Draft text 25 Jan 2013

Progress report

Geographies of Development II: Cash transfers and the reinvention of development *for* the poor

Forthcoming: Progress in Human Geography (2013)

http://phg.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/01/17/0309132512474739.abstract

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Abstract

Since the mid-1990s, a number of governments in the global South have instituted programmes which provide regular cash grants to poor people. The results of cash transfer programmes have been impressed those searching for ways to improve welfare: the depth of poverty has been reduced, more children are being educated and vaccinated, and the poor are more likely to get jobs and start enterprises. Advocates of social democracy are hopeful that this heralds the possibility of comprehensive social protection. Experiments in welfare in the global South do not, however, inevitably signal an epochal shift to a postneoliberal era. They form part of an increasingly heterodox approach which combines an enduring emphasis on liberalised economic growth with bolder biopolitical interventions *for* the poor.

Keywords: cash transfers, welfare, social democracy, postneoliberalism, biopolitics

Development's epiphany

In 1995, when the Mexican GDP contracted by 6%, the newly elected government and World Bank advisors doubted that existing poverty alleviation measures were going to be enough for many vulnerable people to endure the crisis. Subsidies for tortillas and other staples were not reaching many of the rural poor, beneficiaries were not being identified consistently, distribution was subject to clientalism, and administrative costs were high (Levy, 2006; Molyneux, 2008). Besides, researchers were concerned that food provision schemes addressed only one of poverty's many dimensions (Levy, 2006). So they tried something else. They established a programme to give money to the poor. The programme, initially known as *Progresa* and later *Oportunidades*, included a 'scholarship' for children who attended school and obliged beneficiaries to visit clinics for health lectures and check-ups. In less than a decade, it reached a quarter of the Mexican population. It resulted in improved school attendance and completion, a reduction in malnutrition-related stunting, healthier children, and falling extreme poverty. Strikingly, 94% of the budget reached beneficiaries because running costs were low.

Former World Bank president James Wolfensohn argues that, unlike the many successful development projects that are small and short lived, cash transfer programmes are able to benefit large populations over a sustained period of time (Foreword in Levy, 2006). Early innovations in Mexico, Brazil, Honduras and Bangladesh inspired cash transfer programmes in 45 countries in the global South, reaching 110 million families (Hanlon et al., 2010), and have even reformulated social policy in parts of the global North (Peck and Theodore, 2010). Although cash based welfare has a long history in the North, its uptake in the South has been described as a revolution (Barrientos and Hulme, 2009; Houtzager, 2008; *The Economist*, 2012a).

The bourgeoning literature on biopolitics draws attention to the kinds of mechanisms governments use to sustain the lives of populations living within their territories (Foucault, 2008; Hannah, 2012; Li, 2009; Ong, 2006). As the literature reviewed in this report shows, cash transfers have emerged as an important instrument in conducting development *for* the poor. In contrast to the sink-or-swim approach of market fundamentalism, or more proactive attempts to unleash the entrepreneurial power of the poor through micro-credit (Roy, 2010), cash transfers and other distributive mechanisms give form to more overtly ‘pastoral’ relationships between states and populations (Huxley, 2007: 197). Support for these techniques of government comes not only from World Bank-aligned policy, which sees cash transfers as a means to re-orientate the poor to take responsibility for their own development, but also from those who see the potential for establishing distributive mechanisms to ameliorate the effects of globalisation and economic marginalisation. Critics, by contrast, argue that redistribution is limited by enduring commitments to liberalised economic growth, which compromise the ability of large numbers of people to escape poverty.

Reproducing ‘surplus’ populations

Rising wages and the appearance of large middle classes in the global South have vindicated, for many, the role economic growth in development. Kharas and Rogerson (2012) argue, for example, that economic growth will largely vanquish poverty in middle income countries by 2025. Yet against these enduring forms of market faith there has been a broad recognition that economic growth does not, in itself, translate into advances for many poor people. Bakker and Gill argue that the ‘extended power of capital’ is at odds with ‘progressive forms of social reproduction’ (Bakker and Gill, 2003: 18). They identify a ‘crisis of social reproduction’ (Bakker and Gill, 2003: 28; also see Bezuidenhout and Fakier, 2006: 462; Hunter, 2011: 1104) which stems from the inability of people to reproduce themselves through money wages, or through social wages (Hart, 2002) (on social reproduction also see Bakker and Silvey, 2008; Katz, 2004; Roberts, 2008).

