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A hidden counter-movement? Precarity, politics, and social protection before and beyond the neoliberal era

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Abstract To grasp what might exist beyond neoliberalism, we need to rethink the history of development before neoliberalism. This article makes two arguments. First, for poorer countries, processes of commodification which are highlighted as evidence of neoliberalism often predate the neoliberal era. Third World development policies tended to make social and economic life more precarious as a corollary to capital accumulation before neoliberalism as an ideology took hold. Second, the intense theoretical and discursive focus on neoliberalism has obscured a tangible shift towards de-commodification in much of the global South. The most salient examples today are state-led social assistance programs that have been implemented across the former Third World. These emerged not out of technocratic fixes from above but often out of political and social struggles from below. The rise and spread of these programs are not only in stark contrast to popular conceptions of a neoliberal reinforcement, but are also specifically targeted at social strata whose precarity commonly originated in developmental policies before the neoliberal era. Utilizing a database of 183 active flagship social assistance programs in 84 developing countries, we present macro-level quantitative evidence of the rise and spread of social protection policies over the past two decades in the global South. We then detail these programs for four middle-income countries—China, Brazil, India, and South Africa. To those who lament that the 2008 crisis has produced no Polanyian double movement, we argue that these state-driven social assistance policies are such a mechanism.

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The past few decades of global history have been widely described by social scientists as the age of neoliberalism. In both ideology and practice, market fundamentalism dominated the fields of economic and development policy around the world. As a result, it is commonly argued, social and economic life became increasingly commodified throughout the global South and North during the neoliberal era. Processes of commodification eroded various forms of social protection that previously existed in the mid-twentieth century, such as the welfare state, secure formal employment, and access to non-market sources of livelihood. Today, the term "precarity" is broadly used to connote the fragility of social reproduction and working conditions under neoliberalism (e.g., Standing 2011).

The concept of neoliberalism undeniably highlights characteristic features of our current age. However, the inordinate scholarly and popular focus on the ills of neoliberalism over the past 30 years has produced a major confusion about the causes of precarity in contemporary life. In the global South, processes of commodification assumed to be the hallmark of the neoliberal era generally have their roots before neoliberalism, originating in an earlier period of state-led development. Furthermore, the conceptual stretching of neoliberalism to cover nearly all contemporary political and economic change has produced another major confusion about emerging solutions to precarity, and even obscured them from view. During the apparent height of the neoliberal era, many states in the global South have been implementing forms of social protection that constitute a substantial de-commodification of daily life. In breadth, though not yet in depth, this trend rivals the de-commodification of social and economic life that accompanied the growth of welfare states in Northern countries in the first half of the twentieth century. We contend these growing forms of welfare provision constitute a new approach to development that moves beyond neoliberalism in meaningful ways.

We lay out our argument in three segments. First, we connect the observed precarity of the current era with development policies of the mid-twentieth century. Post-war theories of development produced a set of assumptions that linked commodifying transformations in work, land, and welfare with expectations of Third World socioeconomic "catch-up" to wealthy nation-states. A generalized failure to realize such empirical expectations resulted in theoretical confusion and fragmentation among development scholars. One response to the persistence of the North–South divide was to place all forms of precarity under a theoretical umbrella of neoliberalism. Yet in at least three subfields—labor, peasant, and welfare studies—scholars separately and simultaneously engaged in a "precarious" turn. The common claim among these subfields was that precarity is not simply a result of market-oriented neoliberal policies. Instead, precarity stems from the contradictions in "growth first" approaches to development that preceded and continued into the neoliberal era.

Second, we analyze the origins and spread of social assistance programs across the global South, their contribution to de-commodification processes, and their shortcomings and pitfalls. Using a database of 183 flagship social assistance programs implemented in 84 middle and lower-income countries, we show the astonishing proliferation of public policies during the past two decades ranging from anti-poverty cash transfers to work programs to expansions in education and health care access. By reviewing the rise of social assistance programs in China, Brazil, India, and South Africa, we note a common trend shared by these four large middle-income countries. These new social policies were implemented as a response to crises exacerbated by neoliberalism, but induced by long festering structural dilemmas for development in the global South. In the third section, we argue that new social assistance programs are not merely an ancillary element of neoliberal statecraft or a technology of top-down social control. Instead, the political transformations that have both driven and resulted from this rise of social protection may be re-orienting development policies in the global South away from a traditional focus on growth to what we call a "welfare first" approach to development.

The umbrella of neoliberalism

In the past decade, and especially since the global economic crisis of 2008, the character and future of neoliberalism has been fiercely debated. Some observers argued that the sweeping nature of the 2008 crisis discredited both neoliberal policy and ideology. In Latin America in particular, where the "pink tide" of the 2000s offered an alternative to the dominant Washington consensus on macroeconomic policies, scholars heralded a "repoliticization of development" that signified that "neoliberalism is no longer the only game in town" (Burdick et al. 2008, p. 1). Some discerned the outlines of an emerging "post-neoliberalism" in poorer states' newfound penchant for dirigisme and participation in a rising South-South trade (Sandbrook 2011; Grugel and Riggirozzi 2012). In East Asia, states that widened the "national policy space" after the region's 1997 financial crisis reacted more deftly than their European and North American counterparts in the post-2008 period, and their economies proved to be more resilient to global financial jolts. The "productive incoherence" in the variety of policy responses, Ilene Grabel asserted, is "pregnant with new developmental possibilities" (2011, p. 1).

Yet many have been less sanguine about the imminent death of neoliberalism. Scattered responses do not amount to a post-Washington consensus development model (Kaltwasser 2011; Babb 2013). "Productive" incoherence may simply be incoherence. In stark contrast to those who view neoliberalism on the ropes, a sizable group of scholars find that the post-2008 period fostered a deepening of neoliberalism (e.g., Peck et al. 2010; Crouch 2013; Mirowski 2013). Rather than a post-neoliberalism, the world economy is plagued by a "zombie" neoliberalism wherein ideological and institutional inertia continue to drive forward processes of commodification in lieu of a coherent alternative (Wade 2010a; Dale 2012; Peck 2013).

One reason for divergent opinions on the character and future of neoliberalism is that the term itself is an umbrella, covering different phenomena for different scholars. Neoliberalism has been used to describe a specific economic doctrine (Williamson 2004), a project by capitalist classes (Harvey 2005), a sociopolitical theory (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009), a set of cultural practices (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001), and a technique of power and governmentality (Ong 2006; Rose and Miller 2008). Neoliberalism is seen as alternately fostering policies of passivity (where the state sits sentry as night watchman), and active governance (where the state re-regulates and transforms social structures) (Wacquant 2012; Hilgers 2012). Having entered the vernacular of political struggle, neoliberalism is also a "sloppy synonym for capitalism itself … that malevolent force that causes everything else to happen" (Ferguson 2010, p. 171). Nevertheless, amidst the conceptual fuzziness, as Neil Brenner and his colleagues point out, "all prevalent uses of the notion of neoliberalism involve references to the tendential extension of market-based competition and commodification processes into previously insulated realms of political-economic life" (Brenner et al. 2010, p. 329; see also a similar synthesis in Jessop 2013). Given the range and breadth of scholarship on neoliberalism, this is as suitable a definition of the concept as any.

We have no quarrel with the contention that commodification of "previously insulated realms of political-economic life" has been widespread over the past several decades. Yet if commodification is neoliberalism's primary characteristic, and precarity a chief outcome, there are two serious problems in the current debate over the future of neoliberalism. Both stem from a lack of attention to historical processes of commodification within the global South. First, for most countries in the global South, processes of commodification that are highlighted as evidence of neoliberalism predate the neoliberal era. Second, the intense theoretical and discursive focus on neoliberalism has obscured a tangible shift towards *de-commodification* of political-economic life in much of the global South.

The development of precarity and the precarity of development

The current period of widespread precarity associated with market-led neoliberalism is often contrasted with an earlier era of state-led development policy. However, this characterization masks the fact that the "development project" of the mid-twentieth century vastly expanded commodification of economic life and dispossession across the Third World (McMichael 2011). This was not an aberrant outcome but instead concomitant to a growth-oriented development model pursued by post-colonial governments.

A common critique alleges that the era of "high development theory"—the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s—prioritized growth of national production instead of human well-being (e.g., Fioramonti 2013). This critique is not entirely accurate. Even Wolfgang Sachs, a harsh detractor of postwar development theory, noted that "linking the desire for equity to economic growth has been the conceptual cornerstone of the development age" (2010, p. 34). Growth in national income was seen as the primary means with which poorer states could ultimately improve the collective well-being of their citizens. Ever since, the causal effect of economic growth on positive developmental outcomes has remained conventional wisdom, what Thandika Mkandawire calls the "growth first and trickle down" view of development (2004, p. 11).

