Jagged Edges or Natural Flows

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Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order
James Ferguson, Duke University Press, 2006

The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticisation and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho
James Ferguson, University Of Minnesota Press, 1994

Given that European colonials in 19th century Africa considered their legitimate trade and Christianity constituted a civilising mission to reform savage, backward societies, there is an historical irony in the message of Jo Owen’s recent book, ‘Tribal Business: Lessons in Business Survival and Success from the Ultimate Survivors’ (2008). In this book, Maasai ‘tribesmen’ teach UK business leaders the basic principles of business survival, which boil down to the following maxims: ‘don’t get into a fair fight, you could lose’; ‘take the lead’; and lastly that cornerstone of positive thinking, ‘change’. That lessons in such pedagogies of predatory ruthlessness are sought by UK business tells us very little about the Maasai, but does say quite a bit about the extent to which a currently hostile environment exists within global capitalism. The Maasai are not only represented here as ‘noble savages’ who can survive Robinson Crusoe-like, they are also seen as fearsome warriors who adapt to maximise their opportunities in the face of rapacious competitors. For Owen, survival in business is equally precarious, as “since the FSTE 100 was created in 1984, 80% of companies listed business is equally precarious, as “since the FSTE 100 was created in 1984, 80% of companies listed

That such glowing reports of business opportunities can sit alongside the idea that African states are “synonymous with failure and poverty” (p15) suggest that globalisation has not brought convergence and homogeneity to the continent. In contrast, Africa’s social and economic inequalities are widening; small numbers of people live in the entire world economy in the last thirty years, as levels of capital investment have fallen. Rather than seeing Africa as an anomaly to the successes of globalisation elsewhere in the world, such as the Asian ‘tiger’ economies, Ferguson suggests that the economic marginalisation of large parts of Africa is not anomalous, but rather is intrinsic to the process by which a globalised economy is restructured.

The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticisation and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho

One of the strengths of Ferguson’s work in ‘Global Shadows’ is the insightful analysis of the much discussed, but often unclearly defined, processes of ‘globalisation’. Many people argue that globalisation is an inevitable process of social and economic convergence and homogeneity, a single and shared economy into which all parts of the world will eventually become incorporated. While the current extent and pace of the process of globalisation are debated, there is an underlying assumption that convergence is occurring. Globalisation is a process that is often described through metaphors of ‘flow’ and ‘tide’, words that convey both a natural inevitability and also the Canute-like futility of opposition. Yet, as Ferguson shows here, globalisation is a system of disconnection, Rather than joining places together in a unified whole, the globalised economy ‘hops’ between ‘enclosed places’—excluding the spaces that lie between the points’ (p47), globalisation is a ‘globe-hopping’ business not a process of total integration (p47). The example that Ferguson cites is Angola, a state in which oil production occurs largely offshore and staffed mainly by foreign workers who are housed in private enclaves. Foreign oil companies are operating within the Angolan economy, but there is minimal contact with institutions and people in wider Angolan society. Indeed, as Global Witness reports, “the government has ring-fenced the oil sector against the inefficiencies of the rest of the economy and relations with the oil companies are generally good” (p201, in 1999:p5).

Globalisation as ‘convergence’ or ‘jagged edges’?

A common experience across African states, and obscured by localised study, is the impact of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) imposed throughout the continent by state governments as part of International Monetary Fund (IMF) reforms since the 1980s. Structural adjustment policy was presented by the IMF as the solution to the balance of payments crisis of the late 1970s, aiming to promote capital investment through currency devaluation and privatisation. SAPs were standardised policies that, on the face of it, appear to have failed to achieve many of their objectives: there has not been capital investment, the agriculture sector is still dwindling, and the manufacturing industry has been destroyed. However, there is no doubt that SAPs have opened up the economies to the market. Following Ferguson’s earlier ‘The Anti-Politics Machine’ (1994), could the ‘failure’ of many aspects of SAPs be seen as a necessary stage in the overall policy of economic liberalisation? In a globalised economy that is shaped by IMF policy, ‘African’ is considered a region that has been ripe for investment: it is ‘under-polluted’ and has an ‘unfair share’ of unexploited natural resources relative to other areas of the world. Once marketisation is permitted in previously state-run sectors – such as telecommunications, banking, transport, and security forces – foreign investors appear, meaning that the ‘failure’ of SAPs can occur along with trade liberalisation.