A minority of working people in many parts of the world are waged or salaried employees, and many of those who are ‘surplus’ to the requirements of the labour market are self-employed in the informal sector (Denning, 2010; ILO, 2010). The welfare systems that did emerge in the global South during the 20th century produced limited groups of rights-bearing workers (Barchiesi, 2011; Chari, 2010; Ferguson, 2009). Those beyond these social contracts manage risk within their families and social networks, with very little help from the state (Soares, 2012). According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), four fifths of the world’s population does not have access to social security (ILO, 2008). Furthermore, a waged or salaried job is no longer a certain route to inter-generational upward mobility. Trade liberalisation and the mobility of production have weakened the ability of workers to secure decent conditions from capital and consumers (Seekings, 2008b). Rather than participating in a secure proletariat, many are exposed to the uncertainty and hyper-exploitation of what is being called the ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2011).

In response, states and multilateral agencies have undergone a variety of ‘realignment[s]’ away from market orthodoxy (Leiva, 2008: xvii). This has been described by some as a Polanyian counter-movement which mitigates the dislocating effects of market expansion (Craig and Porter, 2006; Sandbrook, 2011; Watts, 2009). A host of other neologisms attempt to capture the various responses to the crises of unemployment and social protection since the 1990s: the Third Way, the post-Washington consensus, postneoliberalism, the new new deal, and neostructuralism. They are not synonyms, to be sure, all question the adequacy of the deregulated market. Some argue that neoliberalism has lost at least some of its ideological hegemony because of the exacerbation of poverty in the wake of liberalisation, the financial crisis following 2008 (Peck et al., 2009) and the fading power of the U.S. (Agnew, 2009). Keynesian social spending is no longer taboo (Smith, 2011) and there is solid commitment to un-neoliberal principles such as ‘universal access to urban services’ (Parnell and Robinson, 2012: 608).

Erstwhile advocates of the tough love of the market in the 1980s such as the World Bank have, since the 1990s, recognised the need for interventionist poverty reduction (Craig and Porter, 2006; Roy, 2010; Ruckert, 2009; Taylor, 2009). Structural Adjustment Programmes morphed into Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, which were, supposedly, drafted by recipient countries themselves rather than imposed, and World Bank lending for social development increased as a proportion of loans (Vetterlein, 2012). Donors have come to accept that regular social transfers are more appropriate than emergency aid for populations whose vulnerability is not transient (Ellis et al., 2009). The most prominent collective commitment to tackling poverty has been the undertaking, in 2000, by all UN member states to meet the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 (Giovannini, 2008; Roy, 2008). Moderate Third Way governments, such as those led by Fernando Henrique Cardoso in Brazil, Patricio Aylwin and Frei Ruiz-Tagle in Chile, and Thabo Mbeki in South Africa, attempted to marry the objectives of social growth and social justice (Taylor, 2006). In the 2000s, popular frustration fuelled the success of parties further to the left, such as the Workers' Party in Brazil (Cameron, 2009; Goldfrank, 2009; Grugel and Riggirozzi, 2012). The more radical, including Venezuela and Bolivia, count themselves as experiments in 21st century socialism (Gibbs, 2006; Meltzer, 2009).

