing good anthropology because they are not trying to do good anthropology—they are trying to do something else, and they are actually very good at doing that something else.

That something else has to do with constituting usable objects, meaning the objects that can be attached to programs that development agencies are there to set up. It has to do with creating the points of engagement with the knowable world that make it possible for them to do their jobs—that make it possible for these programs to build a case for why they need more money to do the next project, and why the next project is going to turn out differently from the previous one. I wanted not only
to say that this technical work is important, it is an action in the world—it is not just talk, it is a material practice that produces material effects—but also to open up the question of “what are those effects?” Simply describing those effects in terms of a binary of success or failure was inadequate.

**H:** You say you were interested in the material practices that were going on in these development agencies and funding agencies. That is one piece of the work, the point of departure for the book—the topic of inquiry, as it were, which was indeed novel. Also central to the success of the book was the way you used Foucault. Specifically, it is an explicit application of the theory of institutional reform that Foucault articulated in *Discipline and Punish*, his genealogy of how humanitarian concern with inhumane conditions in premodern prisons had dubious effects on the quality of lives of prisoners but had absolutely clear results in terms of producing improved technologies of surveillance and control, not just of prisoners but in the wider society as a whole.

It seems to us that part of the power of your application of this conceptual framework to the development industry is that it implicitly frames the Global South as a giant, planetary-scale prison, with the North exercising a global disciplinarian function over the South. Development, in this view, becomes an effective way to manage the global prison, in effect to improve the bureaucratic capacity for prisoner control. And the developmental state, far from being an agent of liberty, instead gets cast in the role of the prison warden.

Although border control issues were not part of your original thesis—in fact, one of your central empirical points is that it makes no sense to think of Lesotho as a self-contained economic object of development, as in fact its economy is completely permeable with South Africa’s—a conception of the role of borders is one of the powerful aspects of the book, even if it remains implicit. Have you considered how your framing of the concept of development connects to the perceived criminality of the Global South, in contrast to the normatively law-abiding and law-giving Global North?

**JF:** I am not sure I would take the analogy of the prison quite as far as you do, if only because actual imprisonment is actually a very expensive, individualized mode of care. A prison is a place where the state houses and feeds everybody, and that is not a very good account of a place like Lesotho, so I do not think it is a literal model in that sense. But yes, I was certainly drawing parallels in terms of the kind of power that is being exercised, an analogy of power. I have become more and more interested in the question of states and mobility in relation to the sorts of power that are exercised in the parts of the world where I have worked—in what Arjun Appadurai once called “the spatial incarceration of the native”—that is, the idea that there are certain kinds of people who properly stay where they are, and there are other kinds of people (like you and me) who travel around the world and decide where we want to live.2

This question of spatial mobility has become a more and more central aspect of the difference between people who live in what we used to call the First World and those who live in what we used to call the Third World. One of the things you see all across Africa is an aspiration to spatial mobility. Whereas what you might have seen
in an earlier era would have been an aspiration for developmental mobility: “The whole society is moving upward, and we want to be part of that.” You are now much more likely to hear, “I have got to get out of this place. Can you help me get out of this place? My strategy is an individual one or a family one based not on moving up but on moving out.” As I say elsewhere, the strategy has become one of “egress, not progress.”3 In other words, whereas the question of the nation-state as a frame of reference was important to my first book, I have increasingly come to understand it in spatial terms, understanding the nation-state as a “container for membership.” The movement of people across those borders inevitably challenges and calls into question those memberships, as we are seeing in Europe and the United States and indeed all over the world. It is one of the key hinges of contemporary politics.

H: How does your thesis compare to that of James Scott in *Seeing Like a State* (1998), where he argues that the goal of development is to help render society legible to the state, to extend the power of the state into previously disorganized fields?4

JF: My conception is a little different from Scott’s. The fields I am describing are not previously disorganized—they are very organized, and I spend a lot of time talking about how they are organized. In other words, it is not so much about introducing order into previously unordered fields, or introducing a greater legibility that allows one to identify objects; it is more about facilitating an engagement with usable objects that results in a swarming state power rather than a controlling state power.

