The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticisation and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho
James Ferguson, Duke University 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, ‘Small 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 it’. 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 supremely precarious, equally as ‘primitive’ (p56) and ‘underdeveloped’ (p341) as the FSFE 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 specifics 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 within a globalised economy, where new ideas serve for Ferguson to depoliticise and obscure the economic and political issues that are common across Africa. The shades of larger scale issues for Africans. The Anti-Politics Machine (p5). During the post-colonial era, African social and economic inequalities are widening; small numbers of people live in the entire economy, while the majority live in its discredited hinterland. Moreover, the whole African continent has become increasingly marginalised within the globalised economy, while the majorities live in its discredited hinterland. Moreover, the whole African continent has become increasingly marginalised within the globalised 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 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 step 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

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 ‘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 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” (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 economy, while the majority live in its discredited hinterland. Moreover, the whole African continent has become increasingly marginalised within the globalised 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.
forces that exist beyond the boundaries of these units are excluded from the debate. According to Ferguson, thinking these categories, “the nation-state becomes an elementary act of theoretical and political clarification... as well as a way to strategically shape the transnational economic 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 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 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 corruption, misappropriations 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 astoundingly greedy” (p201). Given the class divisions within African society it is unlikely that a ‘remoralisation’ of national debates can ever be achieved by cultural values around the morality of wealth would restrain neo-liberal economic 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 controllable to the IMF, 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 global 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’ or ‘global’ level. In short, as long as the nation-state sets the parameters for political resistance, the extent and motives of international interventions are 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” (2006) underestimates the significant role played by the state in facilitating and sustaining the transnational political order. "images of destitution", or should the grassroots be 'worldly, well-connected and opportunistic'? Ferguson's idea that the Zapata strategy can work through the creation of the "image of destitution 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-estimated the potential of resistance through labour. Would it be a good idea to shape a grassroots politics that is "worldly, well-connected and opportunistic"? Is anything 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 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 Bhinda (1999) in the idea that “negative perceptions of Africa are a major cause of under-investment” (Bindha et al 1999:p2), and concludes that it is important to "challenge dominant 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 deficit 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 fragmented points of investment, as a result of 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. Such a process can 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 “South Africans have not been won over by the reform in the Soviet Union, they would have seen that economic reforms could curtail the democratic sphere. Instead, the ‘success’ 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 phenomenon of ‘convergence’ is challenged in the naturalised metaphor of the ‘flow’ and ‘tide’, is shown instead to be disconnected and disconnected points of investment, as a result of a ‘jagged edge’, 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 edge’ is the naturalised ‘flows’. Global policies do not spread prosperity, but rather exacerbate economic inequalities and enrol the ‘peripheral’ 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 quite substantial surpluses on the GDP, yet no evidence that this wealth will ‘trickle down’ to the mass of the population. Indeed, it’s worrying to remember that a range of globally interconnected floods, earthquakes and wars can grow your GDP.

References