Yet, for many commentators, there is no 'sharp rupture' (Leiva, 2008: xxxi) from neoliberalism to postneoliberalism (Bebbington and Humphreys Bebbington, 2011; Hart, 2009) and some prefer to classify shifts since the 1990s as 'inclusive neoliberalism' (Craig and Porter, 2006: 63; Hickey, 2010) or 'roll-out neoliberalism' (Peck et al., 2009: 106). Neoliberal globalisation has 'relative ecological dominance' (Jessop, 2010: 33) as a result of the path established by neoliberal reforms (Taylor, 2009). Although parties in power might be less expressly neoliberal, there are nevertheless on-going processes of *neoliberalization* (Brenner et al., 2010). New left governments continue to rely on many of the macroeconomic frameworks established under more explicitly market oriented regimes (Macdonald and Ruckert, 2009; Webber, 2009). Grugel and Riggirozzi (2012: 6) suggest that the primary difference between neoliberalism and postneoliberalism is 'in government attitudes to the poor and discourses of citizenship rather than economic management as such' (also see Brand and Sekler, 2009). The result is a heterodox mix in which the state attempts to harness existing socio-economic platforms to incorporate marginalised groups (Luna and Filgueira, 2009). However, breezy win-win narratives finesse what Leiva calls a 'heterodox paradox' (Leiva, 2008: xxvii) in which attempts to address the needs of the poor are limited by the demands of affluent groups and capital.

Throw money at the problem

Within this heterodox milieu, the introduction of cash-based social policy measures has assumed a variety of forms. The most popular are those that target the most vulnerable parts of the life cycle: grants for children and pensioners transform those who are normally dependents into breadwinners (Bähre, 2011). Income protection for working age adults is a more difficult sell. A vociferous campaign for a universal basic income grant in South Africa has failed despite chronic levels of unemployment (Seekings, 2008a).

Argentina is relatively unusual for having introduced a cash transfer for the unemployed in the wake of its 2001 collapse (Grugel and Riggirozzi, 2012). Ethiopia and India, rather, give cash to unemployed individuals through public works programmes (Hanlon et al., 2010; Li, 2009). In targeting welfare, states use various kinds of means testing or geographic targeting that 'delimit 'the poor"' as a homogenized beneficiary group (Williams et al., 2012: 995). Policy debates revolve around inclusion errors and exclusion errors: in their efforts to avoid paying those considered not poor enough, means tests run the risk of excluding those who are in fact struggling to survive. Yet regardless of intended patterns of inclusion, Gupta's ethnographic analysis of the workings of bureaucracy in India (2012) shows the alarmingly arbitrary way in which individuals access social protection.

Nevertheless, cash transfers have resulted in the improvement of bureaucratic capacity. Some countries such as South Africa have dramatically improved birth registration (Lund, 2012). However, since more than a third of births worldwide are not registered, many states are contracting information corporations to develop biometric registration systems in order to stabilise information on the populations they govern (Szreter and Breckenridge, 2012). A new biometric identity scheme launched in India aimed to register 200 million people by the end of 2012 to enable the extension of social security (*The Economist*, 2012b). As Breckenridge argues, these technologies occupy an ambiguous position in that they appear to be coercive and also represent the possibility of reducing patronage-based distribution and achieving much higher levels of coverage than would otherwise be possible (Breckenridge, 2005).

Although advocates of cash transfers generally stress that they are not a panacea for all social ills, they do attribute a number of advances to cash transfers. They have helped to reduce income inequality (ILO, 2011; Soares et al., 2010), the depth of poverty has fallen (Woolard and Leibbrandt, 2010) and some households have been able to escape poverty (Lloyd-Sherlock et al., 2012). Cash transfers have improved household consumption (Soares et al., 2010) with associated improvements in nutrition and expenditure on children (CASE, 2008; Hanlon et al., 2010). Cash transfers may result in lower rates of child labour (Soares et al., 2010). School attendance has increased and dropout rates have decreased. Health and nutrition measures have improved. Many schemes claim gender empowerment by, for example, countering tendencies to keep girls out of school (Molyneux, 2008) or by making benefit payments through women, with the rationale that women are better stewards of the money than men, and that this may improve the power of women in households (ILO, 2011).

Mindful that cash transfers might be regarded as little more than charity (e.g. Woolcock, 2012), advocates attach much importance to the way in which they facilitate income-generating activity, through both entrepreneurialism and employment. Economists argue that poverty creates risk aversion, and a regular income provides safer conditions to take the risks needed to start businesses (Levy, 2006). It may provide micro-capital or leverage for micro-finance to establish enterprises (Hanlon et al., 2010). Enterprises are more viable because local demand increases from households that now have more cash to spend. In South Africa, pensions to women over 60 free up working age mothers to look for work (Posel et al., 2006). Cash transfers, therefore, aim to engender long-term autonomy as well as help meet short-term consumption needs.

