

James Ferguson and His Critique on Modernity

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Abstract: The book review reveals the issue of modernity from James Ferguson's *Expectation of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*, which is heartbreaking and heartbreaking. This well-written and thick seven-chapter book is based on Ferguson's ethnographic fieldwork in Copperbelt, Zambia, between the 1970s and 1990s. The book introduced what is called the ethnography of decline, a way of understanding people's point of view about their own experience of social, cultural, and economic 'advance' and 'decline'. It is a very hard task for ethnographers since they must deal with the situation instead of working with people. Related to that, Ferguson also explores a concept called 'abjection', a process of being thrown (down) aside, expelled, or discarded. Using this concept, he claims that modernity is quite similar to colonialism, which brings the dichotomy of 'the West' and 'the rest' where the West is 'modern,' and the rest is 'savage'. Thus, the globalization of the economy brought about by modernization has been experienced as abjection and disconnection, concluding that modernity is no more than a myth that would never exist.

Keywords: James Ferguson; Zambia; Modernity; Expectation of Modernity; Ethnography of decline; Myths

1. WHAT IS MODERNITY? – AN INTRODUCTION

What is modernity? Is it a particular state in the history of society when people live in prosperity? If so, how is society considered modern? Is modernization always Westernization? These questions are always relevant to be asked. Before I read Ferguson (and other materials related to the issue of modernity), I thought that 'modernization' could solve every problem in 'the third world.' Almost everyone in Indonesia also perceives modernity as a solution for a better life. However, modernity is like two sides of the coin. On the one hand, it is a 'promise' of 'positive development' towards a 'better life'. On the other hand, it can be a 'myth', something that would never happen. This essay will explore and analyze more about the issue of modernity from James Ferguson's *Expectation of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*, which is dismantling and heart-breaking.

2. NO ONE UNDERSTAND WHAT HAPPENED? – CONTEXTUALISING THE ISSUES

The book is based on ethnographic fieldwork (in Copperbelt, Zambia) between the 1970s-1990s (published in 1999). This book is divided into seven chapters, and I must admit that the book is very fascinating. It is well written and quite thick (even though Ferguson claimed that he did not want to write the 'thick description'). At first, I found that due to its thickness, it is unavoidable for Ferguson to be quite repetitive in some parts, making me 'skip' some of his sentences since I thought I already knew it. However, Dureau, a supervisor of mine at the University of Auckland, explained in one of the courses that there is a reason why scholars repeat something; it can be the way writers bring back the discussion to a particular topic from the previous part, or it can be an emphasis of the very important argument.

Through this book, Ferguson brings me to Zambia (particularly Copperbelt), one of the countries in the southern part of Africa that emerged in the 1960s to 1970s and was considered

as the ‘next superpower’ in Africa with all its expectations of the modernity that would never come (even Zambia government wanted to defeat America by developing a space program that would never be implemented)¹. At first, Ferguson tells a background story of the ‘emerging Africa’ which I found very interesting and insightful. It was when copper mining seemed very promising in the future, and Zambians came to the city with high hopes of prosperity, modernity, and good times in the retiring ages. However, when the price and the export of copper declined dramatically in the 1970s – 1980s, the country changed. As explained by Ferguson’s informants, life became harder and harder (‘down, down, down’), prices skyrocketed, crimes became commonplace, and lifetime security became worthless. Zambians’ dream of ‘modern Africa’ turned into ashes.

Neither Ferguson nor the Zambians understand what happened. Interestingly, as a scholar, Ferguson came up with important questions, “what happens to anthropological understanding in a situation where ‘the native’ as well as the ethnographer lack a good understanding of what is going on around them?” Or what if both ‘the local people’ and the anthropologists feel alienated and unconnected? So, in the middle of such confusion, Ferguson kept doing his fieldwork without the comfort of a local bounded community, working in the middle of rapid social transformation. He then brought the idea of ethnography of decline, a way of understanding people’s point of view about their own experience of social, cultural, and economic ‘advance’ and ‘decline’. Instead of analyzing spatial community and occupational categories, in his ethnography of decline, Ferguson analyzed ‘a mode of conceptualizing, narrating, and experiencing socioeconomic change and its encounter with a confounding process of economic decline’ (1999:21). In brief, ethnography of decline requires ethnographers to work with the situation instead of working with the people. It is, indeed, a very difficult situation. Ferguson even admits that what he discovered was something that ethical and methodological difficulties that he was not well prepared to deal with. His fieldwork left him with a terrible sense of sadness (1999:18).

