



Institute of
African Studies
CARLETON UNIVERSITY

‘New Technologies of Poverty: Financialization in South Africa's Cash Transfer Program’



By

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Room 482 (Discovery Centre), MacOdrum Library,
Carleton University*

Abstract

The expansion of cash transfer programs across many parts of the Global South has been heralded as revolution in social protection policy. In South Africa, cash transfers now reach over 11 million people and, in a context of chronic unemployment, provide a critical income source for the poor. While cash transfers provide some form of income redistribution in an unequal society, the design and implementation of these systems has been heavily reliant on technologies and systems developed by the financial sector. In South Africa, the financialization of social protection has, as one actor described it, generated “revenue streams from untapped markets,” as financial and biometric technologies are used to sell products and services to the poor. This paper considers the relationship between the rise of cash transfers programs and the emphasis on the ‘financial inclusion’ of the poor promoted by states and business alike. This nexus of cash transfers and financial inclusion technologies raises critical questions about the rights of recipients, the governance of surplus populations, and whether redistributive neoliberalism provides new political possibilities or merely facilitates accumulation among the poor.

About

Christopher Webb is an instructor in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at Carleton. He holds a SSHRC Post-Doctoral Research Fellowship in the Department of Anthropology at the London School of Economics. He obtained his PhD in Human Geography from the University of Toronto in 2019, where he taught at the Centre for Critical Development Studies. His research interests include geographies of education and youth; the future of work, social protection policy and financial inclusion; and the political economy of development.

This is part of the African Studies Brownbag Seminar Series

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