This aim becomes even more explicit when cash transfers entail *conditions*. Many (although not all) schemes are classified as *conditional* cash transfers because they require beneficiaries to fulfil specified conditions in order to continue receiving grants. Those who would otherwise be concerned about dependency on hand-outs might be appeased by the fact that recipients have to 'earn' their grant by keeping their children in school and having them vaccinated (Fiszbein and Schady, 2009; Levy, 2006). The result of improved education, health and civic responsibility will be improved human capacity and, therefore, populations that are able to advance themselves over the long term. Conditional cash transfers are, then, a form of governmentality which enable authorities to try to 'shape the conduct of diverse actors without shattering their formally autonomous character' (Miller and Rose 2008: 39) (also see Hossain, 2010; Li, 2007). Modest cash transfers give households the freedom of consumers to meet some of their needs, but place expectations on them that they will find exit routes from poverty by making good health, education and civic choices to become more capable of earning an income (Hickey, 2010).

This is consistent with the rhetoric of 'economic freedom' which underpins other kinds of interventions such as microfinance (Roy, 2010: 21). As Roy points out, these notions of freedom are normative in that they expect the poor to behave in ways that will improve their human capacity and earnings. Behavioural economists such as Thaler and Sunstein advocate the use of mechanisms to 'nudge' people to make better choices, and call this model 'libertarian paternalism' (2008: 5). But these are crude tools with complex outcomes. Children in Brazil might attend school because of conditions imposed, but they perform below par (Soares, 2012). Without concomitant increases in budgets for services, incentives to get people to use services simply results in overcrowded and understaffed schools and healthcare facilities. Furthermore, grant conditions may undermine rather than advance gender empowerment as they affirm 'more "traditional" divisions of labour and responsibility' such as motherhood, and force women to jump through hoops to access their benefits (Molyneux, 2008: 38). Much like many of the rationales behind microfinance, this essentialises gendered roles such as caring, maternal and responsible women in contrast to unreliable men (Rankin, 2002; Young, 2010).

Upon his election to the presidency of the World Bank in 2012, Jim Yong Kim confirmed the Bank's commitment to distributional interventions to tackle poverty. However, this does not signal mainstream development's abandonment of neoliberalism for welfarism. Proponents of free markets have always been reconciled to the need to intervene in the case of market failure (Collier, 2012; Esping-Andersen, 1999). In managing market failure, these policies do not aim to decommodify people; that is, to reduce their dependence on the market (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Taylor, 2009). The appearance of cash based forms of social support is appealing to some economists not as a route to establishing more extensive redistribution but simply as a way of allowing support to become demand driven rather than supply driven (Kharas and Rogerson, 2012). Grant payments are, by design, too modest to address poor households' needs fully. In a cover story announcing the welfare revolution in Asia, *The Economist* insisted that Asian governments had learned from the mistakes of other welfare experiments and 'have little desire to replace traditions of hard work and thrift with a flabby welfare dependency' (2012a: 9).

An un-Fordist compact?

While advocates of liberalised economic growth cautiously embrace cash transfers, those more of a more social democratic orientation hope to install a global social contract which help governments meet basic human rights and achieve social justice (ILO, 2008). The ILO and other organisations have launched the 'Social Security for All' campaign which proposes a 'global social protection floor'. Cash transfers would form part of a package of cash and service based mechanisms to put in place a 'virtuous circle of development that provides an exit route from poverty' (ILO, 2011: 12). The ILO argues that even relatively poor countries can afford to make progressive improvements to the coverage and quality of social protection over time through their own revenue and with the support of international donors (ILO, 2008). But, most of the world's poor are now located in middle income countries (Sumner, 2012) with increasing financial resources to devote to poverty reduction. Famously, the *Bolsa Família* in Brazil costs 0.5% of the GDP, reaches a quarter of the population and has has contributed to a reduction in income inequality (Palma, 2011).

