

## Book Review

# How it looks from the wrong end of the siphon: James Ferguson on Africa, neoliberalism, and moral relativism in the social sciences

*Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*, by James Ferguson, 2006, Duke University Press, x+257 pp., \$21.95 paperback, \$74.95 hardcover, ISBN: 0-8223-3717-7.

EUGENIA TSAO

It is a curiosity of the modern academy that *sui generis* models of Third World “poverty,” “deficiency,” and “underdevelopment” continue to hold such sway, denuded of all historical and political context. Eric Wolf (1982) once remarked on this sad facet of intellectual life by pointing up the ways in which academics themselves have benefited from the asymmetric relationship between the global North and South: the marginalization and Orientalization of Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia—a direct result of a global division of labour that separates primary producers from both the means of production and the profits of their labours—is precisely that which has enabled their penetration by successive waves of do-gooder development economists, international relations experts, anthropologists, and sociologists (see also Cowen and Shenton 1995; Escobar 1995). If “underdevelopment” has been such an evidently active process, however, why do so many of us in the West have such trouble with the fact that our society has achieved its wealth and abundance only by parasitizing the Rest?

James Ferguson’s *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* strives to answer this question with a cynical but timely observation: social scientists, who produce the facts, arguments, and historical narratives in which lay understandings of the world become rooted, often prefer to dwell on semantic quibbles than on contextualizing material inequalities. While many cultural theorists, for instance, rail against the ethicality of lexicalising “Africa” as a

unitary entity on the grounds (albeit accurate) that there are hundreds of distinct African languages and cultural traditions, Ferguson suggests that it is intellectual parochialism of precisely this kind that has resulted in a built-in irrelevance for much social science. “Refusing the very category of ‘Africa’ as empirically problematic,” he claims, such writers have “allowed themselves to remain bystanders in the wider arena of discussions” (3). Like “race,” “Africa” may be an artificial construct with no ontological basis, but it is a *consequential* construct that informs geopolitical events and interregional interactions, and whose existence as a social organizing principle must therefore be accepted.

Supplementing his two decades’ worth of field experience in the region with a raft of textual, archival, historical, and media analyses, Ferguson scrutinizes a wide range of topics throughout the essays that comprise the pith of his book—from the political aspirations of a Zambian internet magazine to the ways in which international financial institutions have undermined democracy in African states in the name of promoting economic growth (e.g. in Equatorial Guinea, Angola, and the DR Congo). Ferguson thus casts his net far and wide, interrogating the major theoretical undercurrents of two decades’ worth of Africanist research through two interrelated theses: first, that the beneficiaries of programs of “extractive neoliberalism” (210), supported by oligarchic governments and foreign investors, are not African communities but rather the thin layer of elites who sponsor such programs; second, that post-structuralist theorists have drawn focus away from the very real economic inequalities that exist within and between regions by invoking the red herring of cultural relativism. While anthropological refutations of clichés that depict Africa as a fount of primitivism and tyranny are surely valuable, Ferguson argues, the proper conclusion to reach is not that Africa is ‘not worse, just different,’ but rather that *if* Africa *is* worse, it is because it has been systematically decimated by a long history of colonial exploitation and neo-colonial structural adjustment:

[W]hat is lost in the overly easy extension of an ideal equality to “modernities” in the plural are the all too real inequalities that leave most Africans today excluded and abjected from the economic and institutional conditions that they themselves regard as modern (167).

Ferguson’s critique of the ethnocentric paternalism and evolutionism in neoliberal development discourse furthers the line of argument he began in his landmark study *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1990), but with one additional caveat: although researchers should avoid viewing Africa exclusively through the lens of humanitarian crisis, they should also acknowledge that it is *not* reactionary to speak of Africa as a victimized region. Ferguson is not calling for the projection of ‘enlightenment’ upon ‘primitive Others’; he is, however, pointing out that “Africans who lament that their life circumstances are not modern enough are not

talking about cultural practices,” but rather expressing a sincere indictment of “shamefully inadequate socio-economic conditions and their low rank in relation to other places” (186). The shameful inadequacy of those conditions, moreover, is not ameliorable by World Bank “poverty reduction” programs, which serve only to entrench corrupt regimes and fatten the coffers of multinational investors.

By illuminating the processes by which Africa has been fragmented into a collection of militarized enclaves beholden to nepotistic governments wherein foreign-based resource extraction industries (oil, copper, etc) are furnished with cheap labour, Ferguson ultimately demonstrates that the injuriousness of neoliberal “improvement” rhetoric lies not in its paternalism, but in its hypocrisy. In so doing, Ferguson strives to salvage two of the basic prescripts of modernization theory from the criticisms of cultural relativists: the desirability of improvements in resource accessibility, and the aim of constructing a more equitable international polity. In other words, before deigning to conceptualize African welfare in terms of “debt forgiveness,” “charity,” or improvements in “foreign aid,”—all of which presuppose the justness of imperialisms past and present— Western theorists must first acknowledge the active and continuing role of the West in the dispossession of Africans (174-175).

I would level a handful of criticisms against Ferguson. First, the book lacks a concluding chapter that draws together the disparate issues touched upon in his essays, leaving readers with a sense of overarching disunity; rather than being connected argumentatively, the text seems connected only thematically. Some of his material is oddly dated: Ferguson’s imagining of transnational social movements and their transformative potential curiously omits any mention of the World Social Forums, for instance. Readers interested in consulting a more empirically grounded treatment of 21<sup>st</sup> century transnational social movements are encouraged to have a look at Nina Glick Schiller’s and Georges Eugene Fouron’s *Georges Woke up Laughing: Long-Distance Nationalism and the Search for Home* (2001). As well, Ferguson occasionally seems to characterize the activities of “conventional” social science in a somewhat disingenuous light, disregarding, for instance, the fact that many of his colleagues have already spent years arguing, like him, that neither culture nor language are “uncomplicatedly unitary and systemic” (67). Among the myriad anthropological interrogations of this topic to date, highlights include Adam Kuper’s brilliant historiography *The Invention of Primitive Society* (1988), Liisa Malkki’s nuanced deconstruction of “ethnic difference” in *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (1995), and Anna Tsing’s poststructuralist rendering of core-periphery relations in *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-Way Place* (1993).

The above lacunae aside, *Global Shadows* remains a commendably accessible project that dares to make normative claims about the universality of

social justice while refusing to shy away from moral debate beneath a relativistic aegis. The book offers something for everyone, and ought to find audiences all across the social scientific spectrum: critical geographers will be enthused at Ferguson's textured restorations of time and space to putatively isolated events (e.g. protests, policy decisions, legal rulings, publications); information technologists, media semioticians, and even philosophers of language will enjoy Ferguson's gritty look at the deployment of Zambian English ("Zanglish") in periodicals produced locally but disseminated globally; and the usual suspects—free market economists and classical development theorists—will shift uncomfortably at Ferguson's declination to accept their historical narratives at face value, and, perhaps, find themselves asking why rather than whether.

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Author contact information:  
Eugenia Tsao  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Toronto  
19 Russell Street  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
M5S 2S2  
eugenia.tsao@utoronto.ca