Martin, Keir. (2021) 2023. "Dependence". In *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, edited by Felix Stein. Facsimile of the first edition in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Online: http://doi.org/10.29164/21dependence

Dependence

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Dependence is often considered as a primarily negative state of being. It has gone from being described as a threat to individual self-reliance in early modern political theory in Western Europe to being a moral panic in political discourse across the world. Its negative connotation is particularly evident in the spheres of politics and economics, which this entry will focus on. Although anthropological theory has only recently made dependence a topic of explicit theoretical reflection, the idea has underpinned a wide variety of approaches throughout the discipline's history. Given the tendency of anthropologists to stress the fundamental interdependence of human beings, they have emphasised that dependence is not always a bad thing and can even be desirable. They have also questioned whether or not we can neatly divide the world's population into those in states of dependence versus independence. Lastly, they have considered the performative effects of ascribing dependence to some and independence to others. Ethnographically sifting through the different performative effects of ascriptions of dependence becomes particularly important today, as assumed states of dependence have become key tools in the management of populations across the world.

Introduction: dependence in context

The spectre of economic dependence haunts our world. In Western Europe and North America, we have long been familiar with attacks on welfare claimants on the basis that benefit payments encourage dependence. These claims are often based on racialised (see Morgen & Maskowsky 2003) or gendered (see Skeggs 2004) stereotypes, as they target particular groups as being somehow inherently prone to slipping into a negatively evaluated state. Accusations of dependence can often appear as the means by which business or political elites seek to delegitimise the claims for assistance of less fortunate members of society (see Martin 2013). This horror of dependence in Western public discourse is consistent with a long-standing similar aversion to dependence in Western political theory. Although we can trace the origins of the attempt to denigrate and police dependence in political theory to seventeenth century writers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, it is at the start of the twenty-first century that moral panics over the extent and effect of people's dependence have become a global concern (Martin & Yanagisako 2020). Fear that economic dependence may lead to a wider breakdown in community cohesion and individual moral responsibility ranges from North America (Morgen & Maskowsky 2003) through South Africa (Ferguson 2013) to Papua New Guinea (Martin 2013). What sense can we make of such a global phenomenon and what might anthropological theory add to our understanding of it? This entry will show the ways that anthropologists have foregrounded different cultural evaluations of economic dependence in their ethnographic analysis. It thereby challenges the assumption that independence is the highest aspiration for

 ISSN 2398-516X

adult humans, which lies at the heart of much political theory and economic discourse globally.

The valorisation of independence and the denigration of dependence are so well established in contemporary political and economic discourse that it might seem hard to imagine a world in which this was not the case. Yet, the central importance given to the idea of economic independence can be seen as a comparatively recent phenomenon, even in Western Europe. Writing in the 1850s, Karl Marx argued that the idea of the isolated and independent individual, who was the starting point of most political and economic analysis of the time, was itself the outcome of the particular organisation of Victorian capitalist society and that,

… the more deeply we go back into history, the more does the individual… appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole… in the family, and in the family expanded into the clan (1973 [1857-61]: 26).

Marx argues that it is only with the rise of capitalist modernity in the eighteenth century that these dependencies appear less visible and as a consequence that the 'standpoint… of the isolated individual' can emerge (1973 [1857-61]: 26).

A similar set of arguments are made by the political theorist C.B. Macpherson, who argued that early proto-liberal theorists such as Hobbes, Locke and James Harrington shared an underlying assumption of the ideal innate individual independence of adult males. This position of independence was at the core of what Macpherson (1962) described as the ideology of 'possessive individualism' that marked the birth of a new form of personhood. The possessive individual was held to be born 'owing nothing to society' for his capacities and in a state of individual self-ownership (Macpherson 1962: 263-4). However, this valorised independence could be given away by those who acted in a manner that made them dependent on others. Begging and wage labour, for example, were widely seen as relationships that created dependence in seventeenth century England. Variants of this view arguably continue to dominate much political discourse today, such as in debates that focus on the alleged morally negative impacts of 'welfare dependence'.