Now, in the end, the Lesotho state does not find itself in this position of being capable of realizing the dream of modernist social planning, the state that knows where everybody is and is able to control their behaviors. That is not the sort of state you see in places like Lesotho for the most part. On the contrary, it is actually a state that is able to control very little. Under these circumstances, what does it mean for the state to have expanded? It does not mean that they can now control things better than they used to. It means that there are more offices, more people on the payroll, and more procedures that route you through little micro-points of bureaucratic control—what I call a bureaucratic state power. The state gets its hands on more and more things, but without forming a coordinated and rationalized apparatus of planning and control.5

H: This connects to the thesis of your second monograph, *Expectations of Modernity* (1999).6 We might call this a form of *droˆle de modernite´*: an enactment of the forms of bureaucratic state power, based on the imagination of what a modern state “ought” to look like in the minds of bureaucrats in a place like Lesotho. Such role-playing does not necessarily produce the sort of Teutonic bureaucratic efficiency and material rationality that Weber had in mind when he was writing about these things a century ago. And yet there is a mimicking of forms.

JF: Certainly! Something I was very aware of when I was working on the Zambia material was that a lot of the Foucauldian work on the colonial experience does not capture very well what colonial modernity was like in a place like Zambia. Consider discussions of censuses, for instance, which presume the idea of an all-seeing panoptic state, busily enumerating. But in Zambia the colonial authorities did only the crudest
counts of population. They of course published them as if they were solid, well-researched numbers on how many people lived in which district. But when, after independence, the new national government actually performed a modern census for the first time in the history of the place, they found out that there were actually twice as many people in the country as they had previously thought! In other words, all through the period of colonial rule, the authorities had not even the slightest idea of how many people they were ruling.

As you say, there is an element of play, of make-believe. The historian Steven Pierce wrote a piece on Nigeria called “Looking Like a State,” engaging James Scott, which said what is going on Nigeria is not a matter of seeing like a state, it is a matter of looking like a state—that is, of performing the forms of state power in order to be adequate to expectations of the sorts of authority you are supposed to project. Meanwhile, the actual mechanisms of authority were much more continuous with older ways of binding rulers and ruled.7

H: Both The Anti-Politics Machine and Expectations of Modernity were conceived and written in the late twentieth century, when the signal geopolitical transformation of course had to do with the collapse of communism and the triumph of neoliberalism. These books were published, in other words, during the heyday of the postcommunist suspicion of the state, which took the state to be an agent of oppression. Even though your politics share little with celebrators of capitalism like Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, or Daniel Yergin, your skepticism of the developmental state as an agent of positive change shares not a little with these authors. Where are the points of overlap and where are the disjunctures between their critique of the state and yours?

JF: It is important to recognize that this thing we call neoliberalism is an intellectually complex field, and that there is not a single politics that we can neatly and unproblematically attach to the style of reasoning that we identify as neoliberal. This is a point that Stephen Collier has recently made well. He identifies a series of what he calls “minor traditions” within neoliberalism that are actually attached to a very different kind of politics than we are usually used to associating with the word.8 So it is partly a matter of careful intellectual history and scholarship.

But there is also a political issue. I think it is important for us to acknowledge that Hayek and company were importantly right about something. I sometimes remind my students that one of the biggest fans of The Road to Serfdom was Keynes, who spoke very effusively in praise of the book. The reason is that it was not principally an attack on the welfare state; it was an attack on central planning, on Soviet-style centrally planned economies. And Hayek got that mostly right. Now, that Hayekian critique contains an important point of agreement with what anthropologists have always said, which is that ordinary people actually know a lot about their own lives. They are often better positioned than experts from on high to make decisions that affect their own lives. The point is: where does the information lie? Who has enough information to actually know what social good is? Anthropologists very easily assimilate these arguments: we have been saying the same thing for a long time.

The problem is that this observation can degenerate into a simplistic antistatism,
which it does in the rightist politics of many neoliberals. In a similar way, in anthropology, it can also degenerate into a simplistic antistatism, which takes the form of a romanticism that suggests that the grassroots are virtuous and that if only the state were not there then everyone would be egalitarian and nature-loving. So those dangers are undeniably there: of taking a modality of thinking critically about state power and turning it into a simplistic anti-statist politics. But I would rather think of this as one route into a discussion of the problem of government. That is the spirit in which Foucault talks about neoliberalism, which is quite different from most of our discussions of neoliberalism, which tend to be ideological and based on a “for or against” model. Foucault looks at discussions within neoliberalism in the same way that he looks at other discussions of the problem of government. Which is to say that it is a mode of reasoning that takes place within the context of a set of problems. He is both sympathetic with and critical of the problem of governing. He does not think we want to live in a world in which there is no government. But he knows that government always involves the exercise of power, it always involves possibilities for abuse and exploitation.

