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The Uses of Neoliberalism

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Abstract: The term “neoliberalism” has come to be used in a wide variety of partly overlapping and partly contradictory ways. This essay seeks to clarify some of the analytical and political work that the term does in its different usages. It then goes on to suggest that making an analytical distinction between neoliberal “arts of government” and the class-based ideological “project” of neoliberalism can allow us to identify some surprising (and perhaps hopeful) new forms of politics that illustrate how fundamentally polyvalent neoliberal mechanisms of government can be. A range of empirical examples are discussed, mostly coming from my recent work on social policy and anti-poverty politics in southern Africa.

Keywords: neoliberalism, governmentality, South Africa, basic income, poverty

In thinking about the rapidly expanding literature on neoliberalism, I am struck by how much of the critical scholarship on topic arrives in the end at the very same conclusion—a conclusion that might be expressed in its simplest form as: “neoliberalism is bad for poor and working people, therefore we must oppose it.” It is not that I disagree with this conclusion. On the contrary. But I sometimes wonder why I should bother to read one after another extended scholarly analysis only to reach, again and again, such an unsurprising conclusion.

This problem in recent progressive scholarship strikes me as related to a parallel problem in progressive politics more broadly. For over the last couple of decades, what we call “the Left” has come to be organized, in large part, around a project of resisting and refusing harmful new developments in the world. This is understandable, since so many new developments have indeed been highly objectionable. But it has left us with a politics largely defined by negation and disdain, and centered on what I will call “the anti-.” Anti-globalization, anti-neoliberalism, anti-privatization, anti-imperialism, anti-Bush, perhaps even anti-capitalism—but always “anti”, not “pro”. This is good enough, perhaps, if one’s political goal is simply to denounce “the system” and to decry its current tendencies. And, indeed, some seem satisfied with such a politics. In my own disciplines of anthropology and African Studies, for instance, studies of state and development tend, with depressing predictability, to conclude (in tones of righteous indignation) that the rich are benefiting and the poor are getting screwed. The powerless, it seems, are getting the short end of the stick. This is not exactly a

surprising finding, of course (isn't it precisely because they *are* on the losing end of things that we call them "powerless" in the first place?). Yet this sort of work styles itself as "critique", and imagines itself to be very "political".

But what if politics is really not about expressing indignation or denouncing the powerful? What if it is, instead, about getting what you want? Then we progressives must ask: what do we want? This is a quite different question (and a far more difficult question) than: what are we against? *What do we want?* Such a question brings us very quickly to the question of government. Denunciatory analyses often treat government as the simple expression of power or domination—the implication apparently being that it is politically objectionable that people should be governed at all. But any realistic sort of progressive politics that would seek a serious answer to the question "what do we want?" will have to involve an exploration of the contemporary possibilities for developing genuinely progressive arts of government.

In his 1979 lectures on neoliberalism (2008), Michel Foucault famously spoke of the "absence of a socialist art of government", and the historic failure of the left to develop an "autonomous governmentality" comparable to liberalism. Stated as starkly as this, the point is no doubt debatable. Various forms of democratic socialism and social democracy (including but not limited to the German case treated in the lectures) may perhaps leave us with a richer trove of governmental arts than Foucault's very schematic account acknowledged, and the diverse histories of "unhappy symbiosis" of socialism with liberalism that he referred to parenthetically (2008:94n) may well have a greater originality than his analysis allowed. But what seems less open to dispute is that any program for governing from the left today faces an obstacle that we could describe (in Foucaultian terms) as a failure to develop new arts of government adequate to the challenges of our time. New progressive approaches to the problem of government are necessary, it now seems clear, because neither the governmental mechanisms, nor the political strategies of mobilization, that the left came to rely upon in the twentieth century (and which characterized, in different ways, both socialist and social democratic or "welfare state" regimes) are capable of getting the sort of traction that they once did. There are at least two reasons for this that are relevant both to my broader argument here, and to the particular topic of social assistance that I will address in the latter part of this article.

The first reason is the increasing prominence (especially in the region of my own special interest, Africa, but not only there) of urban masses who are not, and are not likely to become, formal wage laborers. Such people (variously, and inadequately, described as "the informal sector", "the lumpen", "the youth", and so on) now constitute the majority of the population in many African cities, and a very substantial proportion in

much of the rest of the world, as Mike Davis (2007) has recently pointed out in his usual alarmist style. The twentieth-century social democracies, on the other hand (and still more so the state socialist regimes), were built on the putatively universal figure of “the worker”. The Keynesian welfare state, as we know, was founded on a pact between capital and organized labor, and the domain we have come to know as “the social” was constructed on the foundation of the able-bodied worker. Indeed, the list of those requiring “social” intervention (the elderly, the infirm, the child, the disabled, the dependent reproductive woman) sketches a kind of photographic negative of the figure of the wage-earning man. Today, however, the question of social assistance is transformed in societies where young, able-bodied men look in vain for work, and are as much in need of assistance as everyone else. A compact between capital and labor, meanwhile, even were it politically possible, risks leaving out most of the population. New approaches to distribution, and new approaches to the question of social assistance, will need to be based on a fundamental rethinking that gives a new prominence to those hard-to-categorize urban improvisers who have for so long been relegated to the margins both of society, and of social analysis.