This "growth first" ideology of modernization provided technocrats, politicians, and scholars a clear goal to pursue and a straightforward set of metrics with which to measure progress (Cooper and Packard 1997). Generating successful development could not happen through a simple boost or nudge to pre-existing market sectors. On the contrary, dramatic changes in social structures of poorer countries were assumed to be both a precondition and an outcome of the economic growth promised in the development project. As Nils Gilman noted, the core assumption of modernization theory was that “changing the economy would require changing everything” (2003, p. 81).

This structural transformation would not materialize out of thin air. In his “non-communist manifesto” *The Stages of Economic Growth*, Walt Rostow argued that the main agent needed to set in motion an economic “take-off” was the state. Newly independent post-colonial governments would have to master “the art of relating economic, social, and political factors over time” (1962, p. 108). Only the removal of “old blocks and resistances to steady growth” would produce a “self-sustaining” process (1960, p. 7). This required states to intervene actively through some form of economic planning, “the conscious effort of a central organization to influence, direct, and, in some cases, even control changes in the principal economic variables of a certain country or region over the course of time in accordance with a predetermined set of objectives” (Todaro 1971, p. 1). Development, as Rostow defined it, would lead to several linked outcomes: the population eventually would be able to consume at a level that “transcended basic food, shelter, and clothing”; the labor force would shift to a higher proportion of “urban to total population … working in offices or skilled factory jobs”; and the allocation of resources “to social welfare and security” would increase via “the emergence of the welfare state” (1960, p. 11). These processes—namely, the proletarianization of labor, the depeasantization and commercialization of the country-side, and the extension of social citizenship through state welfare—were tracked by distinct subfields within development studies. In each of these subfields, scholars emphasized that commodification was constituent to development.

In the mid-twentieth century, labor studies in Northern countries tended to focus on issues facing private employers and corporate management (Burawoy 2008), but labor scholars who studied post-colonial regions viewed states as transformative agents. Turning subsistence peasants into wage workers was not just necessary for economic growth. As Samuel Huntington stated, “making men modern” at the individual level was the “central problem of modernization” (1974, p. 17). Alex Inkeles’s social-psychological measurements of “man’s modernity” in the early 1960s put forward as its slogan: “The factory can be a school—a school for modernization.” In this widely shared (and gendered) view, the factory was “an organization serving as a general school in attitudes, values, and ways of behaving which are more adaptive for life in a modern society” (Inkeles 1969, p. 213). In African labor studies, for example, Bill Freund noted how scholars analyzed unions not as sites of social struggle but rather as institutions that could “control, discipline, and develop” newly proletarianized workers in order to pave “the one-way street of ‘modernization’ that would sweep Africa forward along a route long since pioneered by the industrial nations” (1984, p. 7, see also Freund 2013).

This perspective assumed that industrialization was synonymous with advanced capitalism and the spread of industrial activities across the Third World would generate formalized working classes on a mass scale. Perhaps the most famous expression of this thesis was the projection by Bill Warren (1973) of a flat world brought on by the growth of industrial manufacturing across the globe. The Marx of the *Communist Manifesto* had it right, Warren claimed, and subsequent restatements of Warren’s thesis from Nigel Harris (1986) to Alice Amsden (2001) to, of course, Thomas Friedman were similarly optimistic about the ability of late twentieth-century global capitalism to fashion formal labor forces at a scale relatively proportionate to those of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, postcolonial leaders such as Nehru, Nasser, and Nkrumah rejected calls for a "balanced growth" in both agriculture and industry during the late 1950s. For these newly empowered leaders, rapid industrialization through state intervention was a political vehicle for legitimizing new nation-states because it symbolized both the promise and the means of convergence with Northern living standards (Latham 2011).

The flip side of urban-focused proletarianization was a desire to remake the economic and social relations of the countryside. In peasant studies, the "agrarian question" focused on the contribution, or lack thereof, of rural social structure to urban industrial growth. Orthodox development policies of the postwar era were succinctly described by Benjamin Higgins as "getting rid of farmers" (quoted in Dietz 1982, p. 497). This may sound crude, but as Gavin Kitching points out, "peasant elimination" was generally seen as an essential sign that capitalist development had occurred—whether in Western Europe, "successful" settler colonies (i.e., those with fewer peasants to deal with in the first place), the Soviet Union, or middle-income states with high postwar growth rates such as Japan and Korea (2001, pp. 150–153). Given such an axiom, countries where the majority of the population was engaged in small-scale agricultural activities were believed to be lagging behind. The crux of modernization theory was how to turn these underactive peasants into industrial workers and proletarianized agrarian producers, no matter whether the country was allied with Western states or the Soviet Union. There were liberal, Marxist, and romantic/populist variations of this assumption, but all relied on what Henry Bernstein called a "peasant essentialism" that saw the "disappearance of the peasantry as necessary to modernization and development" (2006, p. 402). In Ethiopia under the Derg, for example, landlordism and tributary relations of production were eliminated in 1975, but so was peasants' customary access to land. This "abolished the institutions around the village commons that had historically afforded peasants some degree of protection against predatory lords and rulers" (Makki 2014, p. 85). Forty percent of Ethiopia's peasantry was forcibly resettled over the next decade in state-designed villages, yet agricultural production levels subsequently deteriorated.

Needless to say, not all peasants could disappear. Someone had to produce the food necessary for the new masses of industrial workers. Political conflicts over food supplies and pricing of staple goods that favored urban consumers during the development project were "symptomatic of a more general tendency to subordinate the agricultural sector … to industrialization" (Smith 1984, p. 34). As a matter of policy, then, agricultural workers were not to be allowed to remain within social structures that largely produced for subsistence purposes. Many economists tended to assume theoretically that households were rational actors akin to firms (Folbre 1986), and thus a sufficient change in market incentives could nudge small producers into urban industry and wage-labor. In reality, peasant communities often adhered to logics of production distinct from *homo economicus* (Chayanov 1986). Instead of a nudge, postcolonial states regularly needed to commercialize the agriculture sector with a violent shove. This was accomplished either by consolidating and capitalizing production, which dispossessed many peasants into rural wage-labor, or by marketizing small-scale production, which shifted household labor towards production for the market (Bryceson and Bank 2001; Ellis and Biggs 2001). Either way, this did not necessarily introduce markets into rural life, because of the long history of small-scale market production and credit networks in the global South. Instead, the ability to rely on non-market sources of income and exchange was disrupted, forcing households to seek out livelihoods via reliance on market incomes (Mooij et al. 2000).[1]

As Rostow proposed, the welfare state would provide a de-commodifying counter-balance to social disruptions precipitated by industrial transformation. As planners and social policy scholars had envisioned, post-colonial states adopted welfare provisioning based on the expectation that their country's development path would reproduce the historical experience of wealthy countries. Northern welfare states, whether of the Bismarckian (German) or Beveridgean (United Kingdom) variety, were constructed around single-wage-earning households employed in the formal labor force. European capitalist development thus produced what Guy Standing called a "labourist core" in the industrial welfare state. Government programs linked social security, disability, and pension benefits to formal labor status; reinforced (and codified) gender divides in the household; and predicated their successful institutional reproduction on full employment (2009, p. 48). As social insurance programs became implemented in newly independent Third World countries from the 1930s onwards, this same model was utilized. However, the formal labor force was a tiny minority of the population. Development planners in Southern states tended to presume that twentieth-century European welfare models could be universalized. Through state-led industrialization drives, economic growth would trickle down to improve overall living standards and transform "traditional" sectors. As new or enlarged urban classes demanded improved social services, Third World governments typically created welfare packages targeted at public sector and industrial workforces, all the while assuming that, with capitalist development, most workers would eventually be incorporated into workplace-administered health and social insurance programs (Hall and Midgley 2004).[2]

By the early 1970s, then, before the rise of neoliberalism, processes of commodification in the global South had noticeably increased. Even with occasional surges of rapid economic growth, the Third World development project did not result in Southern nation-states collectively catching up with the wealthy North. Instead, commodification of political-economic life increased without convergence to Northern living standards. This generalized failure occurred because of internal *and* external constraints. Internally, state-led attempts at rapid proletarianization lessened the ability of self-provisioning households to subsidize their own reproduction. Beforehand, inter- and intra-household economic interactions based on reciprocity and income pooling were widespread phenomena. Exchange within market networks was often present, but did not underpin social reproduction. With state-led rural enclosures that accompanied the

[1] As Fernand Braudel noted, "The peasant himself, when he regularly sells a part of his harvest and buys tools and clothing, is already a part of the market. But if he comes to the market town to sell a few items—eggs or a chicken—in order to obtain a few coins with which to pay his taxes or buy a plowshare, he is merely pressing his nose against the shop window of the marketplace. He remains within the vast world of self-sufficiency" (1979, p. 19).