Anthropological theory tends to take a different starting point, for a number of reasons. Given their strong focus on how values vary across and within cultures, most anthropologists sympathise with Marx and Macpherson's caution that dependence may not be universally valued negatively compared to independence just because this has been the case in Western political thought since the 1700s. Secondly, because of their focus on the importance of social relations in shaping our lives, anthropologists most often begin their analysis by stressing interdependence as a fundamental part of human existence. This means that rather than starting from the assumption of independence as much of modern economic and political theory does, anthropologists tend to start from exploring how people are entangled with and mutually dependent upon each other. Rather than assuming that independence is good and dependence is bad, anthropological research has tended to show that whether or not dependence is positively or negatively evaluated, or indeed what kinds of relationships are evaluated as being examples of 'dependency' at all,

can only be understood in the context of the lived experience and world-views of the communities among which we conduct research.

Importantly, anthropological analyses of ideas, such as 'dependence', have long included a focus on two important aspects. On the one hand, they foreground the contextually shifting nature of what such ideas might refer to. On the other hand, they ask how such ideas shape the obligations and relations that they help to categorise. As Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon observe in their discussion of the role of the concept of 'dependence' in shaping US politics, it is only by charting the 'major historical shifts in the usage of this term', that one might hope to understand its role as a tool of political governance (1994: 310). In the case of US political governance, Fraser and Gordon argue that by the late twentieth century, dependency had come to act as a keyword that, among other effects, was used to accuse single mothers of moral failing and took attention away from wider social structural inequalities. Rather than taking descriptions of 'dependence' as descriptive statements whose truth is to be validated or debunked, ethnographic analysis can explore the different contested dynamics by which a state of dependence is ascribed to or rejected by particular groups of people. This changing and performative role of ascriptions of dependence is here taken as a starting point.

Dependence in anthropological theory

Dependence has long been a central concept underpinning a variety of classical anthropological analyses, from accounts of how gift-exchange creates leaders in the South Pacific by making others 'dependent' upon them (e.g. Malinowski 1922: 161, Sahlins 1963: 292, Epstein 1969: 223, Gregory 1982: 51), through the ascription of 'dependence' upon the environment or nature to peoples with 'simple' material cultures (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1940: 16) to analyses of particular kinds of social systems, such as patron-client relations, with 'dependency' at their heart (e.g. Davis 1977: 81). Structures of dependence can sometimes act as fundamental markers for the difference between Western culture and other cultures. Based on ethnographic material collected in Melanesia, Marilyn Strathern argues that the nature of gift exchange transactions makes the parties to the exchange 'reciprocally dependent upon one another' (1988: 144). She thereby argues that dependency was actively sought in parts of Melanesia, inverting the modern European association between commodity exchange in the marketplace and the ideal of independence, noted by Marx. Yet despite the centrality of the idea of dependence to the framing of so much anthropological theory, the concept itself has remained largely unexplored as an explicit topic of anthropological theorising, unlike other concepts such as 'kinship' or 'exchange', both of which could easily be seen as either constituted by or constitutive of relations of dependence.

This is doubly surprising given the concept's explicit centrality in other fields of enquiry with which anthropology has long had a critical engagement, beyond political theory mentioned above. For example, as Lynn Morgan (1987: 136) notes, many anthropologists in the 1970s and 1980s largely accepted uncritically

