
Redistribution of What?

Beyond Land in the Moral Politics of Distribution

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Introduction

My knowledge of the debates on two of the core themes addressed in this volume – the issue of ‘expropriation without compensation’ and that of the transformative potential of constitutional law in South Africa – is limited.¹ Instead of engaging directly with these concerns, this chapter focuses on the third theme: redistributive justice in contemporary South Africa. It is written as a think piece that is aimed at extending the discussion beyond the issue of land per se. It does so by raising some general issues regarding the nature of distributive justice and distributive politics and probing how they can best be advanced in a society that has not been primarily agrarian for many decades. While my focus is on how to reimagine redistributive justice in terms of what I describe as ‘the rightful share’, I also consider that the perspective on distribution I offer here can usefully inform our understanding of land justice and the question of compensation for privately owned land that is targeted for land reform purposes. At the same time, I recognise that what I describe as the moral politics associated with the ‘land question’ in South Africa can, in turn, invigorate campaigns for ‘the rightful share’, such as that around a basic income grant.

In the first section, I point out some of the limitations of taking land as a kind of general paradigm for issues of justice and redistribution, noting (as others have done before me) some of the specific features of the land question that make it a misleading analogy or model for the larger distributive challenges that South Africa faces today (on this, see also Walker, Chapter 9, this volume). In the second section, I go beyond this

¹ With apologies to Amartya Sen; see his lecture entitled ‘Equality of What?’ (Sen, 1979).

fairly familiar critique to identify some points of commonality between recent land politics and other distributive struggles in the region that have targeted income rather than land. Notable here is the campaign for a basic income grant (BIG). While I am most familiar with developments around this in Namibia, I recognise the significance of the BIG campaign in South Africa, which gained significant traction in 2023 (Ndenze, 2023). In concluding, I suggest that while the long and unfinished struggle over land redistribution offers only a very flawed paradigm for distribution in general, broader distributive struggles may yet be able to learn from the powerful moral politics surrounding ‘the land question’.

Land as ‘the Nation’s Wealth’: An Anachronistic Model of Distribution

Viewed from the larger perspective of distributional politics that I have been working with for some years now (Ferguson, 2015; Ferguson & Li, 2018; see also Loher et al., 2016), the heavily land-focused debate on ‘redistribution’ in South Africa often seems to cloud rather than clarify the key questions that an effective distributive politics in the region needs to confront. The most visible way that this happens is when land (and especially agricultural land) is taken as a kind of fundamental or paradigmatic image of the nation’s wealth – offering a ‘master narrative of loss and restoration’ (Walker, 2008: 27) which becomes the principal interpretive frame for distributive politics. The ambition and reach of such thinking are in some ways admirable in that they boldly imagine a ‘putting right’ of a centuries-long history of injustices that have culminated in a grotesque maldistribution of land, which can be seen as one of the root causes of poverty and inequality today. But the conception of the relationship between land and the nation’s wealth on which such formulations are based is over-simplified and out of date. Increasingly, it obscures more than it reveals. If we are not able to develop richer and more imaginative conceptions of what societal wealth is and where it comes from, we will continue to struggle – not only with the politics of land reform but also with the broader politics of distribution, of which land constitutes only a small and, as I and others have argued, not particularly representative part.

The evocation of a nation’s wealth that can be claimed as a kind of common possession has always been politically attractive, for understandable reasons, and agricultural land and mining have long been the most convenient exemplars for such a politics in southern Africa.

However, under contemporary conditions, a more convincing and non-anachronistic picture of a truly common wealth requires not the resuscitation of nineteenth-century pictures of the economy but, rather, a radically expanded conception of the social basis of both the ownership and the production of that national wealth. Such a conceptual shift would allow us to recognise that the sort of distributive politics that is most urgently needed today is less a matter of an epochal act of seizure involving a lump of valuable stuff ('land' or 'gold') and more a continuous and 'always-already political' process that involves the distribution of the whole social product. One useful lineage of ideas for informing such a conceptual shift can be traced back to the work of the Russian anarchist and communist Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), as I will further discuss briefly.