3. A “Mine” of Fieldwork – Tension among Anthropologists

It is interesting to note that southern Africa (especially Copperbelt) has become the specific area for anthropologists conducting fieldwork on the topics of ‘social change’ and ‘urbanization’ for many years. Ferguson exemplifies how Africa attracted anthropologists (in the past) with the case of debate between the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (RLI) anthropologists and the colonial anthropologists. The RLI considered themselves to be progressive in their political position (actually, they were colonial ‘liberal’). Meanwhile, colonial anthropologists became the loyal servants of the colonial system, reproducing colonial ideology through their analyses. However, both the RLI and the colonial anthropologist were criticized by Ferguson since they ‘used’ their capability as scholars for the political interest. Some of them were considered as ‘racist’ and antagonistic towards the settlers (1999:31-32). They claimed that they battled racism and understood and defended the Africans, but practically, it was just a sense of paternalism.

Furthermore, Ferguson criticized the widely accepted general pictures of the history of migration and urbanization in Zambia, particularly the rural-urban dichotomy (1999:40-41), since Ferguson built a new alternative way of conceptualization to understand the relationship of rural-urban in contemporary Zambia. For instance, Ferguson strongly criticized the arguments that people who were the migrant workers who left from rural areas to Copperbelt were those who moved from an ‘underdeveloped’ situation to a more developed state. This kind of view is clearly derived from the Western standard of ‘development’, which is related to the issue of ‘modernity’. In brief, leaving the village, living in the urban area, and becoming a migrant worker is considered a form of ‘development,’ giving a sense of getting closer to modernity (in the eyes of Western standards). Moreover, Ferguson also stated that the dream of becoming more ‘modern’ was

¹ See for instance *The Time When Zambia Tried to Go to Mars* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7TI9ixb-a5M>)

perceived by the Zambians due to the chances of having a better life. People from rural areas migrated to the cities with all their expectations of permanence. Some brought their families to live with, while others left their families but still had responsibilities by sending money to them.

Ferguson quite criticized ethnographic works that have been tied to the evolutionary-dualist model of social and cultural changes. Topologizing by giving terms such as 'primitive' and 'civilized', 'traditional' and 'modern', or 'rural' and 'urban' might seem too simplistic since the situation is far more complex. Rural-urban interconnection could not be understood in such dualist terms (1999:90). Ferguson argued that the relationship is more than just a dichotomy of rural and urban. Still, at some points, it could be a 'transitory hybrid' or a combination of two 'basic' where 'pure social type' such as which is considered 'rural' and which is 'urban' was very hard to separate. Ferguson gave examples of this situation by explaining how people who used to live in the villages brought their way of life to the city. After returning 'home' or villages, they then also brought an 'urban way of life'. In brief, some of the migrant workers were 'dualist' people who's rural (village/traditional) and urban (modern/European) ways of life fused in their selves, becoming what Ferguson defined as 'style.'

