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IN MEMORIAM

What Would Ferguson Say?

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In February last year, I attended a book talk for Christopher Conz's *Environment, Knowledge & Injustice in Lesotho: The Poverty of Progress* (2024) hosted by the University of Johannesburg's Department of Anthropology and Development Studies. Conz shared a little about some of the arguments of the book, including his claim that "*tsoelopele*" ("development" or "progress") has long been an important discourse in Lesotho. According to Conz, the promise of progress was not entirely foreign nor colonial; it was central to how ordinary Basotho made sense of their world.

Almost on cue, as soon as Conz mentioned "development" and "Lesotho," someone asked a question to the effect, "What would Ferguson say?" Conz responded generously and explained that his work builds on Ferguson's. He also admitted that it can be daunting to feel like you have to speak back to someone like Ferguson, a giant in the pantheon of contemporary anthropology, African studies, and development studies. For scholars of Lesotho—where Ferguson did fieldwork for his dissertation, which later became *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development," Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*—Ferguson is indispensable. Every scholar of Lesotho after 1990 must somehow answer the question, "What about Ferguson?"

For instance, anthropologist Colin Hoag's *The Fluvial Imagination: On Lesotho's Water-Export Economy* (2022) takes Ferguson's "bovine mystique" as fodder for the "ovicaprine mystique." In *The Anti-Politics Machine* ([1990] 1994), Ferguson had acutely observed that livestock were a mysterious kind of property in Lesotho: for men, cattle were a store of wealth, not unlike a retirement fund after a career in South African mines. Thus, men were reluctant to sell their cattle for cash, despite their longtime savvy with livestock markets and the risks inherent in agriculture—Ferguson called this "the bovine mystique." Three decades later, *The Fluvial Imagination* built on this important insight by illustrating that the bovine mystique was only possible because of its alter ego, the ovicaprine mystique. Hoag explained that strapped for cash, rural Basotho easily sold sheep and goats in and outside Lesotho before they had to consider making cattle a commodity.

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Other scholars of Lesotho have worked off Ferguson's arguments about development and politics in *The Anti-Politics Machine.* In "The Reproduction of Inequality: Race, Class, Gender, and the Social Organization of Work at Sites of Large-Scale Development Projects," anthropologist Yvonne Braun (2011) details the hands-on consequences of the most ambitious development project in Lesotho: the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, designed to sell water from rural Lesotho to metropolitan South Africa. Braun shows how the discourse of development that Ferguson described earlier reproduced local and global inequalities along the lines of race, class, and gender. Another scholar, historian John Aerni-Flessner's *Dreams for Lesotho: Independence, Foreign Assistance, and Development* (2020) tracks the political movements of the colonial and early independence era that developed popular, state, and technocratic consensus on the rhetoric of development, such that by the 1970s, the development programs like the one Ferguson described were commonplace.

Ferguson's early work has been enduringly useful to scholars of Lesotho, even though he himself wrote that *The Anti-Politics Machine* "is not principally a book about the Basotho, or even about Lesotho; it is principally a book about the operation of the international 'development' apparatus in a particular setting" (17). But, to his credit, the work remains useful for the ethnographic record because of his careful and attentive commitment to the empirical facts of the place. As an ethnographer of Lesotho and a person from Lesotho, I doubly admire and respect Ferguson's keen ethnographic eye in *The Anti-Politics Machine.* Because sometimes, as Mosotho historian Matšeliso Motšoene (forthcoming) puts it, Lesotho feels like a footnote on South Africa's page. Ferguson showed that this "Small Place" (Kincaid 1988), this tiny dot on a global map, is also a place where theory happens.

