African Studies Review (2026), **69**: 2, 449–456
doi:10.1017/asr.2025.10191

IN MEMORIAM

Reimagining Anthropology: Ferguson, Incompleteness, and Conviviality

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Introduction: Encounters with Ferguson's thought

My first serious engagement with James Ferguson's work came when Richard Werbner invited me to contribute a review essay on his book, *Expectations of Modernity* (Ferguson 1999). My essay used the metaphor of a future seen in the rear-view mirror to argue that Ferguson's book highlights the disillusionment with exogenously induced ideas of modernity in Africa (Nyamnjoh 2001).

The metaphor of the rear-view mirror: Challenging modernity

The rear-view mirror metaphor emphasizes that, contrary to the promises of modernization theories, the anticipated future of progress and development has not materialized beyond for an elite few. Instead, the rear-view mirror represents a turning back to the past, to traditional ways and rural life, as the "modern" urban life has failed to deliver. Ferguson's book focuses on Zambian mineworkers whose unilinear "expectations of modernity" were unmet. Their "future," the promise of urban life, is metaphorically behind them in the rear-view mirror, forcing them to reevaluate their ties to rural areas. The essay argues that this metaphor supports the need to rethink zero-sum development approaches in Africa.

Instead of simply pushing for Eurocentric modernity and its zero-sum indexes of progress, it is crucial to understand the complex realities and local perspectives, including the continued importance of rural connections and traditional values. The "future in the rear-view mirror" metaphor encapsulates an argument for a more nuanced understanding of African experiences, moving beyond simplistic modernization narratives to acknowledge the ongoing relevance of tradition and local realities. I was at the University of Botswana at the time.

Challenges and opportunities of publishing in and on Africa

In 2003, my move to Dakar to lead the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) publications program brought another

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https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2025.10191 Published online by Cambridge University Press

meaningful connection with Jim. He invited me to participate in a panel discussion on February 7, 2006, organized by the Center for African Studies at Stanford University. The conversation centered on the contemporary challenges and opportunities of publishing in and on Africa, and I was privileged to share the stage with esteemed figures such as the writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kassahun Checole of Africa World Press, and Were Omamo, an agricultural economist and writer. As background for our discussion, the organizers had circulated my paper, "From Publish or Perish to Publish and Perish" (Nyamnjoh 2004).

During lunch that day, Ngugi shared captivating excerpts from his then-unpublished English novel, *Wizard of the Crow.* I particularly recall his evident pride in having the protagonist pursue further studies in India, a deliberate departure from the conventional Western destinations. We even shared a lighthearted moment about his unexpected discovery of a pearl in his food. This initiative revealed a commitment to knowledge production on Africa by Ferguson that went beyond standard intellectual extraction and the confines of a particular discipline.

Ferguson's humanity and approachability

Beyond his intellectual contributions, Jim possessed a remarkable humanity and approachability. My memories of him are filled with instances where he went above and beyond to make me feel welcome: from personally fetching me from the airport and engaging in playful banter about the American football league with his son during the drive to my hotel in Palo Alto, to inviting me for dinner at his home. I also fondly remember him accompanying me on shopping trips to Goodwill stores, helping me purchase a laptop or a travel bag at a nearby mall, and even emailing to ask if his daughter could join Liisa and him for dinner on Friday July 24, 2015 at our home in Cape Town. In August 2019 he went out of his way, braving Accra traffic, to meet up with Harry Garuba and I at the University of Ghana; a meeting at which, among other things, we concluded that as scholars, we should take requests for book endorsements seriously, for one's reputation depends on what one writes. He was always generous with his advice and wisdom, accepting, without hesitation, to serve as honorary professor at the Department of Anthropology at University of Cape Town (UCT). That was the essence of Jim.