The second challenge to progressive thought and politics that I would like to identify is the rise of what we might call transnational forms of government, and particularly of the philanthropic funding of what we used to call “the social”. Much has been written about the governmental role played by international organizations like the IMF and the World Bank. But the last couple of decades have also seen an explosion in de facto government carried out by an extraordinary swarm of NGOs, voluntary organizations, and private foundations. The Gates Foundation in Mozambique, to take just one example,¹ is carrying out a wide range of projects (in health, hygiene, education, sanitation, etc) that looks something like the twentieth century “social” of the social welfare state. But there is obviously a very different relation to the nation-state here, and to the national political arena. Social policy and nation-state are, to a very significant degree, decoupled, and we are only beginning to find ways to think about this.

More generally, technical prescriptions for “making poverty history” often seem almost irrelevant because they presume the central actors to be states—and certain sorts of states at that: well-financed, bureaucratically capable, poverty-fighting states that resemble nothing so much as twentieth century European welfare states. Couldn’t the Democratic Republic of the Congo solve all its problems, reformers seems to say, if only its government would start to behave like that of Sweden? Well, maybe so, but it’s the sort of ahistorical and asociological formulation that is worse than useless. Yet what happens when states of the imagined, poverty-fighting kind are simply not present? How can poverty policy be effective where states are (as the political scientists,

rather misleadingly, say) “weak”, or even actively anti-developmental? Where financial capacity is tiny and needs are enormous? What happens when the key implementers of poverty policy are not national states at all, but transnational NGOs, or private transnational foundations? What would count as progressive politics here?

One response here—understandable in the wake of the neoliberal restructuring of recent decades—is to call for the reinstating of old-style developmental states, effectively undoing the neoliberal transformations of the 1980s and 1990s and going back to the 1970s. I am skeptical that this is an adequate response—partly because the supposedly developmental states I know from the 1970s in Africa were pretty awful, and partly because I doubt that you can run history backward (as if you could just hit the rewind button and try again). The world has changed, and simply re-asserting Third World sovereignty will not get us very far in dealing with a fundamentally reconfigured politico-spatial world order. Imperialism is undoubtedly alive and well. But I don’t think we have a good analysis of, say, the Gates Foundation, or the Soros Foundation, if we see them simply as the imperial tools of the global rich, undermining the sovereignty of African governments. It is much more complicated than that—and perhaps also more hopeful. Can we find ways of thinking creatively about the progressive possibilities (and not only the reactionary dangers) of this new terrain of transnational organization of funds, energies, and affect? Can we imagine new “arts of government” that might take advantage of (rather than simply denouncing or resisting) recent transformations in the spatial organization of government and social assistance?

Most broadly, can we engage with these new configurations of governmental power in a way that goes beyond the politics of denunciation, the politics of the “anti”? Can we develop new ways of thinking through the problem of government that are genuinely progressive, but that don’t take for granted the absolute solidity or centrality of those two figures of twentieth-century left common sense: the worker and the nation-state?

It is here that we have to look more carefully at the “arts of government” that have so radically reconfigured the world in the last few decades, and I think we have to come up with something more interesting to say about them than just that we’re against them. With respect to poverty and social policy, for instance (my particular interest here), it is simply not the case (as is often suggested) that neoliberal government ignores poverty, or leaves it to “the market”. (Later in this essay, I will discuss a range of welfare-like interventions and social payments that coexist with—and may, in fact, be necessary complements to—neoliberal economic models.) At the same time, there is sometimes room (in part because of the political spaces opened up by “democracy” as the characteristic mode of legitimation of neoliberal regimes) for social

movements and pro-poor organizations to have some real influence on matters of “social policy”. (Hence my current interest in the “Basic Income Grant” (BIG) campaign in South Africa, which I’ll discuss in a moment.) To understand the political possibilities and dangers that such emergent phenomena contain, we will surely need empirical research on the actual political processes at work. But beyond this, there is a palpable need for conceptual work, for new and better ways of thinking about practices of government and how they might be linked in new ways to the aspirations and demands of the economically and socially marginalized people who constitute the majority of the population in much of the world.

It is in this spirit, then, that I want to consider what I am calling “the uses of neoliberalism”. I begin with a consideration of “uses” in the literal sense of semantic usage, as the wide variation in the way the term is used forces some clarification before we can begin to ask some new questions that might bring to light the surprising affinity of some aspects of what we call “neoliberalism” with certain forms of progressive politics.

As even a cursory inspection reveals, there is huge variation in the way the word, “neoliberalism” is used in contemporary scholarship. In perhaps the strictest sense, neoliberalism refers to a macroeconomic doctrine (and is, in this sense, a true “-ism”). The key elements of the doctrine are variously described, but always include a valorization of private enterprise and suspicion of the state, along with what is sometimes called “free-market fetishism” and the advocacy of tariff elimination, currency deregulation, and the deployment of “enterprise models” that would allow the state itself to be “run like a business”. (See Peck 2008 for an illuminating review of the rise and dissemination of this doctrine.)