the idea of 'dependency theory' imported from development studies as an explanation for global inequalities in fields such as international trade, macroeconomic growth, and health care. Dependency theory was a theory developed by Marxist and radical scholars in the second half of the twentieth century that argued that countries in the global South were kept in a state of permanent and deliberate economic dependence upon powerful Western nations that benefitted by extracting surplus value from them (e.g. Wallerstein 1974). Morgan argues that although dependency theory was useful in drawing attention to global interdependencies and the ways in which they structured enduring socioeconomic inequalities, they often assumed that the development of capitalist markets occurred in fundamentally the same manner across the world (1987: 139-46). This carried the danger of blinding their advocates to the importance of cultural or historical variations in the kinds of relations of dependence that entanglement in the capitalist 'world system' created. It also meant that they tended to assume that international dependence always took on a similarly negative form. Some anthropological texts, (e.g. Comarroff 1985: 154-6), did critically engage with the assumption of one-way 'dependency' of the global South upon the West that characterised approaches such as 'world-system(s) theories', a political economic theory that grew out of 'dependency theory' in the 1970s. Jean Comaroff argues that dependency theory presents the world capitalist system as a total, penetrating, and determining force that overlooks the interaction of this particular sociocultural order with other formations (1985: 154). But even such critiques of dependency theory did not address the term 'dependence' head on but largely focused on other implicit biases, such as the way in which it tended to assume a singular logic to capitalist 'penetration' of local societies regardless of cultural or historical differences.

Anthropologists have also provided critiques of conceptions of dependency that were at the heart of conservative academic approaches to the problems of welfare and social exclusion in Western liberal democracies over the past four decades.[1] In opposition to these views, anthropologists have attempted to redraw debates around welfare away from a narrow focus on the alleged dependency of particular individuals or households, towards the wider question of growing economic inequality in countries such as the US from the 1990s onwards (Morgen & Maskovsky 2003: 317). Although anthropologists have provided critiques of accusatory uses of the concept of dependence, this critique has tended to be limited. They either rejected that the urban poor are best described as 'dependent' in particular contexts, or the showed that dependency did not usually have morally debilitating effects on people (e.g. Morgen & Maskovsky 2003: 325-6, Wacquant 2009: 46-51). Sandra Morgen and Jeff Maskovsky, for example, demonstrate the ways in which anthropologists, such as Katherine Newman (1999) have sought to challenge the conception of single mothers on welfare as being dependent due to moral degeneracy or dysfunctional lifestyles. Whilst this work provided a rebuttal of conservative conceptions of 'dependence' among poor urban communities, it largely avoided providing a theoretical analysis of the concept's analytical limitations and political performative effects more generally.

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Some of the groundworks for a general theory of dependence have been laid by sociologists. One of the most significant works in the history of British sociology is 1957's *Family and kinship in East London*. In this book, Peter Wilmott and Michael Young argued against traditional sociological models, which held that a move from the rural to the urban in 'advanced' economies, such as the UK, automatically led to the death of extended kinship systems and communities built upon such networks. Inspired by anthropological fieldwork in Britain's rapidly decolonising empire, Young and Wilmott conducted long term fieldwork in London's East End largely based upon repeated semi-structured interviews and on-going participant observation. They discovered that this part of London was informally governed by kinship networks, several generations deep and normally headed by an elderly strong matriarch. This was reminiscent, they argued, of the kind of structure that anthropologists had found in African villages (Young and Wilmott 1957: 57-8). Their insight might seem unsurprising today, but at the time it was something of a revolution.

In *Family and kinship,* Young praised the community that he saw as emerging from people's dependence on kinship ties. He feared that the welfare state was loosening those ties and thereby ushering in an age of irresponsible individualism. While dependence on the state allowed the poorest to escape dependence upon their communities that had previously restrained their potentially anti-social behaviour, welfare payments also risked creating an illegitimate and unearned independence with dangerous anti-social consequences. It was dependence on these kinship networks that Wilmott and Young saw as providing the discipline and sanctioning force that stopped young East-Enders from indulging in petty crime, violence, sloth, and so on. This concern was a muted backdrop to *Family and kinship* but became an increasingly urgently stated concern in Young's returns to the East End (Gavron, Dench & Young 2005). Here East London's white working class was portrayed as having lost the community that sustained it half a century earlier. It was now unfavourably compared to Bengali immigrants in the area, who still lived in a community due to their reluctance to rely on state benefits and their persistent dependence on kin.