But, one may ask, what is wrong with the use of land as a conceptual paradigm for thinking about the politics of distribution in South Africa? Is it not really the perfect symbol of the nation's wealth and its historic and continuing maldistribution? It is a powerful symbol, to be sure. But the economic realities of the present matter too – and here we have to remember that South Africa is no longer the predominantly agrarian country that it was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Today agriculture makes up only a small proportion of the national product, considerably smaller than the contribution of industry and the service sector. In 2021, according to the Statista website, agriculture 'contributed around 2.47 per cent to the gross domestic product (GDP) of South Africa, whereas industry and services had contributed 24.5 and 63.02 per cent of the total value added, respectively' (Statista, 2023). As Beinart notes in Chapter 8 (this volume), the total value of agriculture within the economy is larger than the GDP figures convey on their own, once forward and backward linkages and the size of the agricultural labour force are taken into account. Nevertheless, agriculture is still dwarfed by the service sector, while over two-thirds of the population (68 per cent in 2021, according to World Bank, 2018) is urbanised. Thus, a commitment to redistributive justice must start with the stark reality that even the most far-reaching programme for confiscating and redistributing farmland would leave the overwhelming bulk of the national economy untouched. The objection to such a programme should, therefore, not be that it is too radical. Rather, the objection should be that it is not nearly radical enough!

However, as I suggested at the start of this chapter, the emphasis on wealth as land is really a symptom of a larger problem – a problem in the

first instance of the imagination. How do we imagine the way that wealth is created and distributed? The picture or image of wealth that we hold in our heads necessarily shapes how we imagine any move to 'redistribute' it. One way of picturing the national wealth of a country like South Africa is to think of the whole of society as, in some fundamental way, like a very big agricultural estate. No doubt, this metaphoric picture captures something important, especially by foregrounding the question of who owns the estate and how they came to own it. It is thus a picture that has clear implications for understanding and addressing the contemporary maldistribution of 'the nation's wealth'.

But what plan of action for a fair(er) distribution of the nation's wealth does this picture suggest? If the current distribution of this wealth is not only unequal but also, given the history of how it was acquired, unjust, what is to be done about it? And here the understanding of societal wealth as essentially lying in land offers a ready solution to its unequal and unjust distribution: confiscate the big estates, divide the land into small pieces and hand out these pieces to the landless and/or those historically denied access to land. Agricultural experts and economists may argue about the wisdom of such reform, but it is fairly easy to visualise how such a rearrangement of land holdings might look and also to imagine how at least some poor and historically oppressed people might benefit from it. Indeed, it seems likely that the ease with which such 'redistribution' can be imagined surely helps to explain its persistent appeal.

The image of land as the quintessential expression of national wealth that the dispossessed might simply 'take back' shares key features with another persistent object of redistributive fantasy, that of mineral wealth. In both cases, we have a picture of societal wealth as a tangible 'thing' (commercial farms or gold and other mines) which can be physically seized and then redistributed to the state and/or those considered to be deserving (such as mine workers or 'local communities'). But modern economic productivity does not correspond with this understanding of wealth as constituted by physical resources; contemporary wealth certainly does not take this simple form in South Africa. Today, as already indicated, service industries enjoy an increasing share of the economy (both when measured by GDP and, even more overwhelmingly, when measured by employment numbers). Can this economy still be conceptualised primarily in terms of chunks of wealth that can be physically seized and cut into pieces? Can it be nationalised? What exactly is being produced anyway, and how do we reckon its value? Once one has

accepted this perspective, the primary question becomes not 'How do we redistribute an agrarian economy of farms or even an industrial one of mines?' but, rather, 'How do we ensure that the members of society receive their rightful share of the national wealth in a predominantly service-based economy, one that in South Africa is mostly urban, increasingly informal and characterised by exceptionally high levels of unemployment?' What, in short, does redistribution look like in a service economy?

I have said that we need different ways of imagining what wealth is (or maybe many different ways) and also where it comes from. But we also need new ways of imagining what redistributive justice means in a world where fewer and fewer people are able to subsist by working the land or by selling their labour for wages. The old agrarian social reformers dreamed of fixing mass poverty via land reform – 'Give them all land!' Later, industrial modernisers (both on the left and on the right) demanded 'Jobs for all'. At the same time, while it may be the case that these dreams and demands have become anachronistic, the hunger for a much more equitable distribution of wealth and opportunities that they reflect has not. If the modern service economy of South Africa cannot deliver land, or, as is becoming increasingly apparent, formal jobs for all the region's poor and dispossessed, that cannot mean that these people are owed nothing. It only means that we must reconceptualise what it would mean for them to receive what I have called their rightful share – rightful because this share is a consequence not of charity or welfarism but of how wealth is a social creation.