[2] Eastern Europe, while not part of the Third World, is a middle-income region that followed a different path, since here most countries extended social benefits to the entire population in the postwar period. As centrally planned economies, these states instituted full employment as an ideological precept, making it more manageable to administer workplace-linked benefits. As a result, when these states rapidly proletarianized rural sectors and created a large stratum of formalized agrarian wage-laborers, this allowed for the speedy extension of state welfare policies into the countryside at the point of production. In East Asia, though land reform was implemented and excess urbanization was checked, state welfare benefits to the rural sector were quite meager other than an emphasis on primary education (Haggard and Kaufman 2008, pp. 143–152).

development project, such non-commodified economic life came to be seen as a "traditional" barrier to achieving growth (Taussig 1980). Increasing capital intensity in industrial production using imported capital goods often meant that profits progressively went to multinational corporations in the attempt to transfer technology into domestic markets. While capital-intensive firms usually paid higher wages, their inability to absorb large sections of the new working classes limited the overall size of the wage labor market. This put pressure on workers' and peasants' livelihoods at the same time as they were increasingly reliant on the market for social reproduction. Overall low wages at the national level also led to a lack of effective demand, which constricted the domestic market and forced emerging industries to export cheaply or to limit productive expansion (Arrighi 1973; Frankema 2012). "Informalized" labor forces were thus a main outcome as individuals migrated out of rural communities and entered urban labor markets without incorporation into the formal wage sector.

The external constraints were related to these internal dynamics. Low domestic demand drove countries to compete increasingly for a share of global export markets. This competitive environment intensified the cost pressures on wages and inputs. A few individual states could and did succeed at shifting particular manufacturing sectors up the ladder of higher-value-added production, but in doing so intensified the general level of competition among Third World countries and led to decreasing returns for these same economic activities (Arrighi et al. 2003; Wade 2010b). What one country could do, all could not. The price shocks of the 1970s and the debt crises of the 1980s exacerbated these competitive pressures, reversing what minor convergence had occurred between North and South in the postwar era. As the Argentinian economist Raul Prebisch stated in 1978, "Thirty years of industrialization accompanied by high rates of growth [took place] in some important countries and in Latin America as a whole. Yet 40 % of the population has made very little advance even in countries with very high rate [sic] of growth. …We thought that an acceleration of the rate of growth would solve all problems. …This was our great mistake" (Prebisch 1980, pp. 15, 18). Prebisch provided an important insight into these failures. It was not marketization per se that caused the ills, but the ways through which "market forces tend to exclude large masses of the population from the benefits of development" (p. 15). State-led development projects dislocated households' pre-existing sources of livelihoods through commodification processes. Even with economic growth at the national level, most individuals faced highly segmented and unequal access to both labor market incomes and decommodifying social welfare policies.

By the 1970s, then, scholars and development practitioners both began to question the assumptions that had guided postwar development policy. Contrary to the expectation that newly proletarianized workers would be principally absorbed into formal wage-labor, the dominant feature of Southern labor forces was the relative growth in what came to be called the informal sector (Hart 1973). Already in 1972, an International Labour Organization report on employment in Kenya, which first substantively elaborated the idea of informal work, stated, "the evidence suggests that employment has probably increased a good deal faster in the informal than in the formal sector" (ILO 1972, p. 6). It also began to appear that commercializing agricultural production might exacerbate rather than eliminate food insecurity. In 1977, the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization concluded that "since the beginning of the 1970s the rate of [production] increase was considerably lower [than policy targets], and less than achieved in the previous decade…. The gap has continued to widen, not only between the developed and developing countries, but also between the better off and worse off developing countries" (FAO 1977, p. 1). The deepening commodification of households was further aggravated by the economic volatility that plagued the decade, including a widespread recession and multiple spikes in fuel prices (Stavrianos 1981). Such disruptions were not entirely unexpected with modernization, which is why Rostow and other development scholars specified social welfare as an essential component of the transformation. However, the limitations of job-centered state welfare systems introduced across the global South quickly appeared as those without access to secure wage employment fell through the wide gaps of "modern" social welfare systems. As Ronaldo Munck put it, "the type of work described by the term 'precarity' has always been the norm in the global South. In fact, it is Fordism and the welfare state which is the exception to the rule from a global perspective" (2013, p. 752). As the mismatch between theory and reality grew starker, critiques of various stripes grew louder. One was inspired by neoliberal ideology, which refused to recognize the very notion of a "development economics." The other was a precarious turn in development theory itself.

Neoliberalism and the precarious turn

It was in this environment that neoliberalism as a coherent doctrine came out of the intellectual wilderness. As portrayed by supporters of neoliberalism, the emergence of precarity was not the result of rapid commodification and marketization of economic life. Instead, the developmental errors rested with the *state-led* introduction of these processes, inducing inefficiencies, distortions, and profligacies that interfered with "natural" market mechanisms. With the early 1980s debt crisis, many Southern states were forced to solicit aid from international financial institutions and foreign governments to stem a wave of unexpected balance of payments deficits. Requirements for "structural adjustment" in macroeconomic policy that accompanied this aid drove the evolution of neoliberalism from a sideshow ideology to a mainstream development practice. In addition, the adoption of neoliberalism was not simply imposed from the North. The ideology also aligned with the interests of numerous Southern political elites by assuring long-promised economic growth needed to maintain legitimacy while at the same time weakening the position of domestic industrial workers and unions who were often their most vociferous oppositions (Connell and Dados 2014). With support from both the North and the South, neoliberal assumptions about the positive relationship between free markets and economic growth replaced the modernization assumptions of the previous generation. Poorer countries were expected to lessen market regulations, strengthen the rule of law, and "trade their way out of poverty." The original impetus for development theory—to transform and upgrade the productive capacities of the economy—was missing. Neoliberal prescription was, as Ha-Joon Chang put it, "like *Hamlet* without the prince of Denmark" (2011, p. 55).

With the acceptance and promotion of neoliberal policies came a new round of critique. To be sure, the term "neoliberalism" itself is largely reserved for use by detractors, as an epithet for the many ways in which commodification and market dislocation undermined the sustainability of livelihoods. The criticisms were not incorrect. Postwar development policies had already increased mass reliance on market-based income for social reproduction, but by deregulating markets and removing social protections, neoliberal policies amplified these vulnerabilities into full-blown crises. Yet amidst this critique of neoliberalism, a new strand of scholarship emerged which held that precarity has deeper roots. This "precarious turn" occurred in each of the development subfields highlighted above: labor, peasant, and social welfare studies.

Within labor studies, scholars reconsidered the assumptions in modernization theory that mass proletarianization underpins capitalist development. Rather than produce an inclusive and sustainable development, the spread of flexible labor processes, subcontracting networks, and transnationalization of production have increased the precarity of waged work. In curious ways, the alarm sounded about precarity in twenty-first century capitalism is a revival of seemingly passé debates about the lumpenproletariat and the reserve army of labor from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Michael Denning muses, "intriguingly, almost the entire contemporary vocabulary—redundant, superfluous, precarious—can be found" in Marx's *Capital* (2010, p. 97). One common response by scholars and activists is to call for employment that provides secure livelihoods and dignity on a global scale, i.e., "decent work" and a "living wage." Others, however, have questioned the possibility of generalized decent work altogether.

In Latin America, state-led industrialization as well as neoliberal structural adjustment were *both* accompanied by the persistence of informal labor forces, leading to stark income inequality across the region (Portes and Hoffman 2003). In post-apartheid South Africa, Franco Barchiesi examined workers not in the most marginalized or precarious positions, but in formal, often unionized, wage employment. As the observable material decline of even these relatively privileged workers indicates for Barchiesi, "far from being a vehicle of social advancement and emancipation, wage labor is turning in South Africa into a reality of poverty and social exclusion" (2007, p. 64). For China and Southeast Asia, Ching Kwan Lee and Yelizavetta Kofman dismiss the idea that labor precarity is primarily an outcome of increased global competition. Rather, the deliberate creation of flexible labor "is an integral part of the state's strategy of development" (2012, p. 389). Given that the few recent examples of "successful" development, in terms of economic growth, depended on calculated use of precarious labor, a growth-oriented development of this sort will not likely create decent work. This precarious turn in labor studies candidly asks, as Henry Bernstein puts it, "what if capitalism, including industrialization … in the South today is incapable of generating sufficient, and sufficiently secure, employment to provide a living wage to the great majority?" (2009, p. 251).

