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A radical politics of distribution?: work, welfare and public works programmes in rural Mozambique

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Abstract:

Over the last decades, there has been a proliferation of cash transfer programmes across the global South, in what Ferguson (2015) suggests is a harbinger of, and an intellectual resource for, a new radical politics of distribution based on citizenship. Ferguson is among a growing group of 'anti-work' scholars who argue for the urgent need to decentre wage-work from the social and political imaginary amidst an increasing crisis of reproduction – and the cash transfers may be one mechanism to do so. The underlying assumptions are that wage-work is no longer a meaningful form of social incorporation and that a continued focus on politics at the point of production amounts to little more than 'productivist fundamentalism', that the notion of a 'rightful share' is an effective basis for political claim-making, and that cash transfers are a powerful instrument to drive forth this distributional politics.

Drawing on the case of the Productive Social Action Programme (PASP) in rural Mozambique, this thesis critically interrogates these assumptions from the periphery of the global economy. Caught in a tailspin of depeasantisation and deindustrialisation, rural Mozambique is the perfect case to demonstrate Ferguson's proposition. However, it also points to its contradictions. First, there is plenty of wage-work taking place and plenty more to be done. Second, despite the gradual expansion of the social welfare system, its evolution has been constrained by a resource-driven development model. Third, in a context where notions of citizenship are highly fragmented, cash transfers have not generated the kind of political traction envisioned by Ferguson.

Ultimately, without production, there is nothing to redistribute or consume. Therefore, rethinking redistribution requires reclaiming production – and that involves struggles over what is produced, how it is produced and for whom. Indeed, although PASP workers complain about the drudgery of labour-intensive public works, they overwhelmingly prefer state support for small-scale agriculture, access to employment opportunities and improved working conditions over an unconditional cash transfer. Unfortunately, in decentring politics at the point of production, much of the contemporary 'anti-work' scholarship has left the terms of capital accumulation unchallenged precisely when it is most urgent to do so. In an age where the lines between production, redistribution and consumption are increasingly blurred, it is crucial to understand how conceptions of class are being reconfigured.