4. The Ethnography of Decline

Ferguson also mentioned the cultural compliance related to localism. He claimed that localism is an 'urban' style (not a rural one), but it is linked to (specifically, signifying) rural life. It has close relation with micropolitics economic attachments. Ferguson exemplified this relation at the end of chapter three. Migrant workers are 'compelled' and 'obligated' to return 'home' in their retirement since they have economic responsibilities with their rural kin who are dependent on them. The dependency of rural kin on the migrant workers does not make the migrant workers 'overpowered' the rural kin. In fact, both have power in different degrees and in different situations. Ferguson argues that the key to cultural localism is the exerted control by rural kin over urban workers. However, besides the 'economic tribute', cultural compliance is something necessary for the migrant workers if they finally come home. In brief, cultural compliance is a cultural package of ethical (or behavioral) expectations (manners, conduct, speech, and dress) of rural kin to their 'migrant family members' (1999:112-113). For instance, rural kin expect ideal behavior (normative values) from the migrants, such as showing respect and regard, forbidding showing off, being pompous, or underestimating other rural members. If they 'fail', rural society would reject them. Even in some cases, they believe that they will be the object of witchcraft or sorcery of their rural kin and neighbors, which undoubtedly emerged in social anxiety.

Ferguson's "Back to the Land?" chapter contains 'heart-breaking' stories and cases (except the last two success stories). Each case describes the story of the ex-mineworkers who had three options of settlement after their contracts were finished: staying in town, 'going home', or settling in the rural Copperbelt. Staying in town is the rational reason for those who 'do not have a place to go' but have a massive source of cash income since, without a huge amount of money, the city could easily 'kill' them. Going home became the rational option (and most common choice of mineworkers) since they could gather with their kin and neighbors, start agricultural activities (maize farming was the most popular then), and form a new life. The third option is selected if they could not stay in town or go back home was settled in rural areas of Copperbelt. Economically, people could obtain land at a cheaper price, which was close to the urban market, so they could easily start commercial farming. In addition, socially, for those who want to continuously

‘avoid’ their family and neighbors from their ‘home village,’ this is the best option. Even though ideally, they had three choices, Ferguson claims that the forces pushing back urban workers to return to a home village (or to a rural area where they had relatives) were stronger since they thought that they had no other choice (1999:127). Nevertheless, based on the cases that Ferguson presented through the book, going back to the land required economic resources and social preparation. Ferguson believes that it is not the wage-earning failure that pushed people back to their ‘home village,’ but it is their wage-earning success.

Furthermore, the cases that Ferguson presents describe how different assets (economic, social, and cultural) contribute to facing the challenges in the retirement age when the ex-mineworkers leave employment. By using terms namely localists and cosmopolitans, Ferguson succeeded in conveying the argument that, on the one hand, localists may have social and cultural assets. Still, they live in very poor conditions, such as a lack of financial support. On the other hand, cosmopolitans may have money (economic assets) but get in trouble with cultural and social assets such as support from their kin or neighbors. Overall, Ferguson argues that ‘different workers had different amounts, and mixtures, of economic, social, and cultural assets’ which some of these combinations worked and some did not; some ex-mineworkers did reasonably well, while others failed miserably (1999:165). All of them are illustrated in every case and the nexus of all of them are the micropolitical economic social relations (particularly for the urban workers).

Besides the theory, arguments, critiques, and new insights concerning Copperbelt as a whole that Ferguson brings in the Expectation of Modernity, it is the way Ferguson delivers the discussion of the ethnography of decline that makes this book so special. I have mentioned in several paragraphs above that the cases are extremely well-described even though Ferguson ‘worked’ with the situation instead of the people. Ferguson is evocative. He can explain the informants’ understandings or points of view related to their ‘poor’ life or ‘bad’ situation faced by their country. Moreover, what I really appreciate and have learned a lot is how Ferguson brings ethnography to the ‘next level’ of empathy. I once again restate that Ferguson is telling heart-breaking stories about the hard life that his informants had. To my mind, he did a good job as a ‘medium’ or maybe a ‘mouthpiece’ for their informants (like in the letters when his informant asked for help) to communicate the situation of Zambia to the world. With very emotive touch helped with letters and ‘people watching’ scattered across the book, readers can empathize with situations that were faced by Ferguson’s informants. I believe that a successful ethnography is a work that impacts not only the informants but also the readers, such as affecting emotion where the readers join in empathizing (like our emotion toward the characters of a novel or a short story).