Within peasant studies, debates once believed to be settled have also been reopened. The counterpart to a burgeoning informal sector in the cities is a persistence of various forms of peasant agriculture in the countryside. Even in China, where industrial development has arguably been most successful, rural dwellers have shown firm resistance to full urbanization and proletarianization. Recent urban labor shortages, partly resulting from Chinese rural social structure, would have surprised most modernization theorists (Zhan and Huang 2013). However, in most countries and regions the persistence of rural agricultural lifestyles is not the result of increased economic opportunity, but rather a last resort for large segments of the population excluded from development. In India, for example, "the proportion of all workers engaged in agriculture as the main occupation has remained stubbornly above half, despite the decline in the generation of agricultural employment in the most recent decade and the sharp fall in agriculture's share of national income" (Ghosh 2012, pp. 47). Given these realities, Bernstein (2006) argues that the "agrarian question" must be asked again. If the classical agrarian question concerned the transformation of rural inhabitants into industrial labor, however, the pressing matter today is not how to produce labor for capital but how to produce livelihoods for labor. In this context, access to land rights could fill a deficit in livelihoods left via insufficient production of wage labor. As a result, issues of land reform, balanced agro-industrial growth, and the capacity to reinvest domestic surplus have returned to theoretical and practical agendas. What types of political and social coalitions are best poised to carry these out at national and regional levels is currently under debate (Moyo and Yeros 2011, pp. 21–26).

Lastly, scholarly focus on Southern countries within social policy and welfare studies has also taken a precarious turn. State-provided social provisions have been conceptualized as one form of decommodifying welfare institution among many. Around the world, state welfare inputs interact with transfers from markets, households, and community-based aid organizations such as NGOs or "traditional" mutual aid societies in a wide and variable mix. Exogenous financial shocks to poor and middle-income countries in the neoliberal era have often disrupted pre-existing informal networks of market and household transfers without replacing them with more stable state substitutes. Yet for large segments of the population, the development project *itself* was a major exogenous shock to non-state networks of social protection. A principal debate within social policy studies now revolves around how to succeed employer-linked, formal wage-labor models of social protection with alternatives that can actually be universalized (see analyses in Gough and Wood 2004; Haggard and Kaufman 2008).

In summary, precarious turns in development subfields related to labor, peasants, and social policy emerged along with a more general critique of neoliberal ideology. The "growth first" model that drove mid-twentieth-century development policy, some scholars realized, led to a commodification of life for the majority of the population of the global South without convergence to Northern living standards. By tracing the emergence of precarity and commodification to the developmental era before neoliberalism, this coalescing scholarship also specified ways to think beyond neoliberalism in analytical terms. As Northern theoretical discussions over the nature of neoliberalism were climbing to an animated degree, however, a surprising change began to take place within Southern social policy. A widespread extension of social assistance programs across middle- and lower-income countries signaled a tendential but tangible shift towards de-commodification in the global South. This prevalent trend, we argue, shows a potential to move beyond neoliberalism in historical terms: a "welfare-first" approach to development.

The rise and spread of social assistance programs in the global South

Southern welfare policy from development to neoliberal eras

While newly independent countries and other Third World states were encouraged to use public power to create welfare policy, they were usually given a lop-sided blueprint for its implementation. Whether in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, or South Asia, postwar welfare policies were inherited from colonial ruling institutions that targeted settler communities and small but growing classes of "native" administrators and formalized laborers (Mesa-Lago 1978; Midgley and Piachaud 2011). When states chose to extend social policy after independence, their welfare organizations continued to target these new middle classes. This was often because these segments of the population garnered an increased degree of social power during the course of decolonization and early state-building, applying political pressure on state elites in tandem.

Aside from Third World revolutions that occasionally replaced state elites and resulted in a more egalitarian social "leveling," uneven extensions of social policy across the new nations were the norm. Uneven capacity of states to implement these social welfare policies was one reason; variations in social power among different segments of the population that demanded them were another. A more fundamental problem was that postcolonial states modeled much welfare policy on Northern archetypes of economic transformation (Midgley 1984). Social insurance coverage based on formal wage-labor was unattainable for most households. Moreover, taxation and transfer policies that functioned as progressive mechanisms of redistribution in Northern social insurance systems tended to be regressive in Southern countries, due to the fact that welfare beneficiaries in the latter mostly belonged to upper income strata (Segura-Ubiergo 2007). Northern development agencies cautioned against universal social policies that could reach the majority of the population outside the formal labor force. These supposedly were too costly, and so "growth first" development was instead recommended as the main path to improved living standards.

The fact that relatively rapid rates of economic growth *did occur* in the global South during the postwar era made the "growth first" argument more alluring. Yet underneath rested an awkward fact: the same era that experienced a "golden age" of Northern welfare state construction coincided with assertions to Southern states that economic growth, not social spending, was the developmental solution to the problem of welfare access (Surender and Walker 2013, p. 20). Development planning tended to focus on infrastructural projects, technology transfers, and public health interventions such as population control that were assumed to lead to higher per capita growth. By the early 1970s, the persistence of poverty amidst postwar growth fostered a critique of development policies that focused solely on GDP and did not address "basic needs" or equitable distribution of resources (Seers 1972; Hicks and Streeten 1979). Mahbub Al-Haq, the Pakistani economist, reconsidered the postwar orthodoxy of "growth first" development after his observation of Chinese welfare policies. He later wrote how his subsequent public advocacy of a basic needs strategy was met with "shocked disbelief" by the Western academic community that had trained him, but with a "certain sense of relief" by Third World leaders (1976, pp. 8–9).

During the 1970s, a host of commissions, conferences, declarations, and reports—from the call for a New International Economic Order to the Brandt Commission and Club of Rome—discussed a variety of proposals to rebalance development policy and international economic governance towards a global form of Keynesianism—"a welfare state on a planetary scale" (Prashad 2013, p. 69). Yet the debate over tradeoffs versus synergies of economic growth and a more universal welfare system was quickly sidelined as neoliberal criticisms of Northern welfare states extended into the development field by decade's end. Given the association of social spending with states more generally, Third World welfare policies were labeled as inefficient compared with private capital, distortionary for labor markets, and creating personal dependency on the state (Mkandawire 2004, pp. 11–12). This dovetailed with a different critique of postwar development planning, this time from the left, which painted the technocratic push for economic catch-up as paternalistic. In the hands of mostly authoritarian Third World states, such social policies were argued to be profoundly anti-democratic and de-politicizing. The debt crises of the 1980s shelved the more radical proposals for a “people-centered development,” but the sentiments did not go away. Instead, they were absorbed into a growing fascination with micro-level approaches to development, from NGOs to micro-finance, that utilized a language of empowerment and grassroots communitarianism (Prashad 2013, p. 128).

At the macro-economic level, development policy focused on creating an enclave export sector that could be inserted into the new international division of labor. Southern states manufactured and assembled goods for consumption in the North and competed to “upgrade” their position in “global commodity chains.” This phrase neatly concealed the Schumpetarian paradox that a general attempt by all countries to “move up the value ladder” undermines the positional values accrued to particular manufacturing activities (Brewer 2011). Yet international finance and official aid were conditionally tied to liberalization in macroeconomic policies for the purpose of exports. In these circumstances, welfare spending on anything other than alleviating extreme poverty was not just deemed as wasteful but also, given the assumed effect on boosting income, a barrier to growth strategies that supposedly relied on cheap labor inputs. As a consequence, social spending was cut back, existing social insurance programs for middle strata were partially privatized, and foreign aid partly administered through a rapidly growing NGO sector. Throughout the global South, “the social policy vacuum created by structural adjustment thus resulted in the proliferation of alternative and traditional health services, self-help associations and rotational saving schemes, and, most crucially, extended family networks” (Surender and Walker 2013, p. 22).

Southern welfare responses to neoliberalism

While surfacing during the 1970s amidst critiques of Southern state-led development policies, the decade in which neoliberalism became the reigning *doxa* throughout the world is usually thought to be the post-Cold War 1990s. In 1989, John Williamson introduced the term “Washington consensus,” which soon signified not just a policy package—Williamson’s more modest intention (2004)—but a development ideology of universally applicable and ahistorical market fundamentalism. In its precepts, however, the Washington consensus was, in essence, a reincarnation of the “growth-first” model. As this *doxa* spread rapidly to political, economic, and cultural elites around the globe, a chorus of appraisals arose with it. As Fig. 1 illustrates below using corpus linguistics, the use of neoliberalism as a term—largely one of approbation—grew dramatically in this period. As growth-first orthodoxy loomed ever more dominant in an age of “globalization,” critics increasingly situated their analyses under the conceptual umbrella of neoliberalism.