A related usage would have “neoliberalism” refer to a regime of policies and practices associated with or claiming fealty to the doctrine referenced above. Such a regime of practice is obviously different from the doctrine itself. Indeed, as David Harvey (2005) has argued, this divergence is, in fact, necessary, since neoliberal doctrine, if applied consistently, implies a world that could never, in fact, exist (which leads Harvey to term it “utopian”). Rather than purely applying the utopian neoliberal doctrine, Harvey points out that dominant groups around the world have used neoliberal arguments to carry out what is in fact a class project. “Neoliberalism”, in this sense, has become the name for a set of highly interested public policies that have vastly enriched the holders of capital, while leading to increasing inequality, insecurity, loss of public services, and a general deterioration of quality of life for the poor and working classes.

But the policies of neoliberal states have often diverged from neoliberal doctrine for other reasons as well—reasons which have

less to do with straightforward power grabs by the rich than with the contingencies of democratic politics. This no doubt helps to account for the otherwise paradoxical fact that a number of regimes pursuing undoubtedly neoliberal macroeconomic policies have also seen substantial recent rises in social spending (examples include India, Brazil, and South Africa, among others). Neoliberal policy is thus much more complicated than a reading of neoliberal doctrine might suggest.

Finally, it is perhaps worth mentioning, if only schematically, some other common uses of the term. One is as a sloppy synonym for capitalism itself, or as a kind of shorthand for the world economy and its inequalities. In much current anthropological usage, “neoliberalism” appears in this way, as a kind of abstract causal force that comes in from outside (much as “the world system” was reckoned to do at an earlier theoretical moment) to decimate local livelihoods. Another, more interesting, usage sees “neoliberalism” as the name of a broad, global cultural formation characteristic of a new era of “millennial capitalism”—a kind of global meta-culture, characteristic of our newly de-regulated, insecure, and speculative times (eg Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). And finally, “neoliberalism” can be indexed to a sort of “rationality” in the Foucauldian sense, linked less to economic dogmas or class projects than to specific mechanisms of government, and recognizable modes of creating subjects. (I will have more to say about this last usage shortly.)

It is, then, possible to identify many quite distinct referents for the same widely used term. This has some obvious dangers, of course. There is plainly a danger of simple confusion, since the meaning of the term can slip in the course of an argument being passed from author to reader (or, indeed, even in the course of an argument made by a single author). There is also another danger, only slightly less obvious, which is that such an all-encompassing entity can easily come to appear as a kind of gigantic, all-powerful first cause (as categories like “Modernity” or “Capitalism” have done before it)—that malevolent force that causes everything else to happen. This yields empty analysis (since to say that all our problems are caused by “neoliberalism” is really not to say much), and may also lead to an ineffectual politics—since all one can do with such a gigantic, malevolent “thing” as “neoliberalism” conceived in this way is to denounce it. (And *that*, the evidence suggests, doesn’t seem to do much good).

One response would be to stop using the word altogether. This is indeed very tempting. If the word is so ambiguous, perhaps we should just be careful to be more specific, and use less all-encompassing terms. When the term “neoliberalism” is used as imprecisely as it is in many texts, one is tempted to pencil one’s objections in the margins as one might in reading a student essay: “What do you mean by ‘neoliberalism’ here? Do you mean the liberalization of trade policies? Then say

so! Do you mean techniques of government that work through the creation of responsabilized citizen-subjects? Then say *that!* The two don't necessarily go together. Say what you mean, and don't presume that they are all united in some giant package called 'neoliberalism'." Such insistence on specificity and precision would undoubtedly improve the analytical clarity of many of our discussions.

But there is also some utility in words that bring together more than one meaning. As long as we can avoid the mistake of simply confusing the different meanings, the word can be an occasion for reflecting on how the rather different things to which it refers may be related. In particular, I would like to use this confusing, conflating word as an occasion for thinking about the relation between the following two things:

First, we may consider the new governmental rationalities that emerged through the Thatcher–Reagan assaults on the North Atlantic, post-war welfare state. Key here was the deployment of market mechanisms and “enterprise” models to reform government, restructure the state, and pioneer new modes of government and subjectification. (See, eg, Barry, Osborne and Rose 1996; Rose 1999; Cruikshank 1999; Miller and Rose 2008.) There is a clear analysis in this literature of what it is that distinguishes “neoliberalism” from liberalism. Liberalism, in this account, was always about finding the right balance between two spheres understood as properly distinct, if always related: state and market, public and private, the realm of the king and the proper domain of the merchant. Neoliberalism, in contrast, puts governmental mechanisms developed in the private sphere to work within the state itself, so that even core functions of the state are either subcontracted out to private providers, or run (as the saying has it) “like a business”. The question of what should be public and what private becomes blurred, as the state itself increasingly organizes itself around “profit centers”, “enterprise models”, and so on. Rather than shifting the line between state and market, then, neoliberalism in this account involved the deployment of new, market-based techniques of government within the terrain of the state itself. At the same time, new constructions of “active” and “responsible” citizens and communities are deployed to produce governmental results that do not depend on direct state intervention. The “responsibilized” citizen comes to operate as a miniature firm, responding to incentives, rationally assessing risks, and prudently choosing from among different courses of action.