Young's pessimist reappraisal was consistent with an emerging fear among politicians and commentators in the UK in the early 2000s that full employment would never return and that sections of the working class had become content with their allegedly illegitimate and unearned independence from community that dependence on the state had bought them. This fear was shared by centrist politicians who espoused the then-prevalent politics of multicultural neoliberalism. What Young's interventions illustrated was that underpinning these fears was the continued rhetorical importance of a link between labour and independence. In essence, Young argued that if you want independence from your kin (a morally dubious desire in his eyes in the first place) then you should earn it rather than expect it by right. Young's intervention draws attention to the continuing importance of wage labour as an ideal, if not always a present, reality in shaping the boundaries of dependence and independence. This is a long-established linkage in Western political theory, and debate continued to matter in the early 2000s. It is a linkage that a range of anthropological analyses have sought to problematise.

Wage labour and dependence

In many parts of the world it has become common to think of wage labour as one of the main available prerequisites for full independent personhood, at least for those born without access to inherited wealth. Yet we know that this is a highly context-dependent perspective. In fact, wage labour was originally held in seventeenth century England to be a form of dependency upon an employer little different from vagrancy or begging. At the time, only property ownership was cast as the basis for the non-dependence that enabled full individual participation in politics (e.g. Macpherson 1962: 128). It was only in the early nineteenth century that wage labour had become reconceptualised as the basis for the poor to gain independence. Historical analyses such as that of Karl Polanyi (1957 [1944]) in *The great transformation* have drawn attention to the ways in which dependence became characterised as a moral vice by middle-class social reformers in this period. Polanyi tied this process to the increasing need for the rising power of the market in organising society and the consequent need to encourage the spread of wage labour. His analysis also draws our attention to the ways in which dependence on state authorities, wage labour, and kinship ties are mutually constitutive. Polanyi describes how reductions of relief for the rural poor in the United Kingdom (which can be viewed as the precursor of contemporary welfare programmes) were a central part of dividing a 'respectable' and 'deserving' working class, labouring to achieve independent self-reliance, from a class of 'undeserving' and 'dependent' paupers. A key moment in this transition was the abolishment of the so-called 'Speenhamland' system of poor relief, in which many local parishes had subsidised the living expenses of the unemployed rural poor. It was replaced with the Poor Law of 1834 that mandated parishes to force the unemployed into workhouses. Such changes in the nature of wage labour and state support are intimately entangled with changes in the nature of kinship interdependencies, as Polanyi observes. He points out that there had never been a public policy more popular than Speenhamland, as it meant that 'parents were free of the care of their children, and children were no more dependent upon parents' (Polanyi 1957: 83). Polanyi here foreshadows Young's anxieties two centuries later, about the ways in which dependency on the state increased the possibility of independence from kin.

Anthropologists have also observed that the emergence of wage labour as a key social relationship in many parts of the world has reconfigured understandings of dependence and independence, challenging the universalising assumptions of liberal political theory. Australian expatriates, studied in Port Moresby between 1970 and 1972, which was the capital of the colonial territory of New Guinea at the time, considered wage labour to potentially lift 'natives' out of the morally debilitating state of inefficient dependencies on kin held to hold them back (Strathern 1975). For New Guinea migrants in Port Moresby, however, wage labour was sometimes characterised as a humiliating form of dependence upon employers who were not restrained by such obligations from potentially using their economic power to humiliate or damage their employees.