Figure 1 also shows, however, that a separate process began in the early 1990s—one that received far less attention from supporters and critics of neoliberal policies alike. This is the rising implementation of social assistance programs in the global South over the past two decades. Part of a broader package of “social protection” policies, social assistance programs include anti-poverty transfers of cash and in-kind

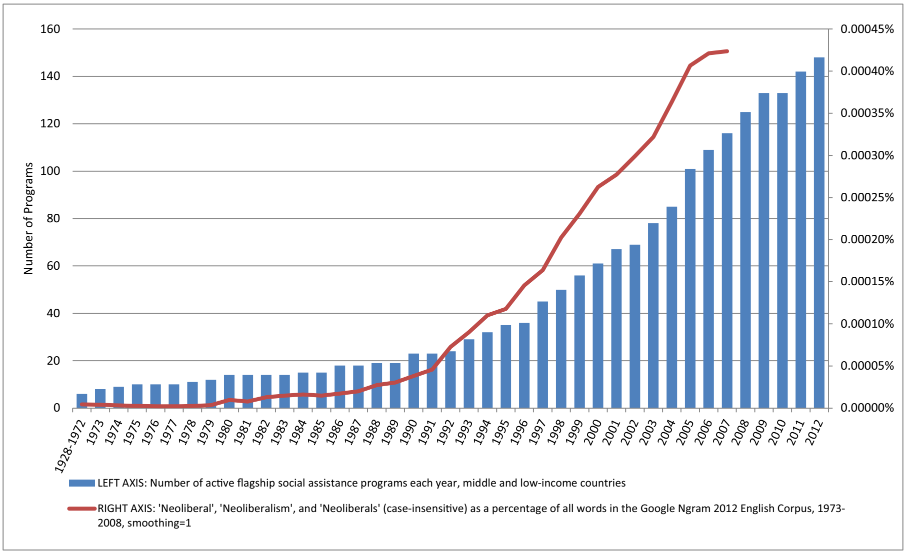

Fig. 1 Usage of the term "neoliberalism" and its variants vs. active flagship social assistance programs in middle and low-income countries, by year. Sources: Barrientos 2013c, authors' calculations, Google Ngram English 2012 Database

goods, targeted expansions of access to health care and education, employment guarantees, and pensions for the elderly poor. These are to be distinguished from "safety net" programs that focus on short-term humanitarian crises and emergencies. Utilizing a database of 183 flagship social assistance programs active over 1928–2012 in 84 developing countries, Fig. 1 shows that a growing section of the world's population experienced new access to some form of de-commodifying social assistance largely from the 1990s onwards (for simplicity's sake, we have collapsed active programs from 1928–1972 into a single column). These are not the only social protection programs in poorer countries: e.g., Chile has over 143 programs, Bangladesh has over 80, and India has over 90. In Fig. 1, however, only active "flagship" programs, defined by high population coverage or as key programs in their respective countries, are shown.[3]

Given the meager outcomes of welfare programs implemented during the postwar development era, such social assistance programs can play a new role for welfare policy in the global South. As the economist Armando Barrientos points out:

> In developed countries, social assistance is largely a residual safety net charged with protecting a small minority of individuals and households from the effects of poverty, after all the other components of social protection (social insurance, basic services, labour market regulation) have proved unsuccessful. In developing countries, where social insurance covers at best a minority of the labour force,

[3] For Fig. 1, we first sorted a list of 162 flagship programs in 76 countries by region and year in the *Social Assistance in Developing Countries Database*, compiled by Barrientos (2013c). We then added 21 additional comparable flagship social assistance programs for eight middle- and low-income countries in West Asia and North Africa that were not included in Barrientos's database. The column for each year represents the number of *active* flagship programs in that particular year. That is, when a social program was cancelled, we removed it from the subsequent year's tally. We thank Mona Rahmani for research assistance in this effort.

> basic services are highly stratified, labour market regulations are thin and poorly enforced, and the incidence of poverty and vulnerability is high; social assistance is the primary—and sometimes the only—social protection instrument addressing poverty and vulnerability (2011, p. 243).

In other words, Northern-styled social insurance is limited precisely because of the persistence of labor informality and precarity in the global South. Social assistance policy therefore has "a primary role within social protection; it is developmental in scope and increasingly large in scale" (2013a, p. 104). How large? Barrientos and his colleagues give a "conservative estimate" that as of 2010, between *750 million and one billion people* lived in households receiving some form of anti-poverty transfer via flagship programs shown in Fig. 1 (p. 4). This estimate is conservative for two reasons. First, as mentioned, not all existing transfer programs are included for each country in the database, which means this range is likely an underestimate. Second, when only household beneficiaries were available in lieu of individual beneficiaries, Barrientos utilized the average size of household for each country to calculate population coverage for flagship programs. Given that poorer household sizes tend to be larger than average, this also underestimates the overall number.[4]

Such programs existed before the 1990s, but the last two decades have experienced a widespread expansion across multiple regions in the global South. To illustrate this, we chart in Fig. 2 our database of 183 active flagship social assistance programs by region of implementation and year.

Not all countries have implemented flagship social assistance programs, and some countries have implemented multiple such programs. Figure 2 therefore does not show universal implementation, but the trend is clear. Starting in the mid-1990s and continuing through the 2008 global financial crisis, most of the global South embarked on a set of bold experiments in development policy that targeted the large segment of the population that had been excluded from the "development project" of the postwar era. The post-2008 crisis slowed down the spread of programs slightly though not entirely. As Fig. 2 shows, this expansion was not limited to one region, but rather occurred in multiple regions via a large array of programs. This broad variety of programs is due to their national format—there is no "one size fits all" aspect. Social assistance programs are not a panacea, in other words, but they are a new phenomenon that is not a residual effect of earlier development paradigms.

In those countries with more than a decade of experience with social assistance policies, some common features can be assessed. These programs do not "trickle down" through labor force formalization but rather can "scale upwards" from the poorest households to those on the cusp of poverty, and from pilot projects to national programs. They often begin as temporary interventions by executive decision, and later develop legal frameworks, legislative accountability, and permanent bureaucratic administration. They are cheaper to implement than social insurance programs for upper income households, but can usually reach far more individuals (depending on the threshold for beneficiaries). In the case of anti-poverty cash transfer programs, the majority of countries spend between 1 and 2 % of GDP (Barrientos 2013a, p. 196). Financing in Latin American states tends to come from national taxes on resource

[4] Personal communication with Armando Barrientos, 11 February 2015.

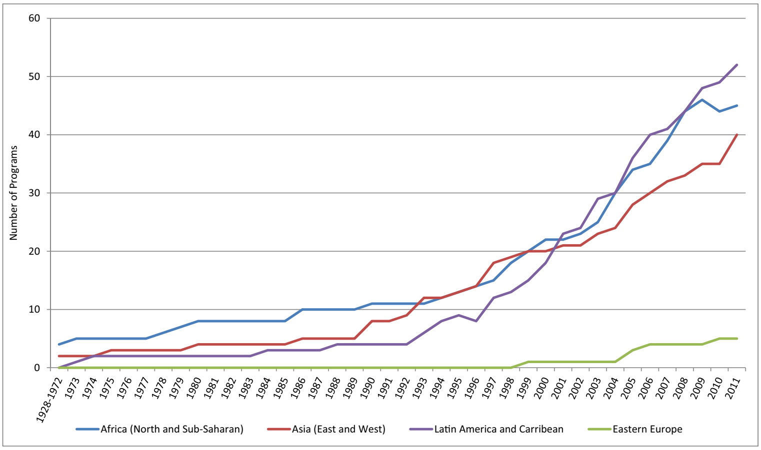

Fig. 2 Active Flagship Social Assistance Programs in middle and low-income countries, by region and year. Source: Barrientos 2013c and authors' calculations

revenues and domestic consumption, while sub-Saharan African programs tend to be funded by resource revenues, customs duties and foreign aid (p. 185). These programs are increasingly tied to multiple dimensions of poverty beyond basic income lines, from educational access and caloric intake to housing needs and preventative health care. Along with decommodifying households through reducing dependence on paid labor or raising the reservation wage, social assistance programs can affect labor force structure in other ways: children and the elderly stop working while formerly unpaid care workers can garner income outside of the home.