Ferguson's call for interdisciplinarity and reflexivity

As his panel discussion initiative on publishing Africa demonstrates, Ferguson wasn't only interested in connecting with fellow anthropologists; he also prioritized forging links with other disciplines and individuals outside academia involved in knowledge production, such as writers and storytellers. His call to incorporate insights from fiction writers deeply resonates with my Amos Tutuola-inspired emphasis on incompleteness (Nyamnjoh 2017a; 2017b). I see this as a crucial acknowledgment of the inherent limitations within disciplinary boundaries, highlighting the necessity of drawing upon diverse sources of knowledge to achieve a more inclusive grasp of social realities. It is in this spirit

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that I interpreted his endorsement of both my academic work, *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging* (Nyamnjoh 2005), and my fiction, *Intimate Strangers* (Nyamnjoh 2010). In this regard, he was truly a "frontier" scholar (Nyamnjoh 2017a).

Ferguson's argument in favor of reflexivity and positionality in *Locations* (Gupta and Ferguson 1997), reiterated in his reaction to my essay, "Blinded by Sight" (Nyamnjoh 2012b), exhorts anthropologists to move beyond the "distancing and exoticisation" prevalent in some anthropological approaches, urging anthropologists to confront their own historical and social embeddedness in relation to their subjects. Ferguson's comment champions interdisciplinary collaboration, specifically advocating for anthropologists to engage with fiction writers as vital intellectual partners, thus enriching the field with varied perspectives:

> I'm especially sympathetic with your point that we need to look to writers of fiction as intellectual interlocutors. It's a suggestion we made back in *Locations*, but we didn't do much to follow it up, and I think it's especially important in southern Africa, where the call to have more engagement between a still mostly white anthropology and "African voices" tends to be countered with the view that there just aren't very many Africans with sufficiently high level anthropological training. But as you point out, the people with the most interesting and sophisticated interpretations of their own societies may very well not have PhDs in anthropology (imagine that!). The solution is surely to broaden the pool of people who count as social and cultural analysts, and then we might find that authors of fiction and other creative works make more interesting scholarly partners than most of our certified PhDs. (James Ferguson, comments, August 31, 2012)

That I took Ferguson's comment seriously can be instantiated in how I have, in my scholarship, sought to draw inspiration from writers of fiction such as Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, and Cyprian Ekwensi (Nyamnjoh 2013, 2017b, 2021, 2024), as well as disseminate some of my research as fiction, and at times use some of my fiction as the basis for my scholarly writing (Nyamnjoh 2011, 2012a). I have also drawn upon Ferguson's concept of "expectations of modernity" and the optimism it engenders in my essay "Beyond an Evangelising Public Anthropology" (Nyamnjoh 2015). Here, I use it to frame discussions of how postcolonial African states and intellectuals approached the powerful influence of the modernization and development agenda, which significantly shaped policies and priorities even as many remained highly critical of the underlying assumptions and logic of development discourse, which, as Ferguson argues in *The Anti-Politics Machine* (Ferguson 1990), often operates with a "fantasy" of a neutral, benevolent, and technically competent intervention that can solve complex social problems without engaging with politics.

By focusing on technical solutions and ignoring the political context, development projects often produce unintended consequences that can exacerbate existing inequalities or create new problems. Little wonder that even well-intentioned development efforts can have negative consequences when they fail to adequately

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understand and address the political dimensions of poverty, resulting in such cynicism that caricatures NGO from "Non-Governmental Organization" to "Nothing Going On." Ferguson's perspective is invaluable in understanding the complex relationship between anthropology and development, particularly the idea that anthropology's "public mission" has historically been intertwined with colonialism and power dynamics within development initiatives. In this respect, his insistence on bringing into conversation interconnecting local and global hierarchies that produce, configure and govern people, places, and spaces has been a particularly productive challenge, offering anthropologists the exciting mission of reuniting "thick" and "thin" description and emic and etic perspectives of cultures in motion in the service of theory building (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 1997). In many ways, Ferguson's work resonates with what I have come to understand and actively promote as "convivial scholarship" (Nyamnjoh 2020, 2024, 2025).