There is now a vocal lobby which argues that social protection can become redistributive if it is made to reach progressively more people with more money and services (Adésínà, 2007; Barrientos and Hulme, 2009; Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004; Hanlon et al., 2010; Mkandawire, 2004; Vellinga, 2007). This lobby rejects the need for conditions, which it argues are redundant anyway. The South African Child Support Grant, which does not have conditions attached, shows that school attendances have improved as a result of cash alone (Hanlon et al., 2010; Lund et al., 2009). Some are also in favour of universal grants, and against means testing which has long been criticised by social democrats for stigmatising the poor (Adésínà, 2007). The possibility of 'social democracy for the tropics' (Leftwich, 2005: 597) appears, for some, to be on the cards (also see Sandbrook et al., 2007; Vellinga, 2007).

Yet contemporary projects for social democracy need to contend with very different circumstances to those of the 20th century in which the bounded national state was regarded as the appropriate geographical frame for mechanisms of distributional justice (Fraser, 2008). Trade liberalisation obviates the possibility of passing on the costs of good conditions of employment to investors and consumers (Seekings, 2008b). Financial liberalisation allows capital flight and the escape of what should be national wealth (Fine et al., 2011). Mass unemployment means more people living in poverty and proportionally fewer taxpayers, and therefore that welfare will be spread thinly over the large 'residuum'. Although the contemporary development zeitgeist has given renewed priority to the problem of under-consumption, there is little interest in curbing over-consumption or instituting punitive redistribution. As demonstrated by literature reviewed in the first report in this series (Ballard, 2012), states regard successful accumulation by middle classes and elites as part of the good story of the economic growth and through which the global South is taking on a 'developed' status (also see Chatterjee, 2008).

If new experiments in social policy do constitute a revolution then they might best be described with Gramsci's notion of a 'passive revolution' (Morton, 2013), which entails top down responses to bottom up demands so that existing elites can manage the inclusion of marginalised groups rather than lose control as they would in a conventional revolution. Many programmes originated with progressive technocrats who, in their creation of schemes, bypassed not only the intended beneficiaries but also civil society and parts of government itself (Fenwick, 2009; Houtzager, 2008; Li, 2009; Lund, 2008). This top-down emphasis does not negate the possibility of significant gains for the poor. Ferguson and Li have both argued that this moment represents an important opening for the implementation of life-sustaining distributional mechanisms, regardless of whether they might come from above or be recognisably neoliberal (Ferguson, 2007; 2009; 2012; Li, 2009).

The poor do have political influence, to be sure. Parties that intend to gain or retain power need to confront poverty in visible ways. They use distribution systems to ward off 'extremism' (Li, 2009) and 'contain dissent' (Hart, 2006: 991). Yet, as Boito (2010) argues in the case of Brazil, the power of the poor is limited because they hand responsibility for improvements to the state. The extent to which social movements and other popular groupings mobilise around the protection, design, implementation and uptake of systems of social protection will determine whether or not cash transfers become a site of 'biopolitical struggle' (Chari, 2010). This, and other forms of development *by* the poor, will be the subject of the final report in this series.

Conclusion

Cash transfers have been championed by a social justice lobby which recognises that the poor do not bear complete responsibility for their poverty and that universal, non-conditional and increasingly generous distributional systems are required to achieve social justice and human rights. However, as literature on postneoliberalism shows, there is no easy return to the welfare state's 'ascending road of social betterment' (Titmuss, 1958: 34) after the detour of neoliberalism. Cash transfers have also been enfolded within mainstream development approaches which locate responsibility for transcending poverty upon the poor themselves and use grants to alter the behaviour of the poor. Enthusiasm for what Roy (2010: 73) calls 'the democratization of capital' obscures important truths such as the way in which poverty is produced, and the way in which women are burdened with the responsibilities for poverty. The role of cash transfers within broader structures of social reproduction has emerged as a fundamental development problem.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful for the editorial guidance of Vicky Lawson and for the inputs by Matt Birkinshaw, Sharad Chari, Kerry Chance, Gill Hart, Mark Hunter, Margaret Jack, Francie Lund, Gregory Morton and Dori Posel on earlier drafts.

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