Even with such diversity among policy types, was their overall spread from the 1990s onwards solely a diffusion of cheaply ameliorative programs encouraged by the World Bank or IMF? For the region most studied in depth, Latin America, evidence shows that the initial establishment of conditional cash transfers across the continent partly exhibited Meyeresque mechanisms of cross-national learning and policy exchange through technocratic norms (Sugiyama 2011). However, the introduction of more redistributive non-contributory social insurance programs in Latin America, such as elderly pensions, did not come about simply through transnational policy diffusion. Instead, an increase in precarious employment across the region due to deindustrialization served "as the foundation for the formation of new political coalitions supporting changes in social policies" (Carnes and Mares 2014, p. 704). Such shifts are not only visible in Latin America. Governments that successfully implement new social assistance policies underpinned by cross-class support can more easily construct viable political coalitions that, in turn, can be pushed to deepen and extend social welfare access. To draw out some common trends in policy implementation, below we examine social assistance programs in four large countries: China, Brazil, India, and South Africa. At some point in the past, each pursued a "growth-first" strategy of development that led to a large rise in precarity of work and livelihoods. Each country faced exogenous economic shocks and constraints from speculative foreign capital that seemingly narrowed their domestic social policy options. Each country also experienced a new wave of political pressure and social unrest from below, often uncoordinated among the "precariat" but still felt by state elites. In all four cases, these programs subsequently expanded far larger than their original scope and became permanent and substantive features of the country's social policy mix. Although implemented to various degrees and instituted in piecemeal fashion, these four countries illustrate that new social assistance programs in the global South, which partly harken back to the "basic needs" critique of the 1970s, are not simply ameliorative.

Social assistance programs

China

We begin with China, which may seem like an outlier given the state's relatively egalitarian development policy in the mid-twentieth century. Yet by the 1990s, the Chinese state pursued a neoliberal growth-first strategy that subjected much of its population to commodification and market-based dislocation. Two such transformations, which had massive national and global repercussions, were the liberalization of China's state-owned enterprise sector and the increasing proletarianization of the rural workforce. Unlike many countries in the global South, China's earlier post-revolutionary trajectory resulted in relatively equal, educated, and healthy outcomes during the postwar development era (Sen 1998). Yet the breakdown in the urban work unit and rural household welfare systems that accompanied increased economic growth has dislocated millions of individuals. This led to two widespread sources of social unrest: existing urban wage-workers pushed out of the old socialist compact and new urban-wage workers who migrated from rural areas (Lee 2007). As the Chinese socialist welfare compact deteriorated "from iron rice bowl to informalization," Mark Frazier writes, "public opinion appears firmly behind the idea of welfare rights and coverage based on citizenship rather than employment" (2011, p. 79).

Even as formal workplace-based social insurance programs were being dismantled, new social policies emerged from the shifting geography of protest that accompanied the country's economic transformation. As Dorothy Solinger writes, "In China, once the program of marketization allowed work units to relinquish their customary welfare responsibilities, the lack of any prior nationwide welfare network, when combined with widespread and frequent worker protests, made the construction of a brand-new system [an] urgent affair" (2009, p. 206). Given the state's high capacity to enact government policy and access to increasing resources linked to economic growth, these new policies at least partly aim to quell the tide of social unrest by establishing a new, stable post-Maoist social compact. The target populations of these programs are worth examining, since this social compact could be more universally accessible than the previous Mao-era social compact situated along the urban–rural divide.

China's state-funded Minimum Livelihood Guarantee (*dibao*), in existence since the mid-1990s and revamped in 2001, is a universal means-tested income grant program. Piloted in Shanghai and spread to 206 cities by 1997, the policy was originally designed as an anti-poverty response to the breakdown in the enterprise-based urban welfare system of the Maoist era. The program's beneficiaries grew from 2 million in 1999 to 21.4 million urban residents in 2012 (Gao et al. 2015). The grant is meager—around one-fifth the monthly average wage—and paid for by a combination of local,

[0] Personal communication with Armando Barrientos, 11 February 2015.

provincial, and national resources (Hurst 2009, pp. 74–77, Solinger 2011, p. 43). Solinger and her colleagues found that implementation of the Minimum Living Guarantee varied between cities since urban administrators possess a degree of autonomy. Some cities required work from able-bodied individuals while others emphasized transfers for the disabled and neediest beneficiaries (Solinger and Hu 2012; Solinger and Jiang 2013). The *dibao* was extended to rural areas, from 3 million in 2001 to 53 million peasants receiving income transfers in 2013 (Golan et al. 2014), and is arguably now "the largest cash transfer program in the world" (Ravallion and Chen 2013, p. 20). In addition to a minimum income policy, China increased basic health coverage from 2003 to 2008 from 15 to 85 % of the population, adding around 800 million people to new rural health care programs. In December 2009, the government also launched a pilot pension program that aims to cover 700 million people living in rural areas by 2020. Overall, according to the ILO, China's social policy push is "the world's fastest and largest social inclusion process ever, and is expected to have substantial impact in boosting Chinese domestic demand and rebalancing growth towards the internal market" (2011, p. 15).

Brazil

In 1988, Brazil's constitution was revised during the transition to democracy to expand access to social security into a universal legal right for all citizens. During the country's previous military dictatorship, citizenship rights formed a main part of oppositional discourse. Yet subsequent years witnessed a deep recession, hyperinflation, and a stark liberalization of Brazil's economic agenda. The decentralization of power that accompanied democratization provided space for social movements of the urban poor and pro-democracy segments of the middle class to demand political accountability at municipal levels. This resulted, at first, in a set of neo-corporatist institutions through which local parties attempted to channel unrest into machine politics. But these struggles ultimately merged into a "broader stream of the democracy movement to become highly politicized struggles for citizenship" (Heller and Evans 2010, p. 446).

During this same period, a means-tested policy of conditional cash transfers was discussed in 1990, implemented in pilot projects in the mid-1990s, and started at the national level in 1996. The program tied school enrollment and attendance to income grants. In 2002, under the Workers' Party, the policy was expanded under the *Bolsa Familia* initiative to seven separate conditional cash transfer programs, which included provisions for health and nutrition (Soares 2011). The program reached 46 million people in 2010; an additional old age and disability grant reaches 3.1 million. Another social pension for long-term rural informal workers reached 7.8 million individuals by 2010. Once a nationally administered program, Brazil's cash transfers touched poorer populations living in the North and Northeast, segments of the rural elderly, and minority ethnic groups. In Sao Paolo, for instance, 19 % of households received *Bolsa Familia* transfers in 2004, with 95 % of them in the lowest-income category (Satterthwaite and Mitlin 2014, p. 214). By 2008, 86.2 % of the population aged sixty-five and over were receiving a pension transfer (Barrientos 2013b, p. 895). Given the small amounts transferred, the social assistance program does not always push families above the national poverty line, but the contribution in lowering Brazil's inequality is measurable: *Bolsa Familia* is estimated to have reduced the Gini coefficient by 0.8, 14 % of the fall in inequality between 1995 and 2009 (Soares 2013, p. 165). As qualitative interviews with recipients of conditional cash transfers show, "far from creating stigma, as one might expect a means-tested program to do, the Bolsa Família imbues beneficiaries with heightened feelings of belonging and agency" (Hunter and Sugiyama 2014, p. 840).

A striking political shift accompanied the expansion of social assistance programs in Brazil. In the mid-1990s, various provincial parties introduced pilot programs of urban cash transfers and rural pensions to win over local voters. The 2002 victory of the Workers' Party allowed for President Lula da Silva's administration to scale up these programs and implement them via the federal executive branch. This exempted the cash transfer program from divisive multi-party negotiations that occur in the legislative arena. As a result, whereas Lula and the PT were first elected as a result of support by urban-based formal working- and middle-class voters, his 2006 re-election saw "a marked switch of support for Lula from the more prosperous south towards the poorer north and north-east of the country" (Hall 2013, p. 171). The successful and efficient rollout of national social assistance programs contributed to the realignment of Brazilian politics towards greater inclusion of poorer citizens. The discourse surrounding the policy moved away from welfare "handout" towards universal citizenship, and it is unlikely to be removed even if Brazil's "emerging market" status experiences a downturn. Given the success of the Brazilian example, sixteen Latin American countries now have a similar social assistance policy in place, covering around 70 million people by 2010, or about 12 % of the region's population (ILO 2010, pp. 76–77). As a result, these programs could be the first step in a more inclusive developmental model where social assistance programs have positive political feedbacks that strengthen and expand access to redistributive welfare institutions. As Evelyn Huber and John Stephens argue, any attempt by Latin American countries to upgrade domestic production in a socially inclusive manner in the twenty-first century will have to rest on universalizable social policies that reduce poverty and inequality while also investing in educational expansion and the provision of technical skills (2012, pp. 44–47).