But his solution is not to say that therefore we should be against power. For him that is silly: you cannot be against power; power is an integral problem of the social world. The question is: how do we want to be governed? That is a very important discussion and I do not think you get anywhere by saying, simply, “We’re against neoliberalism.”

**H:** Your new work describes in depth how neoliberalism forms a complex field. When you wrote *The Anti-Politics Machine*, was neoliberalism already in your head? Was it something that somehow haunted you then that you have felt a need to revisit? In other words, how has your thinking on neoliberalism evolved in the two decades since?

**JF:** I had never heard the word “neoliberalism” when I wrote *The Anti-Politics Machine*. In that book I was writing about a prestructural adjustment world. I was writing it just as structural adjustment was beginning to kick in all across Africa. That is when we first started hearing about neoliberalism—in the context of structural adjustment in Africa. And like everyone else, I thought it was terrible, and I was against it. It was a necessary ideological moment, of saying these are actually disastrous policies, being justified on the basis of spurious arguments, and that nobody has really thought what the long-term costs are going to be.

But that work was done, that critique was made. We reached a point where it did not seem like it was accomplishing much to say, yet again, to an audience full of people who already believe it, “Aha! Look: structural adjustment is bad for the poor!” You got to the point where even the World Bank itself was saying it. So who the hell cares whether I condemn neoliberalism: it is an empty political act! It is not that I disagree with those critiques—I agree with them absolutely—but simply reiterating them does not get us any further at this point.

I have become more interested in thinking not so much about what we are against as about what we’re for, thinking about positive political goals and strategies, which to me leads to the question of government. To see what I mean by that, let me give
an example of a different kind of question. There’s a program in Zambia to take care of AIDS orphans. Zambia has a massive number of AIDS orphans, and the state recognizes that there is a public responsibility to take care of these orphans. Most of these orphans have been taken in by older women, and the state acknowledges that this is a valuable thing and has committed to supporting it. The program that has been in place involves providing these households with food. Once a month a truck comes through and they have a list of names of all the households where AIDS orphans are being minded, and they give each of these old women a bag full of maize meal, which is the local staple.

Now, the new thinking comes in, and says, “You know, it’s good that you’re supporting these women, but this isn’t the right way to do it. Instead of giving them a bag of maize meal once a month, why don’t you give them an amount of money that would enable them to go to the local shop and buy the equivalent amount of maize meal if that’s what they want, but that would also give them the choice to do other things with the money, things you might not know they need. The old woman may realize that what she needs this month, for example, is to use the money for bus fare so that she can go get that lingering infection treated. She knows her own problems, she knows her own circumstances, she knows her own resources to solve those problems much better than some planner in Lusaka does. So give her the ability to make her own choices about how those resources should be allocated.”

Now, what are we to make of this? On the one hand, we can say this is classic neoliberalism: using markets to deliver social services—getting government out of the way of delivering those services, and letting the market provide them instead. But on the other hand, you can also say that this is trusting rural women to understand and address their own needs in ways that planners cannot. A lot of anthropologists find that a very attractive idea.

I do not think it is very helpful to insert this into a left-versus-right ideological frame. It is a different question—about the bow of government, about governmental technique. I want to linger over those questions. I do not want to have a deductive politics where we say, “Ah, so this is neoliberalism, so now we know we’re against it!” I want to stop and say, “Hm. Well, what do I think about that? Let us think this through. What social services can be delivered through markets? What role can cash transfers play in redistributive social programs?” We should allow the political judgments to emerge out of the investigation rather than being the thing that drives it.

**H:** This question of politics connects to the key thesis of *The Anti-Politics Machine*, concerning the depoliticizing effect of development. The idea of depoliticization has become the lodestone of much current historiography of development. Now, twenty years on from the initial publication of the book, does the success of this thesis surprise you? Specifically, Nicolas Guilhot has discussed in these pages how the idea of depoliticization has taken on a life of its own, to become a common theme not just in critiques of development but also in critiques of other fields rooted supposedly in sympathy for the oppressed, such as humanitarianism. What do you make of this broadening of the “depoliticization” narrative?
JF: It remains an important move, to be able to take procedures that are described as purely technical and to demonstrate how and where they involve things that are more than just technical, how and where they may involve a politics that requires digging in order to bring it into visibility. I have no problem with that kind of work, but I am increasingly dissatisfied with work that treats such critique as the end of the project, as if to say that now we have done our job: “We’ve exposed this as political, we’ve revealed that there are relations of power and inequality behind it all, and we’ve denounced it. Now we know we’re in the right and they’re in the wrong. Gotcha!” But a lot of times, this simply demonstrates what everyone knows already. Any sophisticated observer is already well aware of the politics that are going on. I do not see that as a very powerful end point. What is more interesting is if you treat that as a beginning. OK, so there is a politics going on here, but where is that going? What are our possible points of alliance and engagement with that politics? In other words, we need a substantive analysis: given that it is a politics, what do we think of that? What do we do about that? That seems a more substantial discussion than the denunciatory one. It leads into the question of government.