Against this understanding of the neoliberal, consider what we might call neoliberalism in the African sense. Here, neoliberalism has meant first of all the policy measures that were forced on African states in the 1980s by banks and international lending agencies, under the name of “structural adjustment”. Reforms focused on removing tariffs, deregulating currency markets, and removing the state from production and distribution (via dismantling of state marketing boards

and parastatals). This did involve privatization, and an ideological celebration of markets. But the development of new technologies of government, responsabilized prudential subjects, and so on (all the things that Nikolas Rose and other “Anglo-Foucauldians” tend to emphasize) was very limited. Neoliberalism here was (in these terms) not very “neo” at all. It was, in fact, largely a matter of old-style laissez-faire liberalism in the service of imperial capital. And it had disastrous and wildly unpopular results (especially, the selling off of precious state assets to foreign firms at fire-sale prices, massive deindustrialization, and increased unemployment). Across much of the continent, it has raised the specter of a kind of recolonization. The result is that “neoliberalism” in Africa refers to a quite fundamentally different situation than it does in Western Europe and North America. The hasty and uncritical application of ideas of neoliberalism-as-rationality to Africa is thus clearly a mistake, based on a simple confusion (an art of government versus a crude battering open of Third World markets).

But bringing these two different referents together can be more interesting, if we don’t just equate them, but instead reflect on the conceptual themes they share (broadly, a technical reliance on market mechanisms coupled with an ideological valorization of “private enterprise” and a suspicion of the state), and use such a reflection to ask if the new “arts of government” developed within First World neoliberalism might take on new life in other contexts, in the process opening up new political possibilities.

Can we on the left do what the right has, in recent decades, done so successfully, that is, to develop new modes and mechanisms of government? And (perhaps more provocatively) are the neoliberal “arts of government” that have transformed the way that states work in so many places around the world inherently and necessarily conservative, or can they be put to different uses? To ask such questions requires us to be willing at least to imagine the possibility of a truly progressive politics that would also draw on governmental mechanisms that we have become used to terming “neoliberal”.

I have been led to these questions by my current interest in anti-poverty programs in southern Africa that seek to provide cash support for incomes, and thus (in theory) harness markets to the task of meeting the needs of the poor. This is happening in several African countries, but also in a great many other postcolonial states—from Brazil and Venezuela to Mexico and Bangladesh—where leftist and rightist regimes alike have seen fit to introduce policies that transfer cash directly into the hands of the poor. (See Fiszbein and Schady 2009; Standing 2008 [2007] for reviews.) The South African Basic Income Grant campaign is the example I will explore here. The proposal, which I will discuss in some detail shortly, is to deal with a crisis of persistent poverty by providing an unconditional minimum

monthly payment to all. The argument goes like this: markets aren't working for poor people because they're too poor to participate in them; government programs aren't working because the state is inefficient. So, provide income support directly, in the form of cash, and then say to the poor: "you are now empowered to solve your own problems in the way you see best". In contrast to older forms of "welfare" assistance, the claim is that such grants rely on poor people's own ability to solve their own problems, without imposing the policing, paternalism, and surveillance of the traditional welfare state. More broadly, similar new lines of thought are calling for an increased role for direct cash transfers in many forms of social and humanitarian policy (eg famine relief, which will be briefly discussed shortly). The reasoning here often includes recognizably neoliberal elements, including the valorization of market efficiency, individual choice, and autonomy; themes of entrepreneurship; and skepticism about the state as a service provider. But the politics are avowedly (and, I think, on balance, genuinely) "pro-poor" (as the phrase has it). "Pro-poor" and neoliberal—it is the strangeness of this conjunction that is of interest here. For the sorts of new progressive initiatives I have in mind seem to involve not just opposing "the neoliberal project", but appropriating key elements of neoliberal reasoning for different ends. We can't think about this (or even acknowledge its possibility) if we continue to treat "neoliberal" simply as a synonym for "evil". Instead, I suggest (and this is a deliberate provocation) that some innovative (and possible effective) forms of new politics in these times may be showing us how fundamentally polyvalent the neoliberal arts of government can be.

Let me emphasize that to say that certain political initiatives and programs borrow from the neoliberal bag of tricks doesn't mean that these political projects are in league with the ideological project of neoliberalism (in David Harvey's sense)—only that they appropriate certain characteristic neoliberal "moves" (and I think of these discursive and programmatic moves as analogous to the moves one might make in a game). These moves are recognizable enough to look "neoliberal", but they can, I suggest, be used for quite different purposes than that term usually implies. In this connection, one might think of statistical techniques for calculating the probabilities of workplace injuries. These were originally developed in the nineteenth century by large employers to control costs (Ewald 1986), but they eventually became the technical basis for social insurance, and ultimately for the welfare state (which brought unprecedented gains to the working class across much of the world). Techniques, that is to say, can "migrate" across strategic camps, and devices of government that were invented to serve one purpose have often enough ended up, though history's irony, being harnessed to another. Might we see a similar re-appropriation of "market" techniques of government (which were, like workplace statistics, undoubtedly

conservative in their original uses) for different, and more progressive sorts of ends? Maybe not—one should remain genuinely open-minded about this—but it is perhaps worth at least considering. Let me present two empirical examples from southern Africa as a way of making this proposition perhaps a bit more plausible.