India

Of these four countries, India arguably has the largest informal labor sector and the least centralized state apparatus. The 1947 Indian constitution enshrined social protection as a citizenship right early in the postwar era, yet its development strategy was decidedly "growth first." The country has enacted numerous schemes since the 1960s for child health, rural employment, and decreasing poverty, yet the effects are widely uneven due to the fact that the politics and resources of different Indian states varies. In Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Himachal Pradesh, social assistance policies have been applied more universally, with far better welfare outcomes (Drèze and Sen 2011). Since the late 1990s, however, a new range of rights-based social policies have been enacted, partly "achieved through pressure on the government by civil society campaigns and people's movements" (Mutatkar 2013, p. 106).

The Targeted Public Distribution System is one of the largest social assistance programs in the world, reaching an estimated 239 million people in 2007. The program provides subsidized staple foods to poor households. Given the importance of such a program, there is a long-running debate in India over the definition and measurement of poverty. When lower caloric lines are used, official estimates of poverty decrease, but this also limits access to social policies for those households on the cusp of official poverty lines (Corbridge et al. 2013, pp. 50–63). Social protest and debate thus occur concerning the category of poverty as well as its causes. Nevertheless, the state has increased social spending as a percentage of GDP, from roughly 2 % in 1990 to 3.3 % in 2010 (Kattumuri and Singh 2013, pp. 94–95). In addition to food transfers, a widened set of educational assistance, health care, and child development programs reached between 39 and 86 million in 2007, depending on the program. Furthermore, a national old age pension scheme provides pensions for nearly 20 million elderly people as of 2012 (Gupta 2013). Standing (2012) is currently helping to coordinate a pilot program in selected villages to evaluate replacing the food distribution system with cash transfers.

India is also a notable case because of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), passed in 2005. NREGA entitles rural individuals to be employed for 100 days at the minimum wage of around two US dollars a day. It is a workfare program designed to help build basic infrastructural projects such as roads and canals, but it is also a rights-based policy of citizenship. NREGA mandates equal wages for women and requires 33 % of laborers in any work type reserved for women. The program was initially implemented in two hundred districts but is now extended to all rural areas, with a cost of between 0.5 and 1.5 % of GDP depending on utilization (Mutatkar 2013, p. 107). When poorer individuals sign up for NREGA employment, which reaches an estimated 50 million households and an average work length of 40 days, it affects not only the wage recipients themselves but the entire labor market in informal rural sectors (Drèze and Sen 2013, p. 201).

The quality of implementation varies widely and is often criticized by India's right-wing media. India's new Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, claims NREGA is a boondoggle implemented by his Congress Party predecessors. Nevertheless, Modi's finance minister promised the same budget for the program in 2015 as had been allocated previously.[5] In fact, the continuity of NREGA illustrates the effects by which Indian social conflict pushed new social policies onto the agenda. Struggles over rights for education, food, and work, a set of Indian scholars argue, "do seem to represent a Polanyian double movement," which can often involve "different fractions of the middle classes" (Corbridge et al. 2013, p. 116). This middle-class activism, a segment of which favors a broadened social democracy, has occurred at the same time as large-scale protests over land rights, work contracts, and affirmative action for marginalized ethnic and caste groups. More than half of NREGA beneficiaries are Dalit or Adivasi, 48 % are women, and demand for the program is running high.

South Africa

South Africa's system of public social welfare dates back to the 1920s when the government first instituted old-age pensions for white citizens in response to the public outcry and social unrest over the issue of "poor whites"—a group whose numbers swelled with the urbanization and industrialization of the economy that followed the discovery of gold and diamonds. In the early 1980s, pensions were extended to those

[5] "Despite Modi criticism, Jaitley gives NREGA a slight nudge." *The Indian Express*, 5 April 2015.

citizens classified by the government as “Indian” and “Coloured” in an effort to gain those groups’ support against the growing anti-apartheid movement. By the end of that decade the South African economy had entered a severe crisis that saw levels of unemployment and poverty rising dramatically among the black majority. At the same time, the mass-based resistance movement was reaching a militant peak. In response, the Apartheid government took the decision to include the black majority in the pension system. By 1993, the program had been reworked and means-tested old age pensions were made available, for the first time, to all South Africans regardless of race. By 2013 the program provided grants to 2.9 million recipients (SASSA 2013).

By global standards, South Africa’s pension grant is both generous and wide reaching. Although means-tested, around 80 % of age-eligible black and colored South Africans receive the pension. Those excluded tend to be either wealthy or retired formal sector workers who have private pensions. Annually adjusted for inflation since its 1993 implementation, the pension grant pays recipients around half the average household income and more than double the median per-capita income of black households (Case and Deaton 1998, p. 1335; Klasen and Woolard 2009). Although many South African households are multi-generational, the means test is only applied to the recipient and his or her spouse. As a result, pension recipients are often important income earners even in the households of working-age adults. Pensioners also play a vital role in mitigating the effects of South Africa’s ongoing unemployment crisis by providing cash-income to unemployed relatives (Klasen and Woolard 2009). Pensions have also been shown to have positive effects on the health of children who live in recipients’ households (Duflo 2003).

The second major plank of the post-apartheid welfare system is the Child Support Grant established in 1998. Prior to the Child Support Grant, a state grant was available to mothers of children who could not depend on the child’s other parent to provide income. However, participation in this program required applicants to first seek recourse for child support through the courts in order to become eligible. This bureaucratic hurdle, along with a low level of public knowledge of the program, meant that in 1990 only 0.2 % of black children were recipients of the grant (Aguero et al. 2007, p. 4). In 1998, this program was replaced with the Child Support Grant. It only requires a means test, and it is available not just to mothers but to anyone recognized as a child’s primary care giver. Although the means test is more stringent for the Child Support Grant than it is for the Old Age Pension, it has achieved a very wide reach. By 2004, 3.5 million children received the grant, or about half of age-eligible children in the country. Originally limited to children under seven, the age limitation has been regularly increased, and at present it is available to all children under 18. As measured by recipients, the grant has become by far the largest social assistance program in the country, with 10.8 million grants—about one for every five residents in the entire country—provided in November of 2013 (SASSA 2013). Because the Child Support Grant provides a lower amount than the Old Age Pension, the two programs are similar in terms of total cost.

These social grants’ wide reach has made them both popular and politically important programs. Their centrality to the post-1994 government’s ruling project stands in contrast to the general, and largely justified, depiction of this period as one in which the

African National Congress has adopted a neoliberal policy framework. It is telling that, despite being some of the most generous public assistance programs in the global South, these grants are almost never the subject of debate among the ruling ANC and various opposition parties. They have also been consistently expanded by the ANC, despite the fact that the party's ideological commitment to free-market policies has produced a "strong, visceral distaste for 'welfare' and 'dependency'" among its leadership (Marais 2011, pp. 401–402). The contradiction between the ANC's rhetoric of self-reliance over welfare on the one hand (see Barchiesi 2011) and a continued expansion of social assistance on the other suggests that a driving force for these social assistance policies is political pressure from below.

The politics of contemporary social protection

If Barrientos and his colleagues' 2010 estimate of 750 million to one billion beneficiaries of social assistance policies is roughly accurate, then the scale of state-led welfare expansion over the past two decades in the global South easily surpasses the welfare beneficiaries of the golden age of postwar Fordism in the North. There is a widening consensus among development practitioners that such a "social protection floor" can be universalized at a global scale (ILO 2011). Few who advocate for these policies argue that, on the whole, existing social assistance programs are adequate in coverage, funding, or depth. Yet the main theoretical critique leveled at such programs is deeper: as Vijay Prashad has argued, these policies are no more than ameliorative "band-aids," which do not address the structural causes of precarity, poverty, and inequality (2013, p. 178).

Some of these critiques reflect the ideological assumptions of the critics rather than a sincere engagement with the reality of new forms of social protection. For example, neoliberal critics argue that such programs distort markets and disincentivize "productive" work. The Brazilian journalist Augusto Nunes wrote in *Veja,* a conservative Sao Paulo weekly popular with upper-income citizens, that Bolsa Família "preserves misery." He added, for good measure, "Bolsa Família already has its second generation of dependents…. Grandkids of women in the program are the way daughters make sure they too get the benefit."[6] Yet the evidence amounting from these programs shows such assertions to be false and a consequence of the "one size fits all" assumptions embedded in neoliberal thought.