Ethnographic accounts from Europe also complicate the assumptions that the relationship between wage

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labour and dependence is clear-cut. Andrea Muehlebach's account of the outsourcing of care of the elderly in Italy to poorly paid migrant workers from 2003 until 2005 draws our attention to the ways in which wage labour is not a singular category. Relatives of the elderly often demanded a degree of attention and emotional care from paid care workers that went beyond what might be expected in other similarly paid jobs. As one informant put it, it was not a '… normal job. You're not a bricklayer' (Muehlebach 201: 211). Muehlebach draws attention to the ways in which the perceived 'dependency' of the elderly recipients of care led to a situation in which the workers' activities were viewed as sitting uneasily between an ethos of professional wage labour and affection. Her informants point to a difference between paid workers and care volunteers in this regard. The volunteers are normally Italians who provide care for the elderly out of a sense of vocation. Although they are not kin to the elderly that they assist, they are seen as providing an affective and genuine care that is more similar to the kind of support that kin should ideally be providing. The activity of the immigrant workers, on the other hand, is rendered morally dubious in the eyes of many informants by virtue of being conducted in exchange for wages.

Redrawing 'dependence' in the twenty-first century

Modernist teleological hopes that wage labour might expand across the world and provide the basis for universal 'independence' have become increasingly hard to sustain in the twenty-first century (Ferguson 2015). The increasing doubt about expanding 'wage-dependent independence' marks an epochal shift in how we understand legitimate citizenship and full personhood globally. However, the links between wage labour, idioms of independence, and full citizenship do not change according to singular global logic. In some contexts, such as Southern Africa for example, there can be increasing tolerance for citizenship, even for those who depend on government assistance programmes or universal-national basic income (Ferguson 2015). In others, the response might be an intensification of the rhetorical link between wage labour and legitimate independence, such as in the increasing prevalence of work training schemes in countries like the UK. Such schemes are often described as being largely designed to humiliate participants for their 'dependence' upon the state (e.g. Foster 2017: 119).

James Ferguson's 2013 article 'Declarations of dependence' and his subsequent expansion of the article's main thesis in his 2015 monograph *Give a man a fish* explicitly deal with the issue of how we might have to reconsider ascriptions of dependence in a time in which more and more people are coming to be 'surplus' to the needs of a wage labour economy. Both texts were also major factors in bringing discussion of 'dependence' as an analytical category to the forefront of anthropological theory. As noted, the ascription of 'dependence' had previously been critiqued by anthropologists who were opposed to the war on welfare that had characterised, in the 1980s, the Thatcher government in the UK and the Reagan government in the US, and their successors. They explicitly asked if and when 'dependence' was to be viewed as a barrier to legitimate adult personhood or citizenship. Building on fieldwork in Southern Africa, Ferguson drew a

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contrast between Western 'liberal thought' that presented dependence as 'the opposite of freedom' on the one hand, and a Southern African perspective that 'has long recognized relations of social dependence as the very foundation of polities and persons alike' (2013: 223). Ferguson's work addressed head-on the underlying assumption that dependence led to un-freedom and a lesser form of individual personhood that had been identified by Macpherson as the unstated but implicit assumption underlying classical liberal political theory in the West.

Since their publication, Ferguson's works have inspired an extensive and broadly supportive body of literature, that illustrate the importance of relations of dependence in enabling types of valued subjectivity that diverge from that of the ideal autonomous individual of Western liberal theory in Southern Africa and beyond. Most of this literature broadly shares Ferguson's point that relations of dependence continue a long-standing Southern African cultural pattern. They are expressive of a 'form of a political logic that was broadly characteristic of most precolonial southern African societies' (Ferguson 2013: 226). Indeed, earlier comparative anthropological works that contrast political power in Europe and Africa describe European power struggles as being largely concerned with control of land. This stands in contrast to Southern Africa, where land was traditionally in abundant supply and leadership amounted to a contest to attract as many followers as possible, a situation famously described by Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (1977) as accumulating 'wealth in people' (see also Vansina 1990, Guyer 1993). Political power among Ngoni in the early 1950s illustrates this point:

The principal index of power was the number of a man's dependants. Political struggles were essentially not struggles to control wealth but to enjoy the support of followers (Barnes 1967: 30, cited in Ferguson 2013: 226).