Basic Income

My principal example is the basic income grant (BIG) campaign in South Africa. For historical reasons, South Africa came to democratic independence in 1994 with a quite well developed system of social grants and pensions (which I am not able to describe here for reasons of space). In recent years, as neoliberal restructuring has led to widening inequality and very high rates of unemployment, these social grants have substantially expanded, and have been instrumental in holding together what might otherwise be an explosive situation (a fact of which the ANC government appears to be acutely aware). But planners have been bothered by the patchy and arbitrary spread of the coverage, and the inefficiency and cost of administering a host of cumbersome and bureaucratic targeted programs.

It is in this context that proposals emerged for a far-reaching new comprehensive system of income support, anchored by a BIG to be paid to all South Africans (Department of Social Development 2002). The idea of a BIG was first put forward by the labor union federation, COSATU, in 1998, and it acquired new legitimacy when it was embraced in 2002 by a government-appointed committee (the Taylor Committee) charged with recommending measures for the rationalization of the system of social assistance (see Barchiesi 2007; Department of Social Development 2002; Ferguson 2007; Tilton 2005). The proposal has been advocated from 2001 onward by a formal coalition of church groups and labor, the BIG Coalition).²

The proposal was for a modest payment of about R100 (at that time, about \$16) per person per month, to be paid to all South Africans, irrespective of age or income. Advocates insist that a universal system of direct payments is by far the most efficient way to direct assistance to all poor South Africans. Means testing, in their view, would not be necessary; better off South Africans would also receive the grant, but the funds they received (and then some) would be recuperated through the tax system. Economic analyses prepared by BIG advocates (eg Standing and Samson 2003) argue that the measure could be funded through increases in either the income tax or the VAT, as well as by savings created by rationalizing the existing system of pensions. The idea of a BIG has been supported by church groups, NGOs, and the powerful Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU); and a watered down version has even been endorsed by the main (and historically white) opposition party, the Democratic Alliance. The ruling

ANC, however, has thus far rejected the plan, though it does enjoy support from at least some key players within the party (including the Minister for Social Development, Dr Zola Skweyiya).

The BIG campaign is significant not only as an interesting and potentially progressive policy proposal, but also as an illustration of some new ways of thinking about questions of poverty and welfare that bring neoliberal themes to bear on the question of social assistance in ways that are very different from those we have become accustomed to in the last few decades. I begin by acknowledging that the arguments for a basic income grant in South Africa have been many sided and complex, and they are not reducible to a single logic or rationality (neoliberal or otherwise). Older languages of social democracy and solidarity continue to have significant currency, and a reading of pro-BIG documents shows that traditional welfare-state arguments are regularly deployed. These include themes of social solidarity and moral obligation; the advantages of social cohesion and dangers of class war; Keynesian arguments about stimulating demand; and labor-rights arguments about giving workers the security to say no to dangerous and demeaning work.³ Yet these lines of argument lie side by side with others, which are markedly different from social democratic reasoning, and surprisingly similar to the neoliberal rationality that we more usually associate with anti-welfare discourses. The intermingling of these different themes speaks to the complex political struggles around the BIG, which have been discussed by others (eg Mattison and Seekings 2003; Barchiesi 2007). My interest here, though, is not in analyzing these politics, but in identifying some surprising ways in which certain discursive “moves” that we can readily identify as neoliberal are being put to work in the service of apparently pro-poor and pro-welfare political arguments. To make this process visible, it is useful to pull some of these neoliberal “moves” out of the broader mix of BIG arguments so that we can see the work that they are doing. (Note that the following is a highly condensed summary. For a more detailed analysis that includes citations of specific texts, see Ferguson 2007.)

One of the most important themes in arguments in favor of a BIG is the idea of “investment in human capital”. A BIG, supporters say, would enable poor South Africans to increase their spending on such things as nutrition, education, and health care. And this, advocates insist, should be understood as an “investment” in a kind of “capital”. Such “investment”, they insist, will bring handsome returns, in the form of productivity gains. The poor individual is in this way conceived, in classic neoliberal fashion, as a kind of micro-enterprise, earning a rate of return on invested capital.