Elementary acts of theoretical and political clarification: Strategies for political action

Unusually for academic writing, both of Ferguson’s books consider possible strategies for political action against widening inequalities within the nation-state and on a global scale. Both categories of the local and the nation-state are depoliticising, because wider social and economic
forces that exist beyond the boundaries of these units are excluded from the debate. According to Ferguson, thinking these categories “becomes an elementary act of theoretical and political clarification…as well as a way to strategically sharpen analysis of the state and social movements around the world” (2006:p109). However, moving from redefined categories to organisational strategies for political action is another matter that proves more elusive.

Where Ferguson’s political strategies seem weak are in his hopes for an appeal to moral objections to neo-liberalism within the nation-state, and in his appeals to gain the support of the global media for marginalized subaltern groups. Yet neo-liberalism is bereft of ethics. As David Harvey points out, “neo-liberalism does not value market exchange as an ethic in itself” (2005:p3). While Summers has rejected criticism against moral void, saying that “moral objections and social concerns could be turned around and used more or less effectively against every Bank proposal for liberalisation” (The Economist in Ferguson 2006:p71). Ferguson suggests that the ‘insistent moralising’ about the production of wealth and its relation to social relations within African cultures may spark a critique of the value-free, ‘scientific capitalism’ of the neo-liberal agenda (p72), seeing evidence of this in the fact that there are food riots that resist SAP policies. However, in arguing this point Ferguson fails to create a dichotomy between the ‘natural’ order of IMF neo-liberalism and the moral order of African economies that overlook the actual mechanisms and practices by which structural adjustment is imposed.

Neo-liberalism works in Africa in part because its policies are advantageous to the African elite. For example, at points overlooks the African class interests that impose policies and work with foreign investors to facilitate marketisation. Later on, in chapter eight he does, however, discuss the way the Angolan economy has been made attractive to foreign investors, noting that: “Angolan elites meanwhile have been nothing if not astute in creating perceptions of ‘convergence’ and ‘phenomenal growth’ (P201). Given the class divisions within African society it is unlikely that a ‘remoralisation’ of national debate would allow for the cultural values around the morality of wealth would restrain neo-liberal economy policy. On the contrary, just as successful trade liberalisation requires ‘failed’ states, so wealth accumulation may require ‘insistent moralising’ about the merits of the simple, unencumbered life of the village. Furthermore, as Ferguson notes, a ‘remoralisation’ of political debate at national level is unlikely to bring substantial change as economic policy is largely subordinate to the IMF, so the ‘opinion’ of national citizens does not, and would not, constitute a political challenge.

A more promising strategy in the globalised neo-liberal world is the development of a transnational politics of resistance. Ferguson suggests that in the post-Cold War era ‘civil society’ is cast as a set of ‘grassroots’ institutions that exists ‘below’, but can contest, state power. This idea of civil society “obscures antidemocratic transnational politics” (p107) for it takes political and economic freedoms to be maintained by a vigilant civil society against an ‘oppressive’ state. Yet in the globalised economy, both the state and the local are shaped by the interventions of international agencies, whether this is the IMF shaping state policies or the impact of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) operating at ‘local’ unregulated levels. In short, as long as the nation-state sets the parameters for political resistance, the extent and motives of international interaction remain uncontroverted. Certainly, organisational strategies for political resistance do need to reach beyond the state. However, the idea that “transnational power does not come through the state” (p266) underestimates the significant role played by the state in facilitating and sustaining the transnational political order.