H: It is true that in the case of development work a lot of people are aware of the barely hidden political agendas behind technical initiatives, even if they do not put them in their own report. And yet, sitting here in the epicenter of the Silicon Valley, we are struck by how often technology is described in ways that are not so much antipolitical as purportedly postpolitical—undergirded by an assumption that technology can allow us to get away from politics altogether. In the more starry-eyed versions of this narrative, this is even made explicit: the claim that technology can allow us to escape the play of power. This perspective also pervades a lot of discussions about ICT4D (Information and Communication Technologies for Development). In other words, while you may be right that sophisticated observers of development practices are not under any illusions about the political nature of their activities, there remains a very strong constituency (that goes way beyond the development industry) that views technology as not just politically neutral but as a get-out-of-jail-free card for political and social challenges.

JF: Ha! You do not need to tell me this—I teach at Stanford, a place that is absolutely saturated in a certain naive technological utopianism, this idea that “we’ll solve poverty because we’re clever people, and we’ll start some start-up and invent some gadget.” And I think it is often extremely dangerous. These are powerful discourses, particularly in the United States and particularly in Silicon Valley, where people have huge economic stakes in telling that story. So I agree with you, it is not as if that is over, it is not as if there is no need for the critique any more.

H: So here we are in decade seven of the development era. Some on the left argue that the development industry—with its focus on community development, basic needs, and so-called human development—basically exists to palliate the depredations caused by “development” as an immanent historical process of capitalist economic penetration and resource exploitation. (This argument owes something to Polanyi’s idea of the “double movement” of capitalism, with “development aid”
standing in at a global scale for the second move.) Do you think it is fair to characterize the development industry as essentially the velvet glove to neoliberalism’s iron fist?

**JF:** There is an implicit ultra-leftism that lies behind that formulation, that suggests that were it not for the velvet glove, then we would have The Revolution—if only things were worse, they would be better. I just do not find that at all convincing. If things were worse, they would be worse; and if they were better, they would be better. So I suppose that makes me a reformist, in those terms. I do not think that somehow without the velvet glove, all illusions would be undone and the masses would come to consciousness. That is the narrative I see behind that critique, but I think we should have learned something by now. On the other hand, I am more sympathetic to the Polanyian perspective that you refer to. For Polanyi, the double move is not just cosmetic—it is a real, powerful thing. The countermovement is consequential. But the thing to remember is that for Polanyi the countermovement is not necessarily a good thing. It is potentially a very dangerous thing. One of his principal examples of the countermovement is fascism. But the countermovement also contains progressive possibilities—things like the welfare state, or the New Deal, which he is clearly quite sympathetic to.

In the same Polanyian frame, you can say something similar about some of things going on in the contemporary development world. If you look at things like the cash transfer programs that we were discussing earlier, for instance, I do not think they are simply a distraction or a veil. I think they are something new and consequential, significant in just the way that Polanyi suggests about countermovements. But I think we also need the Polanyian suspicion that we do not actually know where these programs lead, or what political significance they are going to turn out to have. I think of this because there is a discussion in Southern Africa that asks whether these cash payments are politically demobilizing. Are they not in fact quite conservative, people ask, because they take the people who have the most to gain from radical change, and buy their quiescence? This is the Marxist line you sometimes hear.

I would rather treat this as an empirical question. Are small cash payments to poor people in fact demobilizing? It is a big mistake to assume we already know the answer to that question. We are starting to see new politics emerging around new forms of distribution, so it will be a matter of historical observation. The advocates of more radical forms of direct distribution say to the Marxists, hey, these are exactly the people you have never known what to do with. (Read Marx on the *Lumpen*—he does not have an optimistic analysis of their political possibilities!) So what do you do when that fraction of the population starts to look like most of the population? The advocates argue that giving people small amounts of cash makes them more active, not less: it does not create passivity, it creates activity, it creates expectations, it creates positive claim-making relationships with the state, and creates the possibility for new forms of political mobilization.