5. “Noise” – The Reinterpretation of Culture

Ferguson also discusses the dismantling definition (or he tried to reinterpret) of culture as ‘not only simply a system of communication but also a system of miscommunication’ (1999:210) which he elaborates more as whether it is ‘something that has meaning’ for the explainable social significances or it is a ‘noise’, something that is unexplainable or ‘have-no-clear’ meaning. It is beyond of Geertz explanation about culture as a symbolic system of shared meaning (1973:5). Ferguson claims that the road

to ethnographic interpretation cannot be simply to understand the meaning of the code (or semiotic system), but ethnographers should deal with the analyses of 'noise' seriously whether it is understandable or not since the signifying actors might have social reasons to rupture the communication instead of developing it.

Ferguson's categorization concerning the reinterpretation of the definition of culture worked well with the concept of 'cultural compliance', where people are suspended between the idea of modernity and traditional life. It is because some of the ex-mineworkers are 'trapped' in that situation in the middle of their search for modernity. Ferguson uses the term 'cosmopolitanism' to categorize such people. It is the opposite term of 'localism', and both are like two sides of the coin. 'Cosmopolitan' appears as a defiance and rejection of localist expectations. From a localist perspective, cosmopolitanism is a rule-breaker, a gesture of anti-membership, and a person who lacks humility and loyalty. However, in the eye of cosmopolitans, they perceive themselves as 'citizens of the world' where they ensure they do not fit within the 'localist world' and are free from all of the localist's claims and expectations. Nevertheless, Ferguson argues that cosmopolitanism is a different term with 'Western culture'. Becoming cosmopolitan does not mean becoming the 'West'. Instead, it is more generically becoming 'international', a new urban culture emerging as the consequence of 'modernity'.

Another interesting point that I would like to discuss related to the idea of modernity is what Ferguson called as 'abjection'. It is a concept that refers to a process of being thrown (down) aside, expelled, or discarded (1999:236). Ferguson clearly states that this is the precisely 'sad' reality that he encountered in his fieldwork. The Zambians (particularly the mine workers) are 'interconnected' with the 'globalizing world,' a 'modern world' with promises of prosperity that they are dreaming of. But at the same time, the more they try to chase that 'ideal state,' the more they are cast outward and downward as the 'second class.' Metaphorically, imagine a group of rich and popular people having a party in a mansion, and they invite and persuade you to come and join them. However, when you want to enter the room, they kick you out and close the door, leaving you alone on the cold winter night, watching them have fun from the outside window. Immediately, you are becoming discarded, disallowed, and disconnected. All of the promises had been betrayed. Indeed, the macro-political economy, namely global capitalism, affects this situation. It is obvious that the world 'only' needs Zambian's copper to connect the world via wire bars, producing cable power and telephone. Still, ironically, it is disconnecting Zambians from the world. In brief, Ferguson argues that the globalization of the economy has been experienced as abjection and disconnection (1999:253). Therefore, modernity is no more than a myth that would never exist.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear now that modernity is not merely a particular state in the history of humankind. More than, modernity is quite similar to colonialism, which brings the dichotomy of 'the West' and 'the rest' where the West is 'modern' and the rest is 'savage'. Thus, even though colonialism and modernity became a mission, a kind of 'holy call' to diminish the savagery, the notions always required an 'Other' and 'Elsewhere' (Trouillot, 2002:850). The 'modern world', led by the North Atlantic countries (which Trouillot described as the North Atlantic Universals), has everything to do with political economy. Modernization means putting global capitalism in specific locales, which is

problematic in some cases (such as Zambia). The concept of modernity as a myth stated by Ferguson is very similar to Trouillot's definition of modernity as a 'utopia,' a promise or dangerous illusion (2003:23). Both of them are similar if we use the Western standard of modernization, 'the savage' will never become 'modern.' In brief, modernity is like two sides of the coin. It is a 'promise' of 'positive development' towards a 'better life'. On the other hand, it can be a 'myth', something that would never happen.

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