From the other side of the political spectrum, some critics argue that social assistance programs are de-politicizing and counter-productive. In this view, such forms of welfare are neoliberal tools that states use to control populations instead of empowering them. This theoretical assertion is ahistorical and almost never backed up with empirical evidence or ethnographic study. As Karl Von Holdt observed for the South African case, much scholarship "tends towards a ritualistic denunciation of neoliberalism and the neoliberal state, concepts which are assigned tremendous and far-reaching explanatory power, but which quite ignore other,

[6] "Brazil's Bolsa Família: welfare model or menace?" *Christian Science Monitor,* 17 November 2013.

equally important, dimensions of state functioning" (Burawoy and Holdt 2012, p. 28). States, especially non-democratic ones, have been implementing welfare policies to control populations at least since Otto von Bismarck, yet that has not prevented the expansion of social citizenship. One could argue that depicting welfare as social control is a functionalist hangover from earlier critical theories of the Northern welfare state in their 1960s heyday (Hort and Therborn 2012). In India, Rina Agarwala has documented how, far from being controlled, female informal workers are demanding welfare access from the state because they cannot secure it at the workplace. By doing so, they are "finding alternative ways to decommodify labor through the state … by claiming their rights as citizens" (2013, p. 6).

There are, however, more nuanced critiques arguing that social protection policies remain limited vehicles that cannot lead to broader decommodification of livelihoods. Lena Lavinas, for example, calls into question comparisons between targeted social transfers, such as those in Latin America, and the Northern welfare states of the twentieth century:

> Whereas one function of the post-war welfare state had been to remove core provision of health, education, housing and social insurance from the buffetings of the market, the role of the new-model 'enabling state' is to facilitate the play of market forces—providing 'public support for private responsibility' (2013, p. 6).

Lavinas further argues that these new programs undermine the conditions necessary for broader universal forms of welfare since they "enforce a principle of selectivity, targeting the poor as a residual category … thus working to diminish social solidarity and cohesion" (p. 38). Lavinas's critique of one specific type of social assistance—conditional cash transfers—needs to be taken into consideration, especially because most studies of social assistance programs tend to be conducted by policy scholars, not social theorists. It is understandable, therefore, that they might be dismissed as a temporary fad.

However, if we broaden our scope beyond a single country, region, or type of program, the specific forms of new policies are less important than the politics that have produced them. Our contention that a new approach to development is emerging does not rest on the content of any single policy but on the fact that waves of social unrest and contention across the global South have transformed the politics of welfare and well-being in numerous countries. As Levinas herself recognizes,

> Social policy has long played a marginal role in Latin America: the elites of the world's most unequal zone have for centuries ignored those most in need. In that sense, the ascendancy of CCTs over the past decade and a half marks an undoubted shift: most countries in the region today recognize the need to reduce poverty as a paramount challenge, to be addressed through large-scale public policies (p. 37–38).

This is occurring not just in Latin America, but across the global South, marking a fundamental transformation in the relationship between states and citizens in a huge portion of the world.

Conclusion: a welfare-first approach to development

We argued above that new forms of social protection arose around the global South over the past 25 years. These policies were driven by political demands from below that have forced states to recognize an obligation to provide welfare to citizens directly, rather than simply promise economic growth. However, one might ask, does this constitute a new approach to development or is it simply a new wave of global policy innovation? What is clear is that these new welfare obligations of poorer states towards citizens contradict the tenets of a growth-first development paradigm. According to both postwar developmentalist and more recent neoliberal doctrines, the state should pursue economic growth so that welfare can be provided in the future. Yet an emerging strand of development thought suggests these orthodox theories have the relationship between welfare and development backwards. If growth-first development often undermines the social foundations of well-being and livelihood, then improved welfare might itself be an engine of development—a prerequisite to, and not an outcome of, high levels of growth. In light of this new line of argument, many states and international agencies have, over the last decade or so, reversed their previous reluctance to address the welfare demands of citizens.

A diverse range of recent theoretical and empirical scholarship supports this nascent welfare-first approach to development. Gillian Hart, for instance, analyzed how land redistribution and social welfare policy played a role in East Asian development. Hart argues, "the retention of peasant property—along with other state-sponsored subsidies securing the reproduction of the workforce—have been both underappreciated and absolutely central in defining the conditions of 'global competition' emanating from East Asia" (2002, p. 54). Debates over neoliberalism and globalization, she asserts, typically do not examine "the crucial importance of historically specific configurations of agrarian social property relations and forms of collective consumption … the role of land in supporting the social wage and underwriting the massive mobilization of industrial labor" (p. 302).

Comparing East Asia with Southern Africa, Giovanni Arrighi built on Hart's work to highlight the structural contradictions contained within growth-first development strategies. South Africa had been highly successful in transferring labor from less productive peasant sectors into more productive industrial sectors, largely through land dispossession. Rather than producing an economic takeoff, however, this commodification of labor precipitated a steady erosion of the contribution made by South Africa's industrial sector to development. The economic growth that has taken place is largely capital intensive and unable to alleviate unemployment levels that are among the highest in the world. For Arrighi and his colleagues, "the true source of South Africa's competitive disadvantages in labor intensive manufacturing lies … in the full proletarian condition, high costs of reproduction, [and] poor health and formal education of its labor force" (Arrighi et al. 2010, p. 434). South Africa is not an outlier, but an extreme case of a common trajectory for most of the global South. A continued commitment to growth-first development has only exacerbated problems:

> By "betting" on capital to solve the [economic] crisis, [the post-apartheid government] forfeited the kind of investments in the welfare of the population (housing, public transport, health and, above all, mass lower and higher education) that would have been key developmental objectives in themselves and may

> well be the most essential, though by no means sufficient, condition of renewed economic expansion (p. 435).

Peter Evans shows how analyses by Hart and Arrighi link with multiple strands of economic theory—including new growth theory's emphasis on "human capital," institutional economics' focus on "good governance," and Amartya Sen's capability approach—all of which point to the fundamental importance of improved welfare as essential, but not sufficient, for successful development. For Evans, what we have referred to as the precarious turn in development theory points to the need for a new "21st century developmental state." As opposed to the postwar era, these new developmental states should make welfare improvements a direct goal:

> Looking at the 20th century development models, it was possible to imagine that "growth policy" could be separated from "social policy" or "welfare policy," such that "growth policy" could be built around partnerships between the state and capital—partnerships that did not have to concern themselves with well-being. The 21st century developmental state cannot afford such myopia. Policies that expand capabilities may look like "social policy" or "welfare policy" but they are essential to growth policy (Evans 2010, p. 50).

The expansion of social assistance programs highlighted in this article constitutes a major shift towards the type of welfare-led development for which Evans and others have argued. Notably, since their beginning in the early 1990s, social assistance programs have become increasingly central to the political and developmental projects of the states in which they are administered. Programs that often began as small-scale responses to political demands from below for protection from commodification and market dislocations that accompanied both development and neoliberal era policies have become some of the largest and most popular social and economic programs in poorer countries.

The popularity—and therefore relatively secure futures—of these programs has shifted the developmental approaches of states in which they are present, even if these states have not explicitly abandoned growth-oriented development goals. In the 1990s, as scholars began widely to critique neoliberal ideology and the processes of globalization associated with it, there was a near consensus view that the coming years would see a race to the bottom in global labor laws, environmental regulation, and general living standards of the poor. This secular decline of welfare was thought to be the inevitable outcome of the competition for growth-producing investment that would define developmental strategies for countries across the global South. However, with the rise of social assistance programs, the current period has instead seen states spending both financial and political resources on improving the welfare of their poorest and most vulnerable citizens. Those who predicted a race to the bottom 20 years ago might be surprised to find that today the most successful developers are those that have implemented the most far reaching social welfare policies.

We do not deny the reality that market-oriented ideology and commodifying development strategies have wielded enormous influence over the past three decades or more. However, it is equally significant that during the same period in which neoliberal ideology has seemingly reached its apex of power, states across the global

South have extended de-commodifying welfare provisions to their citizens on a scale that is unprecedented in the history of the capitalist world economy. While neoliberal policies and the pursuit of economic growth continue to guide development policy, states now have to operate in a new reality in which decommodification of livelihoods and protection from market-based dislocations are becoming firmly entrenched norms among their citizens. At the same time, a growing set of alternative development theories suggests that such decommodifying welfare provisioning might be a key driver of economic development. For those skeptical of the possibility for a Karl Polanyi-styled counter-movement in the current neoliberal era, it is time to realize that one has been going on already, hidden in plain sight.

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