



Comment

The anti-politics of ‘Declarations of dependence’

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Freedom, David Harvey (2005) reminded us recently, is just another word; a handmaiden of neoliberalism promoting well-being by liberating individual enterprise amidst private property, free markets, and free trade. A context in which the prized freedoms (of conscience, speech, association) are underpinned by bad freedoms – excessive advances without benefiting the community, segregating technological innovations from the public, profiting from public atrocities for private gains. Indeed in the standard liberal perspective, freedom has stood for the absence of interference; I am free to do what others do not prevent me from doing. It has offered limited imagination on available options – limited to ‘choice’ or ‘rights’. It has proposed a narrow perspective on the relationship between people, seen as separate individuals pursuing independent ends.

Against this backdrop, Ferguson’s essay on the declarations of dependence by South Africans today is a refreshing critique of the autonomy and freedom of the emancipatory liberal mind. Using the trope of people’s desire to be subordinate and dependent, Ferguson argues that the valuation of individual autonomy and self-sufficiency associated with dignity and freedom promoted by liberalism is not cross-culturally universal. These pursuits of subordination, Ferguson claims, tell us much about the real needs of poor South Africans today, and how they might be better met in years to come.

Readers of *JRAI* will have few problems with the overall argument that the modern idea of free individuals is not universal. Indeed, historically the discipline has been at pains to show that we are who we are through the relations we have with others; that these relations are necessarily relations of dependence; they are what make us human. The quest for dependence is thus hardly surprising. Until here we are likely to be with Ferguson, but then arise at least two sources of frustration. The first is with the dearth of comparative and historical analyses against the general claim of declarations of dependence. The second is the limits of the political possibilities suggested.

Stressing the continuity between declarations of dependence spanning from the Ngoni invasion of the 1820s, colonial conquest, capitalist industrialization, to the contemporary American startled by South Africans seeking to work for him, Ferguson brushes aside comparing their qualitative differences. To the scholar of South Asia it is no surprise that the idealized trajectory of premodern binds displaced by a purchase of

'free' labour is a myth, that bonded relations have remained a crucial feature of capitalist relations of production. But what are the changes in forms of dependence under different regimes, and how do we explore their implications? In the South Asian case, a range of scholarship shows how, for instance, dependence under feudalism was associated with bondage that sometimes lasted generations, and that new forms of bondage under capitalist relations are more temporary, allowing greater mobility. Degrees of shame and humiliation attached to different forms of dependence vary, as do the political possibilities they raise. Declarations of dependence, then, fine; but what kind of dependence? How does the dependence described here relate to those idealized by Marcel Mauss (1990 [1925]) and analysed by James Woodburn (1982) among the Hadza? Not all declarations of dependence are equal.

Tracing differences in dependence is important because it enables analyses of the changing forms of inequalities at stake and the politics nurtured. Focusing on continuities in dependence, Ferguson limits the political possibilities of addressing inequality, which remain here confined largely to questions of social policy. He is surely right that we should not be concerned that schemes like the Basic Income Grant create dependency; that social policy should not treat dependency as a disease but construct desirable forms of it. But he is surprisingly silent on the plethora of other ways through which people have formed relations of dependence to challenge current inequalities. In South Africa, gangs, vigilante groups, and political parties. The South Asian list would include class struggle; that of Maoist guerrillas. These are all relations of dependence whose political possibilities in addressing inequality go beyond the politics of distribution; they contain challenges to the politics of production. They represent relations of dependence which liberalized economies have perceived as a threat and in fact attempted to undercut through social policy: for instance, the Indian government's expansion of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act as a means to undermine the Maoists. It is somewhat ironic that the author famous for his brilliant critique of development policy as an anti-politics machine two decades later resurrects hope in social policy.

But perhaps the deficiencies here are generated beyond Ferguson. They emerge from *JRAI* being the wrong audience for this intervention. Ferguson's article is important as a means for anthropologists to challenge, for instance, development economists. However, for those of us who see dependence as constitutive of human relations, Ferguson may leave unquenched the thirst for a deeper comparative understanding in declarations of dependence, their relationship with the transforming inequalities in which they are embedded, and how new forms of dependence may challenge these inequalities.

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