

Book review: *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. James Ferguson

David Graeber

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Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order. James Ferguson. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, 257 pp. \$21.95

Anthropologists often seem to convince themselves they are in a position to grant things they are not, in fact, in a position to grant. Take for example the concept of “modernity.” We all live in the modern world, of course at least in the sense that no one on earth is actually living in the past. Yet for many, “modernity” is an ideal, and for many on the planet, Africans have become the very paradigm of those who least live up to it. Anthropologists, used to endless battle against racist and evolutionary assumptions, tend to insist, in good relativist style, that this is nonsense. We are simply looking at an “alternative modernity,” modernity as constructed in a different cultural context. But there is a problem. Most Africans don’t see it this way. They see modernity more as a matter of access to modern hospitals, efficient mass transportation, air conditioning, books, and consumer electronics all those things you don’t really have to think much about unless you don’t already have them. In this context, waving some paternalistic wand to declare them “alternatively modern” is simply a way of avoiding the point.

How do we think about the people whose way of being modern consists of feeling that they are not allowed to be modern? That modernity was a promise that wasn’t kept?

James Ferguson has been grappling with such questions-and more broadly with the de-politicization of African poverty in foreign discourse at least since the *Anti-Politics Machine* (1994). *Global Shadows* is a collection of his more recent essays, arranged into a book. Like most such collections it contains some redundancies (which the Duke editors probably should have caught), but overall the structure works. It begins with a series of theoretical reflections on globalization, sovereignty, morality, and civil society. It’s only about halfway through the book that African voices themselves really make themselves known: first vividly, wittily, in a chapter about a Zambian web journal originally dedicated to a celebration of the upcoming neoliberal “African renaissance” that soon descended into vituperation and despair, and finally deeply disturbingly, as in a letter written by two teenagers from Guinea found frozen in the landing gear of a jet in Brussels, appealing to “members and officials of Europe” in the name of human solidarity to assuage the suffering of Africa’s youth. The latter enables the author to ask: Why is it that we anthropologists, who write so enthusiastically about colonial mimicry as

ironic resistance, fall into embarrassed silence when confronted with mimicry that's actually sincere even if it merely represents the sincere desire to be taken seriously as equal participants in an emerging global community, to enter into conversations in which we ourselves have always taken for granted that we will play a part? All this in turn allows Ferguson to return to the panoramic view for two final essays on hierarchies of development and new extractive economies, with a renewed sense of the human beings at stake.

Ferguson has the admirable quality of being able to write things that seem utterly commonsensical, even obvious, until you realize that no one else has actually said them. Most of all, he provides a brilliant dissection of the pretensions of neoliberalism. Much of the book is taken from the perspective of Zambia, a particularly telling case because Zambia is one of the countries that, from a neoliberal perspective, appears to have done everything right. In the 1990s they had peace, democracy, and the electorate actually chose a government pledged to free market reforms and that actually carried them out as promised. Yet the results were catastrophic. At the same time, despite endless self-righteous rhetoric about Africans' trouble being the fault of their own government's corruption and inability to impose the rule of law, it's precisely the most corrupt and violent "failed states" like Angola that have seen the most dramatic rates of growth even if that growth, as increasingly in all of Africa, is focused on a few high-tech, "globalized" bubbles (most being highly fortified enclaves specializing in extractive industries like oil and diamonds) with almost no spill-over to the surrounding communities. The latter in turn are relegated to the status of what French colonialists used to call "useless Africa," abandoned by both governments and the global market (in which capital does not "flow" but "leaps" from point to point), relegated, at best, to the mercies of global charity. While Ferguson is careful not to generalize too much from the African case, the implications are clear enough. The problem is not that Africa did not adequately embrace the neoliberal project. The problem was that its states were in the weakest position to resist it, and this is precisely what that project—a project of suspending moral judgment from anything but the failures of bureaucrats and the poor, of removing all boundaries on the movement of capital while increasing them on the movement of people, of jettisoning any sense of any responsibility of states owed equally to all their citizens—would inevitably produce. As foreign theorists, often as not, continue to make themselves part of the problem by splicing together categories of analysis left over from the old rhetoric of national development with the new neoliberal ones, Africans outside the bubbles are increasingly abandoning the very idea of autonomous national development and effectively calling the world's bluff by asking: Is there, in fact, an international community? And if so, how does one join?

Reference cited

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