This approach is both informed by and reinforces the universality and normalcy of incompleteness—the understanding that no individual, culture, or entity is entirely self-sufficient or whole. Rather, everything and everyone requires relationships and connections with others to activate their potential as a permanent work in progress. This incompleteness is not a deficit but a fundamental aspect of existence, fostering interdependence. Conviviality, grounded in this understanding of incompleteness, underscores the importance of harmonious coexistence, interdependence, and respectful relationships among diverse entities. It values dialogue, exchange, and mutual accommodation, recognizing that varied perspectives and experiences are essential for a more comprehensive understanding of the world. Ferguson's calls to move beyond disciplinary "fixations" and embrace "lateral theory building" strongly align with this notion of incompleteness and conviviality in knowledge production, challenging us to view theory building as an ongoing process of improvisation and exchange that draws upon diverse perspectives and knowledge systems. Ultimately, Ferguson's emphasis on incorporating "African voices" instantiated in his initiative on publishing and comment on "Blinded by Sight" above, directly supports my broader argument for conviviality, highlighting the critical necessity of including diverse and historically marginalized perspectives to achieve a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of social phenomena.

An incompleteness framework: Re-reading Ferguson's works

Here are additional snippets of how to bring Ferguson's work into conversation with my Incompleteness framework.

The Anti-Politics Machine (Ferguson 1990)

Viewed through this prism, Ferguson's critique of the "anti-politics machine" reveals how development discourse actively attempts to impose a premature and contrived sense of completeness onto the less-developed country (LDC) and the solutions offered. By framing poverty as a technical problem solvable through managerial fixes, development discourse denies the inherent political, historical,

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and social complexities—the very "incompleteness"—of the societies it seeks to transform. It seeks a complete, technical solution, ignoring the ongoing negotiations, power struggles, and diverse perspectives that shape lived realities. I would argue that such a framing attempts to erase the relational and dynamic nature of these societies.

The portrayal of the LDC as isolated, traditional, and lacking essential capacities is a move towards creating a simplified, "completed" image devoid of its existing connections, historical trajectories, and internal dynamism. This ignores the inherent incompleteness and interconnectedness of these societies within broader regional and global systems. Ferguson shows how this constructed image serves the development agenda by defining a clear "lack" that the intervention aims to "complete," thus obscuring existing forms of knowledge and agency.

The expansion of bureaucratic power, while often failing to achieve its stated goals, represents an attempt to establish centralized control and impose a sense of order and "completeness" from above. A framework of incompleteness would highlight how this ignores the distributed nature of power, knowledge, and agency within these societies, and the inherent incompleteness of any top-down or exogenously induced attempt at social engineering.

The belief in a neutral, benevolent, and technically perfect intervention reflects a desire for a complete and predictable solution to inherently complex and incomplete social realities. A perspective informed by incompleteness underscores that such a "fantasy" denies the messy, contingent, and relational nature of social change, which is always a process of ongoing negotiation and adaptation.

The unintended negative consequences of development projects are often a direct result of failing to acknowledge the intricate web of relationships and the inherent incompleteness of the systems being intervened in. By focusing on a narrow set of technical inputs, the broader social, political, and ecological interdependencies—the "incompleteness" or compositeness that shapes outcomes—are overlooked.

The reliance on external experts often implies a belief in their specialized "completeness" in understanding and solving problems, often at the expense of local knowledge and perspectives, which represent crucial, albeit different, forms of "completeness" or ways of knowing. An emphasis on "convivial scholarship" and the value of diverse perspectives directly challenges this hierarchical assertion of expertise.

Even well-intentioned efforts can fail because they operate from a limited, "incomplete" or contrived understanding of the context and the diverse needs and perspectives within the target society. A framework of incompleteness encourages a move beyond singular perspectives towards a more relational and inclusive approach that acknowledges the inherent incompleteness of any single viewpoint.

Ferguson's *The Anti-Politics Machine*, when viewed through an incompleteness framework, becomes a powerful critique of development's tendency to seek and impose artificial forms of completeness. This approach ignores the inherent complexities, relational dynamics, and diverse perspectives that characterize

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the societies it aims to assist. Consequently, it underscores the need for a more humble, politically aware, and anthropologically grounded approach that embraces the inherent incompleteness of social realities and fosters more convivial and inclusive forms of engagement.

Give a Man a Fish (Ferguson 2015)

Give a Man a Fish strongly critiques the limited focus on production within development. Ferguson insists that efforts to address poverty and inequality must fundamentally grapple with the politics of distribution, urging development practitioners and theorists to move past simply increasing the number of "fish" and to critically examine the dynamics of access and power.

