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Published version citation:

2013 Li, Tania M. Insistently Seeking Social Incorporation: Comment. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19: 252-3.

TSpace version citation:

2013 Li, Tania M. Insistently Seeking Social Incorporation: Comment. TSpace. 2014.
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Insistently seeking social incorporation: comment

Tania M. Li

Declarations of Dependence challenges the liberal assumption that dependence is a scourge, while its opposites -independence, autonomy and freedom - are unproblematic. I want to propose a slightly different framing that shifts the focus from dependence to incorporation, and enhances its resonance beyond southern Africa.

The surprise for me as a scholar of Southeast Asia was the emphasis on declaration: the verbal performance of a demand to be accepted as a social subordinate. In Southeast Asia such a declaration would be unusual: autonomy is a highly valued element of accomplished personhood. Social subordinates who are *de facto* dependent - clients, tenants, debtors or employees - take no pride in declaring it. They see their dependent position in terms that Marx would readily recognize: lacking control over the means of production, they are subject to the indignity of being ordered about. To "belong to someone" is the tragic lot of a bonded debtor, a person who has no autonomy at all.

For me Ferguson's discussion of the demand for social incorporation, and the various ways such incorporation is sought, legitimated, and denied, opens a crucial line of inquiry. As he shows, the terms of incorporation can sometimes be negotiated - Ngoni captives could move on, urban workers could seek better bosses, so long as labour remained scarce. Under dire conditions - joblessness in contemporary South Africa - there is little room to negotiate, and the focus is on forging a social bond, using whatever approach seems likely to work. The stark question Ferguson urges us to consider is this: how can social bonds be forged today?

There are two meanings of "social" in Ferguson's analysis. One refers to personalized relationships, which may be horizontal (among kin, neighbours) or hierarchical (with employers, patrons, chiefs). The other is "the social" as constructed in Europe in the nineteenth century through social statistics and the social sciences, which became the subject of intervention and social welfare schemes. This second "social" is not personal. It aggregates and divides populations, and governs them differentially for the benefit of "society as a whole," an entity often understood to coincide with a nation-state. Not all citizens of a state are equally enfranchised, or belong to "the social" on the same terms. Workers, for example, struggled to expand the shallow and fragile form of incorporation afforded to them by payment of a money

wage into the full citizenship signalled by their legal guarantee of decent wages, pensions and protections. "Dependent" women and children were incorporated differently.

Contemporary patterns of jobless growth, as Ferguson points out, make the prospect of extending work-based social incorporation unlikely. Subsistence and consumption demands - specifically for housing and water - are important contemporary fronts of struggle. Basic income grants fall into this series as money - like a home - is necessary for wage-less people to live decently. Money also enables people to engage in personalized social exchanges of the horizontal kind that are integral to accomplished personhood in every society: no one respects or trusts an isolated person.

We're lacking in contemporary ethnographies from southern Africa, Asia or elsewhere that would tell us whether there really is a crisis of social relations of the personalized sort- a slide into an atomistic existence, in which kinship, neighbourhood and other social bonds disintegrate. Mike Davis's *Planet of Slums* presents this apocalyptic scenario in his description of the "witches of Kinshasa" - children who have been abandoned by families who cannot care for them. Ethnographic descriptions of destitute people emphasize their fragile or broken social bonds, but confirm that extremely poor people often struggle to sustain horizontal social relations at great cost, liquidating precious assets if necessary to help kin or buy medicine for an ailing child. Guy Standing's book *The Precariat* points to the increasing fragility of personalized social bonds in worlds devoid of stable work and place-based ties. He also argues that people who are incorporated in "the social" and receive state transfers become more altruistic. This point, like many others in his book, cries out for ethnographic research into what precarious work means for livelihoods, identities, relationships, and practices of claiming.

The broad line of inquiry I derive from Ferguson's essay is this: what are the various forms in which people seek social incorporation? What are the conditions under which social incorporation is achieved or denied? What is the role of collective struggles? Of law and rights? Of concepts of personhood and relatedness? Of the threat posed by dangerous classes? Of the persistence of young men on the streets, like those in Johannesburg, whose search for incorporation might provoke a socially progressive response that recognizes their legitimate claims, or the response that worries Ferguson: a retreat into gated communities, intensified policing, and abandonment.