Unfortunately, I never met Ferguson, even though he is decidedly one of the greatest influences on my career in anthropology thus far. I only know him as Ferguson (1990, 1999, 2006, 2015), not as James, let alone Jim. When I was an undergraduate student, I started toying with the idea of researching unemployment in Lesotho. My advisor, Colin Hoag, recommended that I read *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution* (2015). He said it was beautifully written and incredibly sharp, and he was right. I found Ferguson's notion of "distributive labor" especially incisive and capacious. It gave me new language for life in Southern Africa as I knew it. Distributive (as opposed to "productive") labor describes the serious, arduous work of transferring resources: a panhandler begging for change, a mother visiting her son who works in town, returning home with gifts; a pickpocket nicking a wallet in a crowded street. All of these improvisational strategies are how people actually get by day to day when formal, waged work is the exception, not the norm. "Distributive labor" is distinctly original because it forcefully refuses the tendency to privilege production and afford it moral heft, which obscures other ways of working. Connecting social grants to "sugar daddy" relationships to pickpocketing to demands for "universal basic income" in Southern Africa is the hallmark genius of Ferguson: an ethnographic sensibility to take the work of ordinary living seriously, married with innovative theory, delivered in vivid, lucid writing.

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As a graduate student in anthropology, my approach to ethnographic method and anthropological theory is indebted to Ferguson. My dissertation project is about the everyday experience of chronic unemployment for university-educated women in Lesotho, and the entire apparatus intended to reduce it, which I call "the unemployment industry." This impulse to strip the knotty interface of government offices, universities, small businesses, and international programs—all ostensibly working to solve unemployment—is a gift from Ferguson's earlier study on the development complex in Lesotho. I'll always wonder what he'd say about my suspicion that even when the unemployment industry fails to create employment, it still succeeds at generating observable "instrument-effects" on the everyday lives of the unemployed.

Reading *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (1999), I sensed the melancholy and disappointment wafting off the pages. As Ferguson described it, here was a generation of Zambians reckoning with the collapse of modernity, not just as an ideological letdown, but as a practical, everyday disillusion with the failed promise of a better tomorrow. On the heels of rapid economic decline, Copperbelt residents who had donned mail-order suits were now struggling to buy cooking oil and bottled beer. Their profound disappointment, I wager, is not unlike that of university graduates in Lesotho and the rest of Southern Africa who, after leaving university, find themselves waiting for a job that might never come. I am especially interested in the visions of "the good life" that the unemployment industry, especially higher education, promises to the educated unemployed. How do people struggle towards a good life when their expectations are routinely dashed? I would have loved to chat with Ferguson about these questions. I wonder if he would have recognized himself in them.

Since I learned of his passing, I've been reflecting on Ferguson's legacy and what it might ask of anthropology today, especially for those of us just starting out in the discipline. Perhaps we might read in his oeuvre an invitation to reconsider the myth of ethnography. As he did in *Expectations of Modernity*, we might ask, what is the method and the product of ethnography if not an attempt at "the total social facts"? Ferguson writes that many of his informants themselves were confused about their worlds. As the urban economy sharply deteriorated, futures that once seemed certain were suddenly slipping from mineworkers' fingers. As he puts it, "they did not know what was happening to them and did not understand why it was happening. Neither did I" (19). And yet, *Expectations of Modernity* is, if anything, a sure-footed explanation of what was happening and why it was happening. Ferguson orders and packages what he describes as a disorienting and disoriented time into digestible, legible frames—cosmopolitan versus localist style. Various interpretations of "home." Abjection in global capitalism.

On the page, post-1970s Copperbelt seemed pretty stable, not nearly as slippery and dizzying as Ferguson proclaims. Difficult, yes. Alarming, yes. But not nearly as incomprehensible as he insists. How might the product of ethnography more closely mirror the process of ethnography, relaying the chaos and non-sense of the world as we experience it? Where are the limits of our epistemological authority if we write honestly, reflecting that sometimes the

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anthropologist is just as puzzled as their interlocutors because the circumstances are themselves puzzling?

Perhaps Ferguson's legacy might ask that we consider, very seriously, the question of "What is to be done?" In the epilogue to *The Anti-Politics Machine*, Ferguson responds to frustrated readers who object that the book only criticizes the project of "development," and offers no prescriptions or corrections. If Ferguson's work is anything to go by (and it is!), the best ethnography might (only) clarify how profoundly complicated the question of "what to do" is. Anthropology rarely lends itself to straightforward solutions, and its merits need not be applied policy analysis or practical recommendations. Ferguson's legacy might suggest that, still, we would do better to earnestly consider the political, practical implications of our work, and to do so with humility and caution. Maybe Ferguson would say that the heights of abstraction should also meet the pragmatic depths of everyday life.

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