It is here that new ways of thinking about direct and universal income distribution could help us see our way to a very different approach to distributive justice than the one that comes so readily to mind when we habitually think of societal wealth in terms of the model of land.

Beyond Land: A Moral Politics of Distribution on the Societal Level

I have elsewhere explored in more depth alternative images of national or societal wealth that are very different from the land-centred images that feature so prominently in the South African distributive imagination (see Ferguson, 2015). In the current conjuncture, one of these alternatives involves recognition of those who are partly or wholly excluded from the world of productive labour but who nonetheless could make strong distributive claims by styling themselves as members of a collectivity that

is obliged to grant them recognition as also rightful or ultimate ‘owners’ of the nation’s wealth.

Marxism, with its labour theory of value and its fundamental understanding of the oppressed as workers, has always struggled with the politics of the non-worker, the so-called ‘lumpen’ masses excluded from the putatively revolutionary class of wage labourers. But progressive intellectuals are heir to a rich set of alternative Left traditions that have more to offer those excluded from having a role in today’s production system. The anarcho-communist Peter Kropotkin, for instance, always insisted on starting with universal claims of distribution and advocated a notion of distributive justice that is ultimately rooted in societal membership and not just labour. In his 1898 essay on ‘Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal’, he laid out an alternative ‘conception of society . . . in which there is no longer room for those dominating minorities’:

A society entering into possession of the social capital accumulated by the labor of preceding generations, organizing itself so as to make use of this capital in the interests of all, and constituting itself without reconstituting the power of the ruling minorities. It comprises in its midst an infinite variety of capacities, temperaments and individual energies: it excludes none. It even calls for struggles and contentions; because we know that periods of contests, so long as they were freely fought out, without the weight of constituted authority being thrown on the one side of the balance, were periods when human genius took its mightiest flight and achieved the greatest aims. Acknowledging, as a fact, the equal rights of all its members to the treasures accumulated in the past, it no longer recognizes a division between exploited and exploiters, governed and governors, dominated and dominators, and it seeks to establish a certain harmonious compatibility in its midst – not by subjecting all its members to an authority that is fictitiously supposed to represent society, not by trying to establish uniformity, but by urging all men to develop free initiative, free action, free association. (Kropotkin, 1898: 9–10)

Where does our vast societal wealth come from? Why are we so much more productive than our great-grandparents? We are not better people than they were. We certainly do not work harder. Instead, we (all members of society) are able to produce vast riches far beyond what our forebears could have dreamt of only thanks to a massive, worldwide industrial apparatus of production – an apparatus built up through generations of work, sacrifice and invention, across centuries and even millennia of human history, in a process that generated massive suffering for millions all across the globe. Here the case of mining in South Africa

and its historical dependence on the migrant labour system that was enforced throughout southern Africa (and rested in turn on the unpaid work of rural households and rural women in particular) is instructive. So once this history is acknowledged, to whom does the vast wealth-producing apparatus of the present era really belong? Surely not only to the corporations and the holders of stocks and shares who now (outrageously) claim to own this wealth outright, but also, and more compellingly so, to the descendants of all those who worked and imagined and suffered and bled to create it – in short, to all of us.

In this conception, the whole system of production must be regarded as a collective inheritance. And it was from this universal claim of common ownership that Kropotkin derived a universal distributive claim. This is that, surely, at least some portion of the entire output must be due to all who are heirs to this inheritance and hence the rightful owners of the collective apparatus of production. Everyone, that is, must receive a share. (Defining the quantum then becomes a matter of politics; what is critical is that the principle should first be accepted.)