More surprising is the way that pro-BIG arguments neatly reverse the usual right-wing arguments against social payments by insisting that basic income can be justified precisely as a way of *combating*

“dependency”. The existing “safety net”, the BIG promoters argue, relies on very destructive forms of dependency, since any economically productive poor person is surrounded by relatives and other dependents who must be supported. This is destructive, in economic terms, because it constitutes an effective “tax” on the productivity of the poor. The worker whose wages are soaked up by dependents in this way suffers from both a disincentive to work, and a drag on his or her ability to build up human capital. The “dependency” of absolute poverty in this way hurts productivity, and also makes it hard for workers to be economically active, to search for better jobs, etc. The passivity associated with this predicament, moreover, inhibits entrepreneurship and “risk-taking behaviors”. Providing basic income security for all, it is claimed, will enable the poor to behave as proper neoliberal subjects (ie as entrepreneurs and risk takers); the status quo prevents it, and promotes “dependency”. In this way, the BIG would provide not a “safety net” (the circus image of old-style welfare as protection against hazard) but a “springboard”—a facilitator of risky (but presumably empowering) neoliberal flight.

Equally striking is the way that basic income arguments appropriate neoliberal critiques of welfare paternalism and put them in the service of a pro-welfare argument. Echoing the old Margaret Thatcher complaint about the “nanny state” that tries to run everybody’s life in the name of the needs of “society”, BIG advocates point out that South Africa’s *existing* social assistance system makes moralizing judgments about “the undeserving poor”, and requires (at great expense) the surveillance and normalization of grant recipients, who are publicly labeled as such, and thus potentially stigmatized. In contrast to all this, the BIG would be paid to everyone; citizens would access their funds (in the ideal scheme) by simply swiping their national identity cards at an automatic cash dispenser. They would not need the government to tell them how to spend the funds. They would use them (like good rational actors) in the way they saw best. There would be no “nanny state”: no policing of conduct, no stigmatizing labels, no social workers coming into homes—and no costly bureaucracy to sort out who does or doesn’t qualify. Grant recipients, in this vision, appear as sensible people who know their problems and predicaments better than any bureaucrat could. The state, meanwhile, appears as both omnipresent and minimal—universally engaged (as a kind of direct provider for each and every citizen) and maximally disengaged (taking no real interest in shaping the conduct of those under its care, who are seen as knowing their own needs better than the state does).

Finally, the most radical shift from traditional social democracy visible in the arguments for a BIG is the explicit rejection of formal employment as the “normal” frame of reference for social policy (let alone as an entitlement to which all have rights). The 2002 Taylor

Committee Report projected that, even with strong economic growth, formal sector employment in South Africa was not likely to expand at the sort of rate that would be necessary for anything close to full employment (a prediction that recent developments have certainly borne out). On the contrary, it forecast that developing countries like South Africa were likely, over the long term, to see an inexorable shift *away from* (and not toward) formal employment. According to the report:

In developing countries, where stable full-time waged formal sector labour was never the norm, it is increasingly unlikely that it will become the norm (Department of Social Development 2002:38).

The reality is that in the developing world formal sector employment may never become the norm that it is in Europe (ibid 2002:154).

The need for assistance, then, is not about being “between jobs” or correcting for dips in the business cycle; it is part of a world in which many, or even most, people, for the foreseeable future, will lack formal sector employment. Social assistance is here radically decoupled from expectations of employment, and, indeed, from “insurance” rationality altogether. Instead, the Taylor Committee Report re-understands the condition of unemployment not as a hazard, but as the normal condition.

Yet unemployment, in this understanding, need not imply idleness or a lack of productivity. On the contrary, in a world where livelihoods in the “informal economy” will become increasingly important, small expenditures on minimum income support (like the BIG) can have big payoffs in enabling and enhancing economic action in that domain. Social payments, in this optic, are most significant not as temporary substitutes for employment, but as a way of promoting greater productivity, enterprise, and risk-taking in the “informal” domain within which more and more South Africans are expected to make their living.

I hope to have identified some recognizably neoliberal motifs here. But I hope it is also clear that this is not the neoliberalism we love to hate, the so-called “neoliberal project” identified by Harvey (2005). It’s something else—a set of much harder to place arguments that link markets, enterprise, welfare, and social payments in a novel way. It leaves us neither with something to hate, nor something to love, but rather something to ponder. I will return to the question of the perils and promise of the BIG in the conclusion to this article, but for the moment, let us try to hold in our minds the apparently paradoxical idea that a major policy initiative might be, all at once, “pro-poor”, redistributive, and neoliberal.

Food Aid and Cash Transfers

It may be helpful to briefly discuss one additional example, to help suggest something I am increasingly convinced is the case: that the BIG

campaign is part of a much wider, worldwide shift in thinking about poverty and social and humanitarian assistance. The example I have in mind is the increasingly influential argument that hunger is best dealt with by boosting the purchasing power of those at risk, rather than by distributing in-kind food aid.

The current international food aid system is based on the subsidized overproduction of agricultural crops (especially grain) in rich countries like the USA. Food aid programs then take this surplus grain and transport it to places (largely in Africa) where it is distributed to people who are at risk of hunger due to drought, natural disasters, political violence, or other sorts of humanitarian emergency. Critics like Amartya Sen have long noted the (largely unintended) negative impacts of such policies, which tend to depress producer prices for local farmers, while damaging local institutions for producing and distributing food crops. Once food aid has arrived, local food production may never recover. Too often, what was supposed to be a “temporary” crisis becomes a long-term decline in food self-sufficiency (see, eg Sen 1983; Dreze and Sen 1991).