Local, canny grassroots operator

Instead of resistance being based in the idea of grassroots struggle from below, Ferguson argues for struggles ‘across’ against the “hydrated transition” apparatus of banks, international agencies and market institutions through which contemporary capitalist domination functions” (p107). However, in ‘Global Shadown’, the idea of trans-national political resistance seem to be limited to appeals to ‘world opinion’ to support marginalized peoples; a strategy which in contrast to the success of subalterns involvements in labour union campaigns across the region in ‘The Anti-Politics Machine’. In fact, rather surprisingly, Ferguson appears to have a lot of faith in the power of citizens to create a social movement ‘across’ national borders. An example, he suggests, is the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico, whose leader, Subcomandante Marcos, has apparently gathered the support of celebrities and ‘apparently’ appeared in a Benetton fashion shoot, “in camouflagge dress, with the glossy pictures of ‘You have to go to war. But what will you wear? Camouflagge visual dynamic: light, photogenic…ideal for the soldier who goes from war to war, who doesn’t have time to change’ (p108). Ferguson sees this as a clever act of ‘media politics’ in which the old style revolutionary is remade, and “local, canny grassroots operators may trump the national ace appeals with ‘world opinion’”(p111). Yet can a media campaign form a powerful act of resistance that reaches ‘across’ national borders? The icons and images of ‘resistance’ movements are often incorporated, and neutralised, by fashion and advertising. Furthermore, the appeal to ‘world opinion’ is a very limited and unreliable form of political action that is likely to be shaped by the perceptions of the powerful, rather than the actions of the marginalised. Once ‘support’ of ‘world opinion’ is acquired, what next? The ‘political acumen’ of the media savvy Zapatista resistance strategy exists for Ferguson in the hope that its media attention and world press coverage may well help to protect Chiapas communities against potential aggression” (p118). However, in recent times, resistance groups that have did transnational ‘support’ from celebrities and heads of state, such as the Movement for the Survival of the Ogiri People (MOSOP), still met with brutal opposition. Ferguson’s analysis does not take into account is that neo-liberalism does not restrict the repressive power of the state. For Ferguson, his political tactics show that “such rhetorical and organisational moves directly challenge state claims of vertical encompassment” (p111), meaning that state power and authority is undermined by the struggle that reaches ‘across’ different parts of the world. Yet, Ferguson’s hopes for the success of the Zapatista media campaign obscures the way that neo-liberalism sustains and recruits state power to exercise ‘vertical encompassment’ at certain points in time and in certain contexts. As opposed to the emerging global order; they are not an archaic political form. Rather, they are rapidly adapting, providing the infrastructure and the legal framework upon which market liberalisation depends. For example, the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) works by drawing together nation-states to create a transnational order that facilitates capital investment.

images of destablisation or should the grassroots be worldly, well-connected and opportunistic?

Ferguson’s idea that the Zapatista campaign can work through the images of the “image of destablisation through guerrilla warfare” (p108) limits the terms of the debate by starting with the idea that “capitalism is built to perceptions” (p108). Notwithstanding the theory of the spectacle, this also overlooks the fact that capitalism is built on labour and so under-estimates the power of resistance through labour. Would it be a good idea to shape a grassroots politics that is “worldly, well-connected and opportunistic”? That is something that sounds too much like the flexible practices of the transnational capitalism which it opposes. Basing resistance strategies on the management of ‘perceptions’ and ‘images’ seems an unstable base on which to progress, not least as capital investors would require greater certainty and security of return from investments.

At the start of the book Ferguson appears to suggest that capital investment is shaped by ‘perceptions’ rather than ‘objective data’. In the introduction, Ferguson quotes Bhinda (1999) arguing that “negative perceptions of Africa are a major cause of under-investment” (Bindha et al 1999:p72), and concludes that it is because of ‘negative perceptions of objective data’ that informs investment policy (1999:p15). For Ferguson “such perceptions don’t just misunderstand social reality; they also shape it” (p77). However, by chapter eight, foreign investors had adapted to unstable economies and infrastructures. Here, he argues that a new ‘thin’ model of the nation-state is emerging, exemplified by Angola, in which foreign investment occurs despite an ‘inefficient’ and ‘corrupt’ government, and a deprivitised infrastructure ruined by years of civil war. In fact, the inequities that are brought by globalisation are fragmenting, rather than integrating, social relations. This process of fragmented points of investment, as outlined a policy of globalisation, and it could inform political strategies. In the Niger Delta, oil companies have responded to protests by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta by relocating from the Delta region to set up offshore production and housing for foreign workers in Lagos.

Conclusion

Ferguson’s book is an insightful and original analysis of the complexities of the economic and social processes that are termed ‘globalisation’. In particular, the common idea of globalisation as a phenomenon of ‘convergence’ and ‘hydrodynamics’ is developed in the naturalised metaphor of the ‘flow’ and ‘tide’, is shown instead to be disconnected and disconnected points of investment, as outlined a policy of ‘jagged edges’, a set of economic policies and processes that have increased social and economic inequalities, carving out enclaves of wealth in areas of poverty. The ‘jagged edges’ replace the naturalised ‘flows’. Global policies do not spread prosperity, but rather exacerbate economic inequalities and entail the democracy ‘across’ to oppose its processes. In recent years, this overall picture of decline has been further complicated as the balance books in some ‘developing’ countries show quick gains in GDP, yet no evidence that this wealth will ‘trickle down’ to the mass of the population. Indeed, it’s worthwhile remembering that a range of ‘disasters’, such as floods, earthquakes and wars can grow your GDP.

References


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