Note that it is not the worker (as worker) whose claims are prioritised here. It is the members of society – collectively the inheritors of a great common estate in which each and every one of us has a rightful share. In this view, it is not just labour that is the foundation of that inheritance but also contributions like suffering, bloodshed, care, ingenuity and shared experience. It is thus the entire society that is the source of value. And it is all the members of that society, not only those currently employed as workers, who, as inheritors and co-owners of the whole, are entitled to a share of society's proceeds.

Such arguments, I have shown elsewhere (Ferguson, 2015), are not only of academic interest. Indeed, remarkably similar arguments have been put forward by advocates for Namibia's BIG Campaign, which has proposed that each and every Namibian should be entitled to a monthly cash payment precisely because they, as the nation's citizens, are the real owners of the country and its mineral wealth, and therefore ought 'to share in the country's wealth' (Ferguson, 2015: 179–83).² In these arguments, receipt of a modest monthly state payment is rendered as simply the receipt of a share that is properly due to an owner. The most basic citizenship right is thus understood not as the right to vote, but as the

² For more information, including on the positive impact of the BIG pilot project in Namibia in 2008/9, see the website of the BIG Coalition Namibia: www.bignam.org/ (accessed 24 April 2023)..

right 'to partake in the wealth of the nation'. Direct grants from the state, in this understanding, need not bring with them the shame or stigma of receiving charity or getting a 'handout'. In receiving a rightful share, Namibian citizens, in this conception, are simply 'partaking in the wealth' that rightly belongs to the whole nation. And in doing so, they (as rightful co-owners of that wealth) are not receiving a gift or being offered 'help' – they are claiming what is already rightfully their own, their 'rightful share'. Similar arguments are being advanced in South Africa, where advocacy around BIG stretches back into the late 1990s (Mahafu, 2022); these arguments have gathered momentum in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and, at the time of writing, are under consideration within the government.³

Note that the argument that is being made here is not about welfare support but about recognising the rightful share of the nation's wealth that belongs to all of society's members. Significantly, it is the whole economic system and not just 'the land' that is understood here as society's collective inheritance. Furthermore, wealth is not imagined as a fixed substance that might be 'taken' from those who currently have it and divided up among those who do not but as the product of a fast and ever-changing global apparatus of production that is rightfully the inheritance of us all. The universalism of this diagnosis fits well with the universalism of the recent thinking about social protection in the region in the BIG campaigns in both Namibia and South Africa. The assurance of a basic income may offer a particularly appealing way of thinking about how to distribute universally in what has become a predominantly service economy. As already noted, the mechanisms of how this could be funded and the level at which the amount should be set would need to be determined through the political process. Here one avenue to explore further could be the wealth tax proposed by Klug in Chapter 11 (this volume).

Conclusion

What I want to emphasise, by way of closing, is that, in their focus on sharing income rather than land, BIG activists are not giving up claims to

³ In December 2021 a Panel of Experts put together by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Fund and Department of Social Development (DSD) reported that 'an entry-level version of the BIS [basic income support] can be safely implemented using a mix of financing approaches' (see South African Government, 2021).

a historic loss linked to colonial conquest or to the idea of a country that rightfully belongs to all. However, the fundamental redress they call for lies not in a share of the land, but in a share of everything – at least some portion of the whole social product must be shared. This shift in argument allows for a demand that is not, in economic terms, backwards-looking – ‘Return the land to us, and we will return to farming!’ – but is very much forward-looking and attuned to current economic realities: ‘Give us reliable cash incomes and this will flexibly empower a huge range of viable rural and urban livelihoods!’ The result is an expression of universalism (everyone is due a rightful share), but it is a universalism that holds onto the powerful moral image of a historic dispossession under colonialism and apartheid and of a people who lost their rightful ownership of their country. It thus does not in any way preclude the commitment to land reform laid out in section 25 (the property clause) of the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the promise, potential and pitfalls of which are reviewed in Parts I and II of this volume.

What needs to be explored in more depth than is possible here is how to connect the kind of powerful moral reasoning historically associated with land injustices and land reform to the broader societal discussions around what I have termed the moral politics of distribution. While seeking concrete and universalistic remedies via programmes of income distribution and monthly cash payments (as in the BIG campaign), these discussions can still draw on histories of colonialism and historical dispossession (including the role of mining and migrant labour in the development of the nation’s wealth) to inform, legitimate and animate this campaign.

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