Now, one has to treat this too as a what-if story, not as an accomplished fact. The question of what kinds of new politics and new kinds of mobilization come along with new kinds of distribution is an interesting issue that ought to be approached as an empirical question. Much depends on the political arena in which these things are
set. Do you have a democratic political sphere with competitive multiparty elections, as you have in India, where people come to poor communities quite explicitly to say, “Vote for our party because we’ll give you this this and this,” and then the other party has to come in and make a rival offer? In such circumstances, you have a process whereby the political power of people who do not have any property can be transacted in a way that makes it possible for them to make distributive claims. And I do not think that is a bad thing. There is not necessarily a clear separation, in such cases, between patronage politics and democratic politics.

H: The World Bank’s flagship publication, the *World Development Report*, in 2011 took on the topic of the relationship between violence and development and made a concerted claim that development practitioners, particularly ones operating in the many zones of subnational conflict, need to pay much closer attention to the political impact of development work, specifically how aid affects conflict dynamics, in addition to “developmental” outcomes.10 The implicit assumption of this text—supported by a great deal of evidence—is that in fact the development industry has historically been woefully unaware of its political nature and impact. Is this new turn toward an open embrace of politics a positive sign of honesty, or is it simply going to pave the way for yet more intrusive interventions and state penetrations?

JF: The World Bank has always been a very articulate critic of positions that it held ten years earlier. They are very good at that. Now one conclusion you might draw from that is that you should not listen to what they are saying now, because ten years from now it is going to be shown to be wrong. It raises the question of how you should interpret these shifts. In a world that is full of shifting fads, how should you interpret these shifts? Do they just result in you speaking a different language and substituting a few buzzwords, or do they produce a fundamental transformation in the institution? Thinking about it historically makes one a little suspicious about whether there has been some massive and fundamental change here. Changing languages often does not correspond to changing lending priorities. At the same time, institutions do change. You have to be a very cynical observer to assume that a Jim Yong Kim is the same thing as a Paul Wolfowitz. So I would like to be optimistic about what is happening.

H: Rosa Brooks has suggested that one way to characterize the international system is as a global-scale failed state.” She points out that there was once a time when right-thinking cosmopolitans assumed that the telos of global politics was some sort of world government—a government which would surely be federal in its structure, but nonetheless unified in its application of democratic governance and the promotion of welfare and economic growth. That vision was always utopian, but if we re-adopt the idea of a world state as a normative horizon, then it is hard to argue with Brooks’s sly suggestion that the world *in toto* constitutes a failed state, marked by vast stretches where states lack the will (to say nothing of capacity) to promote the general welfare of local populations. Surveying the landscape of the Global South, do you think that the progress of the state’s penetration of the social sector has stalled, or will we continue to see greater state control, for better or worse? If
not, what should we expect to see in places where state control appears to be receding rather than advancing—places like the Sahel, central Africa, parts of central Asia, and perhaps even urban Latin America? Are we seeing a withdrawal of the swarming capacity of the state in some places, and what does this mean for development?

JF: This question makes me think about the healthcare system of the United States. People say the United States does not have a public healthcare system. But that is not true. We do have a public, state-funded healthcare system—it is just a really crappy one: you cannot get primary care, you cannot get preventative care, you cannot get treatment when treatment would have saved your life. But when you finally have tumors all over your body, then they will put you in the hospital and keep you there for six months and it costs $500,000 and the taxpayer pays.

You can say something similar about global social protection. We do have global social protection— it is just that it is really, really bad. So, if we see that there is a famine coming in Somalia, we wait and we wait and we wait. It is only when people start actually dying and we take pictures of people with bones sticking out of them that we act. Then we raise a whole lot of money and put food on ships and bring it there at great expense in order to mop up the damage. The result is not just that the human suffering of the Somalis is much worse than it needed to be but also that the interventions that do take place end up costing more than the much more modest interventions that might have prevented the famine in the first place. So maybe the failed state is a provocative image for capturing that.

But it would be a mistake to suppose that the choice is so stark, that either we have proper world government, or else we have nothing. What we actually have now is a very complicated institutional landscape that is not well theorized. Even empirically, there is a lot we do not know about how these things work. But it is very important to realize that there is a lot of stuff going on that is not at the level of the nation-state, much less anything like world government, but that is nonetheless very consequential. I think of the work of Ramah McKay on the Gates Foundation in Mozambique. The Gates Foundation is huge, and they are part of this big thing that calls itself Global Health that is all over the world spending lots of money and dispensing a standard package that it presents itself as how the world should get its health. States are not irrelevant here. The Gates Foundation makes a point of setting itself up in partnership with the state, and taking on certain responsibilities that we would think of as belonging to the state, but with resources that dwarf the resources that are available to a state like Mozambique. So states are not driving this, but they also have not disappeared. Meanwhile, you have a bunch of resources that are being deployed in ways that are not attached either to states or to international agencies like the United Nations. But they are unquestionably doing important, often beneficial work.