As an alternative, Sen’s followers have pushed for cash payments to be made directly to those at risk of food deficit (either via employment guarantees, or through direct cash transfers). People with money in their pockets, these advocates point out, usually don’t starve. And cash support allows famine victims to preserve or restore productive assets (eg livestock) in ways that simply supplying a certain number of calories does not. What is more, the economic chain of events that is set in motion by boosting purchasing power not only avoids the destructive effects of food aid, but creates a virtuous cycle, in which market forces lead to increased capacity for local production and distribution. A number of pilot projects have been launched putting these principles into practice in recent years. Among the best known is the Cash for Relief Programme in Ethiopia, which used cash payments to enable households that had been hit by crop failure to rebuild their assets and regenerate their livelihoods, and not only to eat (USAID/OFDA 2004). Another widely discussed project has been the Kalomo Social Cash Transfer Scheme in Zambia. Here, too, cash took the place of food aid, with the result that recipients were able to meet non-nutritional as well as nutritional needs, including education, transportation, and health care (Schubert and Goldberg 2004). An impressive range of similar projects are reviewed in Standing (2008 [2007]) and Farrington and Slater (2006). (See also the review of the potential for cash transfers in “unstable situations” that was recently done by Harvey and Holmes (2007) for the UK Department for International Development.)

The arguments made by the increasingly numerous promoters of such programs are in many ways similar to those made on behalf of the South African BIG. Dispensing cash, they insist, is in the first

place more efficient and less expensive than other sorts of assistance, and often requires less infrastructure and institutional capacity. In any case, they argue, why should bureaucrats decide on behalf of recipients what their needs are? Cash transfers provide hungry people with the flexibility to access a broad range of goods and services available on the market to meet their needs. And poor people, in this conception, are good judges of how to do that—using money to go to the clinic this month, to pay school fees for a child the next, to buy a bag of maize meal the next, and so on. Rather than wasting the money on frivolous expenditure, advocates insist, recipients generally apply their scant cash resources very rationally, and even make canny small investments. As one PowerPoint presentation on the Kalamo project put it: “The ‘grannies’ turned out to be excellent economists!”

Top-down, state-planned attempts to directly meet nutritional needs through trucking in food, in this view, are bound to be clumsy, inefficient, and wasteful. Cash transfers, on the other hand, put more decision-making power in the hands of those who know their predicament best—the hunger afflicted—and empower them to use the flexibility and efficiency of markets to help solve their own problems. Unlike direct food aid, cash transfers can have a catalytic effect on many other income-gaining activities, thereby contributing powerfully to the “multiple livelihood strategies” that are so important in keeping the poorest households afloat.

Such arguments recall Jane Guyer’s (1989) groundbreaking work on feeding African cities. Consider, Guyer suggests, how food ends up finding its way to consumers’ plates in the vast megacities of West Africa such as Lagos. The logistical task of moving thousands of tons of food each day from thousands of local producers to millions of urban consumers would be beyond the organizational capacity of any state (to say nothing of the less-than-exemplary Nigerian one). Here, market mechanisms, drawing on the power of vast self-organizing networks, are very powerful, and very efficient. Such forms of organization must appear especially attractive where states lack capacity (and let us remember how many progressive dreams in Africa have crashed on the rocks of low state capacity).

Why should relying on this sort of mechanism be inherently right-wing, or suspect in the eyes of progressives? The answer is, of course, not far to find: markets serve only those with purchasing power. Market-based solutions are thus likely to be true “solutions” only for the better-off, whose needs are so effectively catered to by markets. But the food aid example shows a way of redirecting markets toward the poor, by intervening not to restrict the market, but to boost purchasing power. I have become convinced that (at least in the case of food aid) this is probably good public policy. Is it also neoliberal? Perhaps that is not the right question. Perhaps we should rather ask: are there specific sorts

of social policy that might draw on characteristic neoliberal “moves” (like using markets to deliver services) that would also be genuinely progressive? That seems like a question worth asking, even if we are at this point not fully ready to answer it.

Let me be clear that none of the examples discussed here are (in my view) unequivocally good (or unequivocally bad, for that matter). Instead, they leave us feeling uneasy, unsure of our moorings. They leave us less with strong opinions than with the sense that we need to think about them a bit more. They do not permit the simple denunciations (Aha! Neoliberalism!) that have become so familiar a part of the politics of the “anti-”, even as they clearly require us to turn a thoughtfully critical and skeptical eye toward their dangers and ambiguities.

I also want to emphasize as clearly as possible that none of these examples is a matter of “leaving it to the market”. All require major non-market interventions (either by states or by state-like entities such as foundations or international agencies), and all are premised on the principle that public policy must play a major redistributive role. But they are interventions that create a situation where markets can arguably serve progressive ends, in ways that may require us to revise some of our prejudices that automatically associate market mechanisms with the interests of the well-to-do.

The Point is to Change It!

