

# 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 colonialists 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 or die'. That lessons in such 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 have been taken over [...] any tribe that had only lasted 25 years would be said to have failed."

While Maasai 'tribesmen' teaching principles to UK entrepreneurs may appear a novelty, the idea that the workings of the free market are part of human nature, and have an elegant simplicity about them, unclouded by social mores and the trappings of civilisation, is part of neo-liberalism, along with entrepreneurialism and privatisation. Indeed, writers such as Ayittey (2005) have argued that capitalism is not a European invention, rather the market economy is indigenous to Africa and its authentic forms of production are rural, and include agriculture and the extraction of natural resources. In contrast, institutions and ideas such as 'the state', 'urban society', and 'socialism' are seen by Ayittey as western imports, and for this reason have not flourished in the African nation-state during the post-colonial era. The idea that there can be such a thing as a 'failed' tribe, or indeed a 'failed' state, shows that neo-liberal policy has a limited criteria of success and failure that only really encompasses profitability for the global market. There are, of course, echoes of this throughout the world wherever neo-liberal policies exist, such as the evaluation of 'failed' schools during education reforms in the UK.

In the light of these times, James Ferguson's books *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticisation and Democratic Power in Lesotho* (1994) and *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neo-Liberal World Order* (2006), trace the complex relation between rhetoric and policy within neo-liberalism. In fact, the first book assesses development policies within Lesotho since independence, asking to what extent poverty and development can be tackled within the framework of the nation-state given the impact of the regional economy of southern Africa on Lesotho. The second book extends the debate, arguing that development within the nation-state must be set within a globalised economy, where new ideas surround 'Africa' and 'its place in the world', for both Africans and westerners.

## Globalisation as 'convergence' or 'jagged edges'?

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 the 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 "enclaved points...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 off-shore and staffed mainly by foreign workers who are housed in private enclaves. Foreign oil companies are operating within the Angolan state, but have 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).

That such glowing reports of business opportunities can sit alongside the idea that African states are "synonymous with failure and poverty" (p5) 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 enclaves formed by the globalised economy, while the majority live in its disregarded hinterland. Moreover, the whole African continent has become increasingly marginalized within the 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.

Analysing the complexities of globalisation requires an overview that locates Africa's "place in the world" in order to see how Africa "functions in a wider categorical system and what this means for the way we understand an increasingly trans-national political order" (p5). During the post-colonial era, African social relations and institutions have largely been studied at a local level, using ethnographic research methods. However, *the intricate processes of globalisation* have eluded localised studies. In fact, it could be argued that this micro-focus for research impedes collective discussions among researchers about the economic and political issues that are common across Africa, and also obscures the significances of larger scale issues for Africans. The shades and nuances of meaning located in ethnographic studies of 'alternative modernities', in which globalisation appears in diverse localised forms, serve for Ferguson to depoliticise and obscure the



gulf of global inequality that has opened up between African countries and the west since the 1980s. This inequality has widened to the point that it has eclipsed the idea that African states can catch up with the West at a future point through 'development'. Instead, African states are considered to be of a qualitatively different order and are positioned separately and unequally in the globalised economy. For this reason, the nation-state can no longer be an autonomous economic entity in a global economy, and for African countries this undermines possibilities for the state to pursue development. Africa, as the underdeveloped entity, is necessary to legitimate unhindered or unstructured growth elsewhere.

## The simultaneous 'failure' of the nation-state and the 'success' of trade liberalisation

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, 'Africa' 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, rethinking these categories, “becomes an elementary act of theoretical and political clarification....as well as a way to strategically shape the struggles of subaltern peoples and social movements around the world” (2006:p109). However, moving from redefined categories to organisational strategies for political action is another task 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 values market exchange as an ethic in itself” (2005:p3). While Summers has rejected criticism against moral void, saying that “moral reasons and social concerns, could be turned around and used more or less effectively against every Bank proposal for liberalisation” (The Economist 1992 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 seems to create a dichotomy between the ‘natural’ order of IMF neo-liberalism and the moral order of African economies that overlook the actual negotiations and practices by which structural adjustment is imposed.

Neo-liberalism works in Africa in part because its policies are advantageous to the African elite. Ferguson 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 efficient in growing fabulously rich” (p201). Given the class divisions within African society it is unlikely that a ‘remoralisation’ of national debate prompted by African 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 accountable 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 economy 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 civil society 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’ grassroots level. In short, as long as the nation-state sets the parameters for political resistance, the extent and motives of international intervention remain uncontested. 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” (p106) 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 “hydra-headed transnational apparatus of banks, international agencies and market institutions through which

contemporary capitalist domination functions?” (p107). However, in ‘*Global Shadows*’, the ideas for trans-national forms of resistance seem to be limited to appeals to ‘world opinion’ to support marginalized peoples; a strategy which stands in contrast to the call for the co-ordination of labour union campaigns across the regional economy in ‘*The Anti-Politics Machine*’. In fact, rather surprisingly, Ferguson appears to have a lot of faith in the power of media campaigns 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 camouflage dress, with the glossy photo captioned: ‘You have to go to war. But what will you wear? Camouflage visual dynamic: light, photogenic...ideal for the soldier who goes from war to war and 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 with appeals to ‘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 an extremely limited and unreliable form of political action that is likely to be shaped by the perceptions of the powerful, rather than the terms of the marginalized. 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 “celebrity attention and world press coverage may well help to protect Chiapas communities against potential aggression” (p108). However, in recent times resistance groups that did have transnational ‘support’ from celebrities and heads of state, such as the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), still met with brutal oppression. What Ferguson’s analysis does not take into account is that neo-liberalism does not restrict the repressive power of the state. For Ferguson, Zapatista 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 ways in which neo-liberalism sustains and recruits state power to exercise ‘vertical encompassment’ at certain points in time and in certain contexts. States are critical 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 destabilisation’ or should the grassroots be ‘worldly, well-connected and opportunistic’?

Ferguson’s idea that the Zapatista campaign can work through the circulation of the “image of destabilisation 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 significance of resistance through labour. Would it be a good idea to shape a grassroots politics that is “worldly, well-connected and opportunistic”? (p107) – 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 basis on which to progress, not least as capital investors would require greater certainty and security of return from investment.

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 Bindha (1999) arguing that “negative perceptions of Africa are a major cause of under-investment” (Bindha *et al* 1999:p72), and concludes that it is ‘complex investor perceptions rather than objective data’ that informs investment policy (1999:p15). For Ferguson “such perceptions don’t just misunderstand social reality; they also shape it” (p7). 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 decrepit infrastructure ruined by years of civil war. In fact, the inequalities that are brought by globalisation are fragmenting, rather than integrating, social relations. This process of fragmentation is both a consequence and 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 (MEND) by relocating from the Delta region to set up offshore production and housing for foreign workers in Lagos. While the grassroots struggle ‘across’ may be debated, what of the responsibility of the state official to look ‘across’ and address policy in a critical and informed manner? Naomi Klein notes that if South Africans had studied the reforms in the Soviet Union, they would have seen that economic reforms could curtail the democratic sphere. Instead, they accepted the view of the trans-national advisors that no alternatives to free trade policy existed (2007:p217).

### 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 phenomena of ‘convergence’, often expressed in the naturalised metaphor of the ‘flow’ and ‘tide’, is shown instead to be disconnected and disjointed points of investment, as rather a set 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 curtail the democratic means to oppose its processes. In recent years, this overall picture of decline has been further complicated as the balance books in some ‘developing’ economies show quite large increases 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.

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