Appreciating Ferguson's *Give a Man a Fish* through an incompleteness framework deepens our understanding of its critique of development's bias towards production. Incompleteness illuminates how the overemphasis on generating output often seeks a singular, seemingly "complete" solution (teaching to fish) while neglecting the inherently incomplete and relational aspects of resource access and social justice.

The focus on production embodies a desire for a self-contained solution where individuals or communities become "complete" by acquiring the skills to produce. This paradigm often overlooks the crucial interdependencies and power dynamics that shape who has the opportunity to learn to fish, access fishing grounds, or benefit from the catch. Incompleteness as a framework reminds us that individuals and communities are inherently incomplete and exist within webs of relationships that determine their access to resources.

The marginalization of distribution issues reflects a failure to acknowledge the inherently incomplete and unequal nature of social structures and power relations. Access to resources is not solely determined by individual capacity to produce but is deeply embedded in social, political, and historical contexts. A prism of Incompleteness enables us to argue that focusing only on production ignores the crucial relational dimensions that determine who benefits and who is excluded.

Ferguson's "crisis of distribution" highlights how even when resources are available, unequal power dynamics and social structures prevent their equitable distribution. This underscores how some individuals and groups are positioned to benefit more than others due to their place within incomplete and often asymmetrical relationships.

The reliance on technical solutions to increase production often assumes a level playing field and ignores the pre-existing social and political inequalities that shape access to and control over these technologies. A framework of incompleteness emphasizes that technical fixes alone cannot address the inherently incomplete and often unjust social and political landscapes.

Ferguson's call for a political analysis aligns perfectly with an emphasis on the relational and power-laden nature of social life. Recognizing the incompleteness of purely technical or economic approaches necessitates engaging with the messy realities of power, inequality, and social structures that shape distribution.

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Ferguson's emphasis on access, entitlements, and social justice directly addresses the relational dimensions of incompleteness. These concepts acknowledge that individuals need more than just the capacity to produce; they need secure access to resources and a just social order that recognizes their inherent worth and rights within a larger web of relationships.

Analysing *Give a Man a Fish* through an incompleteness framework reveals a potent critique of the development paradigm's tendency to equate production with a simplistic notion of "completion," offering valuable insights. This perspective highlights how such a focus obscures the fundamental incompleteness inherent in individuals and communities, as well as the crucial relational dynamics that mediate access to resources and opportunities. Ferguson's emphasis on the politics of distribution finds strong resonance with my focus on the interconnectedness and inherent incompleteness of human existence, urging a move beyond simplistic interventions towards an engagement with the complex power structures and relationships that determine access to both the means and the outcomes ("to fish" and "the fish"). Ecologically, this also invites further inquiry into an ethics of "eating and being eaten" by fish (Nyamnjoh 2018).

Conclusion: Anthropology as a frontier discipline

To reimagine anthropology as a frontier discipline serving incompleteness and conviviality, I propose we revisit Ferguson's seminal works. We should understand incompleteness as a multidirectional concept, acknowledging that every social category finds its fullness in open-ended relationships with others, including nonhumans and technologies. This reimagined anthropology should foster dialogues between the possible and impossible, celebrating the humility and courage inherent in in-between categories. It should champion a world of entanglement and blending, strengthening incompleteness in motion and inspiring flexible mobility, belonging, and citizenship. An anthropology grounded in incompleteness compels us to reconfigure conviviality in a world shaped by mobility, encounters, compositeness, and mutual indebtedness, embracing all forms of existence. For such an anthropology, let us draw inspiration from James Ferguson, looking to his insights as a guide.

Author Biographies. **Francis B. Nyamnjoh** has been a professor of social anthropology at the University of Cape Town since 2009. Previously, he served as head of publications at the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in Dakar from 2003 to 2009. He has taught sociology, anthropology, and communication studies at universities in Cameroon and Botswana, and has researched and written extensively on both countries.

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Cite this article: Nyamnjoh, F. 2026. "Reimagining Anthropology: Ferguson, Incompleteness, and Conviviality." *African Studies Review* **69** (2): 449–456. https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2025.10191

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