Elements of Ferguson's framing of dependence have been subject to critical examination by writers otherwise sympathetic to the broad thrust of his argument. One criticism is that his recent argument may lack ethnographic evidence, even if it does raise interesting points. Kathleen Rice, for example, draws attention to the ways in which Ferguson relies primarily on historical accounts rather than contemporary ethnography as his primary means of demonstrating that personhood in contemporary South Africa is deeply relational relative to the West (2015: 60).

Whilst this might seem to be a minor difference of emphasis, Rice's intervention draws attention to a potentially wider issue. In today's interconnected world, it may be an overgeneralisation to draw up different geographical and cultural areas and to argue that part of the essential nature of one 'social system' such as 'The West' has an abhorrence of dependence, while others, such as 'Southern Africa' validate and encourage it (Ferguson 2013: 226). Ferguson's 2013 article contains no less than thirteen instances of the phrase 'social system' in a manner that seemed to refer to a fixed bounded sociocultural entity, such as 'the Ngoni social system', for example (Ferguson 2013: 225). Such schematic and frequently

static models of bounded cultures make it difficult to deal with people who live at the borders of 'cultures'; they tend to erase important differences within those boundaries; these models often fail to deal with the historical entanglements of colonialism and postcolonial global society; and they fail to deal with histories of interconnection more generally (Gupta & Ferguson 1992: 7-8). It may be the fact that Ferguson himself had pioneered criticism of such bounded cultural models twenty years earlier, that his argument around cultural difference based on dependence has found some acceptance today (e.g. Haynes 2017).

This Southern African model of leadership through amassing followers is in some regards similar to the Melanesian pattern of 'big man' leadership. In parts of Melanesia, local leaders known as 'big men' have been described as amassing dependent followers through the creation of 'gift-debts' that followers cannot repay. For example, a 'big man' may sponsor the bridewealth payments of young men, thus binding them to him with a lifelong obligation (see Martin 2019). Similar to the Southern African examples, the focus on wealth in people in Melanesia is often considered to be the outcome of an abundance of land (e.g. Martin 2018: 91-2). That said, land claims and the creation of dependent followers can go hand in hand as well. The Tolai people of East New Britain, studied between 2002 and 2004, for example claimed customary rights to land through activity on it, which included clearing and cultivation of crops. For that claim to remain active, activity had to be maintained. This in part explained the desire for big men to amass as many dependent followers as possible. They recruited them even from outside of their immediate kinship networks, as these dependents could be used to maintain land claims. By the end of the twentieth century, this situation appeared to have drastically altered, however, as a result of a population explosion and the emergence of cash cropping for the global market. As a consequence, the political economy among Tolai people today has shifted from leaders trying to maximise their number of dependents to limiting the number of people who can make claims on them (2018: 91).

Another issue raised in current debates around dependence is whether this concept lies at the heart of a cultural misunderstanding between black South Africans who validate it and predominantly white expatriates who are introducing the idea that dependence is a failing to be overcome. We already saw versions of this question in work on New Guinea (Strathern 1975). Considering wage labour to be a mechanism by which expatriates hope to drag locals out of 'dependence' has also been documented in Zimbabwe by Erica Bornstein. Here, foreign NGO workers have been shown to painstakingly explain to local villagers that the purpose of development programmes and child sponsorship is to encourage villagers to stand on their own two feet and that they should '…not depend on others but should work for themselves' (Bornstein 2001: 613). Bornstein also describes how NGO workers explained to villagers who sought cash payments that aid-donors wanted to '… feel parental delight at seeing their children walking for the first time' (2001: 613). By focusing on child sponsorship, this work draws attention to the ways in which Western liberal thought does acknowledge childhood as a legitimate stage of dependence that should ideally be transcended on the way to adulthood. The dependence of childhood and the state of

