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PROJECT

Between State and Market: A New Anthropology of Redistribution in Precarious Times

Alongside other scholars, anthropologists have recently developed an interest in redistribution. In contrast to what is emphasised by much of the classic literature, their unique contribution to this study lies in an awareness of the growing informality of redistributive processes. The “new middle class” appears to be on the rise, albeit unevenly and often precariously, but state capacity to levy taxes from it (and from those higher up the scale) or to provide support to it in times of trouble appears to be on the wane. The focus is thus shifting to re-allocative processes beyond those that were tried and tested in the heyday of the welfare state. My book project brings together interrelated themes in my recent research that illuminate this topic: the expansion of the global middle class, on the one hand; and the rise of financialised debt and of independently or charitably funded advice in contexts of austerity and the shrinking welfare state, on the other. While drawing on my own first-hand research in the UK and South Africa, the project/book will also incorporate insights from other sources, including those produced by recent cognate research projects conducted in Europe and the global South, in whose workshops and conferences I have been involved.

Recommended Reading

James, Deborah (1999). *Songs of the Women Migrants: Performance and Identity in South Africa*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

– (2007). *Gaining Ground? “Rights” and “Property” in South African Land Reform*. London: Routledge-Cavendish; Johannesburg: Wits University Press.

– (2015). *Money from Nothing: Indebtedness and Aspiration in South Africa*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Redistribution or Debt? Rechannelling Financial Flows

Redistribution can range from high-profile examples such as the shake-up of land ownership in the wake of political change, through less visible/obvious ones like the expansion of welfare payments, to frankly counter-intuitive ones like the extending of credit to the poor. The resources disbursed can range from those collected through formal taxation to those assembled through less organised arrangements. It is no longer (if it ever was) just a matter for the state/society; where financialisation is accompanied by increased informalisation, redistribution can equally involve the market and it can mean funds moving 'upwards' as well as 'downwards'. The form of redistribution I will discuss is one in which state welfare payments have been diverted by financial companies to become loan collateral. My approach to this process challenges some prevalent approaches to financialisation, in which binary thinking about the stark separation of commodified and non-commodity relationships is prevalent; market 'logics' intrude into intimate family and social relations; and families are disciplined to act in ways that reproduce the formalized demands of financial contracts. I use material from South Africa to illustrate my argument, though my broader project encompasses other comparative cases. The extent to which some form of compensation or fair redress is accomplished varies depending on the perspective of participants.

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOW LIBRARY

James, Deborah (Stanford, California, 2025)

Clawing back : redistribution in precarious times

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1914836804>

Culture and economic life

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1914836804>

James, Deborah (Palo Alto, Calif., 2023)

Financialization and the household

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James, Deborah (London [u.a.], 2022)

The state of the welfare state : advice, governance and care in settings of austerity

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James, Deborah (Nes York, NY, 2022)

Owing everyone : debt advice in the UK's time of austerity

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James, Deborah (London, 2021)

Life and debt : a view from the south

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1810989841>

James, Deborah (New York, 2020)

Redistribution and indebtedness : a tale of two settings

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1810994985>

James, Deborah (New York, NY, 2019)

'Sorting out income' : transnational householding and austerity Britain

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1812850549>

James, Deborah (London [u.a.], 2019)

New subjectivities : aspiration, prosperity and the new middle class

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1810997887>

James, Deborah (Cape Town, 2019)

Indebtedness and aspiration in South Africa

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1810985579>

James, Deborah (London [u.a.], 2018)

Mediating indebtedness in South Africa

<https://kxp.k1oplus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1810991293>