So here again we need a research-led strategy. We in fact do not know exactly what the politics of this are—that is one of the things we are trying to figure out in the course of this research: what are the politics of this, what are the possibilities?
As mentioned earlier, your newer work on neoliberalism urges the left and "progressives" to move beyond critique (of antipolitics, neoliberalism, privatization, imperialism, etc.) to think about positive programs for political change. You ask, "What do we want?" Can you elaborate, in answer to your own question?

I can hardly fault you for asking that question, because of course I invite it. Obviously the "we" in that essay is a rhetorical device. I cannot speak for the whole "we" group I was trying to provoke, and I think clearly "we" should not all want the same thing. But for me, the political programs I find most exciting turn on this issue of distributive politics. We are in a world in which a whole bunch of certainties have been disrupted. There has been a presumption for a long time that labor represents the central set of institutions that are or should be how distributive questions get answered. But what you find more and more, especially in Africa but not only there, is increasingly large proportions of the population that are not wage laborers; and people are increasingly realizing that they are never going to become wage laborers. That old transition story in which we were waiting for the industrial revolution to come and then we will all be working in factories is not the future we are actually going to get. At the same time, you have more and more people who are not attached to the land the way they used to be. Class analysis used to start with workers and peasants, and then you add in a few other smaller or residual categories. But in most African countries today, you have huge populations living in cities who are not by any stretch of the imagination peasants, who no longer have claims to land (or any interest in farming for that matter), but who do not have jobs in any conventional sense. So they do a bit of this and a bit of that and we call it the informal economy because we do not know what the hell it is, but somehow people are getting along.

So the question I am interested in is, how do people make distributive demands if it is not in exchange for labor, that is, outside the traditional model of the labor market? There are a lot of ways that that is happening. People are making claims based on citizenship, or based on autochthony ("We're the original people of this place, it is our land, so why don't we see the proceeds from it?") or based on suffering or injury, or based on the fact that they are not cutting down the forest, which is housing carbon. And so on. So there are all sorts of ways that people are making new kinds of distributive claims. What are the possibilities of these new distributive politics? What can and can't they do? In that connection I have been interested in social protection, especially. I am very interested, for example, in the campaign the ILO is now engaged in, to establish what they call a "social protection floor." Their idea is that there should be international norms according to which all states are expected to provide a certain level of education (we have such norms), of healthcare, of housing, and, they now say, of income. Income should be one of those things like education, healthcare, or housing—there should be a floor below which you cannot be permitted to fall. They say that if every state can provide primary education—if you are going to call yourself a state, if you want to have legitimacy as a state, then you are going to have to have a system of primary education—then why can we not have a minimum income? It begins to become something more than a utopian scheme: it becomes something we expect states to do. That is quite interesting.
I am interested in the metaphor of the floor, rather than the safety net. The old idea was that everyone is up there playing on their circus apparatus and from time to time they fall. What the ILO is proposing is a rather different conception that says, no, everyone starts out here on the floor, and if you build something on the floor that is fine, but everyone is entitled to have that starting place. There is a new rationality of poverty embedded in that metaphor. Along the same lines I have been interested in the campaign for the Basic Income Grant, especially in Namibia. There too there is a quite thoughtful, conceptually innovative politics at work that starts with questions of distribution, and questions of justice. Namibia is a rich country, it has all these resources, it is a middle-income country. So why are there all these desperately poor people? Is it not their country? Is it not their wealth? The legitimacy of their claim to be members and even owners of this rich country allows them to make distributive demands.

H: Can you say more about where you see these new forms of claim-making? Are they directed exclusively at the nation-state? If so, how would that sort of claim-making work in a place where the state barely exists—in a place like, say, Chad or Somalia?

JF: The kinds of politics that are possible depend on the kind of state that is present. The programs I have been most interested in are occurring in states that have both a lot of administrative capacity and that have large and economically diverse populations. Places like Brazil, like India, like South Africa—places that have states that can do things like tax people, do things like distribute universalistic social payments across the entire population more or less effectively, and that bring together both large numbers of poor people and significant numbers of rich people who can be taxed in a redistributive way. Lots of parts of the world do not have those features, of course, and we need a different way to think about the politics of distribution in those places.

NOTES