dependence are often conflated in ascriptions to people in the global South by a series of powerful actors from colonial authorities in the past to development agencies in the present day. Elizabeth Povinelli's (2002: 22) observations about how the Australian government acted as the legal guardian for every Aboriginal child in the Northern Territory from 1911 onwards points our attention in a similar direction. Because Aboriginal adults were considered insufficiently independent, they could not be trusted with the care of their own dependents, meaning that the state took it upon itself to step in and take the responsibility. These works all in their different ways frame the situation as one in which an external group or institution of Western origin (expatriates promoting wage labour, NGOs promoting development or the nation-state) step in and attempt to impose a negative understanding of dependence upon local communities. However, my own work with Tolai people in Papua New Guinea draws attention to a different dynamic, in which rapidly emerging socioeconomic inequalities within local communities have led to a situation in which it is the more economically or politically successful local people who begin to adopt the rhetoric of possessive individualism (Martin 2007). Here, local elites denigrate dependence as a means to distance themselves from their own grassroots relatives, whom they castigate for wanting to be 'spoonfed' (Martin 2013) or demanding to be 'fed like children' (Martin 2020).

Examples such as this might lead us to a wider observation, namely the need to pay attention to the ways in which the kinds of relationships characterised as relations of dependence and the values placed upon them vary far across different groups and across the years. Maxim Bolt agrees that dependence is validated in Southern Africa as a 'basic enduring model of sociality that has… survived social and economic transformations' in contrast to the 'lack of freedom' that it signals from a liberal perspective' (2013: 244). However, he goes on to caution that the meaning and experience of relations that might be characterised as 'dependence' varies massively depending upon context and power relations within the particular geographic area under examination. Bolt observes, for example, that during the colonial era in Southern Africa 'personal dependence shaped life far more explicitly on farms than on the mines', yet mine labour was more highly validated and sought after by black South Africans for a variety of socioeconomic reasons (2013: 244). This leads Bolt to conclude that we require a 'messier picture' when we think about dependence (2013: 245). All of this might suggest a starting point for analysis in which anthropologists consider these manifold differences without taking them as being necessarily the outcome of different regional cultural logics. Instead, they may want to focus as much on the changing economic factors that shape how dependence is lived and experienced. In both South Africa and the UK there are on-going political struggles over the extent to which different forms of 'dependence' should be accepted in a changing world. In particular, the situation at the start of the twenty-first century in which the previously widely accepted link between productive wage labour and legitimate independence is being reconfigured, often in widely divergent directions (Ferguson 2015). In such times, a comparative ethnographic analysis of the social effects of contested ascriptions of dependence (Bolt 2013: 245) becomes ever more important. Such an approach would not consider 'dependence' as the description of a particular state of being to

which a particular definition can be fixed. Instead, the task of ethnographers would become to analyse how relations that get characterised under its umbrella become grouped together, and what the wider effects of such ascriptions of dependence are.

Conclusion

The idea of 'dependence' has long been a central theme in many anthropological analyses as an underlying analytical assumption. It has been commonly used in the analysis of non-Western societies as a means of stressing an interdependent model of human being that stands in contrast to the assumed autonomous individual actor of Western liberal theory. When anthropologists have discussed 'dependence' in Western contexts, it has often been in terms of a critique of accusations of the morally debilitating effects of dependence on particular populations, such as welfare recipients. Despite this, the concept of dependence itself has only recently become a central focus of anthropological theory. In particular, the work of Ferguson has made explicit the contrast between Western liberal associations between dependence and a desired state of autonomous freedom and alternative conceptions of personhood that validate some dependencies as their basis of being. As ever-larger populations across the world are potentially being cast as surplus to the needs of the wage labour economy, a previous cultural association between wage labour and validated forms of independence is becoming increasingly contested and difficult to sustain. Anthropology has a valuable role to play in documenting and analysing the performative effects of such contested and shifting ascriptions of dependence at this pivotal moment in global history.

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[1] Notable examples of these conservative attacks on welfare 'dependence' include Murray (1984), Besharov (1995), and Mead (2004).

 ISSN 2398-516X