If we are seeking, as this special issue of *Antipode* aspires to do, to link our critical analyses to the world of grounded political struggle—not only to interpret the world in various ways, but also to change it—then there is much to be said for focusing, as I have here, on mundane, real-world debates around policy and politics, even if doing so inevitably puts us on the compromised and reformist terrain of the possible, rather than the seductive high ground of revolutionary ideals and utopian desires. But I would also insist that there is more at stake in the examples I have discussed here than simply a slightly better way to ameliorate the miseries of the chronically poor, or a technically superior method for relieving the suffering of famine victims.

My point in discussing the South African BIG campaign, for instance, is not really to argue for its implementation. There is much in the campaign that is appealing, to be sure. But one can just as easily identify a series of worries that would bring the whole proposal into doubt. Does not, for instance, the decoupling of the question of assistance from the issue of labor, and the associated valorization of the “informal”, help provide a kind of alibi for the failures of the South African regime to pursue policies that would do more to create jobs? Would not the creation of a basic income benefit tied to national citizenship simply exacerbate the vicious xenophobia that already divides the South African poor,

in a context where many of the poorest are not citizens, and would thus not be eligible for the BIG? Perhaps even more fundamentally, is the idea of basic income really capable of commanding the mass support that alone could make it a central pillar of a new approach to distribution? The record to date gives powerful reasons to doubt it. So far, the technocrats' dreams of relieving poverty through efficient cash transfers have attracted little support from actual poor people, who seem to find that vision a bit pale and washed out, compared with the vivid (if vague) populist promises of jobs and personalistic social inclusion long offered by the ANC patronage machine, and lately personified by Jacob Zuma (Ferguson forthcoming).

My real interest in the policy proposals discussed here, in fact, has little to do with the narrow policy questions to which they seek to provide answers. For what is most significant, for my purposes, is not whether or not these are good policies, but the way that they illustrate a process through which specific governmental devices and modes of reasoning that we have become used to associating with a very particular (and conservative) political agenda ("neoliberalism") may be in the process of being peeled away from that agenda, and put to very different uses. Any progressive who takes seriously the challenge I pointed to at the start of this essay, the challenge of developing new progressive arts of government, ought to find this turn of events of considerable interest.

As Steven Collier (2005) has recently pointed out, it is important to question the assumption that there is, or must be, a neat or automatic fit between a hegemonic "neoliberal" political-economic project (however that might be characterized), on the one hand, and specific "neoliberal" techniques, on the other. Close attention to particular techniques (such as the use of quantitative calculation, free choice, and price driven by supply and demand) in particular settings (in Collier's case, fiscal and budgetary reform in post-Soviet Russia) shows that the relationship between the technical and the political-economic "is much more polymorphous and unstable than is assumed in much critical geographical work", and that neoliberal technical mechanisms are in fact "deployed in relation to diverse political projects and social norms" (2005:2).

As I suggested in referencing the role of statistics and techniques for pooling risk in the creation of social democratic welfare states, social technologies need not have any essential or eternal loyalty to the political formations within which they were first developed. Insurance rationality at the end of the nineteenth century had no essential vocation to provide security and solidarity to the working class; it was turned to that purpose (in some substantial measure) because it was available, in the right place at the right time, to be appropriated for that use. Specific ways of solving or posing governmental problems, specific institutional and intellectual mechanisms, can be combined in an almost infinite variety of ways, to

accomplish different social ends. With social, as with any other sort of technology, it is not the machines or the mechanisms that decide what they will be used to do.

Foucault (2008:94) concluded his discussion of socialist governmentality by insisting that the answers to the Left's governmental problems require not yet another search through our sacred texts, but a process of conceptual and institutional innovation. "[I]f there is a really socialist governmentality, then it is not hidden within socialism and its texts. It cannot be deduced from them. It must be invented". But invention in the domain of governmental technique is rarely something worked up out of whole cloth. More often, it involves a kind of bricolage (Lévi-Strauss 1966), a piecing together of something new out of scavenged parts originally intended for some other purpose. As we pursue such a process of improvisatory invention, we might begin by making an inventory of the parts available for such tinkering, keeping all the while an open mind about how different mechanisms might be put to work, and what kinds of purposes they might serve. If we can go beyond seeing in "neoliberalism" an evil essence or an automatic unity, and instead learn to see a field of specific governmental techniques, we may be surprised to find that some of them can be repurposed, and put to work in the service of political projects very different from those usually associated with that word. If so, we may find that the cabinet of governmental arts available to us is a bit less bare than first appeared, and that some rather useful little mechanisms may be nearer to hand than we thought.

Endnotes

¹ I refer here to the remarkable PhD research now being carried out by Ramah McKay (Department of Anthropology, Stanford University).

² Barchiesi (2007) gives a detailed and illuminating account of the origins of the BIG campaign and the Taylor Committee report.

³ As Barchiesi (2007) noted, some more conservative formulations of the BIG campaign have also made the contrary argument, that it would help move unemployed people into very low wage jobs. He also points out another important theme that I do not explore here: the implicit or explicit moralism of much of the discussion around "the social question" in South Africa.

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